

Teacher Research

Effects on Professional Development and Professional Identity

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When early childhood teachers undertake teacher research as collaborative action at their sites, it changes the nature of professional development and shifts teachers' identities as professionals. Site-wide teacher research places teachers at the center of professional development efforts, up-ending the way professional development is traditionally organized. When long-term learning of teachers and working together in collegial relationships is valued, the culture of early childhood changes in ways that are sorely needed in this time of high stakes testing and increased pressure on the early childhood workforce. Carla Rinaldi highlights the role of the individual teacher and the group. "A cultured teacher not only has a multidisciplinary background, but possesses the culture of research, of curiosity, of working in a group: the culture of project-based thinking" (2005, 73). Both the group and the individual teacher benefit when schools engage research done within and by the group to address immediate challenges grounded in the teachers' real questions.

This paper describes how changes within the group and within individuals occur because of teacher research. It also examines the system of relationships that are created. Finally, it addresses the impact teacher research has on the culture of the teachers' schools.

At the group level, teachers and administrators think about professional development less as a top-down process and more as continual improvement, with strength drawn from the ranks of teachers. At the same time, the individual teacher's engagement in teacher research affects professional identity. Teachers who are researchers think of themselves as knowledge creators, a stance in stark contrast with teachers simply being receivers of knowledge. Teachers' views

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of themselves as capable of generating knowledge about children and learning and the practice of teaching enhance their identity as professionals. In my work with students and teacher inquiry groups, I have seen the powerful and immediate ways that teachers gain something like Rinaldi's "cultured" stance. It is evidenced in the way that teacher researchers relate their findings with voice and confidence, and frame their teaching lives so that problems they face with children, families, colleagues, or teaching environments become questions they address through inquiry. The results of their teacher research become immediate and specific strategies for action, as well as an expanded set of attitudes and perspectives that make real differences in daily practice and school relationships. Thus, while the tool is *research* (a term that sounds scary and off-putting to many teachers at first), the result is a group of teachers and leaders who see situations in classrooms and across sites as problems that they can address through focused, systematic, and collaborative study, that is, teacher research.

Professional development as teacher research: Changes within the group

If professional development is transformed by teacher research, then what does it become? Traditional models of professional development focus on problems framed by leadership that draw on external expertise, and are often arranged as one-time meetings when a presenter is available and shows up at a site to lead one or two discrete meetings bound in space and time and controlled externally. When teacher research is the engine of professional development, it is both local and creative (see Fig. 1). It's focus is on the teachers' curiosity that leads to asking good questions and seeking to answer them through observation. In addition, it emphasizes their ability to analyze their observations and other collected data, and to be reflective about their emotional reactions and pedagogical intentions.

Furthermore, engaging in teacher research changes how a school conducts their staff meetings. This influences how teachers use their time, the way they talk with each other, even the way the group begins to think about the time available to them for this work. Essentially, these changes mark a shift to an emphasis on process over discrete products. When this happens groups and schools make a choice to set aside time for the collaboration they need. When professional development is local, the teachers who are the most engaged in the teacher research process lead the inquiry and build the relational bonds throughout the site. The early childhood site has then created a socially constructed space where professional development happens continually as part of the interaction among the teachers.

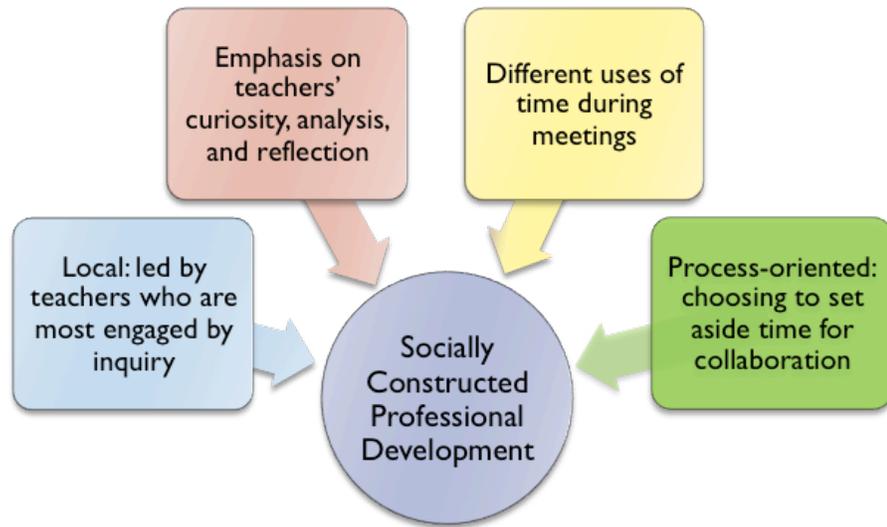


Figure 1. Elements of teacher research, seen as a form of socially constructed professional development.

Professional identity: Individual change

What about professional identity—the way we think about ourselves as teachers, administrators, or higher education faculty—the way we teach our classes? Teacher research starts with the stance of reflective practice, which is a stance of inquiry—a willingness to look at our own practice and say, “I don’t have it all right here and I’m interested in finding out what’s going right and what’s going wrong.” Teacher research begins as reflective practice where we look at the way we are working to seek better answers and continual improvement. Unlike research, reflective practice does not require a full cycle of systematic study. When teachers begin with reflective practice they adopt an inquiry change-oriented perspective. This allows those intrigued by teacher research to proceed slowly without needing to jump in with both feet just yet.

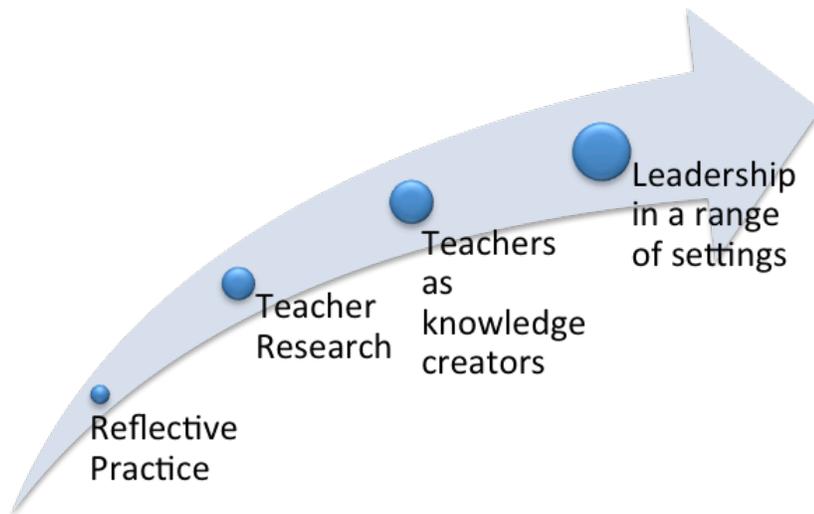


Figure 2. Development of teacher identity through four phases of increasing complexity and responsibility

This next phase of developing teacher identity is the idea of full-fledged teacher research, that is, someone who in a systematic way has decided to do teacher research, to call herself or himself a teacher researcher, and to take part in all that it entails in terms of finding an authentic and open-ended question, seeing what other people have written about the topic, collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on original data centered around the children, drawing implications of those findings, and presenting the full outcomes in a public setting, perhaps through a panel display, a talk, a newsletter article, or an email or blog posting sent to families. As I mentioned earlier, teachers who are teacher researchers become knowledge creators, which is a radical departure from the way we think about teachers, particularly, I think, in early childhood where the cult of the expert often looms large. With teacher research, a new kind of leadership arises directly from the teachers, and it shows up in a range of settings: at NAEYC national conferences, at local or state councils, or when speaking to people who make or influence early childhood or teacher education policies. The shift happens at the school level as well. As a teacher sees herself or himself as a knowledge creator, and is seen that way by school leadership, the teachers, not administrators, are the ones leading the family meetings, the orientation of new teachers, or the weekly staff meetings (see Fig. 2).

Socially constructed professional development: Challenges and successes

Teacher researcher Catherine Malin recently completed a study on the question of how Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood sites provide professional development to their staff members. The study was prompted through her own work at a Reggio Emilia center for over five years where she grew to be a teacher lead-

er. It was driven by the question, “How do teachers learn best?” as she had found herself as a mentor to less experienced staff, and struggled in some ways with the complexity of this role. To address her question, she looked comparatively at four schools, interviewing the directors, veteran teachers, and new teachers. Her findings revealed that mentorship was the most difficult aspect of professional development because it operated informally, was not provided in equal measure to staff, and seemed not to fit well within the non-hierarchical systems that these Reggio-inspired schools try to create among their teachers. Without Reggio’s specialized roles of the *pedagogista* (a kind of curriculum specialist) and the *atelierista* (an art teacher who also supports teachers in their visual representations of their inquiry), teachers expressed the need for stronger models of supervision.

The experiences at the sites around growing collaboration had opposite results. Directors talked about the culture of dialogue that their schools developed as they undertook forms of teacher research to support their Reggio-based project work with the children. An administrator from a publicly funded center in the San Francisco Bay Area talked about changes in her vision as she realized what the teachers were capable of doing and being. Through her leadership, this site adopted a Reggio-inspired practice, which impacted their teaching, the design and use of the school environment, and, as she describes here, their professional development. The director says:

Through the past nine years, I’ve come to a new and different understanding connected to the term professional development. I used to think of it as something [we] left the school to participate in whether . . . attending a college class, a workshop, a seminar, or a conference. What I have come to understand is that the strength of professional development lies in the dialogue among staff in their classroom teams or age-level groups (Malin 2011, 18).

This quote emphasizes how professional development has come home to the site and can be found in the developing expertise of the teachers and the group. It is no longer located outside the school in the heads of others, but is co-created by the staff.

Similarly, another director who leads a non-profit site that has also been inspired by Reggio practices for nearly ten years finds strength in her teachers and the group they form. This director says:

Opportunities to meet regularly and talk about their work with each other are the most potent professional growth that people experience: that chance to reflect about their own teaching, children, curriculum ideas, their challenges, and to get other perspectives. To have to articulate themselves and their experiences and observations and get feedback about that seems to excite people’s professional growth. They become more interested in taking risks, to continue to grow and learn as teachers (Malin 2011, 20-21).

This quote emphasizes the collegiality of teacher research that leads teachers to push themselves to attempt greater challenges and to do more in their daily practice. To extend the framework of the socially constructed space of profession-

al development, the school that engages in teacher research together as a group has what Vygotsky would refer to as a culturally distributed Zone of Proximal Development, that is wider and more open to deep learning than a school that adopts the traditional model of an outsider professional development provider who drops in to drop pearls of wisdom, and then is gone.

In conclusion, Carla Rinaldi emphasizes the wholeness of the process of teacher research when teachers are learners as well as “knowers,” and when their identities as teachers are their own best selves. Rinaldi says, “Above all we need teachers who feel like they truly belong to and participate in this process, as teachers, but most of all as people” (2005, 73).

References

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