

# APPROACHING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: TEACHERS' GOALS

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*Teachers do not come to professional learning opportunities as blank slates. Instead, they come to these settings with a complex collection of professional learning goals. The research presented here takes a closer look at these goals across five different professional learning settings. The results indicate there exists a taxonomy of five categories of goals that teachers may approach professional learning with.*

## INTRODUCTION

Current research on mathematics teachers and the professional development of mathematics teachers can be sorted into three main categories<sup>1</sup>: content, method, and effectiveness. The first of these categories, *content*, is meant to capture all research pertaining to teachers' knowledge and beliefs including teachers' mathematical content knowledge, both as a discipline (Ball, 2002; Davis & Simmt, 2006) and as a practice (Hill, Ball, & Schilling, 2008). Recently, this research has been dominated by a focus on the mathematical knowledge teachers need for teaching (Davis & Simmt, 2006; Hill, Rowan, & Ball, 2005) and how this knowledge is developed within preservice and inservice teachers. Also included in this category is research on teachers' beliefs about mathematics and the teaching and learning of mathematics and the ways in which these beliefs change within the preservice and inservice setting (Liljedahl, 2010a; Liljedahl, Rolka, Rösken, 2007). Some of the conclusions from this research speaks to the observed discontinuities between teachers' knowledge/beliefs and their practice (Skott, 2001; Wilson & Cooney, 2002) and, as a result, calls into question the robustness and authenticity of these knowledge/beliefs (Lerman & Zehetmeir, 2008).

The second category, *method*, is meant to capture the research that focuses on a specific professional development model such as action research (Jasper & Taube, 2004), lesson study (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), or more generally, collegial discourse about teaching (Lord, 1994). This research is "replete with the use of the term inquiry" (Kazemi, 2008, pg. 213) and speaks very strongly of inquiry as one of the central contributors to teachers' professional growth. Also prominent in this research is the centrality of collaboration and collegiality in the professional development of teachers and has even led some researchers to conclude that reform is built by relationships (Middleton, Sawada, Judson, Bloom, & Turley, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> These categories, although presented separately, are not entirely distinct from each other.

More accurately, reform emerges from relationships. No matter from which discipline your partners hail, no matter what financial or human resources are available, no matter what idiosyncratic barriers your project might face, it is the establishment of a structure of distributed competence, mutual respect, common activities (including deliverables), and personal commitment that puts the process of reform in the hands of the reformers and allows for the identification of transportable elements that can be brokered across partners, sites, and conditions. (ibid., p. 429).

Finally, work classified under *effectiveness* is meant to capture research that looks at changes in teachers practice as a result of their participation in some form of a professional development program. Ever present in such research, explicitly or implicitly, is the question of the robustness of any such changes (Lerman & Zehetmeir, 2008).

As powerful and effective as this aforementioned research is, however, it can no longer ignore the growing disquiet that somehow the perspective is all wrong. In fact, it is from this very research that this disquiet emerges. For example, the questions of robustness (Lerman & Zehetmeir, 2008) come from a realization that professional growth is a long term endeavour (Sztajn, 2003) and participation in preservice and inservice programs is brief in comparison. At the same time there is a growing realization that what is actually offered within these programs is often based on facilitators (or administrators or policy makers) perceptions of what teachers need as opposed to actual knowledge of what teachers really want (Ball, 2002). But not much is known about what teachers really want as they approach professional learning opportunities.

The research presented here provides some answers in this regard.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As articulated in Liljedahl (2010b), working in a professional development setting I find it difficult to be both a researcher and a facilitator of learning at the same time. As such, I generally adopt a stance of noticing (Mason, 2002). This stance allows me to focus on the priorities of facilitating learning while at the same time allowing myself to be attuned to various phenomena that occur within the setting. It was through this methodology that I began to notice that there was a distinct difference between the groups of teachers that came willingly to the professional development opportunities that I was leading and the teachers that were required, often by their administrators, to attend. This was an obvious observation. Nonetheless, it was as a result of this observation that, I began to attend more specifically to other differences. In doing so I began to notice, subtly at first, that the teachers who came willingly came with an a priori set of goals. With this less obvious observation I changed my methods from noticing to more directive research methods. I began to gather data from five different professional learning contexts over a period of two years.

## **Master's Programs**

Teachers in this context are practicing secondary school mathematics teachers who were doing their Master's Degree in Secondary Mathematics Teaching. This is a two year program culminating in either a comprehensive examination or a thesis depending on the desires of the teacher and the nature of the degree that they are seeking. From this group I collected interview data and field notes during two different courses I taught in the program.

## **Induction Group**

This group began as an initiative to support early career teachers (elementary and secondary) as they make the transition from pre-service teachers to in-service teachers. In truth, however, it also attracted more established teachers making it a vertically integrated community of practicing teachers of mathematics. Although this group now meets every second month for the duration of the study we met monthly. From this group I collected interview data, field notes, as well as two years of survey data.

## **Hillside Middle School**

Hillside (pseudonym) is the site of a longitudinal study. For the last five years I have meet with a team of three to six middle school teachers every second Wednesday for an hour prior to the start of the school day. This group began as an administration led focus on assessment of numeracy skills, but after the first year took on a self-directed tone. The teachers in this group lead the focus of the sessions and look to me to provide resources, advice, and anecdotal accounts of how I have seen things work in the many other classrooms I spend time in. For the two year period that constitutes the study presented here I collected field notes and interview data.

## **District Learning Teams**

Very much like the professional learning setting at Hillside, district based learning teams are self-directed. Teachers meet over the course of a year to discuss their classroom based inquiries into teaching. This inquiry runs throughout an entire school year, but the teams themselves only meet four to six times a year. The data for this study comes from three such teams that I facilitated in two different school districts. One of these teams ran during the first year of the study, the other two teams ran in the second year of the study. Like at Hillside my primary role is to provide resources, advice, and insights into their plans and reported classroom outcomes. The data from these teams consisted of field notes, interviews, and survey results.

## **Workshops**

During the two years that I collected data for this study I was also asked to do a number of one-shot workshops. These were workshops designed around a variety of different topics either decided by myself or the people asking me to deliver the

workshop. They ranged in time from 1.5 hours to 6 hours with no follow-up sessions. Data, consisting of field notes, comes from six such workshops. Data from two additional workshops consists of field notes and survey results.

## **Data**

Field notes in the aforementioned settings consisted primarily of records of conversations I had with individual teachers during breaks as well as before and after the scheduled sessions. I used these times to probe more specifically about the origins of questions asked, motivations for attending, querying about what they are getting out of the session, and if there is something else they need or want. This sound very formal and intentional, but in reality, this was all part of natural interactions. In all, I collected notes on over 70 such conversations.

More directed than these natural conversations were the interviews. These were much more formal in nature and provided an opportunity for me to probe further about the conversations we had previously had or the things I had observed during our sessions together. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. In all, 36 interviews were conducted over the course of the two years, resulting in 26 hours of audio recordings. These recording were listened to as soon as possible after the interviews and relevant aspects of the recording were flagged for transcription.

The survey used with the Induction Group, The District Learning Teams, and two of the Workshops consisted of an online survey instrument that was sent to the teachers prior to professional learning session. The survey contained five questions, the last two of these were of obvious relevance to the study.

4. *What do you hope to get out of our next session together? You can ask for understanding of mathematical concepts, teaching strategies, resources, lesson ideas, ideas about classroom management, networking opportunities, specific lesson plans, etc. In essence, you can ask for anything that will help you in your teaching or future teaching. List as many as you want but please be specific.*
5. *Please list something from a past session that you found particularly useful.*

The field notes, interview transcripts, and survey data were coded and analysed using the principles of analytic induction (Patton, 2002). "[A]nalytic induction, in contrast to grounded theory, begins with an analyst's deduced propositions or theory-derived hypotheses and is a procedure for verifying theories and propositions based on qualitative data" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 127 cited in Patton, 2002, p. 454). In this case, the a priori proposition was that teachers come to professional learning settings with their own goals in mind and that these goals are accessible through the methods described above. With a focus on teachers' goals the data was coded using a constant comparative method. One of the things that emerged out of this analysis was a taxonomy of five types of goals that teachers come to professional learning settings with. To these I add a sixth theme which also emerged out of the analysis. Although

not a goal per se this sixth theme deals with the resistance with which some teachers engaged in some of the professional developing opportunities.

## **RESULTS**

In what follows I present each of these categories in turn, beginning with resistance and following it up with each of the five categories of goals.

### **Resistance**

In the course of the two years of the study I collected data on a number of teachers who were flatly opposed to being part of the professional development setting I was working in. All of this data consisted of observation and conversations and came solely from the workshops and learning team settings. To a person, these teachers were participating in these settings at the request of an administrator or a department head. Left up to them, these teachers would choose to not attend.

First, these resistant teachers were present and they did participate in the sessions. They engaged in the activities, they asked questions, and they collaborated with others in the room. But this participation was guided by their reluctance at being there. As such, their contribution to the group was often negative, pessimistic, defensive, or challenging in nature. They would say things like "that will never work" and "I already do that". This is not to say that these teachers were the only ones to utter these types of statement, but rather that they only uttered these types of statements. Their questions to me were always challenging in nature with greater demands for evidence, justification, and pragmatism. These challenges were welcomed as they often provided others with an opportunity to engage in the content more critically. The call for pragmatism, in particular, was not unique to resistant teachers, but the goals for making that call were clearly different. When they challenged ideas based on their infeasibility the goal seemed to be to detract from the value of what was being offered; to invalidate it. When non-resistant teachers made the same call it seemed to be motivated by a goal to try to navigate the space between the ideal and the feasible; to find a way to make it happen.

The second reason I include this theme is that these teachers did not always remain resistant. There were several cases in my data where teachers who initially approached the setting with resistance softened their stance over time. In the workshop settings this was marked by a shift in the types and ways in which they asked questions, the ways in which they engaged in activities and interacted with their peers, and in the parting comments and conversations I recorded. In the learning team settings this was marked by the fact that between meetings, these initially resistant teachers, reported back at subsequent sessions about efforts made, and results seen, in their own classrooms.

The third reason for including this theme here is because I want to differentiate between the resistance a teacher may have to an idea in a professional learning

setting and the a priori resistance a teacher may approach that setting with. In the former case I am talking about a healthy form of scepticism that, as mentioned, allows teachers to negotiate the space between the ideal and the real, between the theoretical and the practical. The later, however, is a stance that can prevent the uptake of good ideas and helpful suggestions. It can act as a barrier to learning and professional growth.

In all, out of the 70 conversations that I made notes on, 10 were with teachers who were, at least originally, resistant to being in the setting. Of these, four changed their stance over the course of the setting. However, my field notes record observations of many more such a priori resistant teachers as well as observed changes in some of them.

### **Do Not Disturb**

This category of goals characterizes those instances where a teacher engages in professional learning because they want to improve their practice, but is reluctant to adopt anything that will require too much change. Ideally, what they want are small self-contained strategies, lessons, activities, or resources that they can either use as a replacement of something they already cleanly insert into their teaching without affecting other aspects of their practice. Such goals were rarely stated outright. Instead, they manifest themselves as overly specific statements of what it is they seek.

"I was hoping to learn a new way to introduce integers".

"I want something to do for the first 10 minutes of class."

"A different way to do review."

All of these are indicative of situations where the teacher is looking to improve one thing about their teaching. The "don't let it affect anything else around it" is implicit in the specificity of the statement. In conversations or in interviews, however, this can sometimes come out more explicitly.

"I'm happy with the rest of my fractions unit. It's just division of fractions that messes me up. I was hoping that you could show me a better way to explain it."

Delving deeper it became clear that in many of the instances where concern over disturbance and tight control over impact was important there was an underlying anxiety, most often around the deconstructing what they have worked hard to build up.

"I've been teaching for seven years now, and I'm really happy with the way things are going. After the last curriculum revision and with us getting a new textbook I have worked really hard to organize all of my lessons and worksheets in math. I don't want to mess with that. So, please don't tell me anything that is going to mess me up. I really just want to know if there is a lesson that I can do using computers that will be fun and that I can just sort of insert into my area unit."

Less often this anxiety is around what they have worked hard to understand.

"When I started teaching I was fine with math. But when I was given a grade seven class this year I sort of panicked about math. Especially the unit on integers. I had never understood it when I was in school and it took me a long time to teach it to myself. So, I don't really want to learn anything new that will rock the boat for me."

In other instances there didn't seem to be an underlying anxiety, but just a pragmatic disposition that small change is good "less is more".

### **Willing to Reorganize**

A slight nuance on the previous theme is when teachers want very specific improvements and they are willing to significantly reorganize their teaching and resources to accommodate the necessary changes. Although specific in nature, these goals do not come with limitations. They are stated with an implicit openness to the consequences that the desired improvements may necessitate.

"So, yeah. I'm looking for an improved way to have my students learn how to do problem solving. Right now I do it as a unit in February, but it's not working. I've heard that other teachers do it throughout the whole year and I'm hoping to get some ideas around that."

Further probing of this teacher, as well as the others who made similar statements, revealed that they are not hampered by anxiety around invalidating existing resources or undoing things learned.

### **Willing to Rethink**

Unlike the previous two categories, the goals that fit into this are much broader in scope and often welcome a complete rethinking of significant portions of a teaching practice.

"I'm pretty open to anything. I mean with respect to differentiated learning."

From the interviews it became clear that for this teacher, as well as for those who expressed similar goals, there exists something in their practice that they want to bolster. In many cases these teachers want collections of resources that they could then organize and integrate into their teaching.

"Anything to do with numeracy is good for me."

"I'm looking for new ideas about assessment for differentiated learners."

In some cases, however, these teachers are branching out into new territories and are looking for a comprehensive package of what to do.

"I'm hoping to introduce the use of rubrics into my teaching and want to get the rubrics I should use as well as instruction how to do it."

Either way, these teachers have a rough idea of what it is they want and are willing to rethink their teaching in order to accommodate new ideas. They do not have the

anxieties of disrupting already held knowledge or resources that the teachers in the first category did and their goals are broader in scope than the second.

### **Out With the Old**

The goals in the previous category were characterized by a willingness to rethink significant aspects of teaching practice. In the Out With the Old category, the goals are characterized by a rejection of a significant aspects of teaching practice. Teachers with these goals come to professional learning settings unhappy with something in their practice. This unhappiness goes well beyond the awareness that something needs to be improved that was seen in the previous three categories. For these teachers there is nothing to be integrated, there isn't a replacement of some aspect of their teaching to be made. They have already rejected the current paradigm and are now looking for something to fill the void that is left behind.

"My kids can't think for themselves in problem solving. I don't know what I'm doing wrong, but it doesn't matter. I just need to start over with a new plan."

"I can't stand the way group work has been working in my classroom. Or not working is a better description. I have given up with what I've been doing and am looking to learn something completely different."

This is not to say that these goals are coupled with blind acceptance of anything that fits the bill. The teachers who express these goals are often hypercritical of new ideas, usually as a result of their dissatisfaction with something that they have previously changed in their practice.

"I spent a whole year trying to teach and assess each of the processes [communication, connections, mental mathematics and estimation, problem solving, reasoning, technology, and visualization] that are in the curriculum. In the end my students are no better at estimating or communicating, for example, than they were at the beginning of the year. My approach didn't work. I need a new way to think about this."

This is not to say that they are closed minded, but rather that they exert a greater demand on me, as the facilitator, to bridge the theoretical with the pragmatic.

### **Inquiry**

The final category consists of those goals which align with the ideas and ideals of inquiry (Kazemi, 2008). As such, these goals consist, most often, of a general desire to acquire new knowledge and ideas about teaching. The teachers who express these goals are open to any new ideas and often come to professional learning settings without an agenda.

"I'm not really looking for anything in particular. But, I'm eager to hear about some new ideas on assessment."

This is not to say that these goals are flighty and unrefined. The teachers whose goals fall into this category are often methodical in their change, pausing to ask exactly



"what is it I am doing" and "if it's working". And if it is working they question "what is it that is telling me it is working". They want evidence of success, but they want it to come from their own classroom.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Much can be taken from the results presented above. The most obvious is that teachers who willingly come to professional learning settings do so with one of five possible goals. Further analysis reveals that these goals have some pseudo-hierarchical properties and that they reveal a discordance with the long held belief that single workshops are an ineffective means of creating professional growth (Ball, 2002). Finally, the results indicate that, in essence, teachers treat professional learning settings, and the people that facilitate such settings, as resources for the furtherment of their own professional learning goals.

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