Issues and Perspectives

Peer Coaching in a Research-Based Teachers' Professional Learning Method for Lifelong Learning: A Perspective

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Teacher professional development (PD) has been claimed to be the foundation for transforming school culture. Any PD activity with a human infrastructure that is composed of teachers, researchers, and policy makers who together form a professional learning community (PLC) situated in a local school must incorporate the team's appreciation of collective efficacy and sense of community in the learning environment. A PLC must exemplify the concept of ongoing collaborative experiential learning through experimentation and reflection on emerging practices. It is expected, therefore, that with everyone's active involvement in the support structure, teachers' PD will be positively impacted and reflected in approaches to professional development.

Fundamental to the adult learning environment is the process of collaborative inquiry where participants critically reflect on their own experiences. The process of collaborative inquiry encapsulates the notion that as teachers are regarded as lifelong learners, they need to gather insights from their experiences with the support of their colleagues to ensure that their learning process contributes to the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Collaborative inquiry captures the idea of co-learning PD where professional knowledge and skills are acquired and sustained in an authentic teaching environment that aims to foster sustainable changes in teaching practices. Grounded in the principles of adult learning, this article presents a methodological perspective on how educational institutions can form a professional learning community within the school context where problems from past experiences are critically examined and serve as a foundation to professionally reflect, think, and act.

Il a été affirmé que le développement professionnel des enseignants est la base de la transformation de la culture scolaire. Toute activité liée au développement professionnel ayant une infrastructure humaine composée d'enseignants, de chercheurs et de décideurs qui forment une communauté d'apprentissage professionnelle (CAP) dans une école locale doit incorporer l'appréciation de l'équipe pour l'efficacité collective et le sentiment de communauté dans le milieu d'apprentissage. Une CAP doit illustrer, par l'expérimentation et la réflexion sur les pratiques émergentes, le concept de l'apprentissage expérientiel collaboratif et continu. On s'attend alors que l'implication active de tout le monde dans la structure de soutien aura un impact positif sur le développement professionnel des enseignants et sur les approches à ce cheminement.

Le processus d'enquête collaborative où les participants se livrent à une réflexion critique sur leurs propres expériences constitue un élément fondamental du milieu de l'éducation des

adultes. L'enquête en collaboration résume la notion qu'en tant qu'apprenants à vie, les enseignants se doivent de recueillir des connaissances de leurs expériences avec l'appui de leurs collègues et pour s'assurer que leur cheminement contribue à l'amélioration de la qualité de l'enseignement et des résultats d'apprentissage. L'enquête collaborative englobe l'idée du co-apprentissage dans le contexte du développement professionnel au cours duquel des connaissances et des habiletés professionnelles sont acquises et maintenues dans un milieu pédagogique authentique qui vise la promotion de changements durables dans la pratique enseignante. Fondée sur les principes de la formation des adultes, cet article présente une perspective méthodologique sur la formation, par les établissements d'enseignement, d'une communauté d'apprentissage professionnelle dans un milieu scolaire où les expériences du passé font l'objet d'un examen critique et servent de base à des réflexions et des actions professionnelles.

Knowledge utilization in education has been predominantly understood in terms of the links between policy, research, and practice. Dimmock (2016) argues that policy makers, researchers, and teachers should be in a dynamic relationship grounded in the idea that efficient knowledge production is dependent on each of their roles. This assumption calls for knowledge dissemination through a professional development (PD) model that goes beyond traditional workshops, conferences, and training in order to form a learning community established within the context of emerging trends in educational practice. Dimmock (2016) suggests that such a PD model must be iterative, participatory, extended, and situated in schools where actual practice is observed by researchers, policy makers, and teachers who collaboratively form a community of learning and inquiry. Since learning takes place in this context, everyone envisions themselves as educable adult lifelong learners who are preparing themselves for the uncertainties of the future (Siivonen, 2016; Field, Gallacher, & Ingram, 2009), in particular when considering the dynamic nature of the teaching profession.

Traditional PD programs, which usually follow a pattern of having experts discuss various teaching techniques before an audience of teachers, seem inadequate in addressing concerns related to effective teaching and instruction (Knight, 2006). Hargreaves (2000) claimed that school-based PD approaches, other than the traditional activities, generate substantial knowledge production and take one of three forms: (1) action research and constant communication between and among teachers and school heads, (2) formation of professional learning communities which are focused on finding solutions to school-based problems; and (3) networking among professional learning communities. It is thus recommended that such PD approaches be focused on pedagogical interventions which substantially address linking prior teaching trends to emerging ones, initiating the changing of teachers' beliefs about the dynamics of teaching and learning, and embracing the idea of learning differences among students. In this sense, teachers as adult learners expand their complex roles not only for the benefit of their students but more so for themselves as they develop new perspectives in understanding their personal and professional strengths.

Although studies have shown that peer coaching is an effective means of accomplishing on-going and sustained instructional improvement (Knight, 2006; Neufeld & Roper, 2003), it is imperative to note that the success relies on teachers' resilience (Knight, 2009). Peer coaches are most effective in ensuring professional learning only when teachers are willing to cooperate with them. Teachers' positive responses, which demonstrate their desire to know what they already know and recognize the gaps in their own understanding, serve as their intrinsic

motivation to appreciate learning (Drewery, Nevison, Pretti, & Pennaforte, 2017; Ryan & Deci 2000). This sustained motivation to adult professional learning can be accomplished through frequent and collaborative interaction in a professional learner-friendly environment which guarantees that teachers feel respected, unafraid of taking risks, and clearly recognizing the role of coaches as peers rather than administrators or evaluators (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Thus, this paper presents a sustainable methodology for education stakeholders that can be utilized in research practice when forming of a professional learning community in order to promote best practices that suit specific school contexts.

Raising the Bar for Teacher Professionals

Continuing education is an essential aspect within and across professions. Teachers are no exemption to this idea. Cochran-Smith (2003) recommends that nurturing teacher professionals requires making them actively involved in the process of developing an inquiry lens through research about their own instructional practices. By engaging in collaborative action research about their own pedagogies, they may increase their personal awareness of their self-improvement efforts and identify areas which need pro-active approaches to seek out new learning orientations.

According to Rust (2009), teacher research is a method which can serve as a bridge between theory and the knowledge generated from practice. In fact, it can be considered a unifying method which involves the interplay of teachers, university researchers, and policy makers with the following dynamic interactions: (1) teachers presenting the current problems which require critical solutions through collaborative problem-solving techniques, (2) researchers conducting a deeply rooted evidenced-based analysis of the problem and providing solutions on the complexity of the classroom environment, and (3) policy-makers utilizing the contextualized and evidence-based solutions to serve as forefront to decisions on educational policy reforms (Wesley & Buysse, 2006). In these dynamics, it can be said that the teachers' roles are integral to the change process (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 1991; 2001), while at the same time empowering them to become equally authoritative in educational improvement. Throughout the process however, a school-based teacher research activity entails a willingness and an open-mindedness, as all stakeholders engage in the mobilization of knowledge to raise their own professionalism.

Irrespective of any policy initiative, teachers' expertise must be at the center of any PD activity (Dadds, 2014). Thus, teachers' self-efficacy, understanding of the teaching and learning process, and decision-making must be prioritized in order to set the preconditions and maximize the learning outcomes. Such prioritization ensures that teachers develop a reflective practice where they acquire the skills to clarify assumptions about the impact of educational initiatives. Peer coaching as a form of PD encompasses these characteristics with the overall impact of improved professionalism (Lu, 2010) as teachers become open to accepting professional criticism: a positive indicator that adult learners are receptive of collegial insights (Ovens, 2004; Hasbrouck, 1997).

Coaching a School-based Research Practice

Today, teachers are encouraged to conduct research about their own practice in order to expose them to PD activities that resemble action research which favors teachers' empowerment and

the school community (Kailin, 2002; Magos, 2007). However, teachers' initial resistance to research oriented PD activities is usually coupled with challenges as they are typically more focused on teaching rather than researching. Therefore, incorporating peer coaching in a research-based PD model can be an optimistic move to facilitate content-focused learning which can help teachers improve their teaching (Knight, 2009). Based on studies conducted by Knight (2009), Knight and Cornett (2009), Neufeld and Roper (2003), and Shidler (2009), the features of effective coaching can be summarized as follows: (1) instructing for specific content, (2) modeling techniques and teaching practices, (3) observing classroom teaching, and (4) consulting for evaluation and reflection.

Given the features of coaching, the coach plays a vital role in making a learning community maximize its learning process by encouraging reflection in areas that are crucial for student learning and development. Wynne (2002) claims that adult learners commit to learning when they see immediate application to real life situations. Thus, the role of the coaches, which is to facilitate the learning process and acknowledge the full potential of the teachers, is crucial to this type of PD activity. Collaboratively, teachers and coaches contribute or share insights as to which instructional practice will be most effective for any given lesson. Prior to the actual classroom teaching, the instructional coach models these teaching strategies to address misconceptions and to mock-up the appropriate teaching strategy. Afterwards, the instructional coach observes the teachers' classroom teaching and provides feedback. Post-lesson consultations are often conducted so that teachers may discuss their learning based on feedback from the classroom observations, analyze and reflect on their instruction, collect evidence on their work and its impact, and eventually refine their teaching practice. The primary objective of peer coaching is to accelerate learning by building the teachers' instructional capacity through the implementation of appropriate and effective teaching strategies (Knight & Cornett, 2009; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Shidler, 2009).

Traditionally, universities serve as the locus of educational research. However, Dimmock (2016) suggests that schools rather than universities should be considered as the focus of educational research because the school setting brings about locally-based interventions, meaning solutions to existing problems are contextualized. The dynamics of such a professional learning community is that university researchers can serve as peer coaches or mentors on the emerging theories and practices, and teachers serve as key practitioners to verify the effectiveness of these emerging trends. Such partnerships promote equal and valuable roles in the knowledge generation whereby researchers take the lead to undertake the tasks in understanding the problems and solutions while teachers affirm them and later benefit from the research gains (Dimmock, 2016).

Research-based Teacher Learning for Improved Professional Practice

Educational research is usually compelled to aim for improved practice. Thus, research-based professional learning communities should be institutionalized and formalized whereby policies and PD structures are contextually focused into a series of activities that are expected to be attained through iterative implementations. Through peer coaching, teams can collaboratively design a working condition that aims to investigate current problems and later explore the overall facet of achieving a positive outcome. Research serves as the fulcrum of the PLC wherein knowledge generation is at the center of the learning process (Dimmock, 2016). Through peer coaching, institutions involved can establish interdependency with a mutual understanding so

that roles can be unconsciously switched in the process of research design, data gathering, and interpretation of desired results. This complements Hord's (1997) claim that PLCs can utilize schools when focusing on enhanced professional practice,

> [a school] ... is a place... in which the teachers ... and ... administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; ... this arrangement may also be termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. The notion, therefore, draws attention to the potential for a range of people, based inside and outside a school, to mutually enhance each other's and pupils' learning as well as school development. (p. 1)

Although experience is considered a robust source of information in terms of career development, it is undeniable that tacit knowledge and research outcomes generate a better combination, and that peer coaching may establish a sustainable working professional community. As researchers possess significant amount of tacit knowledge, the teachers possess rich amounts of evidenced-based outcomes of theories. Thus, peer coaching in a professional learning community is a promising method that can be integrated in a research-based PD and inquiry learning. In essence, this method builds a collaborative inquiry that encourages adult and continuing professional learners to conduct investigation of their knowledge and experiences that may improve their points of view and habits of the mind.

Conclusion

This paper was conceptualized around the idea that educational research should be a dynamic engagement where knowledge is participatory, generated with the equal involvement of the three main educational movers: teachers who disseminate knowledge, university researchers who generate knowledge, and policy makers who implement polices centered on established and research-based facts. Our conceptualization of educational research aligns with the study by Toom, Pietarinen, Soini, and Pyhalto (2017) who maintain that social interactions in a professional learning community provide support and opportunities to improve agentic learning. A professional learning community embodies the principle of adult social learning in that it is interdisciplinary, and may result in breaking the barriers of social interaction, reduced negative self-image, increased self-confidence, and the development of an active learning attitude since it is "a cooperative process of problem solving, where social scientists—researchers—and the research subjects are peer-partners" (Boog, Preece, Slagter, & Zeelen, 2008, p. 3). Utilizing schools as the locus to generate knowledge is a promising venue to merge the efforts of educational institutions whereby each of them improves their profession beyond theoretical realms.

In affirming the role of teachers in successful educational reforms, any professional development effort must also recognize their critical capacity, professional autonomy, and self-esteem, and it must revolve around the main objective of bringing together teachers to consolidate their ideas and strengthen the impacts of innovations for the improvement of the school culture (Toom et al. 2017). Moreover, it must incorporate the inter-professional roles played by all three stakeholders (teachers, researchers, and policy-makers) wherein their collaborative negotiation is focused on theory and practice in order to raise awareness about the principles of dialogic learning. Finally, in this type of PD activity, each member contributes to

the diversity of knowledge through an inter-professional and socially-constructive dialogue which gives them ideas to display leadership roles in the implementation of didactic learning.

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