

Research provocation: Creating opportunities for deeper authentic learning for teachers to improve teaching and learning in schools

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ABSTRACT

The goal of teacher professional development should not only be to improve knowledge of the subject matter, but also to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own teaching practices and consider how they can better support learners in their classrooms. For professional development to be effective and purposeful, it must support teachers during the crucial implementation phase where they directly apply what they "learn" to what they "do" in their classrooms. This paper attempts to explore the implications of a social constructivist Vygotskian model as it applies to teacher development, and how it can increase opportunities for deeper authentic reflection on teaching practices in the classroom, and support the creation of environments that nurture authentic teacher collaboration and teacher autonomy.

Keywords: Teacher development, teacher education, social constructivism, zone of proximal development, professional learning communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers, in many ways, play an important role as agents of the future. More than any other profession, teaching has the power to influence and foster ethical leadership; the capacity to inspire lifelong learning; and to provide our society with informed, caring and engaged citizens within local, national and global communities. However, like all professions, a system needs to be in place to ensure that the body of knowledge, skills, and practices that are necessary to do the work effectively are continually monitored and evaluated in a supportive non-threatening environment. For many schools, solutions to improve teaching still tend to be to send teachers to workshop-style training sessions during the academic year. Despite its prevalence, however, "the workshop model's track record for changing teachers' practice and learner achievement appears to be abysmal in many countries around the world" (Gulamhussein, 2013:2). If traditional professional development initiatives such as workshops are considered as ineffective by teachers, this paper suggests that it is because there is little or no

follow up provided in many schools to support these teachers during the crucial 'implementation' stage of learning in their own classrooms after attending these workshops. For professional development initiatives such as workshops to be effective, teachers require a system in their schools that provides them with the necessary opportunities to genuinely reflect on and explore how the newly acquired knowledge can be transferred into their own classroom teaching practice. In the same way that physically riding a bike is more difficult than listening to someone talk about how to ride a bike, employing a new teaching strategy in the classroom is in the same way, more difficult than simply being informed about the teaching strategy itself. Schools should not assume that teachers' learning is straightforward, with teachers merely needing to be presented with information about effective teaching strategies. More care and support using a teacher-as-learner approach is needed, in order to support the journey alongside the students in becoming autonomous lifelong learners.

The goal of professional development should not only be to improve teachers' knowledge of the subject matter that they are teaching, but it should also be to provide opportunities to reflect on their own teaching practices and consider how they can better support learners in the classroom. For professional development to be effective and purposeful, it must provide teachers with a way to directly apply what they 'learn' to what they 'do' in their teaching. The purpose of this paper is to consider how a social constructivist Vygotskian model of teacher development implemented directly in schools, can act as a catalyst in nurturing authentic teacher collaboration and teacher autonomy, accommodating the growth in each teacher's personal and professional development in the process. This paper begins with a description of the term 'constructivism' as it applies to teaching and learning, particularly on Vygotsky's model of the zone of proximal development, followed by a discussion on its implications on teacher development in schools.

WHAT IS CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY?

Constructivism as a learning theory suggests that knowledge is not something that is 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but rather something that is 'constructed' by the learners as they try to make sense of what is happening in the world around them. As Brooks and Brooks (2001) has posited "each of us makes sense of our world by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand" (p. 4). What we grow to understand, is either something that is carefully interpreted so that it conforms to our present set of rules for explaining and understanding our world, or it is something that is generated/constructed using a new set of rules that better describes what we see.

The social constructivist worldview goes even further to say that the whole process of knowledge construction and meaning making is a 'social' process and that meaningful learning occurs when learners are engaged in social activities. This treatment of knowledge and its relationship with the learner is quite different from the traditional transmission model of teaching that is predominant in many contemporary schools and classrooms. It involves a learning environment that offers opportunities for learners to design their own inquiries, continually ask questions, and take meaningful actions. It can also provide opportunities to explore new possibilities, synthesize new findings, all within a collaborative classroom 'community', assessing and re-evaluating what they know at each stage of the learning process. Schools new to this approach will require a whole new different set of tools and strategies to support teachers in its effective shift "from knowledge transmission to cultural transformation" (Warford, 2014:257) in the classroom. Teachers are required to view their role as more of a facilitator of learning, using their expert knowledge in the

field to assist in guiding learners through their own inquiries and actively creating new meaning and understanding. To do this effectively, it is advised that the teacher establishes shared control of the classroom where learners are provided with opportunities to freely discuss their own views in a non-threatening learning environment. They should be provided with opportunities to explore and reflect on their own actions during which the students evaluate and self-regulate their performance, and have a realistic appreciation of, and control over, their own learning process. What is important is that the focus be placed on the perspectives and standpoints of 'learners' in the classroom, where 'learner' refers not only to the students but to the teachers as well. The learning should be concept-driven and adapted to address learners' suppositions, with opportunities to inquire into problems that are of emerging relevance, seeking and valuing diversity in points of view through the whole process.

In this way, social constructivism as an approach in teaching can be viewed as a tool in promoting the nurturing of a learning environment that brings opportunities for creative tensions to develop in the classroom among all learners in the classroom. Time and space should be provided to explore and consider the nature of the knowledge that they have acquired, and the implications it has from varying perspectives. Constructivist pedagogy, given its approach to, and relationship with knowledge, can ensure that knowledge is treated equally in a fair and even playing field, and consequently nurturing the ability for learners to empathize and treat each other with mutual respect.

Due to the very nature of how knowledge is treated in this constructivist worldview, with the provision of appropriate guidance, teachers of all subject areas can learn to facilitate learning in a way that lets all learners in the classroom to approach knowledge objectively and develop a more intimate and critical relationship with it. For most schools, working to build a learning environment and curriculum with constructivist pedagogy in mind will require significant change at varying levels in the school's organizational structure.

At the administration level, the most crucial first step will be the development of a programme that supports the process in which teachers can learn to facilitate this new learning environment. For teachers to be able to facilitate an inquiry-based learning environment that puts learners at the forefront of discovery, they must first be able to model the process of inquiry themselves in their own teaching practice as Bruner (1971) suggests, "I have never seen anybody improve in the art and technique of inquiry by any means other than engaging in inquiry" (p. 94). Teachers need to be provided with opportunities to be engaged in their own inquiry but there must also be a system in place in the school to ensure that they are provided with support to do it effectively and meaningfully. One way in which this could be done is through the

implementation of a Vygotskian social-constructivist teacher development program that fosters a culture of learning amongst teachers and promotes the continuous renewal and re-evaluation of instructional methods and curricular offerings, in an atmosphere of collegiality, trust, and shared mission.

ZPD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON SCHOOL-BASED TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The zone of proximal development (zpd) has been defined by Vygotsky (1978) as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). According to Vygotsky, skills and understandings contained within a learner’s zpd are the ones that have not yet emerged but could emerge if the learner engaged in interactions with ‘more capable peers’. The most effective method of teaching/mentoring is thus, not the kind that is aimed at the learner’s level of independent performance (what they can do on their own) but rather those that are aimed within their zpd. This suggests two things: First, is that learning is a social activity. Second, is that learning in schools should occur in a context that is meaningful and not separated from learning that takes place in the ‘real world’ implying that out-of-school experiences should be related to the learner’s school experience. Vygotsky suggests that “learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978:90) emphasizing that while the process of learning must always be a collective effort, it is also what creates the environment that allows for the development. In this sense, Holzman (2009) suggests that “the ZPD is more usefully understood as a process than as a spatial-temporal entity, an activity rather than an actual zone, space, or distance” (p. 29).

Let us consider now, how this idea can be applied to helping teachers as learners, in developing and becoming more knowledgeable teachers. In the context of teacher development, Eun (2011) posits that “one of the biggest challenges for schools is in developing a sustainable ongoing professional development program in schools that supports teacher professional learning during and after the whole implementation process” (p. 329). While opportunities to participate in quality educational experiences such as workshops and in-school teacher professional development (PD) sessions can be beneficial in informing teachers of new educational theories, more direct attention and care needs to be placed in monitoring and following up with how the contents of the PD that teachers have been given can be implemented in their respective classrooms.

The details of how to structure such a program will differ depending on the context of each individual school, however what should be included in some form or another is a type of mentoring system that allows opportunities for teachers to discuss and collaborate with each other about one another’s practices. It would also help schools to define key components of a ‘teaching vision’ such as the one suggested by Beck and Kosnik (2014) as listed:

- i) A broad teacher role
- ii) Making learning relevant
- iii) Prioritizing key learning areas
- iv) Integrating learning
- v) Individualizing learning
- vi) Learner choice and autonomy
- vii) Collaboration and co-learning
- viii) Class community and a strong teacher-learner relationship
- ix) Inclusion and equity
- x) Work-life balance (for both teacher and learners)

These school derived visions of teaching can be used to provide structure to support each teacher in defining their professional learning journeys, and to help focus the discussions on their respective inquiries using a common language defined by the school. Teachers can then identify their own areas of improvement/refinement based on this common language and set it as their goal throughout the academic year. These goals can be carried over to the next academic year, or modified at the beginning of each year. All teachers should be assigned learning partners, to increase opportunities for teachers to discuss with one another issues concerning their own teaching that will support the interchange of valuable feedback that they could use to refine their practice.

With regard to the process of selecting learning partners, there is no prescribed manner in which this must be conducted. However, it will help if the learning partner has some level of familiarity to provide meaningful feedback in the area of improvement and refinement identified by the teacher. For example, if a particular teacher would like to implement more ICT into the classroom teaching and has read up a lot of strategies from books and attended workshops on ICT in the classroom but not entirely confident in the implementation into their own classroom, it would be advisable to have as a learning partner, one who has experience with a fair degree of success in embedding ICT into the curriculum, so that relevant and appropriate feedback can be given to the teacher accordingly during the various stages of implementation. Nevertheless, a lot of learning can still take place regardless of the learning partner’s background and expertise, as long as teachers are provided with the freedom to comfortably experiment with their teaching practices through trial and error, knowing that there is someone to provide them with

feedback on how they are going. The key is that they work collaboratively together and not in isolation. This will provide added assurance to teachers helping them feel that it is okay to make mistakes along the way as long as there is careful reflection and a clear direction towards overall improvements in teaching practice. In this way, it is suggested that the Vygotskian social constructivist model may be a useful alternative model in developing teachers as collaborative inquirers and reflective practitioners. At the same time, it can provide a sustainable ongoing structure in place in the school to support improvement in teaching practices of all teachers as they work towards overcoming their challenges within their respective zones of proximal development.

Once the decision has been taken by a school to implement such a program, the next step is to consider the systems and structures that will be necessary to put in place, to ensure that it operates effectively. Schools will need to ensure that participation in the program is manageable for all teachers given their already busy work schedule. Dedicated time will need to be allotted to encourage ongoing collaborative engagements between teachers that focus on teacher development. Simply allocating time for teacher collaboration in their weekly timetable, is not enough. Schools will need to provide a model and a structure for teachers to work collaboratively with one another, in addition to equipping teachers with new tools, knowledge and skills required to pursue their inquiries so that they can transfer it into their own practice. School leaders will be required to understand and appreciate the importance of their role as pedagogical leaders in fostering authentic teacher collaboration. There will need to be transparency and active exchanges of viewpoints during discussions between administrators and teachers for genuine teacher professional learning to happen on a school-wide scale. The teacher-learning environment will have to be “structured and organized in such a way that teachers are encouraged to be participants in learning and to develop a professional identity in the course of their participation” (Wubbels et al., 2004:285).

Focusing on the development of each individual teacher's professional identity is an important key to building a successful teacher development program. The Vygotskian constructivist model of teacher development cannot function effectively unless it is facilitated within a supportive and genuinely collaborative workspace where teachers as learners are guided by ongoing feedback provided by their learning partners through each stage of implementation and development. Schools that carefully monitor the development of each teacher by providing ongoing follow-up and support through the whole implementation process, are those that will begin to see firsthand how authentic collaboration can influence and positively impact on the culture and community of the school, consequently seeing improvements in the well-being and performance of all learners in the school community.

CONCLUSION

Some teachers and administrators may strongly believe that teacher inquiry is something that is always happening, and professional development programs are merely peripheral to what teachers learn in their day to day experiences. However, the argument made in this paper is that very rarely do these experiences in the classroom allow teachers to experience dramatic changes in their teaching practices if they are simply left to their own devices. Teachers will learn most when given the proper support in the form of a structured program within the school that allows them to reflect, discuss, and collaborate with others on issues that concern them most regarding curriculum development and teaching practice, as teaching professionals. It should not be assumed therefore, that teachers are capable of genuine change on their own. The design of the program should be tailored in a way that allows for and requires that teachers work collaboratively and collectively with one another to create the environment necessary for working and developing as teacher learners within their respective zones of proximal development.

The placement of a structured program alone, however, will not necessarily guarantee that genuine teacher learning happens. In order for any kind of program to be effective, all members of the program will need to demonstrate an appropriate level of care, attention, respect and professionalism with one another as reflective practitioners for it to work. For teaching to become a truly collaborative profession, teachers will need to work within an environment where teacher autonomy is valued and supported by all members of the school community. These are some of the challenges that schools will need to consider when deciding to implement a teacher development program such as the one described in this paper inspired by the Vygotskian social constructivist model. A program of this nature will only work when a school culture is established that promotes the development of a professional learning community that allows teachers to genuinely and collaboratively inquire into their own teaching practices. Another important point to note here is that “Vygotsky's developmental theory does not posit a universal endpoint for development” (Eun, 2011:327). It should be an ongoing developmental journey towards becoming an even better teacher than the one they were before. It should be a continuous process that shifts its path in response to the constantly changing needs of the learners in the classroom, as well as the changing needs within the whole school community.

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