

# Professional development and the impact of teacher relationships

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## Abstract

Collegial relationships between teachers are very important within the school environment. They are essential to ensuring the school operates smoothly and within a positive atmosphere. Positive relationships between teachers benefit both students and teachers within the school. Professional Development is reliant on positive relationships between teaching staff, with it being an essential component of effective Professional Development courses. Many teachers have negative attitudes towards Professional Development due to it being very individual and irrelevant to their teaching practice. However, when it is based around collaboration and coaching with other colleagues, teachers are much more engaged and ultimately find it beneficial. Professional Development needs to be driven by senior leaders within schools, with them also responsible for pushing positive relationships. This literature review looks at a variety of literature regarding Professional Development and how teacher's relationships are essential to successful execution.

**Keywords:** *professional development, relationships, collaboration, teacher relationships*



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## Introduction

Professional Development (PD) is a key function within school environments, and helps teachers develop into more effective educators. At its simplest form PD can be defined as the development of competence, and the acquiring of skills to improve performance (Ferrier-Kerr, Keown & Hume, 2009). Teachers need to be open to change and adapt their teaching pedagogy appropriately so that they can adapt to the changing nature of school environments and their student's needs. 21<sup>st</sup> century schools are rapidly changing, with the emergence of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), E-learning and other technology which are changing the face of education.

Teachers are required to learn new skills so that they can maximise their student's learning opportunities, which places more importance on PD. When discussing PD it is important that we are aware of the pros and cons of the current system, the importance of a community of learning and the impact principals can have. By doing this we can have a greater understanding of PD and in turn how teachers can interact with it more effectively.

## Why professional development?

There are a number of reasons why teachers should engage in effective PD, with the primary goal being to improve teacher and student performance. Harnett (2012) explores the idea that there is a growing importance on the teacher's role in relation to student achievement. If teachers are able to effectively learn new skills and hone their profession we should see benefits for our students. Harnett (2012) explains through efficient PD teachers will learn new skills, become more effective, learn off other people's experiences and develop a clearer teaching philosophy which suits their style. This will help create more confident teachers who are less afraid to take risks, which can only benefit both teachers and students in the long term. Another key reason for teachers to engage in PD is that it can be hugely important in helping support major educational reforms or changes within the education sector (Starkey et al., 2009). Starkey et al. (2009) look at how PD was essential in implementing key reforms to the NCEA system in New Zealand. Effective PD allowed teachers within schools and the wider teaching community to learn about the changes that would affect their teaching and in turn their student's learning. Some PD courses allow for teachers to network with other teachers within their subject area outside of their own school environment. Chalmers and Keown (2006)

explore this within a secondary geography context in New Zealand, with them listing networking as one of the key benefits of PD. This was because it enabled teachers to learn from other teachers within varying environments and establish a number of effective support structures.

## Flaws in Professional Development

Even though PD is recognised as having an important role in the continued development of teachers it is not always delivered in a way that is effective, or received well by teachers. Some PD programs are seen as lacking in certain areas, with teachers having a negative attitude towards them. Hill (2009) describes PD as being a broken system, with it not being delivered consistently, not reaching enough teachers and being ineffective at times. This is concerning, especially when considering the fact that effective PD can help develop teachers, and in turn benefit student's achievement and schooling experience. Ferrier-Kerr et al. (2009) mention that teachers develop negative attitudes towards PD due to many courses being short half day sessions, which they believe hold no benefit for them.

Teachers believe that these courses are removed from practice and do not consider the realities that occur within the classroom. The fact that many of these PD courses are taught by outside 'experts' does not help engage teachers with the learning. Ferrier-Kerr et al. (2009) indicate that PD is often centred on deficit discourse, and the idea that teachers require outside information to become 'good teachers,' they are viewed as students in their own right. Poskitt and Taylor (2008) reinforce the idea of deficit discourse with them stating that a number of PD courses are based on the premise that intervention, or training, will in turn make an improvement to the teacher. PD programmes that adopt a deficit discourse do not help increase PD participation or buy-in. Lastly, Harnett (2012) states that many teachers believe PD can be too individual, with the emphasis being on how they can improve what they are doing by looking at current research and practice. It does not consider what teachers can learn from each other, through collaboration and reflection. Teachers enjoy PD that includes collaboration, and so for many it is seen as being a major flaw of many PD programmes.

## Learning Community

It is acknowledged that teachers prefer PD which involves collaboration with other teachers and the development of a community of learning. Teachers enjoy the opportunity to work with other teachers, and learn from their experiences. Ferrier-Kerr et al. (2009) state that this is because it is shifting the primary objective of PD from 'teaching' to 'learning.' Teachers are able to learn from other teachers experiences within their own classroom, for many teachers this sort of learning is seen as more relevant. It also acknowledges that teachers participating in PD have their own knowledge and experiences, and that it is worth sharing (Ferrier-Kerr et al., 2009). Teachers view it as more practical learning which can make a difference on their teaching, as opposed to expert led lecture style teachings. This does not need to be limited to a school setting, but could be across a region, country or even the world, creating a community of learning. As with any community the people are very important, in this scenario the community could not exist without teacher relationships. Whitworth and Chiu (2015) mention that within this community of learning teachers are able

to mentor and coach each other, which makes for very effective PD. Teachers are able to learn directly from other teachers who are at the same level as them, which for many is very beneficial. Starkey et al. (2009) stress how important this form of collegial feedback is within effective PD programmes. Positive relationships between teachers are hugely important when trying to implement collegial feedback and a community of learning approach to PD, but can be extremely beneficial. Ferrier-Kerr et al. (2009) also state that positive relationships between teachers can help develop the right atmosphere for reflective learning to occur within a PD context. For teachers to share their own experiences and open themselves up for criticism and assistance there needs to be a culture of trust established, which requires strong relationships. Collegial relationships are key to effective PD due to the simple fact that teachers enjoy PD more when they have the opportunity to learn from their peers, these relationships can then help develop a community of learning amongst teachers and the creation of more effective PD programmes.

## Conclusion

Collegial relationships are hugely important within the local and international setting. They allow for teachers to develop and grow more effectively and offer outstanding support programs. One area where collegial relationships are highlighted is within PD. PD is an important tool to help teachers develop and in turn help improve students experience of school. PD can be ineffective however, with some courses focusing on the individual too much, or not acknowledging the vast amount of knowledge teachers already have. Collegial relationships help ensure that PD is of use to teachers. This is through coaching, collaboration, networking and reflection. Strong collegial relationships between teachers helps develop a community of learning and in turn effective PD, which teachers will be more willing to engage with.

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