NeMTSS Research Brief

The Relationship Between Professional Development and Attitudes and Beliefs

Linnea Swanson, M.A. PLMHP & Amanda Witte, Ph.D.

NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS

The Relationship Between Professional Development and Attitudes and Beliefs: An NeMTSS Research Brief

Key Points:

- Many factors can impact educators' attitudes, beliefs, and practices, including experiences, self-efficacy, school culture, formal learning, and participation in professional development addressing multiple dimensions of learning.

- Experiences can include personal experiences, professional experiences, and experiences with formal learning.

- There may be value in using professional development time to reflect on experiences, attitudes, and beliefs to challenge educators to evaluate their attitudes and beliefs toward educational practices and address conflict associated with these practices.

There are many factors influencing changes in attitudes and beliefs. Before addressing these, it is important to consider how educators best learn. According to research, a large degree of teacher learning takes place unconsciously. Additionally, cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions of learning are intertwined, and influenced by their social contexts (Korthagen, 2017; Saunders, 2013). All of these factors must be considered when addressing long term, meaningful, change.

Changing Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Practices

When considering change in educational practices and changes in beliefs or attitudes toward these practices, we look at research addressing changes in attitudes and beliefs, practices, and teacher learning outcomes. Change may occur in one of these areas of influence but will not necessarily translate into change in others. Because of this, learning in one system needs to impact other systems and effective learning requires addressing multiple dimensions of change (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Kim (2020) goes further to address change in leadership practices, emphasizing the importance of cognitive, emotional, and intuitive learning by addressing learning and leadership development in informal and formal settings. Kim's study examined how school principals' transformative learning results in changes in leadership practices and perceptions. Results suggested that leadership development is an ongoing process, but that meaningful change requires an interaction of critical reflection on past experiences, especially challenging experiences, and the learning environment (e.g., influential relationships, access to resources, and school context).

Research has produced mixed results regarding attitudes and belief changes. For educators, beliefs are heavily influenced by experiences, including personal experience, experience with school and instruction, and experience with formal knowledge (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Professional development often addresses formal knowledge and therefore may indirectly address beliefs. It is important to consider that changing beliefs is not a linear process. However, common patterns of change include: change in beliefs and practices, change in beliefs but not practices, and change in practices but not beliefs. The research summary by Guskey (2020) provides a model of teacher change that emphasizes the need of experiencing positive outcomes in student achievement following changes in teacher practice before change in teacher attitudes and beliefs will occur. When professional development provides information that contradicts professionals' current beliefs, ideas, or values, cognitive dissonance occurs and

professionals may avoid the provided information, alter their understanding, or change their beliefs, ideas, or values. A longitudinal study of a professional learning community (PLC) addressed the impact of participation in a PLC on changes in beliefs and practices. Results found that a coherent structure, collaborative culture, and effective learning activities helped teachers overcome difficulties and increased motivation to change (Tam, 2015). It is also important to note that teacher collaboration in an effective PLC changed teachers' beliefs and practices. However, the patterns and extent of change varied among individuals participating in these PLCs.

Self-efficacy

Attitudes and beliefs can be heavily influenced by self-efficacy. In a comparative analysis looking at factors impacting teacher attitudes toward inclusion in South African and Finish classrooms, attitudes toward disabilities were positive in both countries, but teachers had concerns about inclusion. Self-efficacy, and efficacy in collaboration, was found to be related to the overall attitudes toward inclusion (Savolainen, et al., 2011). These findings suggest that confidence in ability to successfully integrate students with disabilities will impact their overall attitudes toward inclusion. However, it also emphasizes the impact of the school culture in which they have the resources to learn and collaborate with others to successfully integrate inclusion in their classrooms. This research demonstrates that when professional development teaches skills to enhance perceived ability to succeed in given scenarios, attitudes and beliefs begin to change. Similarly, research has shown a professional development program to improve educator self- efficacy for increasing support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and changing educator beliefs and biases toward LGBT youth (Greytak et al., 2013). This article reviews previous research assessing the impact of professional development to support LGBT students and closely examines a brief training workshop addressing bullying and harassment of LGBT youth and anti-LGBT bias of educators. Participants included teachers, administrators, and mental health professionals. Data collected before and after the training showed significant differences in awareness, empathy, self-efficacy, and beliefs about the importance of intervention. These results suggest short-term professional development can impact educators' beliefs about school climate for LGBT youth and their own self-efficacy in addressing anti-LGBT behaviors, ultimately creating more inclusive school environments.

Personal Experiences

However, other research points to the use of combined education and experience to address attitudes and biases. A project examining attitudes of inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms found positive attitude change by pairing education with practical experiences (Swain et al., 2013). In this study, participants were pre-service teachers without a significant amount of field experience. Participants were involved in an introductory special education course that was paired with a 24-hour practicum where they gained experience working with students with disabilities. Results suggest that pairing explicit coursework with field experience can significantly influence pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and further the idea that experience can greatly impact attitudes and beliefs associated with education.

Studies examining the relationship between professional development and changes in attitudes and behaviors of science teachers point to benefits of an attitude-focused approach of professional development as being effective (Van Aaldersen-Smeets & Van Der Molen, 2015). Van Aaldersen-Smeets & Van Der Molen examine the impact of an attitude-focused professional development intervention on personal attitudes toward teaching science and their

teaching behaviors. Results revealed that participation in the attitude-focused program improved teachers' professional attitude toward teaching science and science teaching behavior compared to solely being engaged in science teaching. When addressing changes in attitudes and beliefs of school leadership, specifically, research points to the influence of experience and reflection on events (Kim, 2020).

Implications for Practitioners

Although the article, "Flip the Script on Change" by Thomas R. Guskey (2020) emphasizes the role of experience on changes in attitudes and beliefs, research demonstrates other factors, including self-efficacy, school culture, formal learning, and professional development addressing multiple dimensions of learning, may also impact educators' attitudes, beliefs, and practices. This summary concludes that there may be value in using professional development time to reflect on experiences, attitudes, and beliefs to challenge educators to evaluate their attitudes and beliefs toward educational practices and address conflict associated with these practices. Although attitudes and beliefs may not be impacted by a single professional development activity, continuous reflection of practice is essential for eventual change in attitudes and beliefs.

References

Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., & Boesen, M. J. (2013). Educating the educator: Creating supportive school personnel through professional development, *Journal of School Violence, 12*(1), 80-97, DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2012.731586

Guskey, T. R. (2020). Flip the script on change: Experience shapes teachers' attitudes and beliefs. *The Learning Professional, 41*(2), 18-22.

Kim, T. (2020), Becoming skillful leaders: American school principals' transformative learning. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 48*(2), 353-378. DOI: 10.1177/1741143218802596

Korthagen, F. (2017) Inconvenient truths about teacher learning: Towards professional development 3.0, *Teachers and Teaching, 23*:4, 387-405 DOI:10.1080/13540602.2016.1211523

Opfer, V. D. & Pedder, D. (2011). Conceptualizing teacher professional learning. *Review of Educational Research, 81*(3), 376-407 DOI: 10.3102/0034654311413609

Saunders, R. (2012) The role of teacher emotions in change: Experiences, patterns and implications for professional development. *Journal of Education Change, 14*, 303-333 DOI 10.1007/s10833-012-9195-0

Savolainen, H., Engelbrecht, P., Nel, M. & Malinen, O. (2012). Understanding teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in inclusive education: Implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education, *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 27*:1, 51-68, DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2011.613603

Swain, K. D., Nordness, P. D., & Leader-Janssen, E. M. (2012). Changes in preservice teacher attitudes toward inclusion, preventing school failure: Alternative education for children and youth, 56(2), 75-81, DOI: 10.1080/1045988X.2011.565386

Tam, A. C. F. (2015). The role of a professional learning community in teacher change: A perspective from beliefs and practices, *Teachers and Teaching, 21*:1, 22-43, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2014.928122

Van Aaldersen-Smeets, S. I. & Walma Van Der Molen, J. H. (2015). Improving primary teachers' attitudes toward science by attitude-focused professional development. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 52*(5), 710-734 DOI 10.1002/tea.21218

Authorship Information:

Linnea Swanson, **M.A. PLMHP**
School Psychology Doctoral Student
Graduate Research Assistant
Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
linnea.swanson@huskers.unl.edu