Chapter 26
Middle School Teachers’ Sensemaking of Job-Embedded Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss a multi-case study on how middle school teachers constructed understandings of their job-embedded learning experiences. The aim of the study was to explore how teachers made sense of and gave meaning to their learning experiences that occurred during the school day as they engaged in the work of being a teacher. Job-embedded learning experiences referred to any formal or informal learning opportunity that was grounded in the context of the school day and characterized by active learning and reflection. This chapter includes a detailed overview of the literature on effective professional development and the characteristics of job-embedded learning as each relates to the middle school context; the background and significance of the study; a description of the research design, methods, and procedures; a discussion of the research findings and subsequent implications for educators; and suggestions and recommendations for practice and future research.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars contend that the improvement of professional learning is critical for transforming schools, improving teacher quality, and increasing academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Guskey, 2009). Furthermore, scholars assert that by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and practices of teachers through embedded, ongoing, and intensive professional learning within the context of the teacher’s work environment, the achievement of students and teachers will be greater (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Jaafar & Earl, 2008; Leithwood & Earl, 2000; Wills & Sandholtz, 2009). However, most of the professional development in which teachers engage follows the traditional format of one-stop workshops in which little opportunity is given for collaborative planning and implementation of knowledge and skills learned in the teachers’ work context (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1067-3.ch026
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Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). These traditional forms of professional development have been widely criticized as shallow, top-down, and ineffective (e.g., Birman et al., 2000; Butler et al., 2004; Garet et al., 2001) while ultimately lacking the follow up and support necessary to deem such forms of professional development effective (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Zepeda, 1999, 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2012b, 2015). Thus, the professional learning of teachers is a task that must be assumed and revised if teachers are expected to improve their professional practice and ultimately increase student achievement and growth.

Consequently, little research has been conducted on alternative forms of professional development that include the key features of effective practice (Garet et al., 2001), the context and form of professional development in which teachers engage (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010), and the processes teachers use to make sense of professional development (Coburn, 2001). Greater attention to how teachers make sense of their professional learning experiences might offer ideas for revising current professional development practices as well as initiating changes in how teachers are supported during the school day. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to examine a study on how middle school teachers construct understandings of their job-embedded learning experiences. In particular, the aim of this study was to explore how middle school teachers make sense of and give meaning to their learning experiences that occur during the school day as they engage in the work of being a teacher.

BACKGROUND

Professional Development

Numerous scholars have studied what constitutes effective professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Hirsh, 2009; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008; Wei et al., 2010). Collectively, these scholars agree that the key features of effective professional development include a focus on content, an emphasis on active learning, attention to coherence, consideration of duration, and the encouragement of collective participation (Borko, 2004; Elmore, 2002; Wayne et al., 2008; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007; Zepeda, 2011b, 2012b). Understanding what makes professional development effective is critical to improving both teacher and student learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001). Furthermore, a focus on effective professional development not only increases the transfer of new knowledge and skills into practice, but it also encourages refinement of teaching and a sense of renewal (Pate & Thompson, 2003).

In addition, numerous research studies explicate the relationship among effective professional development, teacher quality, and adult learning. For instance, for professional development to have a positive influence on teacher learning, it should:

- **Incorporate hands-on activities (Borko, 2004; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009)**
- **Meet the needs of the teacher (Fenwick, 2004; Zepeda, 2011b, 2012b)**
- **Be sustained, embedded, and ongoing (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Hirsh, 2009; Yoon et al., 2007; Zepeda, 2011a, 2011b, 2012b)**
- **Be learning centered, knowledge centered, assessment centered, and community centered (Coggshall, Rasmussen, Colton, Milton, & Jacques, 2012; Hawley & Valli, 1999)**