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A Conceptual Model of Effective Teacher Learning

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Background

The complexity of what constitutes teacher learning and how to improve this learning has stymied researchers across multiple national and international contexts. Desimone (2009) has recently suggested, "The myriad of experiences that count as teacher learning pose a challenge for measuring professional development in causal studies,...measuring the core features of teachers' learning experiences is a way to address this challenge." (p. 181) Further, Desimone (2009) argues that "there is enough empirical evidence to suggest that there is in fact a consensus on a core set of features" (p.183) for teacher learning. This core set of features include: duration, collective participation, active learning, coherence, and content focus (Birman et al., 2000).

Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual model of effective teacher learning shaped by a systematic review of the literature.

Methods

Researchers have included an emphasis on the context of teacher learning (Borko, 2004); an acknowledgement that learning can occur through multiple pathways; and the recognition that growth and learning occur at individual rates (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). These researchers recognize that teacher learning is influenced not only by the characteristics or features of the learning opportunity itself but also by the characteristics of both the individual teacher and the environment in which they then teach (i.e., their school). For example, individual teacher characteristics such as prior knowledge, experience, beliefs, attitudes, and professional identity have all been shown to impact teacher learning and changes in teachers' instructional practice (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Carpenter, Franke, & Levi, 1998; Cohen & Ball, 1990; Feiman-Nemser, 1985; Grossman, 1990; Peressini et al., 2004; Porter, 1989; Richardson, 1996).

Still others have identified the characteristics of the school as impacting teacher learning and subsequent changes in practice include both school context factors and the school conditions in which teaching and learning take place. The contextual factors include characteristics of students being taught including prior achievement and relative disadvantage (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999); and the policy conditions at multiple levels (Desimone, 2002; Desimone, Birman, Porter, Garet, & Yoon, 2003; Desimone, Garet, Birman, Porter, & Yoon, 2002; Opfer, Henry & Mashburn, 2008; Porter, 1994; Spillane, 2004; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). School conditions include available support for learning and instruction including resources, time, and encouragement, high expectations, collective beliefs about learning, collective norms of practice, and monitoring by administrators (Banilower et al., 2005; Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Elmore & Burney, 1996; Guskey & Sparks, 1991; Jeanpierre et al., 2005; Opfer, Henry, & Mashburn, 2008; Nir & Bogler, 2008; Pedder et al., 2005; Pedder, 2006; Pedder, 2007; Scribner, 1999).

Frame

In order to understand teachers' learning and the effectiveness of teacher learning activities, we developed a model of teacher learning that includes the features of professional learning activities as experienced by teachers and then considered how this learning opportunity was mediated by participants' own learning values, their current teaching practices, and the context and conditions of their school that afforded or impeded their learning.

Research findings

The results of analysis undertaken to test the model are presented in paper 5 of this symposium.