Beyond reproduction: the transformative potential of professional learning

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EDITORIAL

Beyond reproduction: the transformative potential of professional learning

There is an often unquestioned assumption that professional learning and development (PLD) is unequivocally a 'good thing' (Stevenson 2019). However, this assumption belies a much more complex situation, fraught with challenges. Numerous studies have demonstrated that teachers can experience significant barriers when trying to access PLD (OECD 2014), including limited access to appropriate opportunities, having insufficient time to undertake the opportunities that are available and that even when teachers do participate in PLD activities, impact can be limited (McChesney and Aldridge 2021). These are important challenges and should not be dismissed. However, they tend to generate policy responses that focus only on identifying 'what works' solutions within a set of parameters that do not question 'what matters' (Biesta 2007).

Professional Development in Education has done much over the years to seek to move beyond this debate about structural challenges and practical solutions, and to open up discussion about more fundamental questions such as who is PLD for, who should decide, and what should it look like? We have sought to open up a discussion about 'transformative professional learning': both what it is and what it might be. This work has assumed many forms over the years, but a significant moment was the publication of Aileen Kennedy's (2005) article '*Models of Continuing Professional Development: A framework for analysis*' which distinguishes between transmissive and transformative modes of professional learning. These issues have been reflected since in ongoing debates within the journal and highlighted in the recent special issue on 'Non-linear perspectives on teacher development: complexity in professional learning and practice' (vol. 47, issues 2 and 3). However, despite these discussions, much of the research relating to professional learning remains focused on transmissive models that fail to question the fundamentally reproductive nature of much PLD. These initiatives are often managerially imposed, embedded within performative structures and are central to encouraging cultures that value conformity and compliance over radical change. Although such approaches have often co-opted the language of transformation, the reality suggests that very little is being transformed. The danger is that the language of 'transformation' becomes accepted as a contemporary 'common sense' – over-used and under-analysed. The ultimate irony is that learning processes that claim to be about change play a key role in reinforcing existing structures and their linked inequalities.

In this Special Issue of *PDiE*, we explore the potential of professional learning to be disruptive – to challenge current inequalities, dominant ideas, and established orthodoxies. We seek to understand how professional learning can be genuinely transformative, not only by opening up possibilities that may be beyond our current imagination, but which connect abstract and conceptual thinking with practical actions capable of bringing about real change – what Freire (1970) called 'conscientization'. We consider transformative professional learning to be that which enables critical consciousness, what Mezirow (1981, p. 6) describes as an awareness and understanding of 'how an ideology reflects and distorts moral, social and political reality and what material and psychological factors influence and sustain the false consciousness which it represents – especially reified powers of domination'. Transformative professional learning is therefore liberatory and emancipatory, but at times also 'disorienting' (Mezirow 1991).

Our intention in curating this special issue is to provide an impetus for a more joined up attempt at challenging the dominant approach to professional learning which focuses on attempts to

identify the most 'effective' means of ensuring that teachers can improve pupils' scores on standardised test – often seen as the 'gold-standard' outcome of PLD (Sims et al., 2021). We therefore invited authors to explore such questions as follows: What do we mean by 'reproductive professional learning' and in what ways does professional learning act in reproductive ways? To what extent can professional learning be transformative? What are the challenges for those who work in the field of 'professional learning' and who seek to work in transformative ways? To what extent is it possible to work 'in and against' the system we seek to transform? Can professional learning open up genuine possibilities to work in counter-hegemonic ways? We welcomed contributions that would draw on innovative and creative methodologies, speak directly to questions of equality and the reproduction of inequalities and/or that would offer critical and analytical perspectives on PLD policy and governance. We were delighted to receive a range of different contributions on the theme that, when brought together, provide an exciting challenging and potentially agenda-setting set of ideas. The articles in this issue provide stimulus for us not only to get ideas about what to *do* by way of professional learning but also about how we might think and talk about professional learning, and ultimately, how we might truly understand its power.

All the articles address a broad range of common questions, but they do so in different and distinctive ways. For example, there is a range of approaches to 'transformation' itself – about what is being transformed, by whom and for what purpose. These are all issues that are central to 'transformational learning theory', but which are often insufficiently problematised. Many of the articles in this volume begin to address these key questions, but in a range of different ways. There is a similar diversity when one considers both methods and theory, with a plurality of traditions being utilised, but often in new and creative ways. A particularly pleasing feature is the willingness to work across theory borders, and to explore how different theoretical perspectives may be sutured together to provide new insights into addressing some long established issues.

In their varied approaches to a range of common questions, all the papers help map a terrain that can help navigate future discussions. They set a direction for future work, but also provide an imperative to extend and deepen our debates. The case for transformation is not a matter of intellectual conjecture but a matter of societal necessity. In an 'age of crises' (Stevenson 2023), professional learning has to be about more than preparation for work, it must also consider how we can 'transform' work itself. How can work challenge injustice and inequality, promote democracy, and ensure sustainability (of ourselves, and of the planet)? In this sense, transformative professional learning cannot be confined to learning for work but must engage critically with learning about work: considering what work is, the impact it has, and how else it might be organised. In this sense, perhaps genuinely transformative professional learning is not about learning for work, but about learning against work?

Rice, Castañon & Fiedler start the issue with their self-study exploring the relational work of instructional coaches. They explore this work through the use of the Greek myth of Niobe and in so doing, open up new spaces to think about and understand relationships, emotions, grief, and loss as part of professional learning. This is particularly poignant in Rice et al.'s article as they explore the instructional coaches' work during COVID 19, from which they conclude that 'future research demands a deliberate relational stance'.

We then move to a piece by Woods, Culshaw, Smith, Jarvis, Payne & Roberts, in which arts-based and embodied approaches are used to explore professional learning in relation to distributed leadership. They advocate for aesthetic grounding as a tool for understanding the potential learning that arises from engagement in arts-based and embodied approaches. Although a very different context and approach to the foregoing article, the two share similarity in terms of their attention to the affective domain, and argue for their centrality in transformative professional learning.

Baldinger offers us a 'Teacher Learning for Transformation' framework, suggesting that it offers 'a holistic view of multiple aspects of teachers' learning, which are embedded in and mediated by socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts'. Striking in this piece is its intention to support teachers to resist the reproduction of long-standing and entrenched injustices and inequities. This work

reminds us that professional learning is not always about teachers learning what to do, but that learning how to resist should also be a feature of professional learning, particularly that which seeks to be transformative.

As well as the importance of learning when and how to resist, transformative professional learning requires the development of critical consciousness, and Morgan and Cieminski explore this in the context of school leader preparation. In particular, they report on professional learning on an educational leadership course with a specific focus on participants developing their 'dispositions (courage and humility), knowledge (cultural intelligence), and skills to challenge entrenched organisational practices that suppress diversity, equity and inclusion'. They draw clear conclusions about the importance of critical reflection and conscious-raising in preparing more racially conscious school leaders.

Boylan, Adams, Perry & Booth offer us a conceptual piece which considers the relationship between transformative professional learning, and what the authors call 'critical professionalism'. Their conceptualisation of critical professionalism draws on literature about democratic, activist, and transformative perspectives on professionalism, offering a helpful and powerful way to understand the essence of these movements. Ultimately, they seek to distinguish genuinely transformative professional learning from those 'forms of professional development and learning that are badged as transformative but that may serve narrower educational purposes, promoting reproductive and culturally conservative views of knowledge'.

Qin, Zhu, Cheng, Membiela, Mena, and Zhu provide a study of training teachers in China and Spain to understand how, and to what extent, the teaching practicum in two very different contexts provide students with what might be presented as transformative learning experiences. The contrasting experiences generate a range of interesting findings, but of particular note is the way in which the authors seek to combine transformative learning theory (drawing largely on Mezirow) with third space theory. The article points to the creative possibilities when efforts are made to work within and across multiple theories, and the opportunities this can open up for new thinking. In particular, their article highlights the need to move beyond traditional (and constraining?) binaries as we look to make sense of the theory-practice nexus.

French, Griffin, and Lambert also raise issues identified by Qin et al. above when they explore a Masters programme in Education that explicitly seeks to challenge dominant narratives embedded in much of the mainstream professional learning programmes that proliferate in the English school system. Working alongside students on the programme to develop their analysis, French and colleagues present their programme as a 'liminal space' with an intention to transform the thinking of participants by deliberately creating environments that are not only uncertain but unsettling. The article provides interesting insights into teachers' perspectives on 'what matters' in their professional learning, when they are offered opportunities to step back from, and critique, the 'what works' environment in which they perform their work. The authors urge readers to be comfortable with professional learning as a process of 'always becoming' and that the formation of teacher identities is 'a never arrived at place'.

Goodwin, Lee, and Pratt are concerned with the transformative impact of mentoring as their article explores the role of mentorship in supporting beginning teachers. Goodwin and colleagues highlight the dangers of focusing on a narrow range of pedagogical skills and make a passionate and intellectually powerful plea to focus on the 'heart, soul and mind' of those entering teaching careers. They set out a more holistic approach to early career mentoring and argue that 'pedagogy in teacher education must attend to the wellbeing of teachers, with the aim of transforming them intellectually, emotionally, socially, and psychologically'.

Parkhouse, Senechal, and Severson-Irby explore the notion of 'critical professional development' as a form of professional learning that is intentionally disruptive, but which often struggles to have an impact because this provision is frequently located outside of mainstream system and structures. Such programmes are often provided by grassroots and community organisations, for example, and Parkhouse and colleagues argue that the associated problems of legitimacy (the need for system

support for implementation) and resourcing (the challenge of teachers being able to find time) can limit their reach. In their article, they provide details of an innovative research–practice partnership that demonstrated the possibilities of simultaneously working in and against the system.

Milner and Scholkmann are concerned with changing notions of teacher professionalism in a context that is not only globalised but which must adapt to increasingly complex societal challenges. The authors question whether traditional approaches to teachers' professional learning are fit for purpose given the scale of the challenges we face. In setting out this critique, they present an approach to Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a 'transformative model of professional development'. As a pedagogical approach, PBL is well established, if not uncontested. However, Milner and Scholkmann approach the issue in an innovative way, demonstrating how an approach to professional learning grounded in PBL principles can develop a teacher professionalism able to navigate the key challenges that currently confront teachers and their profession.

In an article by Romano and Bostic, the nature of, and imperative for, transformation is posed starkly. The challenges posed by structural inequalities across societies demand transformation, and in their paper Romano and Bostic focus on the need to confront racial inequalities in the United States. In highlighting the school as a space where racial inequalities are reproduced, but can also be challenged, the authors argue that teachers' professional learning must support educators to develop transformative practices. Romano and Bostic bring together transformative learning theory and critical race theory to make a case for an approach to professional learning that places challenging racism at its core.

Ngee Derk Tiong's article focuses on how performative cultures and high stakes accountability mechanisms are internalised by teachers, but also what possibilities for resistance might be generated by engaging with, and intervening in, the informal discourses that are grounded in teachers' everyday activities. The article is based on detailed vignettes from two Malaysian secondary schools. It reminds us that the frames of reference that teachers construct for themselves act as powerful guides for understanding professional practices, but that counter-frames can be developed that are capable of disrupting dominant discourses and offering alternative courses of action.

We invite you, the reader, to engage with these pieces and to use the ideas therein to challenge and extend your own work, whether that be in designing and supporting professional learning opportunities in your own context, in contributing to or leading the development of PLD policy across jurisdictions, and/or in researching PLD policies, processes, and impact. We welcome future contributions to the journal which build on and critique the ideas in this Special Issue in an attempt to move our understanding forward.

Disclosure statement

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