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Citation for published version:

Kennedy, A 2017, 'International conversations on professional learning', *Professional Development in Education*, vol. 43, no. 5, pp. 689-691. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1362738>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/19415257.2017.1362738](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1362738)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Professional Development in Education

Publisher Rights Statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Professional Development in Education on 22/08/17, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19415257.2017.1362738>.

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International conversations on professional learning

I was lucky to be invited to the International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET) conference in Brno, Czech Republic, in June 2017. The conference was truly international with all regions of the globe represented, and no one geographical area particularly dominant. This proved to be a very productive space for learning and networking, and built into the programme was a series of roundtable research discussions. I took part in the discussion on professional development along with academic and policy colleagues, where we raised in a very open way, the issues that we each felt were most pertinent to teacher professional learning for the future in our own internationally-diverse contexts. Such issues included: what it means to be digitally literate, and how digital literacy varies across jurisdictions and between learners and teachers; the age-old dilemma of whether professional learning opportunities should be 'provided' or sought (passive versus active orientations), including how our local and international discourses support particular conceptions of that dichotomy; and we discussed real-time, how context shapes interpretations and needs in our particular national contexts. What this discussion provided was not just a range of perspectives, but the opportunity to use these different perspectives to reflect on our own situations and then to test our ideas and interpretations with colleagues from different countries. While this is clearly easier to do face-to-face than in writing, the benefits of engaging in cross-country interpretations of written articles is also very valuable. We aspire for PDiE to act in such a capacity, that is, to provide stimulus and debate, and we welcome articles which can stimulate and respond to debate from a range of international perspectives.

This issue presents a range of international perspectives on key topics within the professional learning field, and we hope that these articles might serve as springboards for further conversations and reflections within future articles which will help us to build a rich and truly international discussion of professional learning and development within PDiE.

This issue starts with an article by Hazel Bryan and Bob Burstow which focuses on school-based research, and in particular, school leaders' views on this. Bryan and Burstow provide a detailed overview of the history of research-engaged teachers in England, demonstrating that this is not an entirely new concept. Their research into the views of school leaders would make an excellent stimulus for discussion of how school leaders in other national contexts understand and support, or otherwise, the notion of research-engaged teachers. Of particular interest is the question Bryan and Burstow raise about the boundary between a teacher who is researching and a teacher who is 'actively enquiring into the learning of their pupils'. I suspect that this boundary might fall in different places in different contexts due to cultural and policy-driven understandings of teachers' work in different national contexts.

The next article, by Judy Parr and Eleanor Hawe, explores the effect of a year-long peer observation and feedback initiative focusing on the development of writing in a school in New Zealand. It highlights the importance of the social, collaborative aspect of professional

learning as well as the need for focused and expert subject knowledge. The article acknowledges the potential tension in instigating such a collegiate approach where professional cultures may often run counter to such practices, and where teachers are 'not often asked to explain practice'. This issue is well worthy of exploration across different national contexts where cultures may differ significantly in terms of collegiatism and privatism, and therefore sustained collegiate approaches to professional learning may be more or less in alignment with professional culture more widely.

The article by Christina Dobbs, Jacy Ippolito and Megin Charner-Laird brings together nicely some of the themes raised in the first two articles. Their study reports on a small-scale collaborative professional learning initiative in literacy in one school in the US over two years, highlighting participants' changing views over the course of that period. They surface tensions around expectations that teachers involved in collaborative professional learning initiatives will necessarily, and simply, transfer their learning to other staff in the school, raising interesting questions about how both technical and adaptive professional learning can be supported.

In contrast to the in-depth, small-scale research presented in the first three articles, Katherine Main and Donna Pendergast report on a large-scale study of a professional development intervention across 258 schools in Queensland, Australia. The intervention was designed to support school leaders to effect largescale systemic reform at key stages of schooling. Main and Pendergast conclude that evidence-based frameworks must be employed alongside any large-scale education reform, raising a whole set of different, but related, issues to those discussed in the earlier articles in this issue.

The relationship between professional cultures and professional learning has been highlighted as a key concern in the above articles, and this is something that is explored explicitly in the article by Monika Louws, Jacobiene Meirink, Klaas van Veen and Jan van Driel. In a four-teacher case-study the authors found that 'teachers' perceptions of cultural workplace conditions and supportive leadership practices seem to be more important influences for teachers' self-directed learning than their perception of structural conditions'. Whether this conclusion would hold in other contexts where cultural conditions varied significantly, would be of interest to explore. Nonetheless, yet again the importance of supportive and facilitative leadership is highlighted as key to good professional learning.

Jon Saderholm, Robert Ronau, Christopher Rakes, Sarah Bush and Margaret Mohr-Schroeder's article reports on the evaluation of a two-week, state-wide professional development programme for maths teachers and for science teachers in the US. Their conclusions point to a seemingly obvious, yet commonly absent, condition, that 'all stakeholders – including funding agencies, designers, facilitators and participants – should consider all phases of PD, from design, through implementation, to application in the classroom and eventually to evaluation, feedback and research, to be essential elements of any [PD] framework'. I wonder how often this is actually the case, and how we might work together to make this a more commonplace condition for PD.

Marie-Jeanne Meijer, Marinka, Kuijpers, Fer Boi, Emmy Vrieling and Femke Geijsel present an empirical study which examines how professional learning for teacher educators can help

their students to adopt 'inquiry-based attitude', something required of Dutch teacher education. This is an interesting and complex idea to study, and illustrates the constant quest to find new ways of identifying the effectiveness of professional learning in terms of outcomes for learners. Meijer et al employed a qualitative, multiple case-study approach, and were keen to identify if the professional learning intervention had resulted in transformative learning for the teacher educators. One of their conclusions (although they do acknowledge the small sample involved in the study) focuses on the 'qualities of specific [PD] facilitators', thereby illustrating how impossible it is factor out the human condition in professional learning, in pursuit of a 'what works' approach.

Alaster Douglas' article also focuses on teacher educators, this time exploring how they work with school based mentors within the English context, where teacher educators are feeling increasingly marginalised owing to policy changes in initial teacher education. Douglas uses a cultural and historical activity theory lens to explore the changes in teacher educators' work and perceptions over the past nine years, referring back to an earlier double special issue in this journal which focused on teacher educators (see PDiE (2010) Vol 36 Nos 1-2 and Bates et al (2011)). His article provides an illuminating insight into the changing work of teacher educators in one specific national context, and provides stimulus for discussion on the possibilities that teacher educators have to respond in proactive and positive ways to changes in teacher education policy across the globe.

In the final article in this issue, and indeed in this volume, Wouter Schenke, Jan van Driel, Femke Geijsel and Monique Volman explore the age-old concern around the alignment of education research and education practice. They do this through an empirical study of 19 research and development projects in secondary schools in the Netherlands. These R&D projects were specifically designed to encourage cross-professional collaboration between education professionals working in universities and in schools, to the mutual benefit of all. Again, it is clear that such work may be supported more easily in contexts where genuine partnership is already in existence, and therefore, what seems to be a global challenge is clearly mediated by local/national cultures and practices. In their conclusions, Schenke et al highlight that the most important consideration in ensuring 'productive interplay' between school-based and university-based collaborators was 'the attention paid to closing the feedback loop', that is, the regular and clear sharing of results and impact, leading to further refinement of the R&D process.

A key theme across the articles in this issue is the identification of successful or effective professional learning or development, and it is clear that yet again, cultural, and indeed political factors influence strongly what is deemed to be necessary or worthwhile in terms of evaluating the success of professional learning. This is an important topic worthy of international comparison and debate. We therefore encourage submission of empirical and/or conceptual articles which take forward common issues within our field from a range of international perspectives, thereby building a more coherent and richer body of evidence on which to move forward.

Reference

Bates, T., Swennen, A. and Jones, K. (Eds) (2011) *The Professional Development of Teacher Educators* London: Routledge