

Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices

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Kathleen Smith

Teachers as Self-directed Learners

Active Positioning through Professional
Learning

 Springer

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Foreword

There has been considerable writing about the nature of teachers' professional development over the years. Even a cursory glance of the literature illustrates that despite the best efforts of many, a prevailing view of teacher development hinges on notions of working *on* teachers as opposed to working *with* teachers. The difference between these two views is stark. An important, and far too often overlooked, aspect of the difference revolves around teachers' knowledge and how it is recognised, valued and developed.

In the working *on* teachers approach to professional development, teachers tend to be positioned as members of a workforce that need 'upskilling', usually as a consequence of a change in policy and curriculum or in response to a new teaching activity/idea that has recently come to prominence. Under these circumstances, teachers are not necessarily seen as creators of knowledge. Rather, they are viewed as consumers and implementers of others' knowledge. Yet, on a daily basis, through the very interactions that define quality in learning and teaching, teachers are building their professional knowledge of practice – albeit idiosyncratic, tacit and highly contextualised. Recognising and valuing that knowledge is what matters for developing the teaching as a profession and so doing offers a window into understanding the complex and sophisticated work of teaching and the expertise that results from learning about it in meaningful ways.

In this book, Kathy Smith breaks new ground around these issues as she makes clear how working with teachers through professional learning impacts their practice and their understanding of student learning in new and powerful ways. The project at the heart of this text draws serious attention to the nature of professional learning and makes clear how valuing teachers as producers, not just users, of knowledge matters – it shapes their deeds and actions as professionals. There is little doubt, as her data makes clear, that for many teachers, being valued in this way is a new experience, an experience that changes how they come to see themselves, what they do and the way they go about doing it.

This book offers insights into the ways in which creating conditions for learning matter in shaping the way teachers come to see, and accept, the possibilities for their own growth and development. The professional learning approach Smith developed

through this project and the way in which she has researched it and now shares with the education community, in new ways. In so doing, she creates an invitation for education systems to think differently about how they work with their teachers – she offers evidence of real change through professional learning. More than that though, she also illustrates the importance of placing the teacher at the centre of their own pedagogical thinking and reasoning. In recognising and responding to that type of positioning, their issues, needs and concerns are not only met, but their practice is also challenged and further developed in ways that matter for their sense of efficacy and ultimately, their students' learning.

What it is that teachers know and are able to do has been a point of discussion for some time. However, much of that discussion has hinged on the work of those observing teaching, not necessarily those involved in it. Through this book, Smith offers an opportunity to see into what teachers know and are able to do from their perspective as a consequence of their ownership of their professional learning. As her research makes clear, that is not necessarily an easy task, but it is an important task. It is a task that is driven by a respect for, and a serious valuing of, teachers' professional knowledge of practice.

In reading this book, it becomes immediately obvious that sharpening the focus on professional learning leads to outcomes that cannot be mandated and certainly should not be seen as a model for precise duplication. As her research consistently demonstrates, there is a crucial element of professional learning that is deeply personal, so supporting teacher growth requires a form of planning and leadership that is inherently tied to context and to teachers' personal pedagogical needs and concerns. As she makes clear, creating a professional learning model that will solve the many and varied issues in teaching and learning is not the intention. However, it is a message that education systems need to come to grips with if teacher development is to genuinely respond to the needs of the profession.

Through this book, Smith shows us that the very nature of learning and teaching, and how teachers grapple with that on a daily basis, is a gateway to valuable professional learning. By developing principles of practice, by creating opportunities for pedagogical growth through the notion of conditions for learning, she illustrates how to better value teachers and teaching, their knowledge and the way that is developed, refined and enacted over time – these essence of learning.

I find this book to be a compelling and powerful account of research into professional learning that makes a difference. Research like this matters because it offers an opportunity to impact what teachers do and how. It goes well beyond superficial views of teaching as training or the simplistic pursuit of technical competence alone. I appreciated enormously the thoughtfulness, rigour and evidence displayed throughout the text in building a case for professional learning as a catalyst for educational change. I trust you arrive at a similar conclusion through your reading.

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About the Book

Research, at its best, exposes the complex weave of events and intricacies that are the fabric of routine. The familiar becomes extraordinary and from that moment on there is no going back; this clarity demands attention. Teachers, the professionals who weave the fabric of educational routine, those who are most familiar with the intricacies of this work, have an expertise and professional knowledge that provides a clarity about what matters in education. This is a story of research about teachers who share what they think matters and how they determine what they need to learn to become the teachers they want to be. After hearing this story, there is no going back; there is only one way forward.

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