

What Can We Learn from Powerful Professional Learning?

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Many teachers would have no trouble imagining this scene. At the end of a long school day, they are sitting in a room with their colleagues and sneak a look at their smartphone – something they have often upbraided their own students for doing. Self-consciously looking up, they notice other colleagues doing the same. When a voice suddenly directs them to get into small groups and respond to a question, they snap out of their reverie and wonder what they have missed.

This is what it looks like to be a disengaged learner, and it is a caricature view of professional development (PD). And yet, many teachers would be quick to agree that some professional learning experiences are notable departures from this imagined norm, profoundly influential, inspiring, even enjoyable. My most recent research project – also my dissertation (“Teachers Learning: Engagement, Identity, and Agency in Powerful Professional Development”) – asks what we can learn from these apparently outlying experiences. How do teachers describe and make meaning from their most powerful professional learning experiences? What made these experiences stand out from the norm? For that matter, how do they contrast with some of their *least* powerful learning experiences? The stories that emerge from these questions – stories of engaged and powerful learning – have important implications for how we conceptualize, study, and design PD. Put simply: teacher engagement matters in PD, because if teachers are disengaged they are unlikely to learn.

It was during the conceptualization and analysis of my dissertation that I became immersed in the rich archive of scholarship on teacher identity and teacher learning in *Teaching and Teachers: Theory and Practice*. For example, I observed in my data that one of the defining features of teachers’ accounts of powerful learning, especially compared to their accounts of a negative PD experience, seemed to be the presence of teacher agency. Powerful learning experiences were overwhelmingly ones of choice whereas negative learning experiences tended to be required. Trying to make sense of this finding, I was glad to find articles like Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson’s (2015) findings on teacher beliefs and agency and Buchanan’s (2015) piece about “teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability” (both Volume 21, Issue 6). The connections between agency and identity in these and other articles further led me to explore teacher identity in more depth – including Mockler’s (2011) model of identity as a “practical and political tool” (Volume 17, Issue 5) – and analyze how powerful professional learning could shape and be shaped by teacher identity.

As an early career scholar interested in teachers’ practice and learning, I am thrilled to know there is a thriving international community of researchers dedicated to understanding not just what teachers do but “how they think and feel about what they’re doing.” I hope to dedicate my career to documenting and better understanding teachers’ thinking, especially about their own learning, and I expect the collegiality and collective wisdom of ISATT will be instrumental in my own (engaged and powerful) professional development.