The Organized Contradictions of Professional Development and School Improvement*

Neil Sappington
Joseph Pacha
Paul Baker
Dianne Gardner

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1 Sumario en espanol

Como las escuelas públicas reciben aumentando la presión para mostrar mejora en el logro de estudiante que es apropiado revisar el estatus actual de esto la "relación simbiótica". ¿Dar este reclamo informado de una correlación directa la pregunta obvia es, "qué es el estatus de la relación entre mejora profesional de desarrollo y escuela como los esfuerzos de mejorar el sistema público norteamericano de la educación continúa"? Este estudio, que formó parte de una tentativas graduadas de programa de principal-preparación para analizar el nivel del desarrollo de la escuela en escuelas y distritos locales. El programa de la principal-preparación es ofrecido en una universidad investigación-intensivo que sirve una red regional de distritos de escuela y escuelas en un área sumamente diversa de comunidades rurales, de los barrios de las afueras, y de las ciudades. Los miembros de la facultad y numerosos estudiantes de posgrado han dedicado el por delante de varios años a realizar un estudio sistemático de la relación entre mejora profesional de desarrollo y escuela. Informamos conclusiones y conclusiones empíricas en este artículo.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

2 Introduction

“One of the most persistent findings from research on school improvement is, in fact, the symbiotic relationship between professional development and school improvement efforts" (Hawley & Valli, 1999, p. 129). These researchers, and others in the field, argue that there must be a direct relationship between the professional development of educators and efforts to improve learning for students. As public schools receive increasing pressure to show improvement in student achievement it is appropriate to examine the current status of this "symbiotic relationship." Given this reported claim of a direct correlation the obvious question is, "what is the status of the relationship between professional development and school improvement as efforts to improve the American public education system continue?" This study, which was part of a graduate principal-preparation program attempts to analyze the level of school development in local schools and districts. The principal-preparation program is offered at a research-intensive university that serves a regional network of school districts and schools in a highly diverse area of rural communities, suburbs, and cities. Faculty members and numerous graduate students have dedicated the past several years to conducting a systematic study of the relationship between professional development and school improvement. We report empirical findings and conclusions in this article.

3 Participatory Action Research Project

The data were gathered by aspiring principals as a class assignment in a Seminar on School Development. These graduate students collected data, analyzed the school improvement planning documents and the professional development activities offered to educators in local schools. They studied the connection between the two components in the school improvement process. This article will focus on the data gathered in 78 local schools about the status of professional development and its connection to the school improvement process.

To date, 106 principal candidates enrolled in the Seminar on School Development have conducted field work in their respective schools. Using a field-tested model to describe and analyze school improvement planning and professional development practices, the principal candidates constructed 78 comprehensive profiles of schools in various stages of development. The larger number of graduate students is based on the fact that in some schools two or more students participated in the study from the same school. The set of profiles describe the school improvement planning and professional learning in schools that university professors and principal candidates examine critically to begin to address longstanding, intractable challenges if schools are to do more with less and serve as responsive constituents in communities.

Scholars in the field have long advocated that school improvement planning needs to be focused on student achievement needs, establish clear and concise goals that all stakeholders understand and have buy in, and be continuous and cumulative in nature (Marzano, 2003; Blankstein, 2010). In the Seminar on School Development graduate students use a variety of analysis tools to evaluate the status of school improvement planning in their schools. The school improvement plan is analyzed to determine if it is continuous and cumulative in nature building on each year's efforts or if it is a paperwork exercise that has little impact on the daily work of teachers and administrators.

Scholars in the field of professional development have described and criticized common approaches to professional development in schools as sporadic, inauthentic, disconnected from teacher work, and unresponsive to students, their families and communities (Bryk, Rollow, & Pinnell, 1996; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010; Elmore, 2004, 2008; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Payne, 2008; Schneider, 2002; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). The primary criticism of professional development is that it is insufficient to meet the learning challenges that schools face. The participatory action research in which principal candidates engage allows them to analyze professional development in their schools and districts. The conceptual framework used by the action researchers to study the complexities of professional development was a descriptive guide (Structures of Training and Processes of Implementation-STPI Model) initially developed in an empirical study of 28 school-university professional development partnerships (Gardner, Baker, Vogt, & Hodel, 2005). The STPI Model is a fourfold typology constructed along two dimensions: (1) short and discrete training versus long term and continuous interactive professional learning; (2) training solo practitioners versus training collectivities and groups (See Table 1).

Table 1

Implementation: Processes of Interaction in School Settings

	Teaching & Leadership Roles Remain the Same; Collaborative Opportunities Not Considered	Teaching & Leadership Roles Are Expanded with New Collaborative Opportunities
	(B)	(C)
Complex: Two or More Levels	School Workshop Teachers & Others *Training is Completed * Training is sufficient for Improvement *No or Minimal Networks are Developed	School Network Teachers & Others *Training is Ongoing *Training is Not Sufficient for Improvement * Embedded, Interactive & Iterative
	(A)	(D)
Simple: One Level	Individual Workshop Individual Only *Training is Completed * Training is Sufficient for Improvement *No or Minimal Networks are Developed	Individual Network Individual Only *Training is Ongoing *Training is Not Sufficient for Improvement *Collegial Networks to Consult with Peers & Experts

Using the two dimensions described above the conceptual framework is a fourfold typology that allows the action researcher to analyze and categorize professional development into "four frames" (Gardner, Baker, Vogt, & Hodel, 2005).

Frame A: Describes what has been criticized as ineffective by scholars in the field. Professional development is offered to the solo practitioner with no or minimal opportunities for collaboration and the development of supportive networks. Training is completed at the end of the professional development activity with no opportunities for follow up or support. Most commonly this involves individual teachers attending workshops or conferences and listening to presenters. Principal candidates conducting action research often refer to this activity as the "sit and get" mode of professional development.

Frame B: This category retains the element of short and discrete offerings, but it involves more than one educator in the professional development activity. It also involves two levels of the school's organization; i.e. it could involve teachers, groups of teachers, and/or administrators thereby increasing the complexity of

the professional development offering. Frame B shares the similarity of training completed at the end of the session with Frame A. Little or no follow up or support is offered once the activity is completed. The main difference between Frame A and Frame B is the number of educators involved. In seminar discussions, action-researchers often describe county or regional institutes as fitting into Frame B. In the words of one student, "educators are herded into a large auditorium to hear a main speaker." The topic often has little to do with what concerns principals and teachers in their daily work in schools. After these professional development activities have ended participants have often been informed about some aspects of school improvement, but they return to their schools with little information about the next critical steps that need to be taken.

Frame C: Activities in this frame share the characteristic that multiple educators and multiple levels are involved in the professional development activity as with Frame B. A key difference between Frames A and B when compared with Frame C is that training is not completed at the end of the training session. For activities to "qualify" for this frame there must be follow-up support with developing networks of educators who focus on the ongoing training. In addition, the professional development is embedded in the educators' work by being focused on instructional challenges that teachers face and interaction among educators is a key component. To date, few action researchers have found many activities that "fit" into Frame C. Activities often fail to have the elements of ongoing, embedded, continuous and cumulative.

Frame D: Activities contained in Frame D share the characteristics of developing networks, continuous, cumulative and embedded; however, only single educators are involved in these activities. In seminar discussions the program that most often emerges as "qualifying" for Frame D is the National Board Certification for Teachers. In this program the professional development activities are continuous, cumulative and embedded but the networks are most often formed outside the school. On their own, these activities may improve individual teacher's skills; however, they will do little to move a school forward in the development process.

4 School Development Conceptual Framework

The action researchers use the STPI Model and school improvement plan analysis to examine the many complexities and contradictions of professional development and school improvement programs in their own schools. The school profiles that they developed were constructed through the conceptual lenses of pioneering scholars (e.g., Fullan, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1991; Sarason, 1978) who called attention to the need to examine schools through various stages of development. These scholars also recognized the integral connection between the professional development of educators and the collective development of schools. They insisted on the centrality of effective professional development that is needed to move schools forward as learning-centered institutions with the organizational capacity for continuous improvement (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk). Using the information from these studies and others, we developed a continuum representing four stages of school development. This School Development Continuum consists of four developmental stages:

- **Stuck:** Schools in this category have little if any meaningful professional learning that is coordinated with the school improvement agenda. Professional development is offered in random, sporadic, and disconnected activities. Connection to the school improvement process does not exist. The school improvement process is a paperwork exercise at best. As a result the school has no meaningful plan to improve.
- **Limited Connections:** Schools in this category have some activities that focus on school improvement but they fail to be continuous and cumulative. Professional development activities are often described by local educators as "flavor of the month." As a result, the professional development exists as sporadic endeavors. The connection to school improvement is not sustained over an extended time period.
- **Transitional:** Schools in this category have started to connect professional development to school improvement however, the school is in the fledgling stages and it has yet to be institutionalized. Professional development activities may be continuous during one or two school years but, the element of cumulative efforts has not yet been developed.
- **Systemic:** Schools in this category have connected professional development and school improvement in a systemic manner. Professional development activities clearly support the school improvement

process. Professional development and school improvement has achieved that "symbiotic" relationship as a continuous and integrated process. It is embedded in the culture of the school (Bryk et al. 2010; Newman et al., 2001; Rosenholtz, 1991).

5 Data Sources and Methods

Principal candidates conduct an action research project on the schools where they are employed or, in a few cases, a school with which they have a professional connection if they are not currently employed in a school. They critically examine the school's School Improvement Plan and conduct a field study of professional development activities. The STPI Model is used in semi-structured interviews with a district administrator, the principal, and two teachers. Documents and archival information is also collected and analyzed. Seminar sessions center on readings from scholarly literature and the implications of findings from fieldwork. Students write a 15 to 20-page profile of the professional development and its connection to school improvement in their school. In addition to the paper, each student submits a file that contains critical data including interview notes and documents.

Two faculty members analyzed the field studies of these 78 schools. Each faculty member independently analyzed the school profile and coded the level of school development in the following categories:

- The connection between school improvement and professional development
- The types of professional development according to the STPI framework
- The focus of school improvement and professional development on student and teacher learning.

The codes developed for this study follow guidelines developed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Using this coding schema, each of the two faculty members independently designated each school according to four levels of school development: *Stuck*, *Limited Connections*, *Transitional*, or *Systemic*. If there was disagreement on the level of school development a third faculty served as a "tie breaker". Using this process an inter-rater reliability of .954 was established. Once coded, the data were entered into SPSS for further analysis. Cross tabulations were used to analyze the data from a variety of perspectives.

6 Findings

The 78 schools represent 27 elementary schools, 18 middle/junior high schools, and 33 high schools. The majority of these schools (n = 64 or 82%) are in the two "bottom" categories of school development: *Stuck* or *Limited Connections*. Twenty of the schools (26%) remain *Stuck* while 44 of the schools (56%) have developed only *Limited Connections* to meaningful school development. Eleven schools (14%) appear to be *Transitional* and moving toward systemic development. But only three schools (4%) were identified as *Systemic* in four years of field work studies. All of the *Systemic* schools were elementary schools.

As can be seen in Table 2 the vast majority of high schools remain *Stuck* (n = 14) or have developed only *Limited Connections* (n = 18) in the school development process. Of the 33 high schools in the study, only one demonstrated the characteristics of the *Transitional* category of school development. No high school in the sample demonstrated *Systemic* level of school development with strong connections between professional development and school improvement.

Table 2

Level of School Development and Type of School

	Elementary	Middle/Jr. high	High school	Total
Stuck	5	1	14	20
Limited connections	12	14	18	44
Transitional	7	3	1	11
Systemic	3	0	0	3
Total	27	18	33	78

At the middle/junior high school level, the majority of schools in the sample remain in the bottom two categories (n = 15 or 83%). One school was rated as *Stuck* while 14 of the schools had only developed *Limited Connections*. Three of the middle/junior high schools had moved to the *Transitional* category with definite connections between continuous professional development and school improvement. The most promising data was seen in the elementary schools in the sample. While a majority (n = 17 or 63%) were classified as either *Stuck* or only having *Limited Connections*, ten of the schools (37%) were determined to have *Transitional* or *Systemic* characteristics. The only three schools in the sample characterized as *Systemic* were elementary schools.

As stated earlier, this university works in a highly diverse regional network of school districts and schools. These schools serve rural, small city, metro suburban, and large urban communities. To further analyze the data the schools were coded and placed in categories that described the communities that they served. Each school was coded as being located in one of the following communities: Small Town Rural, Small City, Suburban Metro Area, or Urban Large City. Cross tabulation allowed the schools to be viewed from the perspective of the community they serve. Table 3 reflects how the schools in the sample are distributed throughout the diverse state of Illinois.

Table 3

Type of Community

	Schools
Small Town Rural	18
Small City	5
Suburban Metro Area	25
Urban Large City	30
Total	78

As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of the schools serve either Suburban Metro Areas or Urban Large Cities (n = 55 or 71%). Eighteen of the schools are located in rural areas while only five of the schools were located in Small Cities. This is an interesting analysis because all of the schools are preparing students to work and live in a globally competitive environment.

With this categorization, it is possible to analyze the status of school improvement and connection to professional development by school level (elementary, middle/junior high school, and high school) and by the community the schools serve. Because the number of schools categorized as "Small City" was small (n

= 5), it was combined with schools labeled as "Small Town Rural" for the purposes of this analysis. This combination resulted in 23 schools in the category. The first analysis looked at high schools and the types of communities they serve (See Table 4).

Table 4

Level of School Development by Community Type – High Schools

	Small Town Rural/ Small City	Suburban Metro Area	Urban Large City	Total
Stuck	9	3	2	14
Limited connections	4	10	4	18
Transitional	0	0	1	1
Systemic	0	0	0	0
Total	13	13	7	33

Regardless of where the high schools are located, only one had moved to the *Transitional* category. Thirty-two of the high schools in the sample remain as Stuck or only having *Limited Connections* to school improvement and professional development. More high schools located in either Suburban Metro Areas or Large Urban Cities (n = 14) were able to achieve at least *Limited Connections*. The most sobering data is reflected in high schools that serve Small Town Rural/Small City communities. The majority of these schools remain *Stuck* (n = 9) and only four high schools have *Limited Connections*.

The data was also analyzed by middle/junior high schools and the type of community they serve (See Table 5).

Table 5

Level of School Development by Community Type – Middle/Junior High Schools

	Small Town Rural/ Small City	Suburban Metro Area	Urban Large City	Total
Stuck	1	0	0	1
Limited connections	1	4	8	13
Transitional	0	4	0	4
Systemic	0	0	0	0
Total	2	8	8	18

With a smaller portion of the sample (n = 18), conclusions are more difficult. Certainly, with only two schools in the combined category of Small Town Rural and Small City, this is the case. However, 12 of the schools (4 located in Suburban Metro Areas and 8 located in Urban Large City) show the characteristics of *Limited Connections*. Four schools located in Metro Suburban Areas have made those fledgling connections to the relationship between professional development and school improvement. None of the 18 Middle/Junior

High Schools had developed *Systemic* organizations that had the continuous and cumulative professional development with the symbiotic connection to school improvement.

The data was also analyzed by elementary schools and the type of community (See Table 6).

Table 6

Level of School Development by Community Type – Elementary Schools

	Small Town Rural/ Small City	Suburban Metro Area	Urban Large City	Total
Stuck	2	1	2	5
Limited connections	4	2	6	12
Transitional	1	0	6	7
Systemic	1	1	1	3
Total	8	4	15	27

Analyzing the data gathered from elementary school profiles offer the brightest picture in the attempt to improve schools. It is obvious that when compared by level (elementary, middle or high school), the elementary schools have made the most progress in connecting meaningful professional development to school improvement. When looking at the data by Type of Community, it is apparent that schools can achieve the *Transitional* and *Systemic* characteristics regardless of what kind of community that the school serves. A total of 10 schools have achieved that level of development and all three Types of Communities are represented in that distribution. When reviewing the data, one has to remember that despite this ray of hope for improved schools, 17 of the elementary schools - in all three types of communities- remain *Stuck* or with only *Limited Connections*.

7 Conclusions

Data collected and analyzed by 106 field studies present sobering findings for the next generation of school leaders who are expected to transform Illinois public schools. In 1985, Illinois established clear mandates to require all schools to develop School Improvement Plans. The State has also dedicated millions of dollars have been dedicated to professional development programs intended to leverage urgently needed improvements. In the past decade, the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have reinforced the importance of school improvement planning and professional development. Evidence from these 106 field studies suggests that in the past 35 years little progress has been made to link professional development and school improvement.

We return to our opening quote: “One of the most persistent findings from research on school improvement is, in fact, the symbiotic relationship between professional development and school improvement efforts" (Hawley & Valli, 1999, p. 129). If this is the case then policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels must find ways to allocate and redirect resources to articulate and develop a systemic relationship between the improvement of the core technology of education—teaching—and the improvement of schools.

8 Implications for Further Research and Policy Development

The findings from this exploratory study, while sobering, are dramatic. The focus of improving schools has been identified by many scholars in the field (Bryk, A. S., Rollow, S. G., & Pinnell, G. S. 1996; Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. 2002; Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J.Q. 2010; Fullan, M.G. 1991; Garet, M. S., Porter, A. C. Desimone, L., Birman, B. F. & Yoon, K. S., 2001). From many years

of research one can see the obvious: connecting the collective effort to improve a school with the committed professional learning of educators that work there. Then, why is the obvious so difficult to implement? A careful study of these field reports indicate that the vast majority of teachers and administrators espouse the conventional wisdom of needing embedded professional training that is linked to school improvement planning. Yet, the educators know that their school is *Stuck* or barely moving. Why is it so hard for educators to move beyond the status quo? We offer some concluding thoughts and suggestions for additional inquiry.

1. **Collective Bargaining Agreements:** Do they facilitate or block efforts to implement a meaningful connection between school improvement and professional development? If collective bargaining agreements block these efforts, how do we overcome these obstacles?
2. **Career Recertification Requirements:** Currently, teachers in these schools are under state-mandated recertification requirements. Do these promote the privatization of improved teaching at the expense of the collective learning of the professionals in the school?
3. **Required Training for Administrators:** All principals who work in these schools are required to participate in annual training through the Illinois Principals Academy. Do these offerings support or detract from the leadership needed to improve schools through systematic linkages between school improvement and professional development?
4. **Ambiguous and Multifaceted Definition of Professional Development:** Over the years professional development has become a ubiquitous umbrella of activities that means different things to different people. Is it possible to reduce and reshape these activities into a meaningful and coherent program that clearly connects school improvement to the collective learning of local educators?
5. **Sustained Leadership and Opportunities for Continuity:** Research has shown that improving schools and connecting the professional development that is needed is a long-term process which needs continuous leadership. How has the turnover of administrators in the district and local schools affected this important component of school improvement?
6. **Series of Multiple and Disconnected Mandates for Improvement:** History has clearly shown that schools receive a series of mandates from state and federal agencies. Often these mandates come with required training. Do these requirements erode the resources schools need to maintain continuous and cumulative school development work? Do they reduce the school's capacity for improvement? Do the mandates create reactive and fragmented professional development activities, intended primarily to assure compliance with new rules, detract from coherent strategies for improvement?

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