

Looking beyond the obvious: applying a critically reflective lens to professional learning literature

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There is growing acknowledgement of the fact that education is political, and that this means it is inextricably influenced by cultural, historical and social practices. While this assumption is perhaps more explicitly applied to initial professional learning, it seems not an unreasonable leap to assert that post-qualification professional learning must be similarly political, and also be influenced by particular cultural, historical and social practices. Hence the growing emphasis on critical reflection, rather than simply on being a 'reflective practitioner', namely, understanding critical reflection as '...uncovering within the educational process how dominant social and economic groups impose their values and beliefs to legitimise their power and authority' (Šarić & Šteh, 2017, p. 72)

With my Masters-level, pre-service teachers, I use Brookfield's (2017) work on hegemonic assumptions to help students to engage in critical reflection, to 'see' hegemony at play in young peoples' school experiences, and to support our beginning teachers to interrogate their own and their institutional practices in ways that support them to identify and challenge practices that ignore or misrepresent particular individuals and groups. Brookfield's work is particularly helpful in terms of supporting us to uncover hegemonic assumptions by interrogating 'common sense' interpretations of teaching, and, by extension, of teacher learning. In this editorial, I want to use that lens to reflect on potential common sense assumptions and/or hegemonic practices at play in the professional learning literature.

In introducing the thirteen varied and interesting papers in this issue, I'd like to present them in relation to how they speak to questions of equity, hegemony and power in professional learning. I do this with a view to opening up conversations about how we might seek to look beyond the obvious, or 'common-sense assumptions', in developing professional learning approaches and opportunities that promote access for all teachers. The aim is to enable hegemonic practices to be rendered visible, and, ultimately, to support the wider social agenda of promoting socially just practices in our education systems. In short, looking at the articles through a critically reflective lens can open up their potential impact even more widely.

The issue opens with a piece from Walsh and Dolan which explores the changing identities and practices of 'placement tutors' in Ireland. In so doing, it raises explicitly the question of the impact of terminology on the identity of these educators, and illustrates for us how terminology can be a powerful influencer of our perceptions of ourselves and others. The article highlights the importance of the community of practice to which these educators belong, and this raises questions for us to ponder around who is able to join that community of practice, and maybe even more importantly, who is not?

Tran and Pasura then present their work on the professional development implications for post-secondary vocational education and training (VET) teachers working with international students. This article contributes a really helpful perspective to the existing literature by focusing specifically on the professional development needs of these teachers. In adopting a critically reflective lens, it might be asked why this focus for professional learning is not prioritised at the outset of a VET teacher's career, rather than as something to be considered only when the 'challenge' of working with international students is faced. We might also use these ideas to explore the ways in which working with international students is very often positioned as a deficit to be remedied rather than an asset to be capitalised on.

The professional functionings of early childhood educators is the focus of Molla and Nolan's article, and they use a capability approach lens to understand their data, setting this against a changing policy context in which professionalization of the workforce has been a significant focus. The capability lens seems to be a helpful way to shift the focus on professional learning away from a deficit position, serving to empower teachers as learners.

Elek and Page also focus on early childhood educators, but their article reviews the empirical literature on what is deemed to be 'effective' coaching for this group of educators. Looking at this and the previous article together allows us to think more critically about the policy context that contributes to how 'effective' coaching is understood. Indeed, Eleka and Page urge us to think more about not only 'what works', but why things work and in what contexts they are deemed to work. This is a crucial place to stop and think about who, and what agendas, influence what it means to be an effective early educator, and how coaching might support that endeavour. In this regard, Cushion's (2018) Foucauldian analysis of the 'taken-for-grantedness' of much coaching practice, provides a very useful counterpoint.

We then move from early education to youth work, with an article from Ranahan and Alsaieq in which they explore how professional learning designed to enhance mental health literacy can be applied to youth work practice. The article is explicit about the connection between youth workers' professional learning and their own personal identity development. This work is a timely reminder that ongoing professional learning requires constant interrogation of one's own identity and personal history: this is not something simply to be done in initial professional preparation and then forgotten about, rather it is a career-long process of interrogating and articulating one's own enculturation, and its impact on relationships with learners.

Shirrell, Hopkins and Spillane focus on the impact of formal and 'on-the-job' professional learning designed to introduce and embed systemic change in the teaching of mathematics. Importantly, the authors stress the need to explore and interrogate teachers' beliefs about teaching mathematics, and not just their instructional skills. While the substantive issue of supporting teachers to deliver a new approach to teaching mathematics is interesting in itself, what this article also contributes is insight into the importance of decision-making structures at regional and local levels. The study also highlights the interaction between structures and demographics, reminding us that no matter what structures are in place, the demographics of the pupil (and presumably teacher) population has a bearing on any teaching or professional learning intervention.

Context is key in the next article too, where Kilpatrick and Fraser report on the challenges of equipping teachers to deliver high quality STEM education in rural settings in Australia. The article reports on the development of a STEM framework to support non-specialists/generalist teachers through the development of a community of practice (CoP). Perhaps unsurprisingly in a context like this, the article reports favourably on the support provided through the CoP. However, it is also important to think about the possible drawbacks associated with CoPs in terms of their capacity to promote groupthink and their potential to exclude those who do not fit within the dominant, and often unspoken, parameters that shape communities of practice.

Le and Alefaio's contribution explores the impact of professional development on mindfulness, undertaken by twenty-six Hawaii teachers and counsellors. The authors highlight the challenges associated with secular mindfulness and its relationship to Buddhism, while acknowledging the importance of participants' own personal biographies. The role and influence of religious belief in teachers seems an under-researched aspect of teachers' engagement with professional learning, and yet undoubtedly one which impacts greatly on their common sense understandings of the purpose of education and the role of teachers.

The next article in this issue, by Ufnar and Shepherd, also focuses on professional development to support STEM teaching, reporting on an innovative project which saw STEM graduate students working alongside classroom teachers over an extended period of time. The authors claim that this is 'a replicable model that exhibits characteristics of effective PD', and their article outlines justification for this claim. However, it seems that the professional development experience under investigation perhaps does more than simply to exhibit characteristics of 'effective' professional development; the capacity for teachers to work closely with graduates of STEM disciplines has the power to disrupt the dominant education narrative in the school, opening practice up to healthy scrutiny and challenge. It perhaps also provides a very helpful potential means of recruiting good STEM graduates into teacher education!

Christianson, Bainbridge and Halupa's article reports on a small-scale pilot study investigating the impact of professional development on educators' preparation to teach interprofessional education. While the authors do not claim to be able to draw clear conclusions from the study, the work is evidence of increased focus on interprofessional skills and capacities. It seems particularly important, in this context, to consider the participants' backgrounds and personal biographies, especially when the authors conclude that while the professional development intervention increased participants' knowledge, it 'found no significant change in attitudes'.

The next article, by Zuzovsky, Donitsa-Schmidt, Trumper, Arar and Barak, provides a fascinating case study of two different post-qualification Masters routes for teachers in Israel. These two routes – one established by the Council for Higher Education, and one by the Ministry of Education – each have different ideological underpinnings. What follows is a complex story, involving the Israeli teacher colleges negotiating and mediating mixed messages about the purpose and value of professional Masters study. The article provides a timely contribution to the growing global narrative pushing teaching as a Masters-level

profession by reminding us that a 'Masters' can be many things, but ultimately there will be an ideological underpinning somewhere to be uncovered.

Louie, Pughe, Kuo and Björling's article reports on a study of the professional development needs of Washington state principals, focusing on supporting their work with English learner students. They begin by outlining changes in pupil demographics which highlight a growing need for greater teacher expertise in this area. The three key areas that principals reported needing professional development in were: 1) culturally responsive teaching, 2) differentiated instruction, and 3) family and community engagement. It is interesting to observe that these aspects are not exclusive to teaching English learners, rather they are illustrative of teaching with a focus on social justice more widely. It seems important to be able to find ways to tie up the system in a coherent way by considering where in a teacher's professional career these areas might best be first explored, and how best they might be revisited regularly.

The final article in this issue, authored by Cheng and Pan, is also set within the context of English language teacher learning, this time in the context of China. Unlike the previous article, however, the focus of the research is not so much on English language teaching, but on the features of interactions within formal meetings of a professional learning community. Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the data show that the nominated 'teacher educator' was dominant in both meetings; it would be interesting to explore the interaction of PLC members within more informal learning contexts, enabling greater insight into the learning relationships between and across the PLC membership when the dominant influence is less present.

Reviewing the articles in this issue with a critically reflective lens allows us to see what is not said, as well as what is said. It also provokes us into paying attention to who is included and who is not included. I thank the authors of the articles in this issue for providing a rich stimulus for us to consider professional learning as critical practice, but want to conclude with some words of comfort from Brookfield (2017, p. 43): 'Given the power of history, politics, and culture it's insane for any teacher to imagine that he or she can walk into a classroom and overturn centuries of racial, gender, and class exploitation', but we can and should work towards that aim through ethical and well-considered professional learning.

References:

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