Roadblocks and Gates: Longitudinal Experiences of Highly Accomplished Teachers Following Professional Development Experiences

Objectives or purposes

Professional development (PD) is an important mechanism which allows research and new ideas to be interrogated and subsequently enacted in schools. However, moderating factors such as time, and the relationships between ideas, teacher’s beliefs, and school goals will influence how this knowledge is mobilized (Gleson et al., 2022). While there is much research on teacher PD (e.g., Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Desimone, 2009; Hill et al., 2013), there is little reported on what happens in schools when teachers return from rich PD experiences that go beyond implementation of a program to have broader implications than the teacher making changes to their own practice. Similarly, research on outcomes or effects of PD experiences on Highly Accomplished Teachers (HATs) who have a well-developed appreciation of their own beliefs and practices is limited. HATs appreciate their own understanding about the complex relationship between teaching and learning, and focus more on student learning than classroom management (Schoenfeld, 2011). We argue that greater insights into their experiences would be valuable in terms of their middle leadership responsibilities and the personal domain leading to their ongoing professional learning (see Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

Our study focused these teachers after their involvement in an extended PD program that included both a residential component and a yearlong coaching program. Our previous paper reported their experiences and highlighted important considerations for future research including identifying that these teachers want to take the ideas presented at PD further than their own classrooms, yet they encounter tensions within their schools, which they need to navigate.

In this paper, we report our investigation of the experiences of the same eight HATs two years post-PD, exploring their thinking about their learning, any actions they took in response to the PD and any tensions they encountered and how they navigated these. Thus, our study was framed by two research questions:

1. What are the tensions that these HATs faced when bringing ideas and experiences two years post a PD program and coaching back to implement in their schools?
2. What assumptions about HATs’ and their professional learning can create challenges and/or opportunities for these teachers and their schools?

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Multiple models of PD have been created to show teacher learning, where some are linear in nature (e.g., McChesney & Aldridge, 2021) while others signal learning as a complex process (e.g., Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). What is common though, is emphasis on changes to teacher beliefs and attitudes. However, this is not the case for HATs, whose beliefs are entrenched from multiple experiences. Along with considering changes to teachers’ beliefs and attitudes, the role of agency is a significant consideration for understanding teachers’ PD experiences (Buxton et al., 2015). However, there are few studies that define agency or isolate HATs, which is important for this study given the participants. Our participants all held leadership positions focused on teaching and learning, positioning them as likely to exert high levels of agency (e.g., see Louws et al., 2020; Toom et al., 2015). We draw on definitions of agency from Louws et al. (2020) and Vähäsantanen (2015), who describe it as how teachers make decisions within their unique learning context, including in their classroom and how they influence decisions at a leadership level.

Given the focus of this study, we also consider the role of tensions within a school through the lens of PD and changes to thinking and practice. We use tensions to describe the different pressures HATs need to navigate within their learning context as they make decisions (Day, 2007). Le Fevre et al. (2021) explored the tensions faced by principals around creating
an appropriate level of challenge, accountability, self-direction and representation of individual’s voices to foster a sense of collective responsibility for school improvement. Important for our study, is understanding the tensions that HATs face when implementing PD ideas, and how these tensions connect with those identified by Le Fevre et al. (2021).

**Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry:**

This paper is based on data from a longitudinal, small scale, qualitative study. Participants include eight secondary school HATs from two large urban government secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. Schools were invited to participate in the international PD program based on their existing relationship with a Australian University, where the authors of the paper are academics. Three of the authors attended the program as observers. Principals were invited to nominate up to four teachers they considered to be HATs and who also held a learning specialist leadership position.

Using an interpretive paradigm to focus on understanding HATs’ experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), data was collected using a focus group interview approach to maximize efficiency. The purpose of these focus group interviews was to elicit the experiences and tensions associated with HATs’ learning from their PD experiences, including what and how they chose to bring from their learning into their school context. The participants were encouraged to discuss any additional points of interest that they believed relevant for understanding their experiences. Two focus group interviews were conducted two years post-PD and coaching, one with each participating school, and four teachers attended each. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes, audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Ethics approval was obtained from the University, state Department of Education, school principals, and teachers.

Given the little research about HATs’ PD experiences, we utilized a similar data analysis approach to our previous work, drawing on an inductive thematic process (Bryman, 2016). This inductive process focused on highlighting recurring aspects relating to the tensions that HATs faced and how they navigated them in ways that allowed them to enhance their own practice, and support colleagues.

**Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials**

Analysis revealed multiple experiences of tensions, but with space limitations, we offer examples around one finding: tension between HATs’ views and beliefs, and those of school leadership.

**School 1**

Post-PD, these HATs met to develop a table of ideas about how the school could improve learning and teaching based on their learning from the PD experience (e.g., encouraging colleagues to be more explicit about pedagogical purposes). However, these HATs felt that school leadership did not take the time to understand their ideas and was not willing to allow them to implement the changes they identified. The HATs were critical of the way teacher meetings were structured at their school as the agenda was too prescribed; teachers would report something, and the meeting would move on. There was no time for meaningful reflection and discussion, and while there was some conversation about ideas, it was not listened to.

The ideas presented by that HATs that school leadership picked up on were those aligned with what the school was already doing. For example, one teacher stated: "we weren't able to influence the direction the school was going...We were only given the space to implement it, because the space was already there". Similarly, another teacher commented: "I actually think within our context, there's often a lot of competing priorities around the different things that are trying to be rolled out or established". The momentum of existing initiatives was too great to shift. While school leaders seemed immovable in some respects, HATs were able
to influence some change including developing teaching strategies and giving colleagues greater agency.

School 2

Like School 1, HATs felt that significant change was needed in how teacher meetings were conducted at their school and felt changes were needed in how their school curriculum was documented and presented to teachers.

School leadership struggled to know what to do with the ideas that the HATs brought back, as one teacher expressed: “they [school leadership] thought it was a traditional PD where we would just take it and be able to throw it at somebody else, and it would stick, and everyone would move on”. School leadership wanted a faster implementation, saying they had spent a lot of money and wanted to see immediate change. They did not see that the HATs ideas involved what the HATs labelled transformational issues.

In contrast to School 1, however, HATs did have a serious discussion with the principal about what they had learnt, but without much effect. School leadership seemed to expect more discontinuous change (i.e., adopt these new practices), and in the HAT’s view, school leadership seemed to (apparently) reject the idea of trying to build on existing pedagogies ignoring change as an evolutionary journey. During the focus group, these HATs expressed some impact on their personal practice (reported in prior research). However, it became clear that when they tried to implement their ideas more widely, tensions with school leadership dominated the degree of change. For example, one teacher commented:

I don’t think that they [school leadership] intentionally set out to be submissive… we sat with the principal, and portrayed how much we learned, and where we could see it going and how it would value the school. It kept coming back to… we’ve spent a lot of money on you, we need to see change by this point. But I’m like, that’s not how this really operates. But that’s how their mindset works… [they] want to be able to walk through classrooms…and see easily the change in time…That was disheartening.

Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view

Summary

The HATs’ experience enabled them to return to school with ideas that were more sophisticated and complex than is sometimes the case with less accomplished teachers. Importantly, the outcomes and the ideas HATs wanted to implement when returning to their school could not be predicted before the program. This unpredictable nature becomes a considerable challenge when trying to utilize PD as a mechanism to enhance teaching and learning within a school. Complicating matters further is that HATs are middle-level leaders, but not at the top of the decision-making tree. Hence, they did not have formal power to make changes, apart from their own classroom or through informal conversations. In both schools, the lack of structures where teachers could regularly meet to collaboratively discuss and reflect on new thinking and practices was a significant issue. For these HATs, the issue of how they could extract from the program aspects that ‘were the right grain size’ for the school leadership to understand and ‘that they could digest’, was not solved.

We propose that the processes at both schools for handling the return of HATs with a range of challenging ideas from this rich PD program was made more difficult by the lack of a clear vision of a desired pedagogy; but what would such an articulated vision look like? How would it build in acknowledgement of differences in teachers’ styles and values, and allowance for growth? It is within this space of tension where there are roadblocks (impeding implementation) and gates (supporting implementation), which is conceptualized below in Figure 1. Notwithstanding, these two terms are at ends of a continuum and there are important moderating factors to consider the degree of implementation.
Figure 1: The influence of roadblocks and gates on success of professional development.

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

Roadblocks and gates influence how HATs enact their agency to implement what they have learned at PD experiences. Despite their middle leadership responsibilities, HATs still require support from school leadership to align what they want to implement with the bigger school vision, particularly to effect change at different levels (i.e., classroom, department, school, system). A tension arises between maintaining stability and the evolutionary development of a school’s vision for teacher learning, classroom culture and student learning. Managing such a tension comes through the acknowledgement of new ideas to benefit the evolutionary development of a school vision. No-one would suggest that things should be turned upside down every time teachers return from PD, including HATs, but an effective school should be able to learn, grow, and evolve. Learning from PD when, the PD is about ideas rather than activities, should be seen as the start, not the end of some professional learning experiences.

References


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**Figure 1**

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Pre-PD Experiences

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Roadblocks and Gates to

Success: Enhancement of Knowledge; Practice; Mentoring; Student Outcomes

At Classroom, Department, or School Level