

Engagement with Research as a Form of Teacher Development

A PhD candidate argues that effective teacher development is best realized when undertaken by a community of teachers, who are locally based, and perform most of their activities online.

by Sardar M. Anwaruddin

Many teachers

perceive traditional professional development (PD) activities “to be fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant to the real problems of their classroom practice” (Lieberman & Mace, 2010, p. 77). Why do they feel this way? I believe that part of this problem is due to the long-existing gap between research and practice in the field of education. Many argue that educational research makes little impact on day-to-day classroom practice (e.g., Ball, 2012; Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Sharp, 2003; Kennedy, 1997;). As Mitchell (1999, p. 44) observes, “the great majority of published research has little or no influence on teaching practice.” Teachers often complain that research is “variously unsuitable, inaccessible, overly simplistic or complex, too prescriptive or un-

duly vague, or contradictory across studies” (Huberman, 1999, p. 290). Some scholars argue that the researcher’s theoretical knowledge hardly contributes to the teacher’s pedagogical knowledge (e.g., McIntyre, 2005). I acknowledge that the matter of research-practice gap is too complex to be fully tackled within the scope of this article. Therefore, I focus on one of the issues that I believe is important for us to understand why research often fails to inform and improve practice. Drawing on my international experiences in teacher education and professional development, I argue that most PD activities *tell* teachers about research, rather than have them *engage with* it. The traditional PD rarely encourages teachers to interrogate the research-based – often *generalized* – knowledge as a way of developing local and personal pedagogical knowledge. In the pages that

In conventional PD activities, teachers get to know findings and recommendations of educational research that their trainers choose for them. This is best exemplified by the training model which “is generally ‘delivered’ to the teacher by an ‘expert’, with the agenda determined by the deliverer, and the participant placed in a passive role” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 237).

follow, I first discuss why teachers’ direct and unmediated engagement with research is important, and then I make suggestions for their engagement with research (EwR) as a form of professional learning.

Engagement with Research

In conventional PD activities, teachers get to know findings and recommendations of educational research that their trainers/developers choose for them. This is best exemplified by the training model of PD, which “is generally ‘delivered’ to the teacher by an ‘expert’, with the agenda determined by the deliverer, and the participant placed in a passive role” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 237). In addition to this top-down approach to PD, various models have been proposed to make research-based knowledge usable in teachers’ practice (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007). For instance, some scholars believe that teachers’ lack of information literacy, i.e., their abilities to locate, evaluate, and use research-based knowledge, is a key barrier to closing the research-practice gap. Therefore, they recommend that teachers’ information literacy be developed if they are to use research-based knowledge in their practice (Williams & Coles, 2007). Another group of scholars suggest that educational researchers publish research findings in open-access journals so that the contents become freely available on the

World Wide Web (Willinsky, 2012). They hope that open-access publication will reach out a wide and diverse readership including teachers. Yet, there are others who prefer to summarize educational research in “plain” language for teachers. For example, the Ontario Education Research Exchange publishes summaries of research (2-4 pages in length) on their website. In this way, it aims to make research accessible and useful for teachers (OERE, 2013).

Although these initiatives are useful for disseminating research knowledge, what remains largely unexplored is whether or how teachers engage with this knowledge. Recent studies have reported that very few teachers read research (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2013; Borg, 2009). Therefore, I recommend that educational leaders including principals and vice-principals pay attention to how

teachers may engage with research as a form of professional learning. I define teachers’ engagement *with* research as reading (**note:** *reading research is broadly defined here. It also includes viewing and listening to research texts in various formats such as print, audio, and visual*) and using research to inform and improve pedagogical knowledge and practice. This is different from teachers’ engagement *in* research, which is generally understood as teachers’ own inquiry in which they attempt to better understand their work. Various terms such as action research, practitioner research, teacher research, and self-study are used to describe teachers’ engagement in research (Borg, 2010). Thus, my conceptualization of EwR differs from other models of knowledge dissemination that rely heavily on mediators who (arguably) distort the meaning and implication of research findings as they translate and transmit research-based knowledge to teachers. For example, Levin’s (2004) model of bridging the research-practice gap involves mediators such as media (mass and professional), think tanks, lobbyists, policy entrepreneurs, and populizers who make connections between researchers and practitioners. In addition to possible distortion of the

Adminfo

VOLUME 27
NUMBER 2

Adminfo is published five times per year by the BC Principals’ & Vice-Principals’ Association. Subscriptions for non-members of the Association are available for \$33.60 per year, including taxes. Adminfo welcomes your editorial contributions and student artwork. All material should be sent to: Richard Williams, Editor, Adminfo, #200-525 10th Avenue West, Vancouver V5Z 1K9 [call 604-689-3399 or 800-663-0432, fax 604-877-5381 or email: rwilliams@bcpvpa.bc.ca].

Editor

Richard Williams

meanings of research-based knowledge, this over-reliance on mediators may reinforce “a discourse that focuses on the professional as deficient and in need of developing and directing rather than on a professional engaged in self-directed learning” (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 712). To resist the reinforcement of such discourse, the EwR model that I propose views teachers as self-directed professional learners who evaluate and interrogate the researcher’s theoretical knowledge to develop their pedagogical knowledge that is relevant for them, in their context, and at the present time.

Three Characteristics of EwR

EwR as a model of professional learning has three essential characteristics: it is a community of teachers, the community is locally-based, and most of its activities are performed online. Below, I briefly describe these characteristics.

Community of teachers:

For meaningful engagement with research, I recommend that teachers work in a community and choose research materials through a process of negotiation. I use “research material” in its broadest sense to include journal articles, books, conference presentations, lectures, and any other formats deemed appropriate to teachers’ professional knowledge. These materials may be in various forms: print, electronic, audio, video etc. Each member of the community should get an equal opportunity to choose and share research

texts that she/he feels appropriate for the community. The idea of a community of teachers is premised on the social theory of learning, which departs from the more familiar psychological theories of learning. For example, Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss how learning occurs in a social world through participation in communities. The social theory of learning, as reflected in the concept of *community of learners*, maintains that:

learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others ... This contrasts with models of learning that are based on one-sided notions of learning – either that it occurs through transmission of knowledge from experts or acquisition of knowledge by novices, with the learner or the others (respectively) in a passive role. (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209)

Grounded in this social theory of learning, the EwR model emphasizes that teachers work collaboratively in a community, and that they interact with one another to create a *multidirectional* flow of knowledge.

The idea of a community of teachers may be supported by some literature on knowledge management. For example, Coakes (2002) believes that successful knowledge management for innovation requires a collaborative culture that fosters creation, sharing, learning, and using of knowledge. Therefore, I propose that teachers be provided with opportunities to collaborate with peers. In this collaborative endeavour, they choose, read, and

evaluate research-based recommendations and examine their applicability to their classroom practice. Then, they share their ideas with peers and, in this way, verify their own knowledge and understanding in reference to that of others. Thus, the community of teachers is likely to provide multiple opportunities to learn: one learns from the other, one shares his/her own knowledge with the other, and one puts her/his knowledge at risk through openness to the idea of the other. In sum, teachers in this community may be able to collaborate with one another and engage with the researcher’s theoretical knowledge, which may contribute to the development of their pedagogical knowledge (McIntyre, 2005).

The community of teachers is locally-based:

For meaningful engagement with research, I suggest that teachers participate in locally-based communities. This focus on the local is important because the researcher’s generalizable knowledge does not always speak to specific problems that teachers face in their local contexts. I argue that the various initiatives to promote research-informed practice do not pay proper attention to the contextual realities of research use. For example, Klein and Gwaltney (1991) describe four types of dissemination of research-knowledge: spread, choice, exchange, and implementation. The first type – spread—is a “one-way diffusion or distribution of informa-

The producer push model does not support an exchange of ideas between researchers and teachers. It suggests that teachers use research-based knowledge as it comes to them through conduits such as one-shot PD sessions. This approach ignores the local contextual realities, nuances and sociocultural factors.

EwR as a model of professional learning has three essential characteristics: it is a community of teachers, the community is locally-based, and most of its activities are performed online.

tion” (p. 246). In this type of dissemination, knowledge producers share and promote the use of knowledge among the target audiences. Compared to the first, the second type – choice – is more reactive and responsive because it “helps users seek and acquire alternative sources of information and learn about their options” (p. 246). This type of dissemination is usually carried out by clearinghouses, libraries, data bases, and information centres. The third type of dissemination is called exchange, which “involves interactions between people and the multidirectional flow of information through such media as conferences, forums, computer networks, feedback systems, and so on” (p. 246). The final type of dissemination is implementation or use of knowledge, “which includes technical assistance, training, or interpersonal activities designed to increase the use of knowledge or R&D or to change attitudes or behavior of organizations or individuals” (p. 247). Klein and Gwaltney’s (1991) typology of dissemination is similar, in many ways, to a framework proposed by Lavis et al. (2003). This framework highlights three types of dissemination: producer push, user pull, and exchange of research knowledge and information. A careful review of the literature on knowledge management in education indicates that most knowledge dissemination initiatives take a “producer push” approach to applying research-knowledge to practice.


The producer push model does

not support an exchange of ideas between researchers and teachers. It suggests that teachers use research-based knowledge as it comes to them through conduits such as one-shot PD sessions. This approach ignores the local contextual realities, nuances and sociocultural factors. The producer push model is conceptually akin to the position of the world culture theorists who believe that schools around the world are becoming similar by adopting common educational principles and practices (Myer & Ramirez, 2000; for critique of world culture theory, see Anderson-Levitt, 2003). This theory of converging school culture encourages researchers, policy makers, knowledge managers, educational leaders and teachers to take a universal approach to applying research knowledge to all contexts, regardless of their socio-cultural differences. To counter the world culture theory’s universal approach to re-

search and practice, many scholars have examined various forms of “transfer” of knowledge and methods of education (e.g., Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). They point to how educational policy makers often *uncritically* adopt theories and methods that are not always suited to the needs and culture of local educational contexts (e.g., Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2009). Therefore, I propose that we take a locally-based approach to teachers’ engagement with research as a form of professional learning.

Online community:

The third characteristic of EwR is that the community of teachers operates (mostly) online. In fact, the recent years have witnessed “a growing recognition of the importance in using online communities of practice




ALUMNI TEACHER AWARD
nominate greatness

The UBC Faculty of Education
Alumni Teacher Award
celebrates outstanding
achievement by UBC Education
graduates teaching in a school
or community organization.

Nominate a Great Teacher!

Deadline: January 31, 2015
Details: www.educ.ubc.ca/alumni



a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Faculty of Education

as a model for professional development” (Kirschner & Lai, 2007, p. 129). Teachers are now increasingly participating in online communities for their learning (Holmes, 2013; Hur & Brush, 2009). Proponents of online community argue that it has “the potential to connect teachers in ways that encourage them to deepen their professional knowledge, offer support to one another, to mentor and be mentored, and to engage in professional dialogue” (Hutchison & Colwell, 2012, p. 274). Drawing on these arguments, I believe that participation in online communities will provide teachers with an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogues with peers. These dialogues are necessary for them to interrogate and evaluate research-based recommendations and to understand whether and how these recommendations may be applicable to their local teaching contexts and practices.

Online communities may also help overcome two challenges that often prevent teachers from collaborative professional learning. The challenges are (1) teachers’ lack of time, and (2) teacher isolation. Among others, Borg (2009) finds that a lack of time is the primary barrier for teachers to engage with research. This lack of time also hinders their collaboration with peers who are located at the same school or in a geographically distant region. These challenges factor into what is known as teacher isolation. As DuFour (2011) writes, most “schools offer no infrastructure to support collaboration or continuous improvement, and, in fact, the very structure of their schools serves as a powerful force for preserving the status quo [with regard to teacher isolation]” (pp. 57-58). Thus, teacher isolation functions as a key impediment to

school improvement, as most teachers plan, execute, and evaluate their classroom practice alone (DuFour, 2011; Lortie, 1975). In short, teachers’ lack of time and their working environment marked with isolation appear to be major barriers to their professional learning, including engagement with research. To overcome these challenges, I suggest that the community of teachers operate online. By participating in online communities, teachers may become independent of time and location, which is “an advantage over traditional models of teacher professional development” (Carr & Chambers, 2006, p. 155).

Conclusion

As an alternative to the traditional PD activities that just *tell* teachers about research (Greenleaf & Katz, 2004), I have proposed the EwR model and recommended that teachers directly engage with educational research. Principals and vice-principals may play important roles in teachers’ engagement with research. One essential role for them is to create and sustain an organizational culture that supports teachers’ direct engagement with research for their professional development. Creating this culture is vital because studies have found that “the main barriers to knowledge use in the public sector ... were not at

the level of individual resistance but lay in an institutionalized organizational culture that did not facilitate learning through the use of research” (Hemsley-Brown, 2004, p. 542). Having said this, I shall note that teachers use different kinds of knowledge in their teaching, and that they of course acquire knowledge from many different sources. Therefore, it is not my intension to argue that research-based knowledge will always be “translated into pedagogical knowledge” (McIntyre, 2005, p. 359). Nevertheless, I maintain that critical and judicious engagement with research-based recommendations will lead to teachers’ development of pedagogical knowledge that is relevant to their local teaching contexts. Three major barriers that have long impeded such engagement are a lack of focus on the social nature of teachers’ learning, a lack of attention to the local contexts of teaching, and the problem of teacher isolation. The model of teachers’ engagement with research that I have briefly presented in this article is expected to help overcome these challenges. By supporting this model, principals and vice-principals can foster teachers’ professional development, “which is arguably the most central function of instructional leadership” (Leithwood, 1992, p. 86). ^{bcp}_{vp}

Sardar M. Anwaruddin is a PhD Candidate in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development at OISE, University of Toronto. This is his first article for Adminfo. He is an assistant editor of Curriculum Inquiry and can be reached at s.anwaruddin@mail.utoronto.ca

References for this article are available online at <http://bit.ly/1yU4XKC>

ShortCourse 2015 • UBC, July 6 – 10

Watch for information

www.bcpvpa.bc.ca and www.twitter.com/bcpvpa