



Commentary

Teachers' Professional Development: A Vital Lever for Change

Megan Webster

ABSTRACT

In this interview, Megan Webster describes key tenets of teachers' professional development. First, it needs to be practice-focused, meaning that the subject is very close to what teachers do every day. Secondly, teachers need to have opportunities to examine expert forms of practice; teachers need models of excellent performance. Finally, teachers must be able to practice and receive feedback in a supportive environment with peers who work in the same subject. This model, described as the "cycle of investigation and enactment," is best implemented in a sustained, long-term way. This model allows teachers to build relationships, develop trust, and commit to improving their teaching practice. She concludes by stating that high-quality professional development for teachers is "one of the greatest levers for change that we have."

Can you talk about your career as an educator to date?

 started as a teacher. I was working at St. George's and I taught for about eight/nine years as a teacher and over that time I did my master's here at McGill. Then I started a service learning program at St. George's where we were connecting kids with community organizations, training community organizations to be ready to receive younger volunteers than they're often used to, and then training parents to accompany the kids. That was an exciting program that I ran for a few years. In my ninth year of teaching I decided to go to school full time to do my PhD. I kept a foot in the door while I did my PhD and now I'm wrapping up my PhD.

How did you get interested in professional development?

I had an extremely positive experience of professional development at St. George's. My experience with PD was that it profoundly impacted my practice and radically changed the way—not just that I taught—but that I thought about the endeavour of teaching, that I thought about what it means to be a teacher, what it means to work with kids. I had such a meaningful experience. It contrasted with what I heard from other educators who felt frustrated with PD, who felt like it wasn't doing anything for them...they were doing it as a compliance activity. I thought, "What is it about this PD that makes it so good and how could we think about scaling up what I experienced?" I initially set out to do my PhD on an investigation of the PD that I had: "What made it so great?" As I began to step into the stream of academic life and I learned more, my interests evolved and deepened and moved in different directions. But that was initially my impetus for getting in the door.

Can you explain what you think are the fundamental principles for professional development, and why?

The key feature of high-quality professional development is that it's focused on practice. By "practice," I mean something that is very close to what teachers do on an everyday basis. "Equity" is a really important idea, but what does it look like in terms of what a teacher is doing in grade eight math tomorrow morning with her unit on triangles? That is complicated for that teacher to negotiate: what does equity look like in that math lesson about triangles? It's really important that PD support people to understand big ideas of high-quality teaching, like ideas around equity or embracing different kinds of learners, or using children's thinking as a resource for the group's thinking via a very concrete practice...but what are you going to do tomorrow and the next day?

The first thing that we need to look at is to make sure that the PD really indicates clearly what the practice is that we want teachers to be working on. Maybe it would be something like orchestrating a whole-group discussion or organizing small groups to work on complex tasks. These are things that teachers do every day or every week. They can get better at doing those things, and in working on those particular things they can work out big ideas about pedagogy. "What does it mean to really think about student thinking...what does it mean to really think about geometry?" That's the first piece, that's it's practice-focused.

The second piece is that teachers need a chance to investigate models of somebody who can do that practice better than them. Watching video representations or watching modelling, or reading text examples of high-quality performance, decomposing that practice, breaking that into smaller pieces and thinking about “what is it exactly that that master teacher was doing, why did the teacher say that at that moment, why did the teacher respond to that comment or not that comment?” and really understand the performance. Then they need to try it out in a situation of reduced complexity with high levels of support.

And it's in the enactment that they get lots of feedback from somebody who's good at it, and it could be a peer as well. And so, they practice it, and they try it out in their classroom, and with somebody to give them support, to give them feedback, maybe coaching while they try it out, and then to come back to the whole group and to iterate the cycle again. Maybe we'll videotape the teacher trying it out and then share that video with the group, analyze it, thinking about, “what could you do to make that even better next time or what do we need to do to tweak the model so that it works really well for your kids?” And either, do the cycle again with a new layer of information or a new level of challenge, or just say, “let's work on something else now.” That cycle is called the “cycle of investigation and enactment,” and I have a lot of confidence that when teachers go through those cycles, that they learn their brains out and their performance improves.

What do you believe is the ideal form of professional development? Can you share an example of this?

That model can be held in lots of different ways. One way that that could be held is in a professional learning community or professional development grants, or some opportunity for teachers to work together with a coach in a sustained long-term way. The cycle of investigation and enactment that I described is pretty complex work that requires teachers to be vulnerable and take risks with each other, and to open up their practice to each other. In the absence of a strong sense of community, that's not likely to happen. Most people are quite private about their practice: they feel insecure about it or they feel like they're going to be judged, or made fun of if they make a mistake.

What happens when you have a long-term group like a professional learning community is that you get a chance to get to know each other, to trust each other, to build relationships, to kind of try something out and have it not work out that great and then have the group say, “I thought it was really interesting. Good for you for trying it out!”

That experience of falling a little bit and being caught by the group, that community feeling, is absolutely integral for people to take the risks that learning entails.

My ideal form, I don't think it needs to be in a particular model. It could be a series of department meetings if the department is well organized. It could be in a series of workshops with an outside provider. I think in general it's nice to have a long-term commitment from a group of people who work together, and ideally that group of people has a very similar practice. [For example], grade eight math teachers or kindergarten through grade two ELA teachers...that the practice is quite similar so that their heads are in the same space. It's also hard for a grade eight math teacher to give meaningful feedback to a kindergarten literacy teacher...the work is so different.

My fantasy professional development situation is a small group of people who work together over time on particular practices, where they're iterating on a small set of focused practices where they're developing community and developing trust. A really nice example of this kind of work in action is a group that I'm working with at St. Thomas high school: they're the math teachers and they teach from grade seven to grade 11. We're working with nine different teachers who all signed up to join a professional development improvement grant—they got the grant and they hired me to orchestrate the work. What we did at the beginning is we talked about, "what is high-quality math instruction?" and we had everybody articulate what they thought are the features of high-quality math instruction.

Then we looked at a video of some high-quality math instruction and said, "what do you think about this, what sticks out to you about this, what makes sense to you about this, what compels you about this, now that we've seen this, does that just change your vision?" And then we added on some more information to the vision. Then we looked at rubrics that have been developed: the instructional quality assessment rubrics for evaluating math instruction. Nobody had ever seen a rubric for teaching before, so it was a little scary as people were maybe self-assessing as they were filling it out. "This is what math educators think high-quality math instruction looks like. What do you think about this?" Then they again refined their vision. At each step the vision is becoming more elaborate and more sophisticated, and they're kind of setting their sights a little bit further and developing more ambitious vision, which I found really exciting. Then we said, "of this list, which of these things really sticks out to you as most interesting or the thing you'd like to zoom in on to work on yourselves?" And they said quite quickly that the thing they all wanted to work on the most was improving their whole-group discussions: how could they get the kids talking to each other about big ideas in math after completing complex tasks? So great, we set that as our vision.

Over the next six sessions what we did is I would offer a little bit of research or a video, or something to get them thinking about the elements of a high-quality whole-group discussion. We began to label different moves of great teachers in whole-group discussions. They started to notice things like what effective teachers do is they allow lots of wait time. They also don't immediately say, "yes, that's the right answer!" because they then shut down the conversation. Or "no, that's not the right answer; what does anybody else think/did anybody get a different answer/how did you figure it out/what other ways could we find to figure out this problem?"

They noticed that their own instruction needed to improve as they began to decompose this practice. So they would set goals for themselves and then they would co-plan a lesson—people who taught the same grade—those two people would go teach the lesson, really working on the whole-group discussion, they would give each other feedback on the whole-group discussion using an evaluation tool that we developed together, and then we'd bring that video to the class. So they'd already been observed, they already talked about it and debriefed it. Then we bring it back to the group at our next session, we watch the video, and we give each other feedback using that same observation grid.

It was extraordinary to me to see how the practice is shifting, with people just getting a little bit of time to work together, to put their heads together, to co-plan, to think about what they're doing, and to act with intention in an area that they hadn't maybe been intentional [in] before. Their practices evolved and [have] gotten so much deeper. One participant said to me, "I don't think math is what I used to think math was"; her ideas have really changed.

We're now in our third year together. Every year we take a different lens: we did a whole-group discussion [and] now we're working on developing complex tasks because they realized if you don't have something juicy to talk about, it's hard to have a good conversation. Every year we take a different slice, and the practice is evolving. More and more people want to join the group. What's happening is that in the math department, people are actually talking to each other about they're doing. In the past they would have planned on their own—now they're co-planning more, they're working on tasks together, they're developing a repertoire of lessons that others are using. It's gone from quite a private practice to quite a public practice. They were strong teachers to begin with. They're a very smart group of hard-working extraordinary teachers, but in the absence of a chance to work together and put their heads together, that structure will limit their capacity for excellence. Using this model that was provided through this grant, they were able to really take their practice to the next level.

The response could be, “well, they had money to have time to do it.” How do you envision doing that without having money? Is that possible?

It’s possible, but it takes a tremendous amount of creativity on the part of the principal and the school leadership team. There is actually a lot of money in schools. There is a lot of money that goes to all sorts of different important places, but when there are a lot of different competing agendas—competing visions, competing ideas about what constitutes high-quality PD—then the money doesn’t always go the same place. In that disbursement you end up often not feeling any improvement or any change because you’ve got one person working on this thing here and one person working over there.

In the end, the school doesn’t get better...you’re not developing a kind of community resources. The costs of this are the minimal cost of my consulting fees and subbing fees for nine teachers for six days a year. That is not a lot of money when you think about how much schools and school boards pay to have, for example, one famous person come for the day and do an inspirational talk...that is much more than the cost of the substitution fees for those days. The first thing that’s important is that we really need a clear vision of what our goals are and to align our resources in that direction. The second thing that we need is to use what is already there better: make more of the resources that currently exist. All teachers and public schools have at least 10 days of professional development days. Those days are hardly ever used for anything but teachers doing “their own thing” like writing their report cards. It’s important that teachers have time to do that, but if they’re professional development days, it’s my idea that at least some of those should be used for professional development.

And if you have a principal with a vision who’s in the same place and can really “dig in” and build something amazing, you could have a theme for five years that you’re working on. Five years times 10 days with teachers is 50 days of professional development...is universe changing...there’s a lot of potential there. Even things like principals arranging to have teachers who teach the same subject in the same grade to have a common period. In the absence of teachers having time in their schedule to collaborate to put their heads together, it’s unlikely that they’re going to. And that’s not rocket science—that’s just the logistics of scheduling. I think that we have really underestimated the potential of our current resources. Obviously, I would love to have more money for PD but I don’t think it’s necessary to really move the practice of teachers in Quebec.

What is your stance on one-time professional development sessions?

My stance is that if all we can get is a one-off, [then] we should take it. We should use every single opportunity that we have to give teachers opportunities to learn and to grow together. I also think that it's hard to do much in a short session. If you don't have teachers that get to work with each other over time, it's hard [for them to] develop the trust that learning entails. There is always potential when you get people together and you give them some protected time. The question is not, "let's throw away all the one-offs," but let's think first of all, "How can we minimize the one-offs and grow the long-term projects?" Think about the one-offs as being series of things. For example, if all the teachers are going to the same six one-offs, why don't we just think of those six things as a series?

Finally, if all we have is a one-off, to say, "what is potentially learnable in a one-off?" There are things that are potentially learnable. One thing that can happen in those sessions is that those could be like "public service announcements" or advertising for more sustained long-term projects. [For example], "I have an hour with teachers. What am I going to do?" "I'm going to tell them about what they can do with the PDIG [Professional Development and Innovation Grant]. This is the PDIG model. Here is the application form. I'll help you fill it out." I'm using that hour to mobilize PD that I think might work.

Another thing that can happen there is that you can think about it as an opportunity for networking. It is very important for teachers to get to know each other and to build communities and networks across schools and school boards. If your goal is to connect teachers, you can have a session that's like speed-dating for English teachers...and they can share a unit that you developed and trade e-mail addresses if you want to get in touch with each other...just as a premise of getting people to connect with each other.

Finally, the other thing you can do with a one-off is think about it as "it's not going to teach teachers how to radically improve their practices...it's not going to change school life...it's not going to improve instruction in a significant way," but sometimes a one-off has the potential to tweak a practice. Tweaking is important. If we're constantly tweaking, over time we might get a little bit better. So we'll take that opportunity to tweak. That would mean teachers can learn something that doesn't require a change in an epistemic stance. As long as it doesn't require them to radically reimagine what they think of as teaching or learning or knowledge, or thinking. An example of something might be, "you keep your grades in a grade book by hand, [which] takes a lot of time. You could keep your grade book online using this program. Here you go!"

If a teacher is not assessing their students accurately, if their judgments aren't sound, this is not going to be improving their practice. But it's a tiny tweak that might save them a couple of hours a semester—that couple of hours a semester might be exactly what they need to go to the gym and feel healthier, happier, and more grounded, and that might lead them to eventually seek professional development on developing more sound judgments about their students' thinking and learning. It's not optimal, but there is potential.

A concern about professional development is that when there is no enticement or it's not mandated, educators who might benefit most from professional development do not seek it. How do you think all educators might become seekers of PD?

The question that you're asking gets to a theory of change at scale: "How do we move entire organizations in a different direction?" And what often happens is that if we think about the normal curve...we've got a couple of teachers who are really struggling and they're killing the mood in the school, and their kids are frustrated with them. Most of your teachers are pretty competent, most of your teachers are doing a pretty good job; everything is great. And then you've got a few teachers who are serious leaders, who are setting a positive tone and they are making schools exciting, wonderful places for kids to learn and grow. Often what happens is that PD targets the teachers who are most struggling: "You guys are bringing us down. We want to give you intensive forms of support so that you will stop taking so much attention and giving me so many parent calls, and so on." What happens is that often you make serious investments with these teachers and they grow very little. Or you set up PD for them and they don't choose it.

Principals, in particular, have this experience of spending energy and resources on teachers who are not learning, and they become discouraged and sort of pull off from PD because there's no motivation to do that any more. I encourage principals to actually put those teachers aside in their mind for a little while and think about these teachers at the top end of the curve—those teachers that with a very modest investment of professional resources of time [and] energy will grow tremendously because they want it, they're not struggling with will. So what happens is that they will grow and they will support the teachers who are doing pretty well. [For example], your department leaders or your social leaders, the people who sort of set the tone—invest in them, and they will shift what's considered normal to improve.

That's the goal. You water the flowers, not the stones, and what happens is that these stones find themselves so far way from what the rest of the school is doing, that they either step it up a notch and say, "I want to get on board. It seems like everybody is in a PLC. I'm starting to feel left out. Maybe I should join a PLC too." It's the social pressure that gets them to move—the light, not the fire, so to speak—and they step up their performance, or they say, "You know what, I really don't fit in in this community any more. Maybe teaching isn't for me. Maybe I should retire. Maybe I should look into a different career." [Any of those realizations] are totally fine and totally appropriate.

If you make your initial investments with the teachers who are willing, passionate, excited and you set them up to mentor somebody else in the department that they really like working with, then what happens is you shift what's normal, you put tension on the lower end of performance and those people step up or step out. That is my theory of change in organizations. It's the easiest way to move an organization. It's the most efficient way to move an organization. It's also the one that feels the best because principals are making investments and they're seeing improvements, which motivates them to work harder to make more investments. And the positive cycle of energy builds, rather than feeling like, "I'm doing all this work and nothing is happening." So let's just not do the work that doesn't feel good and we'll take the path of least resistance, which actually is the most effective path.

In closing, how would like to wrap this session up?

If we figure out how to lead high-quality professional development for teachers, our schools will become radically different places. So much attention goes on thinking about the kids' thinking, but we really need to invest in supporting the teachers' thinking. Because if the teachers are learning and growing, their kids will be learning and growing. And if we improve the learning opportunities for teachers, our kids will do better in school and our society as a whole will improve. I'm absolutely convinced that professional development is one of the greatest levers for social change that we have.



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