

# Removing Barriers to Professional Learning

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## Abstract

*The professional learning journey for teachers can be either a challenging or a fulfilling one, depending on the conditions in each educational setting. One new initiative at the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the Collaborative Learning Team Grants project, seeks to address barriers such as fixed mindsets, a lack of time, and the absence of praxis, in order to enable professional growth through instructional leadership, collaborative inquiry, and sustained focus on learning over time.*

As a Staff Officer at the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS), it is my role to address potential barriers that can impede teachers' professional growth. Three particular challenges are the impact of a fixed mindset, the absence of praxis in their professional community, and the question of limited time. These roadblocks can cause teachers to lose motivation and disengage from the work of improving instructional practice. In my work with educators across the province, I therefore advocate professional development that incorporates three key enablers of learning: instructional leadership, collaborative inquiry, and focus (Katz & Dack, 2013). This year, through the launch of the Collaborative Learning (CL) Team Grants project at MTS, I will explore both the barriers and counteractive practices in order to enhance professional development opportunities for teachers in Manitoba.

## Three Primary Barriers to Professional Learning

Three primary barriers hinder teachers' professional learning: the presence of a fixed mindset, the devaluing of praxis, and a lack of time. A fixed mindset is the belief that abilities cannot be changed (Katz & Dack, 2013). This mindset can lead to a lack of awareness, with teachers stuck in the first stage of learning where they are unconsciously unskilled, not knowing what they do not know (Adams, 2016). Since it is a natural tendency for human beings to take mental shortcuts, a fixed mindset can also affect metacognition and the attention to biases in thinking, which will interfere with learning (Katz & Dack, 2013). These teachers' level of awareness is diminished, interfering with the acquisition of new knowledge and skills for teaching. Although teachers will inevitably experience moments of fixed and growth mindsets, awareness of both states of mind enables educators to adjust their thoughts and actions, moving toward an understanding that mistakes are valuable learning opportunities (Dweck, 2015).

Praxis is the belief that teachers should have opportunities to reflect while learning, so they can then apply it to their teaching (Knight, 2011). Praxis is lost when educators look to outside organizations or attend professional learning sessions that are not relevant or that do not have any practical application (LaPointe-McEwan, DeLuca, & Klinger, 2017), resulting in a return to the teaching methods that feel the most comfortable (Gutierrez & Heui-Baik, 2017). Finally, when we do not believe that the concept of praxis is important, we put teachers in a passive role, making it difficult for them to apply ideas within their own classrooms (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). Without praxis, learning is not meaningful, relevant, or applicable to problems of practice.

Time can become another barrier to professional development. Teachers are consistently challenged by finding and organizing time, securing paid release time, and determining how much time they will have and whether it will be enough (Peterson, 2008). They therefore may be hesitant to participate in professional learning, particularly when it involves spending time on research (Gutierrez & Heui-Baik, 2017). In addition, teachers may feel isolated if they have little time to dialogue with colleagues about the instructional practices that they learn in professional

development sessions (Hadar & Brody, 2010; Peterson, 2008), and they may not have sufficient time to analyze the classroom evidence that can determine whether this new learning is positively affecting student achievement (LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017). Educators may also experience anxiety because of the time pressures related to missed instructional hours (Young, Cavanagh, & Moloney, 2018). Only when issues related to time, praxis, and the fixed mindset are resolved is it possible to enhance professional learning for teachers.

### **Three Key Enablers of Professional Learning**

One way that the Manitoba Teachers' Society is enabling professional learning for teachers is through the CL Team Grants initiative. This project aims to address barriers in professional development by incorporating supports for instructional leadership, collaborative inquiry, and focus. These grants are awarded to teacher teams who would like to engage in educational research around problems of practice to improve student learning. In addition, the groups selected receive support in the form of instructional coaching by an MTS facilitator. Each team receives guidance throughout the inquiry process to assist them in sustaining their focus on a question of study, exploring current research, creating a plan, reflecting upon and interpreting data, and sharing their learning as a team.

Instructional leadership, as provided by the MTS facilitators, is a key enabling factor in supporting professional growth (Katz & Dack, 2013). This is because leadership in the form of instructional coaching can help teachers break through the barrier of a fixed mindset. This opportunity for educators to examine their thinking about their beliefs and practices, facilitates a shift toward a growth mindset (Aguilar, 2013). This enables teachers to raise their level of awareness, observe themselves and others without judgement, focus on learning opportunities, and understand that their effort and attitude determine success (Dweck, 2006). Consequently, teachers develop a meta-awareness about themselves as learners, leading to more intentional reflective practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). This intentionality creates an appreciation of professional dialogue as a means for growth (Katz & Dack, 2006) and a learning stance that enables exploration and application of new knowledge and skills (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018). Therefore, instructional coaches, like the MTS facilitators, support the development of both a growth mindset and an inquiry stance.

With the support of instructional leaders, teachers are more likely to adopt an inquiry stance that results in curiosity about student performance data, prompting them to examine the information available to improve instruction (Lamb, Philipp, Jacobs, & Schappelle, 2009). Instructional coaches play an integral role in the inquiry process because they assist teachers in exploring and planning to address problems of practice (Knight, 2011). The resulting inquiry stance involves both action and reflection, culminating in a change of practice (Halbert & Kaser, 2016). The instructional leadership and coaching provided within the CL Team Grants project addresses the need to support teachers in developing a growth mindset that makes inquiry possible to improve their learning and that of their students.

The CL Team Grants project also aims to enable meaningful professional learning by creating a culture of collaborative inquiry that honours the concept of praxis, the belief that learning should be practical. The project does this by responding to three motivational needs for teachers in professional development: competence, autonomy, and connection (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Meeting the need for competence is important because when teachers experience success in reflective practice, they believe that they can reach their goals and avoid pitfalls. Fulfilling the need for autonomy is equally important because it results in self-directed learning that empowers teachers (Franks, Jarvis, & Wideman, 2011). Finally, addressing the need for connection, through the creation of a culture of collaborative inquiry, motivates educators to want to make a difference through their collective effort (Franks et al., 2011). Collaborative inquiry meets teachers' need for connection through dialogue and collaboration, making it one of the most successful forms of professional learning (Danielson, 2016; Fullan et

al., 2018). Through professional dialogue, educators develop a collective growth mindset that leads to collective efficacy, the belief that, as a team, they can improve student performance (Lipton & Wellman, 2012). This is significant because collective efficacy is the factor that has been found to have the greatest influence on student achievement (Donohoo, 2017). The feelings of competence, autonomy and connection that teachers can experience when working together lay the foundation for the creation of a culture of collaborative inquiry needed for professional learning.

Collaborative inquiry is a form of high quality professional development because it is rooted in problems of practice (Planche & Donohoo, 2018). It moves learning forward by providing a way for educators to work together to engage in deep reflection that will change their knowledge, their way of thinking, their beliefs, and their practice (Katz & Dack, 2013). In a culture of collaborative inquiry, the principle of praxis comes alive, and teachers choose what they want to learn, and how they want to transform their teaching together (Knight, 2011). The connection with colleagues creates a support system that assists teachers in exploring and sustaining the implementation of new teaching approaches (Fullan et al., 2018). When teachers feel competent, independent, and connected to one another, the concept of praxis is honoured, and that is the goal of the MTS CL Team Grants.

Focus is the third key enabler of professional development that the CL Team Grants initiative seeks to offer to help teachers maximize the use of their time for professional learning. Teacher teams who receive a grant through MTS benefit from a sustained focus on job-embedded work over an extended period of time instead of simply experiencing the one-hour workshop model. This ongoing focus on professional learning is a feature of effective schools (Weston, 2018). When teachers have the opportunity to explore a particular professional learning topic for a prolonged period, it is an important investment of time that results in improved student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2008). With the support of MTS instructional coaches, teams move through a facilitated process that involves the use of discussion protocols and guidance around how to use their time the most efficiently. When teams make good use of their precious time, they can maintain a clear focus on learning priorities (Lipton & Wellman, 2012). The CL Team Grants project also provides adequate time for teachers to delve into problems of practice, to explore new strategies and to implement new teaching approaches, an important principle of effective professional development (Gulamhussein, 2013). With the support of the MTS facilitators, as well as the grant provided for release time and resources, teachers have the time to focus collaboratively and meaningfully on problems of practice.

## **Conclusion**

In my role as an advocate for and a facilitator of meaningful learning experiences for teachers across Manitoba, I am currently focusing on three problematic barriers and three key enablers for professional growth and development of teachers. Through the Collaborative Learning Team Grants initiative, these issues and supportive practices are being further explored to determine whether the Manitoba Teachers' Society is meeting the learning needs of teachers in the province. Three hurdles in professional development that the Society is seeking to better understand are the presence of a fixed mindset, the lack of praxis in learning cultures, and the troublesome issue of time. These realities can deter teachers from engaging in and reflecting on their learning, preventing professional growth. When confronted with these challenges, educators feel frustrated, which leads to a lack of motivation and engagement. In order to address these issues, MTS aims to provide professional development experiences that incorporate three key enablers of learning for educators: instructional leadership, collaborative inquiry, and focus. Focusing on these key enablers of teacher growth is an important investment, since this is what ultimately leads to improved student learning (Katz & Dack, 2013). Through the launch of the CL Team Grants project at MTS, there is a unique opportunity to

remove barriers in order to create enhanced professional learning experiences for teachers in Manitoba.

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