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Teacher Effectiveness Research and Professional Learning: What if?

Alma Harris

Institute of Educational Leadership

University of Malaya, Malaysia

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Editorial correspondence can be addressed to:
Ms Jenny Lewis
International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement
86 Ellison Rd, Springwood 2777, NSW, Australia
admin@icsei.net

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All inquiries should be made to ICSEI:
86 Ellison Rd, Springwood 2777, NSW, Australia
Phone: +612 4751 7974
Fax: +612 4751 7974
Email: admin@icsei.net
Web: www.icsei.net

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Teacher Effectiveness Research and Professional Learning: What if?

Alma Harris
Institute of Educational Leadership
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that despite a wealth of literature on the subject of teacher effectiveness and a large body of empirical evidence about the forms of professional learning that are most effective it remains the case that a) professional learning at both pre-service and in-service levels would benefit from more input from this research base b) there is still investment in forms of professional learning with a weak or non existent evidence base where the 'new or innovative' outpace the empirically proven c) assessing the impact of professional learning, particularly in terms of teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes is still not prevalent. This paper expands upon each of these points and uses the example of professional learning communities to illustrate how practice and professional learning can be positively informed by the research on teacher effectiveness and school improvement. It also highlights a number of caveats. The paper concludes by asking 'what if' professional learning programmes were designed around principles derived directly from the SESI empirical evidence? 'What if research actually informed practice in ways that were powerful and productive and what if this was reciprocated?

Introduction

Over the past two and a half decades, the field of school improvement and school effectiveness (SESI) has generated a considerable body of empirical knowledge that has influenced the process of school improvement in a number of countries As a scientific field, SESI has gained international recognition for its scholarship, as the vast array of publications clearly demonstrates (Harris and Chrispeels, 2008, Chapman, 2012; Reynolds, 2009, Muijs, 2011). Yet, the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) in its many guises, including a range of commercial organizations, networks and global think tanks, is now guiding change and reform at a system level in many countries (Salsberg, 2013). Despite the quality of the empirical evidence and the extent of the scientific knowledge created by the SESI field, it remains the case that policy makers across the world are not routinely using the SESI evidence base to inform their educational change and reform approaches. The question is why not?

In order to address this question, the SESI field has engaged in a critical self-reflection in the past few years and has sought firstly, to reassert what is known about school/teacher effectiveness and improvement and secondly, to find more ways of communicating this scientific knowledge to policy makers, researchers and practitioners. In 2011, a set of papers was produced which clearly outline 'what is known' in the SESI field (Hopkins et al, 2011;Reynolds et al, 2011; Muijs et al, 2011). These 'State of the Art' papers were followed by a in depth, critical analysis of the reasons why many policy makers, practitioners and researchers seem not be turning to the SESI research base in any substantial or sustained way (Harris, Chapman, Reynolds and Muijs, 2013).

One of the conclusions from this analysis was that with the exception of the early school effectiveness research (SER) studies, it was fairly difficult to find a great deal of contemporary evidence of sustained take-up of the SESI research findings at the policy or practitioner level, except where they were already part of a mandated national strategy. While there will always be examples of policy makers who draw upon SESI findings to shape their reform efforts there are many others with fairly limited knowledge of this evidence base.

It could be argued that the school improvement research base has had greater contemporary influence on teachers, schools and systems than its school effectiveness counterpart. The school improvement field has had four clear phases of the development and is now moving into a fifth phase (Hopkins et al 2011). Without question, the SI research base remains influential and continues to inform improvement processes at the local and national level. But there are some important caveats. Increasingly, this research knowledge is disseminated to policy-makers and practitioners through a range of intermediary parties, such as consultants, 'think tanks' and research clearing houses. This has some clear advantages, in that these intermediaries are often skilled at presenting and disseminating information in policy-maker and practitioner-friendly formats, and can draw on a range of connections. However a real and present danger is that the school improvement findings can get distorted or filtered in ways that do not reflect or indeed, authentically represent the original evidence.

The SI field is particularly prone to commercialism and therefore is susceptible from pressure to generate new approaches, models or products. To this end, certain ideas from the

SI field have been given particular prominence. For example, the idea of 'capacity building' has become very popular and in some cases has been advocated as being separate from, rather than part of, the school improvement literature. Within the field of school improvement some ideas, it seem, prove to be more commercially attractive than others. This is also the case in the field of teacher effectiveness.

Teacher Effectiveness

The teacher effectiveness field is the one that should resonate most with practitioners. After all, the field has chiefly concerned itself with identifying those features or characteristics that are known to positively influence teachers' behavior, their professional learning and their classroom practice. It is this field that connects most to instructional and pedagogical knowledge. The development of TER in the 1960s and 1970s (see Muijs et al. 2011) did evoke significant interest, certainly among practitioners, and directly contributed to the production of manuals and textbooks for use in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (e.g. Borich 2010; Muijs and Reynolds 2011; Ornstein and Lasley 2003). In addition, there are a number of strong examples of professional learning programmes drawing upon the teacher effectiveness research base (Muijs and Reynolds, 2000; Gunraj 2010, Houtveen, van de Grift, and Creemers 2004).

In more recent years however there are fewer such examples of the teacher effectiveness research base being used to inform professional learning and professional development.

The professional learning terrain does not subscribe, in the main, to independent validated research but rather tends to follow trends that are more fashionable than substantiated. For example, the many training courses on the themes of 'accelerated learning', 'learning styles' or 'multiple intelligences' while very popular with teachers, have largely disregarded the empirical evidence that gave rise to these concepts in the first place. Similarly, presentations that dominate the educational world in the shape of Ted Talks or U Tube video clips tend towards inspirational, anecdotal and personal reflections rather than scholarly discourse where hard evidence is presented and discussed. The professional learning market, it seems, is aimed at entertainment rather than enlightenment. The central point here is that whether it is teacher effectiveness or any other educational field of enquiry, in terms of professional learning and development, the research evidence is often conveniently airbrushed out in favour of a more palatable re-packaging.

One potential exception, to this rule has been the recent work by John Hattie (2008). His book 'Visible Learning' has gained international acclaim and recognition. Yet, questions about the methodology employed, the studies included (and indeed excluded) along with the fact that many of the effect sizes were captured in a very different educational climate from today, are not part of the contemporary professional discourse. This is not to suggest that this research is not a significant scholarly contribution, it is, and interestingly many of its findings concur with those highlighted several decades earlier by the teacher effectiveness field. Instead it is is simply to underline that research findings and conclusions, once they are absorbed and regurgitated by the professional learning and development machinery, not only change shape and in some cases, meaning but they also loose any critical or contentious features.

Even though some might contest this claim, it is the case that the substantial and potentially influential field of teacher effectiveness is simply not being fully underutilized by those designing professional learning programmes. The field is also not at the forefront of the current global debate and discussion about improving teacher and teaching quality. The question once again is why not? The next section of this paper considers the implications and consequences of the disconnection between the teacher effectiveness research base and professional learning/development. The paper concludes by asking 'what if' there was a closer relationship between research and practice in the future, what might be the benefits, possibilities and outcomes for teachers and learners?

Consequences

This section explores some of the consequences of the disconnect between the teacher effectiveness research and professional learning/training programes. Simply thinking of the other professions such as medicine or law, it would be unacceptable, and indeed unheard of, if the latest medical evidence or case law did not influence training and professional learning in some direct way. Yet this is true for much of the professional learning and development programmes that teachers are offered. They tend not to embrace evidence, and if they do, as has been argued earlier, it is often be changed or misrepresented. In her latest work, Linda Darling Hammond (2009) has argued that the evidence base on effective teaching and effective professional learning is not just nimbly side-stepped by those planning professional learning, it is willfully ignored.

In 2009, Darling-Hammond and her colleagues undertook a major study for the National Staff Development Council that looked at the quality and nature of professional development in the US and abroad. The report noted:

> *the United States is squandering a significant opportunity to leverage improvements in teacher knowledge to improve school and student performance. Other nations, our competitors, have made support for teachers and teacher learning a top priority with significant results. In these countries, students learn and achieve more. Teachers stay in the field longer and are more satisfied with their work. Educators take on even more responsibility' (Darling Hammond, 2009:3)*

The authors commented that 'effective professional development is intensive, on-going, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives and builds strong working relationships among teachers. They conclude that 'most teachers in the United States do not have access to professional development that uniformly meets all these criteria' (Darling Hammond et al, 2009: 5) This report also underlined that much of the professional learning undertaken by teachers in the US has limited evidential support. In particular, it highlights mentoring and coaching.

Across many counties a great deal of emphasis is placed on mentoring and coaching as being a very productive use of valuable professional learning time. Yet, the hard evidence to support this position is not forthcoming. The many claims that mentoring or coaching result in improved professional practice that lead to improved student achievement remain

unsubstantiated (Darling Hammond et al 2009). There are studies that show that when the mentoring or coaching activities have a clear instructional focus, it can enhance teacher performance. A major literature review, conducted as part of an Institute for Education Sciences evaluation of the Reading First program, reported mixed findings on the impact of coaching on improving instructional practice. It was noted that unless the instructional practices promoted through the processes of mentoring or coaching are *in and of themselves effective* then a positive impact on teaching and learning is unlikely.

In the professional learning field there are many who would advocate that expecting professional learning and development to impact on learner outcomes, in the shape of improved achievement, is fairly unrealistic. Yet, the teacher effectiveness research unequivocally focuses on those behavious and practices that do positively impact on learners and learning. How much stronger and more powerful might professional interventions, training and development be if there was a connection with this field of research? The answer is fairly obvious. But of much more concern are the consequences of spending valuable time, money and resource on professional learning approaches that are based upon weak, contested or dubious evidence. It is possible and indeed, feasible that the reason why so much professional learning, development and training has little relative impact is chiefly because much of it ignores the evidence and then simply focuses on the wrong thing.

But what happens if the evidence is looked at and taken seriously? Let's take for example, professional learning communities and the associated evidence base derived mainly, but not exclusively, from the empirical findings concerning school improvement. In summary, the key findings are that:

- Professional learning communities (PLCs) can have a positive impact on student achievement (Goldenberg, 2004; Stoll et al, 2006; Verscio et al, 2008; Whitehurst, 2002; Saunders et al, 2009; Dufour et al,2010).

- A PLC is a powerful vehicle for changing teachers' behaviour and improving student learning outcomes but only when it is focused on the improvement of learning rather than the improvement of teaching (Little 1997; DuFour and Eaker, 1998).

- Teachers who are part of a professional learning community tend to be more effective in the classroom and achieve better student outcomes (Huffman and Jacobson. 2003; Lewis and Andrews, 2004)

- Teacher enquiry is at the heart of effective professional learning communities, it is a key driver in improving classroom practice (Hopkins,2002; Bielaczyc and Collins, 1999; Harris and Jones, 2010; 2012)

- Professional learning communities improve teachers' professional learning and secure improved school performance, irrespective of the school context and its socio-economic profile (Elmore, 2002; Stoll et al, 2006; Hargreaves, Goldenberg, 2004)

- Professional learning communities can enhance professionalism and prevent stress and burnout. They provide a forum to translate research into practice in the classroom (Rosenhotlx, 1989; Clement and Vandenberghe, 2000)

There is no question that this evidential base is substantial and clearly points to the many benefits of PLCs. This has led many countries to invest in PLCs on a large scale. The research base has certainly fuelled the decision to use PLCs as a way of enhancing teacher effectiveness. Plus there is emerging evidence that there can be a significant return on this particular investment, as a number of countries are finding (Harris et al, 2012). But this is not the entire story.

As Fullan (2010:36) points out 'there has been a great deal written about professional learning communities... the term travels a lot better than the concept'. In fact there is conceptual confusion about PLCs as the entire organisation (sometimes encompassing the wider community) and intra-organisational PLCs where they are a sub group within the organisation. The issue is not just one of semantics as the consequences of mistaking one for the other is to jettison the potential benefits highlighted by the research literature.

Essentially, the literature is very clear that the term 'PLC' can be used in two distinctively different ways. For example, Stoll (2012:6) argues that 'professional learning communities are groups of teachers or school leaders, or even whole schools or groups of schools- also known as learning networks or networked learning communities'. This interpretation is inclusive and expansive. It allows for wide participation and varied involvement. This interpretation is essentially derived from the concept of the 'learning organisation' where active participation of all stakeholders is an essential feature (Senge, 1990). For some writers, therefore a PLC is simply shorthand way of describing the cultural norms, values and attributes of a learning organisation. A PLC describes what should be aspired to rather than what is in place for those schools seeking to be PLCs.

For other writers, a PLC is a dynamic group or team that operates within a school or district initially. Professional learning communities, in the form of groups or teams within the organisation, draws directly upon the idea of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Here the PLC is a group or team charged with the responsibility of innovation and change. The PLC is a catalyst to make new things happen. It is expected to take action and create new ideas. Here a professional learning community is a group of connected and engaged professionals who are responsible for driving change and improvement within their organization (Dufour et al 1999; Harris and Jones, 2010). In the case of schools or districts, this change and improvement is aimed at securing better learning through better teaching.

The important point here is that drawing upon research to inform practice is an important first step but understanding exactly what the research suggests and advises is another step altogether. Simply drawing upon research to shape and inform professional learning is not sufficient to guarantee positive outcomes. It is essential, that empirical findings are understood properly and conveyed authentically by those advocating them, as well as, on the receiving end of them.

What if?

To conclude, building a stronger relationship between professional learning/ development and the teacher effectiveness research base is not just a matter of making connections. It is not just a case of cherry picking certain concepts and not others. It is not just using some of

the findings but covering over the nuances, complications and contradictions that appear in the research evidence. Rather it is gauging exactly what this evidence implies for those engaging in professional learning and making the ideas as clear and accessible as possible. Additionally, it means that some ideas, even those with a substantial evidence base, may not be ideally suited or accommodated within professional learning and development.

So if research and practice were authentically combined what would we hope to see in the future? Firstly, we would expect to see less variation and variability in the nature and quality of professional training and development. If professional learning programs were based firmly on what we know about effective teaching then there would be a 'body of knowledge' that all teachers would need to know, learn and understand that would shape and sharpen their practice.

Secondly, we would expect to see a much greater impact from professional training or development in the shape of better learning outcomes. No longer would there be low-level evaluation forms produced post-event to gauge the impact of the training. Like medicine or law, the impact would be clearly visible in the form of changed practice and better outcomes. The unit of analysis would no longer be the teacher but the learner. The ultimate beneficiary from professional learning would be the child and not the adult.

Finally, if there was a strong reciprocal relationship between the SESI research base, policy and practice we would expect to see more alignment and consistency within education systems, schools and classrooms. There would be a clear and grounded mandate for change

that all constituencies would be working towards. The high performing education systems already know and demonstrate this. They function with a high degree of internal consistency, total system alignment and an unrelenting focus on improving outcomes. This does not mean that they are rigid or inflexible but rather they introduce change carefully and implement it properly, they do not swap and change policies as other, less effective countries, do. Rather they look at the evidence, carefully evaluate it, then plan and invest in the long term.

The SESI field has 25 years of evidence about what works in making teachers, schools and systems more effective. Like any other field there are inevitable limitations and these are accepted and acknowledged. The SESI field is far from perfect and issues of methodology, knowledge utilization and consistency of findings remain areas of concern and contention (Schreens, 2012). To conclude, this monograph asks the following questions:

- What if those teachers, schools, systems and countries looking for 'the solution' engaged with the teacher effectiveness research in a substantive way?

- What if those designing professional learning programmes looked at the evidence about teacher effectiveness and constructed their provision accordingly?

- What if the teacher effectiveness research informed practice in ways that were consistently powerful and productive? What if this were reciprocated?

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Contact ICSEI

Jenny Lewis
86 Ellison Rd Springwood,
NSW 2777 Australia
Tel: +612 4751 7974
Email: jennylewis@icsei.net
Web: www.icsei.net

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About the author

Alma Harris is Professor of Educational Leadership at the Institute of Education (IOE) London and currently Director of the Institute of Educational Leadership at the University of Malaya. In 2010/12 she was Senior Policy Adviser to the Welsh Government and was jointly responsible for the national implementation of professional learning communities. Her research work focuses primarily on leading organizational change, leadership and development. She is internationally known for her work on school improvement, focusing particularly on improving schools in challenging circumstances. Alma has written extensively about leadership in schools and she is an expert on the theme of distributed leadership. Her books 'Distributed Leadership in Schools: Developing the Leaders of Tomorrow' (Routledge) and 'Distributed Leadership Matters' (Corwin Press) have been translated into several languages.

She is President of the 'International Congress of School Effectiveness and School Improvement' and holds visiting positions at the Nottingham Business School, the University of Southampton and the Moscow Higher School of Economics. Her latest book 'Uplifting Leadership' (2014) with Andy Hargreaves and Alan Boyle is published by Wiley Business Press.