Chapter 24

Developmental Changes in Teachers’ Attitudes About Professional Development

Bruce Torff
Hofstra University, USA

ABSTRACT

Teachers’ attitudes about professional development exert strong influence on the outcomes of professional-development programs. This chapter provides a review of the research literature in this area, pointing to a three-phase developmental pattern in these attitudes. This pattern is then elucidated with a theoretical model based on the development of teachers’ working styles in the classroom, as a function of processes of innovation and routinization. The three-phase model encompasses early career challenges, mid-career establishment of a working style, and later-career stability. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these data and theoretical model for optimal use of PD resources.

INTRODUCTION

These are challenging times for school administrators and others tasked with providing professional development (PD) programs for teachers. An untimely combination of educational-reform mandates and budget shortfalls has prompted renewed efforts to seek maximum return on investments in PD programs. Needs as such have motivated administrators and researchers to examine the factors associated with effective PD interventions.

This chapter explores one such factor, teachers’ attitudes about professional development. The chapter begins with a brief summary of research in this area, followed by a theoretical model of the development of these attitudes – one that accounts for a pattern in the research results. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research results and theoretical model for optimal investment of PD resources.

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RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVENESS OF PD INITIATIVES

An extensive body of literature is focused on the features and characteristics of professional development programs that make these programs effective in promoting teacher growth. For example, a great deal of evidence suggests that these programs are more efficacious when extended over a long period rather than conducted in a single session, responsive to teachers’ perceived needs and concerns, grounded in teacher practice rather than presented as general and abstract, and provided by individuals seen as credible and experienced by participating teachers (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Herrington & Daubenmire, 2016; McGill-Franzen & Allington; Newman, King, & Youngs, 2000; Supovitz, Mayer, & Kahle, 2000; Weiss & Pasley, 2006).

Less attention has been paid to teacher characteristics that influence the effectiveness of professional development (PD) initiatives (e.g., Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2001; Lumpe & Chambers, 2001; Haney, Czerniak, & Lumpe, 1996; Smylie, 1988; Sparks, 1988; Speck, 1996; van Aalderen-Smeets & van der Molen, 2015). For example, consider teachers’ attitudes about the PD programs in which they participate. An enormous body of literature in social psychology and elsewhere supports the common-sense belief that individuals with supportive attitudes gain more from any kind of initiative, educational or otherwise (Aist, 1987; Graham et al., 2002). PD initiatives are no exception; it follows that teachers who are eager to expand their skills are more likely to make headway in a PD program relative to teachers who would prefer not to participate (a fact not lost on individuals who provide these programs).

Of late, teachers’ attitudes about PD have begun to come under scrutiny, as providers of these programs search for ways to enhance teacher practice in these times of educational reform. Torff, Sessions, and Byrnes (2005) developed a survey instrument that assesses teachers’ attitudes about PD, entitled Teachers’ Attitudes about Professional Development (TAP). Development of the scale began with the drafting of 44 statements that reflect attitudes about PD. The statements were worded to encompass a range of PD formats (e.g., staff-development programs, college and university courses, professional-development workshops, teacher-training conferences, books, journals) and possible outcomes of PD initiatives (e.g., development of new teaching techniques, growth as a teacher, effect on teaching performance, familiarity with trends in the teaching profession, improvement of classroom instruction). Factor analysis and internal-consistency reliability analysis were employed to selected the best-performing items, resulting in a five-item instrument. To mitigate against response bias, three of the selected items describe favorable attitudes about PD (e.g., “I have been enriched by the professional development workshops I have attended”) and two items were worded for reverse scoring and thus describe unfavorable attitudes (e.g., “If I did not have to attend professional development events, I would not”). Results of a series of three instrument-evaluation studies indicate that the TAP scale produced scores with high internal-consistency reliability, a stable one-factor structure, and satisfactory construct and discriminant validity (relative to measures of need for social approval, need for cognition, authoritarianism, and teacher self-efficacy) (Torff, Sessions, & Byrnes, 2005). The results support the theoretical and practical utility of the construct and measure of teachers’ attitudes about professional development.

Implementation of the TAP instrument has produced some striking results. To begin with, not all factors that might plausibly be thought to influence teachers’ attitudes about PD actually exert such influence. Gender, for example, has not been found to affect teachers’ attitudes about PD, despite speculation that female teachers might be more open to PD than their male colleagues (Torff, & Byrnes, 2011; Torff & Sessions, 2008, 2009). Similarly, educational attainment has not been found to be associated with
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