

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Rural teacher professional development

By Candy Skyhar, Ph.D.



Why this research is important

Rural school divisions and teachers face challenges in providing and accessing meaningful and effective teacher PD due to the contexts in which they operate. Funding, geography, staffing, and contextual differences are four categories of challenges that must be overcome in order for school divisions to provide effective PD for teachers, and for teachers to access PD that is meaningful for themselves and their students. The question of *how* rural divisions and teachers might go about creating models of PD that lead to the provision of effective and meaningful PD, and that mitigate the challenges faced in providing effective PD locally, is an important one in terms of equity. In order for quality educational programming to exist for rural students, rural educators must have not only access to opportunities for professional growth but also access to PD that is relevant to the contexts in which they work.

What you need to know

Through single case study design, this research project investigated the impact of a locally constructed teacher professional development (PD) model, designed within the context of a small rural Manitoba school division. The model, which was designed both to meet the unique needs of the rural teachers employed within the division (in the area of mathematics instruction and student numeracy) and to mitigate the local challenges faced by the division and its teachers in terms of providing and accessing meaningful teacher PD, was effective in meeting its goals in several ways.

How the research was conducted

Through a qualitative, single case study design, the research inquired into the effectiveness of the Numeracy Cohort, a locally constructed teacher PD model implemented in a small rural Manitoba school division. Three research questions guided the study: (1) To what extent (if at all) is the specific, locally constructed PD model utilized in the rural school division able to mitigate the challenges faced by the rural division and its rural teachers in accessing meaningful PD?; (2) To what extent (if at all) is the model effective in terms of supporting teachers' professional growth in the area of mathematics instruction and student numeracy?; and (3) How do social constructivist principles contribute to teacher professional

growth through the locally constructed rural PD model? Multiple forms of data including teacher interviews, facilitator notes, artifacts from the initiative (e.g., reflections, forms, agendas, presentation files, etc.), an interview with the superintendent, and focus group discussions with Numeracy Cohort teachers and their principals were organized, transcribed, coded, and analyzed to address the three research questions.

What the researcher found

In addition to identifying several challenges faced by the division and its teachers in accessing and providing meaningful PD, findings from the study suggested that the Numeracy Cohort initiative was able to mitigate several of the challenges faced through its design. Moreover, the model was effective in supporting teachers' professional growth in the area of mathematics instruction and student numeracy. In addition to fostering a sense of community, collaboration, and accountability for learning, the model provided valuable pedagogical content, time and resources to support learning, and opportunities for teachers to work on areas of their choosing through the use of action research. Growth was evident through changes in the beliefs and attitudes of teachers, changes in teaching practices, changes in the organization, and improvements in student learning outcomes. Through the research study, several promising practices emerged as potentially beneficial ways of mitigating challenges to the provision of effective teacher PD in rural contexts. The usefulness of social constructivist principles as considerations for both the design and evaluation of teacher PD models also emerged from the study as an important implication.

How this research can be used

Those who wish to design teacher PD models in rural contexts can draw not only from the four areas of challenge identified in this study (funding, geography, staffing, and contextual differences), but also from the promising practices

employed by the rural Manitoba school division to mitigate such challenges. In this way, the research has the potential to inform future practice, thereby improving access to meaningful and effective teacher PD in rural places.

About the researcher

Candy Skyhar is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University. Prior to arriving at Brandon University, Candy spent 20 years in the education field in roles such as classroom teacher, numeracy coach, and professional development chair. In the Faculty of Education, Candy teaches courses focused on instructional methods, mathematics education, and teacher identity.

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Keywords

Rural teacher professional development; rural teacher PD; rural challenges; effective PD; social constructivist teacher PD

Publication based on this research

Skyhar, C. L. (2018). *Grassroots professional growth: Inquiring into the effectiveness of a locally constructed professional development model for rural teachers* (Doctoral thesis, University of Manitoba). Retrieved from <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/xmlui/handle/1993/33295>

Acknowledgements

Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services and by the Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies, Faculty of Education.

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