

Chapter 12: Politics, Policy and Teacher Agency

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Chapter Summary

This chapter looks at a case of teacher decision-making and how it is influenced by politics and policy. The case is embedded in early literacy teaching and contrasts policy approaches that empower the teacher to make strong links between theory and practice, and those which disempower the teacher, creating a less coherent approach to teaching negatively influenced by prevailing policy decisions. This chapter argues for teacher autonomy in raising standards of attainment. It suggests that professional autonomy is underpinned by both effective initial teacher preparation and continuing professional learning that include explicit discussion of interactions between student¹, syllabus, curriculum and policy.

Ben had been in school for one year and enjoyed listening to high quality children's stories read aloud by his teacher. He shared books at home and knew how to hold a book and turn pages. Ben enjoyed reading simple caption books and understood that the few changes on every page were highly supported by the illustrations. Sometimes he enjoyed making up parts of the story when reading books that were, as yet, too hard for him. Ben had learned to recognise many letters and relate them to the sounds he heard. He sometimes used these letters to help him read. He considered himself a reader.

Ben's previous class teacher had passed on assessment records which indicated knowledge of some letters and sounds. However, it was clear to his new teacher that Ben was not making the same progress during the first few weeks in his new class as the other five and six year olds. Ben's new class teacher observed him during the daily phonics sessions. Ben joined in and was able to orally separate words into their constituent sounds – '/c/a/t/ – cat'. He tried to use his knowledge of letters and sounds to read books but became frustrated when sounding out didn't help him access the stories he loved so much. Ben was now struggling to read the words in the simple books he was being presented with during reading lessons and his previous enjoyment of books was being negatively affected. He tried to use the strategy of 'calling sounds' modelled by his teacher when reading but could not make sense of what he was saying, so stopped. She did not consider him a reader.

Approaches available for a teacher to help Ben and investigate his poor progress differ across educational contexts internationally (Tan, 2012). In some policy contexts (Schleicher, 2012), a teacher is enabled to engage in a comprehensive assessment process to identify a student's strengths and weaknesses. How governments view teachers and teaching shapes policy, directly affecting the education students receive and the ways that teachers are able to teach. Policy

¹ In this chapter, we use the term 'student' to mean: child, children, student or pupil, young learners to make the chapter accessible to all contexts

determines how much leeway the teacher has for decision-making. In some policy contexts, teachers are enabled to engage in a comprehensive assessment process to identify a child's strengths and weaknesses. They are supported by policy that demonstrates trust in professional decision making (*ibid*). Curricula descriptions provide evidence that those governments understand that learning and teaching are complex, and that teachers need to continue to receive professional learning opportunities throughout their professional lives. In some contexts, professional learning prepares teachers to respond to student's slow progress and consider their needs, drawing on robust and meaningful evidence to design suitable learning programmes. In other contexts, teachers are told how to respond through professional learning about how to enact highly prescribed curricula. In such contexts, policy prescribes teaching content, style of teaching and teaching sequence. Teachers are instructed to ignore the context of learning, what is already known, what has been taught before and how the student learns effectively. There is little room for autonomous professional decision-making based on expertise, professional knowledge and assessment of the individual. The teacher is reduced to delivering content rather than developing effective pedagogies to respond to individual student's needs. The nature of policy, we suggest, communicates to the teacher how much she is trusted to respond appropriately and how government and society in general understands teaching and learning.

So what happened next for Ben? How did the current prescriptive policy of teaching reading through a strict sequence of phonics support the teacher and provide guidance? Current policy prescribes that the first steps of teaching should focus solely on learning letter-sound correspondences and applying this phonic knowledge to the reading process. Therefore, Ben's teacher consulted his records of phonic knowledge and re-assessed him. He appeared to have learned just, and only, what had been taught. Ben's teacher was at a loss as to what to do next; she had followed the step-by-step policy of phonics teaching but Ben was not learning at the same rate or in the same way as most of the other students. Ben's teacher was not able to provide instruction that developed the book-handling and language skills that he had in place. She had to focus on the aspects that he found most difficult before using interesting stories and information books written in language structures that Ben was familiar with. Despite continued letter-sound instruction in class and extra catch-up sessions on phonics with the teaching assistant, Ben fell further behind his peers. He became confused, resentful of teacher attention and put a lot of energy into avoiding reading and writing activities. These and similar experiences led Ben's teacher to believe that attainment in reading is solely about success in phonics instruction and that those students not able to learn in this way are somehow lacking or 'slower' than others.

Unfortunately, this situation is not unique. Ben's teacher did not want him to fail. She wanted to help unravel his confusions and avoid the ensuing negativity. She had faithfully followed the national and school policy on phonics instruction and it had worked for the majority of students. She wondered about adopting an approach centred on Ben's knowledge and understanding but was concerned how such an approach would 'fit' within the prescriptive current government policy. Her adherence to national policy was carefully monitored by middle and senior management at the school. She was aware that during school inspections, there

would be scrutiny of her teaching in relation to national policy and that student data would be used as a way of monitoring her teaching of reading. She was not enabled to take a fresh approach and her understanding of her role did not support her conviction that as the teacher she had the power, or agency, to act as she felt suited the needs of the student. She recognises that the teaching indicated by policy is not helping empower a young reader, but she feels powerless to search for alternative responses. She is unsure of the level of autonomy allowed in making changes to pedagogy within the particular education policy context. Her teacher's pay is linked to her performance management targets which focused partially on the attainment of the students in her class. Attainment in this age group of students was measured primarily by phonic knowledge. The school's policy followed the national curriculum on the primacy of phonics teaching but Ben's learning needs presented a challenge to the prevailing pedagogy determined by policy, so it was considered he had less of a capacity to learn effectively than his peers.

The example that started this chapter, and the analysis of teacher-response, indicate clear tensions between what the teacher felt was needed to support literacy learning, and a government policy on literacy instruction. In the remainder of this chapter we explore ways of theorising and understanding these tensions and suggest ways that professional learning can help overcome feelings of helplessness and re-engage teachers with decision-making founded on knowledge, skills and assessment evidence.

Key questions for reflection

In what ways is policy supportive of an individual student's literacy learning?

How could teachers work within policy guidelines yet still feel in control of an appropriate pedagogy for each student?

The International drive for standards

The challenges faced by Ben and his teacher will be recognisable by teachers in many contexts. Educational policy internationally appears to be becoming more specific and prescriptive (Schleicher, 2012). Do those prescriptions represent positive moves forward for the teaching profession? Do they support teachers to develop a view of themselves as autonomous decision-makers? The move to prescriptions about curricula and pedagogy was an international response to improving standards and removing the stress of teacher decision-making through the creation of universal curricula (*ibid*). But have such policies back-fired? We explore shifts in policy throughout the latter part of the 20th century into the 21st century that have influenced teacher professional learning and autonomy.

The latter part of the 20th century saw political interest in education focus particularly on the achievement of universal literacy and numeracy (Fullan et al, 2001; OECD, 2010). Technology began to be used to generate large amounts of student data and paved the way for assessment of narrow aspects of curricula. These large data sets led to the development of international league tables against which individual nations could be compared. In turn, there was a heightened

interest in the kinds of curricula and the methods of teaching that might lead to improvements in the international rankings of particular countries in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2010). In relation to literacy skills, this interest focused on the methods used in learning to read, reported in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Twist et al, 2012). The focus of both of these studies is evaluation and measurement, looking at test scores, rather than how students learn, to make comparisons between attainment within and across education systems.

With the advent of international league tables in addition to national results, governments endeavour to create policies that aspire to achieve high outcomes for all students. This and similar foci on systemic strategies that enhance student's learning is both a moral and societal goal. However, not all systematic strategies will work in the same way; some weaken professional autonomy. For instance, Ben's teacher rigorously followed the advice of English policy about the teaching of reading and seemed to have neither the professional knowledge nor the opportunity to consider more appropriate ways to approach Ben's learning difficulties. The effect of lack of professional autonomy can be identified in policies that aim to improve educational standards through control; telling teachers what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it. Policies which try to ensure quality through control turns teachers from "autonomous professionals into...technicians" (Gray, 2006: 30). Ben's teacher is a product of such an approach; she has been offered one methodology and when it fails she has no other way of understanding and responding to Ben's difficulty but to only repeat the same teaching approach, either at a slower pace or reducing the numbers in a teaching group led by a teaching assistant, or both.

When understandings of what teaching entails are reduced to lists of standards and checklists that can be easily identified, monitored and measured, the subtlety and nuance that teaching requires can be devalued and neglected (Tan, 2012). A top-down approach to monitoring teacher standards is now common in many nations. It has been interpreted as having more to do with control and conformity than raising the quality of teaching and learning (Evans, 2011). The way teachers teach, their view of themselves as teachers and their expectations of students are the result of the ways that policy represents their professional skills, the content and curricula and the way in which learning for teachers is valued.

The use of top-down control and increased surveillance in performance and accountability are evident in the standards for teachers in England. Other factors contribute to feelings of professional insecurity and lack of value. There is competition for their role from a growing workforce of teaching assistants and other para-professionals. This is accompanied by increased marketisation with a commercial approach to education concurrent with reductions in funding. A failing respect or recognition for the professional knowledge of teachers is also reflected in the media which often perpetuates the government view that teachers are solely and directly responsible for standards. This, in combination with the other policy features above, undermines teachers' perceived and actual autonomy even further.

We do not wish to suggest that policy designed to raise standards is in essence a bad thing. System improvement and consequent improvement in student outcomes is an admirable goal which we do not dispute. However we will argue that

achieving positive outcomes is driven by developments in pedagogy not through accountability measures. In analysing the approaches typically chosen by leaders in countries such as Australia and the USA, Fullan (2011) considers policy features that do and do not support “the moral imperative of raising the bar (for all students) and closing the gap (for lower performing groups) relative to higher order skills and competencies required to be successful world citizens” (2011: 3). He concludes that the key to successful reform is to capture the energy of educators and students as the driving force. He suggests that the energy comes from “doing something well that is important to you” and “makes a contribution to others as well as society as a whole” (*ibid*: 3). We interpret this conclusion as an indication that successful reform requires teachers to understand the interactive relationship between their practice in the classroom, the theories surrounding those practices and the moral purpose of the need to ensure student progress, as they reflect on their practice. This understanding is called praxis (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). One way to ensure that teachers develop a praxis stance is to make it a key focus of professional learning; the collection of activities, training and critical reflection that teachers do, to make sure that they are always working for improved student outcomes.

Professional learning opportunities focusing on praxis, may involve:

- teachers working collaboratively on problem-solving activities to find solutions and discover causal connections between their instruction and student outcomes (Gallimore et al, 2009);
- opportunities to share goals for particular student groups and plan collaboratively with colleagues;
- observing colleagues teaching with a focus on specific students or learning goals such as lesson study;
- training on particular approaches;
- professional development focused on student improvement and built on theory and evidence.

It provides many opportunities for teachers to talk about why we do what we do; define what must be done to achieve our purposes and goals; creates clearly understood ways and practices of ‘being a teacher’, and identifies goals for that practice. This concept of professional learning is in sharp contrast to the top-down approaches focused on teacher-control discussed earlier in the chapter. It is effective because it builds competence, capacity, culture, expectation and action in combination.

Capacity building, collaboration, pedagogy, and coherence of all aspects of the ‘system’ are effective in improving attainment “because they work directly on changing the culture of schools systems” (Fullan, 2011: 5). In Fullan’s view, accountability on the basis of test results is less effective, relying on individual teacher quality rather than collaboration, expecting technology alone to raise standards, and using fragmented rather than systemic approaches. Such ‘drivers’ should not be used to lead change since they merely change structures and

procedures of the system, “and that is why they fail” (*ibid*: 5). However, they are attractive to governments since they may bring about short term, observable shifts which indicate that policy is being enacted by teachers. This may serve to protect the reputations of ministers “by having new programmes to announce which can demonstrate that they are driving forward the process of reform” (Moss, 2009: 166). National testing of students and measurement of teacher quality are by-products of government attempts to establish the success of their policies and seek ‘evidence’ that their policy is succeeding or that further change is needed. When policy contexts seem to invest less in teacher decision-making, and privilege accountability, there is a consequent risk not only to professionalism but also to student outcomes.

The ways of working that Fullan describes as effective for improvement, imply the need for particular kinds of professional learning. A focus on the ‘wrong drivers’ can lead to the adoption of linear approaches to professional learning, and to prescribed curricula, as experienced by Ben’s teacher. She was powerless to think for herself and act accordingly – she was denied the right to develop ‘agency’. Reforms adopting a linear approach of spreading and demanding particular teaching approaches, can give rise to a limited capacity for teacher agency where a teacher’s role is to faithfully replicate a chosen approach (Coburn & Stein, 2010). On the one hand there is programme and policy, based on what is seen to work for most students and on the other hand, the teacher is confronted by the evidence of observation of how the approach plays out in the classroom with individual students. Returning to the example of Ben and his teacher, we can see a clear dissonance between policy assumptions of ‘what works’ and the reality of what works for individuals. The focus on one method of interpreting and responding to a student’s needs caused a negative impact on the range of skills Ben’s teacher is able to use to help him. This is a clear example of how teachers have been prepared professionally to follow a narrow and prescribed curriculum but have had only limited preparation for, and even less perceived choice about alternative pedagogies and practices and how to adapt them to meet the needs of all students. Next, we consider the particular case of English education reform.

The case of Educational Reform in England

Curriculum development and teacher professional development in England focuses on aspects of learning that can be easily measured. For example, in 1993, as part of a National Curriculum, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were developed. The strategies were based on large-scale cascade models of professional development and learning, linked to teaching practices with the goal of raising attainment in literacy and numeracy. Nationally-provided opportunities for professional development became inextricably linked to what could be measured through student outcomes and increased teacher accountability. It also became linked to school inspection processes and an expanded inspection system was introduced heightening the role of accountability using both student outcomes and teacher performance to evaluate and compare schools through league tables and linking teachers’ pay to student performance.

Over time, education in England moved from a service ethic to a performance ethic (Barnett, 2008). A drive to shape teacher agency through government reform has led to a ‘demanded’ professionalism, focusing predominantly on teachers’

behaviours rather than their dispositions or how they think about pedagogy (Evans, 2011). A statutory system of 'performance management' was introduced in 2007, along with published 'professional standards' (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2007). The updated standards (DFE, 2012a) are a simplified version with a single set of standards which applies to all teachers. These standards conceptualise teachers' pedagogy as relating to subject or curriculum knowledge (*ibid*). The White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DFE, 2010), indicated the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's intentions for teacher professionalism with a narrowing of the standards, leaving a remaining structure and a goal of using these to identify and deal with unsatisfactory performance. The thrust of the proposals in the White Paper represents a particular philosophy which implies control of the teacher, rather than facilitating teachers' decision-making (Evans, 2011). Further politicisation of teacher training is evident in the suggestion from government that the standards will not be mandatory for any schools which choose to move to academy² status. This has potential to further weaken the collective professional status of teachers and reduce the agency they have to be decision-makers.

Teacher agency

Teacher agency is shaped by the interaction between teachers' own learning and experience with the wider context of policy and accountability. Teachers' learning includes their own experiences as students; their initial and continuing professional learning as teachers; their knowledge and understanding of the classroom contexts and their observation of the needs and responses of students which builds up a case knowledge over time. Factors relating to the wider context include government policies on teaching and learning and on teacher education; accountability processes such as testing and inspection; national and local priorities frequently change and may not always be congruent with the learning trajectories of teachers.

How a teacher thinks about their own professional learning and knowledge is an important aspect of their professional agency (Opfer et al, 2011). The teacher we aspire to be has an impact on the development of our own and others' perceptions of us as a teacher (Day et al, 2006). The ways in which teacher agency is understood and experienced may impact on our decision-making processes (Beijaard et al, 2004). Informed professional autonomy such as this is the backdrop of this chapter. In our example, Ben's teacher lacked professional agency and therefore the ability and autonomy to make decisions about Ben's next steps and support him to become a reader. Her perception of herself as a teacher reflects this inability to make pedagogic decisions in the classroom that differ from current policy and is consequently a threat to her agency.

Teacher agency can be self-initiated or demanded by others, be planned or incidental, be in an individual or social context. The ways in which teacher learning is developed may result in an increase or decrease in teacher agency and therefore in decision-making. The extent to which teacher learning develops and maintains agency, depends on a range of factors. Teachers learn to interpret and reflect on what occurs in student learning from a standpoint of continuous development of

² Academies are publicly-funded independent schools where the governing body has greater autonomy.

professional knowledge, “having high standards and (a) strong drive to learn...and to be responsive to students’ needs” (Tan, 2012: 7). How and what teachers learn from their own experience of practice and from observing the practice of others can be underestimated (Gallimore et al, 2009).

Professional knowledge

According to Eraut (1994) knowledge can be categorised into four main kinds: replicative, applicative, associative and interpretive. Table 1 outlines these four categories with an illustrative example of Ben and his teacher.

Replicative and applicative knowledge are the most prevalent forms of knowledge construction teachers experience in professional learning programmes within policy driven curricula. Teachers are conceived as “corporate agents, grasping and executing the organisation’s mission” (Newman & Clarke, 2009:82) rather than agentic decision-making professionals (Billett, 2008). Any sense of agency under such circumstances seems to be conceptualised as externally awarded to teachers and limited to the level of choice about programmes and materials rather than methods.

Currently there is world-wide interest in the Finnish education system as both politicians and educators look for successful models (Niemi, 2012). Despite contextual differences, what should not be ignored is the investment in teacher development in Finland: teachers have a seven year course of study, having to attain a Master’s degree to be accredited, and are respected decision-makers with autonomy to adapt a loose national curriculum to suit the local needs of their students (*ibid*). They have time and dedicated spaces in the school environment to collaborate with colleagues and also have access to continuing professional learning classes throughout their careers. This style and concept of teacher learning appears to align more with the professional learning associated with a professional agency that is fundamental to the success of students like Ben. It resonates with Fullan’s description of the ‘right drivers’ for educational improvement - working directly on changing values, norms, skill, practices and relationships (Fullan, 2011: 5). This professional agency arises through particular types of teacher learning. In the next section we consider two types: linear and conceptual.

Category	Features	Application	Implications for Ben and his teacher
Replicative	Positions teacher as scholar with more knowledge than student.	Imparted didactically. Used in similar contexts/conditions. Relates to specific knowledge of topic. Taught to particular age phase. No reflection	Ben's teacher followed prescriptive guidance from policy-makers.
Applicative	Application of knowledge to new contexts.	Some adaptation and differentiation for age phases or ability groups	Ben's teacher knew the phases in phonic instruction, had assessed Ben and identified which phase he was working within. She knew which sounds Ben had learned and applied this knowledge to her instruction for him
Interpretive	Implies knowledge generated at the point of practice	Allows for teacher agency. Links with Schön's (1991) reflection-in-action leading to decisions about possible next learning steps for the student.	Ben's teacher needed an explanation for why he was not learning how to read despite his letter-sound knowledge. She was beginning to reflect on her practice and on Ben's learning.
Associative	Draws on not only knowledge of pedagogy and subject but also intuitive elements of reflection	Role of reflection prior to, during and after practice. It is knowledge <i>in</i> action, knowledge <i>on</i> action and knowledge <i>for</i> action that leads to professional agency.	Ben's teacher had not yet taken the next step in turning that reflection into action or felt she had the agency for re-thinking a pedagogy that would support Ben's learning to read

Table 1: Categories of knowledge

Key questions for reflection

How does the drive for standards, for instance through national testing and inspection, affect how you develop pedagogy in your classroom?

What opportunities do you feel you have for autonomy?

How does your view and application of knowledge fit with Eraut's categories?

Models of Professional Learning

Earlier in the chapter we introduced the notion of a linear approach to professional learning (Coburn & Stein, 2010). Linear approaches to teacher learning may or may not be informed by research and frequently go through a development stage before being rolled out to a wider context. The goal of linear approaches is to rapidly change teachers' behaviours to align them with current policy - practical tools such as schemes of work and lesson plans are sometimes fore-grounded to rapidly alter classroom practice as a means of shifting teachers' thinking (Coburn & Stein, 2010).

In England, the policy at the time of writing on the teaching of early reading represents a linear approach to teacher professional learning. By privileging one component skill - synthetic phonics, taught systematically (SSP³), materials for teachers, from a range of commercial providers, have been confined to sequences of described and prescribed content. All providers of phonics phase teaching materials nevertheless have to be in alignment with government policy and need to ensure that the teaching sequence and phases conform. As the prescribed teaching materials merely give a sequence and a practice to be followed, the underlying theories and research on teaching reading are not accessible for teachers to draw into their pedagogical decision-making. Therefore the complexity of reading theory is largely hidden from teachers. The linear professional learning in SSP has emphasised replicative and applicative types of knowledge described above and is closer to a 'training' model, with outcome measures based on the number of teachers adopting the approach (Coburn & Stein, 2010). The adoption of SSP has been evaluated by monitoring the numbers of schools which have responded to an offer of matched funding to purchase government approved phonics resources (DfE, 2012b). This approach demonstrates an assumption that materials can change practice and that the teacher's role is to replicate and apply knowledge. Replicative and applicative types of knowledge which teachers can learn in linear professional learning approaches are not sufficient to equip them for decision-making as described in the example of Ben's teacher above. Opfer et al (2011) found that supporting teacher agency through professional learning opportunities was not a sequential process and that "assuming that belief change leads to practice change or that practice change leads to belief change may not be

³ Synthetic phonics teaches the phonemes (sounds) associated with the graphemes (letters). The sounds are taught in isolation then blended together (i.e. synthesised), throughout the word.

helpful in understanding the complex processes at work” (2011:143). Teacher learning was found to be a complex interaction between changes in belief, changes in practice and changes in students which depended significantly on teachers’ orientation to learning. Developing interpretive and associative knowledge (Eraut, 1994) is critical to achieving the goal of developing generative learning processes (Taylor & Bodman, 2012) which extend beyond the time-frame of professional learning sessions.

Failure to improve student outcomes in linear models is often attributed to a lack of correct application of the programme mandated by policy (Coburn & Stein, 2010). Student outcomes are an accountability tool in the SSP policy and so we can perhaps understand the dilemma of Ben’s teacher. She is accountable for the progress of all the students in her class yet despite following this linear approach and the government policy on SSP teaching, Ben was not meeting expected outcomes. Standard assessment tasks in reading for seven year-old students in England offer one measure demonstrating no improvement of student outcomes indicating falling standards which in turn can trigger inspection as discussed above.

Through examples of policy in England we have demonstrated how a linear model of professional learning casts teachers as conduits for policy decisions rather than developing their professional agency and allowing them to act as professionals in the fullest sense. The flexibility with which teachers are able to interpret curriculum is diminished by narrowing the scope of teacher professional learning programmes and linking them to accountability measures (Richards, 2012). This can result in an imbalance since the policy, which by its nature is a general one, is not intended to be re-interpreted at the level of the classroom. Policy which demands a particular approach to teaching reading focuses on behavioural aspects of the role: what teachers will do and be seen to be doing when monitored. It fails to take into account two other key aspects: firstly, teachers’ orientations (for example beliefs, perceptions, views held, self-perception, values, motivation, job satisfaction and morale) and secondly, the intellectual component of professionalism (knowledge bases, the amount and degree of reasoning applied to practice, analytic skills and what they understand) (Evans, 2011).

There is an alternative to a top-down linear approach to reform: conceptual approaches to teacher professional learning can offer greater potential in developing teacher agency.

New visions

Effective contexts for conceptual approaches to teacher professional learning create interactive spaces where teachers can collaboratively draw on theory and practice and develop reflective dispositions driven by observation of their students. This interaction takes into account the learning that practitioners do as they enact practices and is focused on shifting teachers’ cognitions and increasing their knowledge, enabling them to make responsive, practical decisions day-by-day (Coburn & Stein, 2010). This kind of professional learning may have enabled Ben’s teacher to make moment-by-moment decisions based on her knowledge of his progress. A conceptual approach foregrounds the professional capacity of teachers and promotes a positive professional self-perception as a teacher as well as teacher agency.

Taylor and Bodman (2012) observed the positive impact on student learning that occurs when teachers become self-teaching learners through extended periods of related professional learning opportunities. Hattie (2009) also indicated efficacy of professional learning models which occurred over an extended period of time but which were led by external experts rather than by in-school initiatives and aimed to deepen teacher knowledge and extend skills thereby positively impacting student outcomes. Importantly, professional learning programmes needed to challenge teachers' prevailing discourse and conceptions through dialogue with colleagues grounded in student learning (*ibid*).

An example of professional learning that follows a conceptual approach is the initial and on-going professional learning opportunities built into the literacy intervention, Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery enables students who have made little or no progress in reading and writing to catch up with their peers (Burroughs-Lange & Ince, 2013; DFE, 2011; Douëttil, 2011). Teachers, through extended professional learning opportunities, are empowered to draw on moment-by-moment observations of the learning interactions with students. Opportunities to discuss and critically reflect upon personal and observed practice, linking theory and practice in continual cycles, are built into all instances of professional learning. Learning opportunities are on-going over extended periods of time and facilitated by 'experts' (Taylor et al, 2013). From these observations of pupils, teachers construct hypotheses about the pupil's learning, using assessment knowledge together with newly learned theories of literacy learning to determine the next steps for that particular student. Teachers learn to critically reflect and to act on their reflections to make informed decisions thereby increasing teacher autonomy. Reading Recovery provides a clear example of a professional learning design which develops and maintains agency as one of its core purposes.

A key factor in the success of Reading Recovery pupil outcomes is its approach to professional learning for teachers (DFE, 2011). It represents an investment in the planned development and maintenance of teacher agency by recognising that high quality decision-making is dependent on teachers' knowledge and their ability to critically reflect on the application of that knowledge. This tenet links to the previously discussed applicative and associative areas of professional knowledge. A key practical feature is the use of a one-way screen behind which a member of the teacher learning group teaches a student. Together the group describes, theorises and then critically reflects in real-time dialogue to provide supportive and constructive feedback for their colleague and to draw out new insights for the group that will help their decision-making processes with struggling literacy learners. The leader of the learning coaches the group to become "more flexible and tentative, to observe constantly and alter their assumptions in line with what they record as children work. They need to challenge their own thinking continually" (Clay, 2009: 237). One-to-one coaching also takes place in each teacher's own school context. Reading Recovery professional learning has several design elements that seem to work together to promote professional agency: building and applying theory based on practice and close observation of that practice; discussion grounded in teachers' work with learners, and sustained and ongoing learning.

A distinctive feature of Reading Recovery professional learning is that theoretical understandings are considered core to pedagogical decision-making underpinning

the intervention practices. This theoretical base is articulated for teachers in a series of core texts. These are not handbooks or schemes of work, but are used as a reflective tool during professional learning sessions and as reflection on teaching in teachers' own contexts. This is unusual amongst guidance and publications for professional learning activity, particularly for the teaching of literacy skills amongst low attaining groups. Such materials are often confined to sequences of described and prescribed content (Wasik & Slavin, 1993). This building and applying theory is fundamental to a sense of professional agency being forged by such professional learning practices.

Ben might benefit from Reading Recovery instruction with a teacher who can reflect on observations not only of his progress of phonic knowledge, but also on his other reading behaviours. Ben's teacher would praise what he does correctly and model how to apply that knowledge or partial knowledge to problem-solving ways of reading new words to make sense of the 'story'. She would observe and reflect on how Ben approaches his reading with his newly acquired reading strategies and would support him making his own decisions and problem-solving. She would be able to incorporate national policy with informed teaching decisions based on what she knows of Ben and his needs.

Teachers in Reading Recovery are asked to reflect on the ways that working with individual students has taught them something about learning more generally. They are referring to the opportunities for critical reflection on practice. Their daily teaching of students provides opportunities for newly acquired theories of teaching and learning to be tested and re-formulated (Pinnell, 1997), thereby allowing teachers the opportunity for an agentic role. So Ben's teacher would learn not only how to support him but would learn more generally how to support other learners and be empowered to make decisions about all her student's learning. The model of professional learning espoused in Reading Recovery has been described as "inquiry-based" with teaching and learning interwoven through a "reflective/analytic experience" (Pinnell, 1997: 9). Teachers bring their experiences of working with students to professional learning sessions and engage in collaborative dialogue about challenges they have encountered in their teaching. Each teacher sees the situation through a different lens, triggering a reflective loop "around theory, practice and observation, with critical reflection operating at its hub" (Taylor et al., 2013: 98). It is important to note here that Reading Recovery operates internationally and works successfully in all policy contexts, including those such as England where the curriculum is prescribed.

Teacher professional learning is never seen to be complete in the Reading Recovery professional development context. Knowledge generated at the intersection between technical procedures and the point of practice provides a demonstration of praxis during which teachers adapt and restructure learning opportunities in ways that might best meet the needs of the students. Within this process, existing professional knowledge is used to develop both reformulated knowledge and new practice as it is occurring. Therefore it would seem to involve reflection-in-action (Schön, 1991). Designing professional learning opportunities such as these described here draws on not only knowledge of pedagogy and subject but also intuitive elements of reflection. This view of professional knowledge suggests a dynamism, incorporating not only replicative and applicative

knowledge and prior experience, but also the seminal role of critical reflection as fundamental to the development of professional knowledge; reflection prior to, during and after practice (Schön, 1991).

The model of professional learning we use and advocate represents the transformation of learning opportunities from passive receipt of policy information to one of repeated and upward spiralling of information to support and 'power' the learning process (Carless, 2007). Additionally, the model confronts the importance of attitudinal change, vital to developing and maintaining a professional identity of teacher as powerful decision-maker; knowing not only how to act, but also why, able to rationalise and evidence their decision-making using a theoretical framework for action. To neglect the full extent of what is needed for change is to risk widespread misunderstanding of failure of any given top-down policy (Fullan et al, 2001).

Conclusions

Teacher professional agency and decision-making is in conflict in many international settings such as Korea, Poland and Slovenia (OECD, 2009), caught between a linear model of professional learning with growing accountability and a lack of agency to affect how political policy reforms are played out at the point of learning. Competition rather than collaboration creates a negative climate with unrealistic claims that all teachers should be outstanding, and the public perception of teachers competency developed through the media creates a further lever for teacher competency to be used as a political tool. If decision-making lies at the policy level rather than the classroom level, teachers may feel less, not more responsible for outcomes. They have neither autonomy nor responsibility. Teachers should "conceive of themselves as 'agents of change', rather than 'victims of change'" (Whitty, 2008: 45). Teachers need to be able to develop as 'imaginative professional(s)' who can make "creative and articulate responses rather than respond with feelings of hopelessness" (Power, 2008: 157).

We argue that the pathway to teachers re-claiming trust and respect and a capacity for developing and using professional knowledge is possible through coherent approaches to continuing professional learning. Longer term and conceptual models of professional learning which aim to build teachers' interpretive and associative knowledge and privilege a conceptual rather than a linear approach can equip teachers with a well-informed praxis. This in turn enables greater agency and creativity on the part of the teacher and more effective learning outcomes for all students. Rather than acting as a performative robot enacting policy, the teacher becomes an 'alchemist', planning and leading learning experiences creatively, flexibly and responsibly and able to do so through informed autonomy. If Ben's teacher and others like her felt this level of autonomy and teacher agency, then maybe Ben would become a successful reader as his teacher felt empowered to make decisions based on her observations of Ben's reading behaviours.

Teacher training/development activity

Think about what kind of teaching and learning approaches you have experienced. In what ways would they relate to the linear and conceptual models described in the chapter?

What helped build your understanding of your future role as a teacher?
In what ways is your professional preparation as a teacher developing 'agency'?

What kinds of professional support and learning would help you to extend your confidence in becoming an autonomous decision-maker in your own classroom after your first year as a teacher?

Further Reading

Burroughs-Lange, S. G. & Ince, A. (2013) (eds.). *Every Child a Reader: History, Politics and Practice*. London: IoE Press.

By providing a comprehensive description and critique of how Every Child a Reader was operationalised in England, this book provides a recent case context of autonomy and decision-making agency within a prescriptive policy system.

Lyons, C.A. & Pinnell, G.S. (2001) *Systems for Change in Literacy Education a guide to professional development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

This book offers theories, designs, guidelines, examples, and materials needed to bring about school-wide, long-lasting change

Opfer, D.V., Pedder, D.G., Lavicza, Z. (2011) The role of teachers' orientation to learning in professional development and change: A national study of teachers in England. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27, 443-453.

This article proposes a model of teachers' orientation to professional learning consisting of beliefs, practice and experience and how these impact change in practice.

Tan, O-S. (2012) *Teacher Education Frontiers: International Perspectives on Policy and Practice for Building New Teacher Competencies*. Singapore: Cengage Learning Asia Pte Ltd.

This edited book looks at international perspectives on teacher education and professional learning.

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