

TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

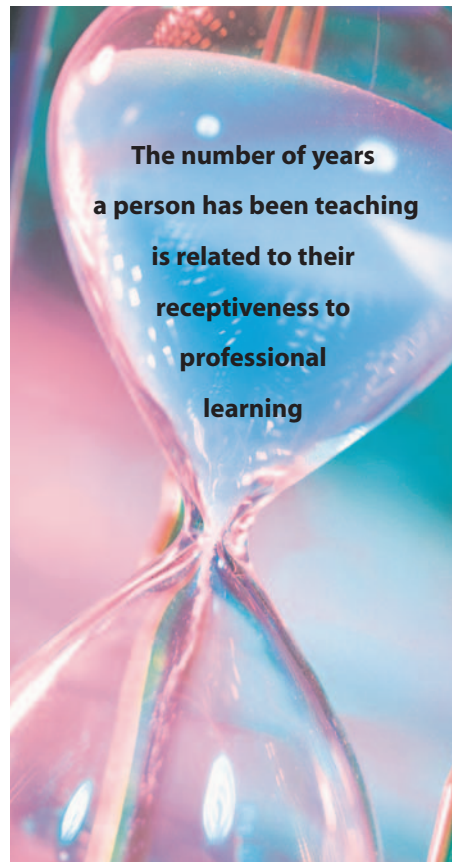
FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

Which teachers will be receptive?

By Bruce Torff

You've seen and heard all this before. Experienced veterans of professional development for teachers often have plenty to say concerning which teachers are likely to respond well to a professional development initiative and which tend to be more resistant.

Many of these veterans say that teacher attitudes about professional development tend to grow less favorable as their careers proceed, owing to some combination of age and years in the classroom trenches. It's widely believed as well that professional development initiatives are more highly regarded by elementary teachers than secondary ones. And gender is thought to play a part, with women seen as generally more supportive



of professional development relative to their male colleagues. Finally, teachers with a higher level of educational attainment are believed to be more resistant than their less-educated colleagues (after all, you typically can't tell a Ph.D.-toting university professor anything).

WHAT'S INSIDE

Voice of a teacher leader

Bill Ferriter explodes about being held accountable again.

PAGE 5

Lessons from a coach

Coach Mark Gideon lends them his ear.

PAGE 6

Focus on NSDC's standards

Joellen Killion describes the Resources standard.

PAGE 7

Research brief

Some kinds of parental involvement are better than others.

PAGE 9



National Staff
Development
Council
800-727-7288
www.nsd.org

This conventional wisdom about professional development has been neither supported nor refuted by research. A large body of literature describes design features that make professional development programs most effective — e.g. sustained initiatives linked to classroom practices and learning standards (Birman et al., 2000; Boyle, Laprianou, & Boyle, 2005; Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2000; Killion & Hirsh, 2001; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). Some scholars go so far as to include “teachers’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions” among the factors that predict the effectiveness of a professional development program (Newman et al., 2000, pp. 259; Smylie, 1988). But there has been no research specifying how or why these teacher characteristics make a difference.

Moving into the breach, a research project was conducted in which a survey was administered to 229 practicing elementary and secondary teachers (Torff, 2006; Torff & Sessions, in review; for validation data see Torff, Sessions, & Byrnes, 2005). The results lend support to the conventional wisdom about professional development, but also include some surprises.

Three stages of teacher attitudes

As teachers’ careers proceed, their attitudes about professional development appeared to fall out in three stages — first increasing, then decreasing, and then leveling out.

Stage 1

In the first three years, attitudes about professional development grew markedly more favorable. This increase seems to stem from the typical practice of having teachers complete a three-year probationary period before tenure. But if the exigencies of a tenure candidacy were teachers’ sole motive, their attitudes toward professional development would have started favorably and stayed that way. Instead, their attitudes brightened over those first three years, suggesting that something about teachers’ early experiences in the classroom motivated them to become more receptive to professional development assistance. In general, many teachers find these early years difficult, which seems understandable given that newcomers have few lessons in the filing cabinet

and little experience with lesson implementation, classroom management, and other fundamental skills of teaching. These difficulties may make teachers increasingly amenable to professional development — receptiveness likely to gain strength as tenure hearings draw near.

Stage 2

The second stage, from years three through 10 of a teaching career, showed a steep drop in attitudes about professional development. At the 10-year mark, teachers’ attitudes had declined to the level produced by newcomers to the profession. It’s unclear what caused this decline. Teachers may regard input from professional development providers as less desirable or needed after they develop a classroom working style (and secure tenure). In some cases, teachers’ personal experiences with professional development programs may have been less than optimal, causing them to sour on professional development in general.

But this decline did not continue after the first decade in the classroom.

Stage 3

In the third stage, with 10 or more years of classroom experience, teachers tended not to change their attitudes about professional development. Ten-year veterans and teachers with three times that much experience evinced similar attitudes about professional development — about the same as first-year teachers. Whatever factors caused teachers’ support for professional development to diminish between the third and tenth years of a teaching career, these factors apparently ceased to exert significant impact after year 10.

Development though these three stages was attributable (statistically) to teaching experience, not age. Mid-career entrants to the profession demonstrated the same three-stage progression as teachers who began immediately after college. Moreover, although the three-stage pattern was produced by both elementary and secondary teachers, the latter were less supportive of professional development at each stage. This gap grew wider over time, such that veteran elementary teachers were considerably more amenable to

Bruce Torff is associate professor of curriculum and teaching at Hofstra University. Contact him at catbat@hofstra.edu

Development though these three stages was attributable (statistically) to teaching experience, not age.



professional development than similarly experienced secondary teachers. Clearly, some of the study's findings support the conventional wisdom about professional development.

But other findings do not. It seems plausible that women might outpace men in support for professional development, given research showing men to have generally more rigidly-held beliefs (e.g. McGillicuddy-De Lisi & De Lisi, 2001). But gender was found to have no effect on attitudes about professional development. It also seems plausible that teachers might grow less amenable to professional development as they gain academic credits and degrees, since these experiences could be viewed as reducing the perceived need for further education. But educational attainment had no effect on attitudes about professional development.

So, research reveals the conventional wisdom about teachers' attitudes about professional development to be only partially accurate.

Implications for school-based professional learning

What do these findings mean for school-based professional development providers? Of course, teacher attitudes are but one of many factors bearing on the effectiveness of professional development programs (Newman et al., 2000; Smylie, 1988). To the extent that these attitudes influence program outcomes, research on teacher attitudes has implications for design and implementation professional development programs.

To begin with, the propitious time to intervene with a professional development initiative appears to be early in teachers' careers, but not as early as possible. Since receptiveness toward professional development rises for three years and then falls, the six-year period in which attitudes toward professional development are most favorable encompasses years one through six of teachers' careers. However, because of the increase in teachers' attitudes over the first three years, the optimal three-year period spans years two through four – not years one through three, as would have been the case had teachers' attitudes been consistently favorable over the first three years. To the extent that attitudes about professional development affect program outcomes, professional

development is best timed to be as near to the three-year mark as possible, not as early in teachers' careers as possible.

This suggestion seems consistent with the goal of timing professional development to avoid conflicts between school-based professional development initiatives and the requirements set out in teacher-certification regulations. Many states require teachers to earn a master's degree within the first few years following completion of a bachelor's (for those new teachers who don't already hold a master's). Moreover, states increasingly require schools to provide mentorship for first-year teachers — an alternative form of professional development administered by school districts (but one that differs from the "school-based professional development initiatives" discussed in this article, since the latter are not limited to first-year teachers and typically do not involve one-to-one tutelage). If many teachers are completing master's degrees and/or receiving mentorship early on, school-based professional development initiatives might well target teachers somewhat later, when teachers' attitudes are most favorable and degree programs and mentorship periods are well under way if not completed.

The findings also have implications for allocation of limited professional development resources. In some cases, school-based professional development administrators have little control over the population of teachers to be served, but in other cases they must decide which services to offer for which group of teachers. Consideration of participating teachers' characteristics can help determine what kind of professional development initiative to attempt. As noted, various design features optimize the effectiveness of professional development initiatives (e.g. sustained initiatives linked to classroom practices and learning standards) (Birman et al, 2000; Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2000; Killion & Hirsch, 2001; Newman et al., 2000). An analysis combining these features with participating teachers' characteristics best predicts how successful professional development initiatives are likely to be. Of course, professional development initiatives are most likely to be effective when optimally structured and delivered to teachers



Professional development initiatives are most likely to be effective when optimally structured and delivered to teachers with the most favorable characteristics, and least likely to be effective when less-than-optimally structured and presented to teachers with less-than-favorable characteristics.

with the most favorable characteristics, and least likely to be effective when less-than-optimally structured and presented to teachers with less-than-favorable characteristics.

But most school-based professional development situations fall between these poles, raising issues concerning what kind of professional development to attempt (and which teachers with whom to attempt it). When working with teachers with less-than-favorable characteristics, it seems advisable to ensure that design features are optimized, even if that means devoting professional development resources to a comparatively smaller number of teachers – on the theory that making headway with a few teachers is better than serving a greater number of teachers with a program that faces too many obstacles to be effective. Conversely, when a professional development program serves teachers with favorable characteristics, less-than-optimal design features might be worth the risk, since the program’s shortcomings may be partly offset by supportive teacher attitudes.

It’s true: some teachers are more amenable to professional development than others. And research can determine which teachers are likely to lend strong support to a professional development initiative – something the conventional wisdom about professional development does with only partial accuracy. The best strategy for allocating school-based professional development resources is to analyze how a program’s design features will likely dovetail with the attitudes of participating teachers. This analysis has potential to enhance the effectiveness of school-based professional development, ultimately for the benefit of teachers and students.

References

Berliner, D. (1992). The nature of expertise in teaching. In Oser, F., Dick, A., & Patry, J. (Eds.), *Effective and responsible teaching* (p. 227-248). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Birman, B.F., Desimone, L., Porter, A.C., & Garet, M.S. (2000). Designing professional development that works. *Educational Leadership*, 57(8), 28-33.

Boyle, B., Laprianou, L., & Boyle, T. (2005). A longitudinal study of teacher change:

What makes professional development effective? *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 16, 1-27.

Garet, M.S., Porter, A. C., Desimone, L., Birman, B.F., & Yoon, K.S. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38, 915-945.

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

McGillicuddy-De Lisi, A.V. & De Lisi, R. (Eds.) (2001). *Biology, society, and behavior: The development of sex differences in cognition*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Killion, J. & Hirsh, S. (2001). Continuous learning: Top-quality professional development is key to teacher effectiveness. *American School Board Journal*, 188, 36-38.

Newmann, F.M., King, M.B., & Youngs, P. (2000). Professional development that addresses school capacity: Lessons from urban schools. *American Journal of Education*, 108, 259-299.

Smylie, M.A. (1988). The enhancement function of staff development: Organizational and psychological antecedents to individual teacher change. *American Educational Research Journal*, 23, 1-30.

Torff, B. (2006, April). Teacher characteristics that predict teachers’ attitudes about professional development. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, CA.

Torff, B. & Sessions, D. (in review). The development of teachers’ attitudes about professional development. *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Torff, B., Sessions, D., & Byrnes, K. (2005). Assessment of teachers’ attitudes about professional development. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 65, 914-924. ◆



Research can determine which teachers are likely to lend strong support to a professional development initiative — something the conventional wisdom about professional development does with only partial accuracy.