Professional Development Research, a year later

Suzanne M Wilson
University of Connecticut
June 2014
Three puzzles
- Teachers collaborating and actively engaged
- Focused on content and student learning
- Over time
- Coherent and aligned with relevant policies and practices

Puzzle 1: Design features
When tested in large scale, experimental settings, the principles do not always hold and there are not always significant effects on teachers or their students.

But . . . .
While we are learning some things about how to design formal professional development opportunities, maybe we don’t have a handle on the ingredients yet.

So . . . .
We also know that teachers learn in many different contexts, many of which are not designated as professional development and thus much more relevant research . . . . .

- Network research
- Preparing for NBPTS certification
- Curriculum or assessment development
- Comprehensive school reform
- Teacher quality research (school leadership, for example)
- During the school day . . . .

Puzzle 2: Professional learning
Serendipity vs. intended
Individual vs. collective
Volunteer vs. mandated
Learning what? Experience v. expertise
Systems/ecological thinking

But . . . .
A focus on one thing can obscure/distort another

e.g., educator evaluation systems

And . . .
We live in an age enamored with data and information

“Research” is seen as objective and free from bias

“Experience” is seen as subjective and biased

Puzzle 3: Research and experience
This is, of course, a fallacy
Research is values-driven, ranging from the questions we ask, the methods we choose, the instruments we use
Experience is the bedrock of wisdom
Teaching is not a science, although it can be informed by science

But . . . .
We are losing out on the opportunity to tap into teachers’ wisdom re: professional learning/development

We are avoiding dealing with the fact that experience can both enlighten and blind

So . . . .
So what does all of this mean for the future of policy, practice, and research on professional learning?
Puzzle 1: Design principles

Puzzle 2: Learning is everywhere

Puzzle 3: Research and experience

We need more insight into the ingredients

We need to more systematically enhance the work of teaching to be educative and study that

We need to put experience back into the dialogue, but in ways that do so critically

We need to interrogate the assumptions that are driving research
Developing expertise
Spreading expertise
Helping others learn
Informing policy and program development

Teacher leading to what end?