

How Teachers Change:

A Study of Professional Development in Adult Education

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Key Findings

- Most teachers changed at least minimally through gains in knowledge or actions in their classrooms; relatively few experienced no change at all.
- Changes were most often seen in teachers' roles as classroom teachers (53%), rather than their roles as program members (20%), learners (7%), or members of the field (1%).
- Multiple factors interact to influence teacher change as a result of participating in professional development.
- Overall, teachers who gained the most from participating in professional development were those who: worked more hours in adult education, had well-supported jobs (good benefits, ample prep time, paid professional development release time), had a voice in decision-making in their programs, had their first teaching experience in adult education, were relatively new to the field, had more access to colleagues, did not have an advanced degree (above Bachelor's), and participated for more hours in high-quality professional development.

Key Recommendations

- Professional developers should advocate for teachers to spend a greater number of hours participating in well-designed professional development.
- Program directors should consider how to: provide access to professional development; allow teachers to participate more in decision-making; increase opportunities for teachers to interact; and create well-supported jobs for their teachers.

This study investigated how adult education teachers changed after participating in one of three different models of professional development (multisession workshop, mentor teacher group, or practitioner research group), all on the same topic of learner persistence. The study also investigated the most important individual, professional development, program, and system factors that influenced the type and amount of teacher change. This study was conducted primarily to help professional development decision-makers plan and deliver effective professional development, and to understand the factors that influence how teachers change as a result of professional development.

The study design was based on the overall hypothesis that teachers change in different ways and amounts as a result of participating in professional development, and that multiple factors influence the type and amount of change practitioners experience as a result of professional development, including:

- *Individual factors—their experience, background, and motivation as they come into the professional development*
- *Professional development factors—the quality and amount of professional development attended*
- *Program and system factors—the structure of and support offered by the program, adult education system, and professional development system in which they work, including teachers' working conditions*

Methods

The sample consisted of 106 women and men from three New England states (Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut). One hundred of these teachers participated in up to 18 hours of professional development in one of three professional development models (multisession workshop, mentor teacher group, or practitioner research group); the other six people were nonparticipant teachers who served as a comparison group. From the 100 participants, 18 teachers were randomly selected (six from each model) to serve as a subsample. Participants were listed as completers if they attended at least two thirds (12 of the 18 hours) of the professional development required. If they completed less than 12 hours, they were considered dropouts. Total dropouts equaled 16 out of 100. Participants provided data to researchers through questionnaires and interviews before, after, and one year after participating in the professional development.

The topic of the NCSALL professional development—learner motivation, retention, and persistence—was the same across all models and

across all states. Our goal was to develop high-quality professional development in three different models appropriate for adult educators. The research team designed all three professional development models, using the best methods and accepted principles of adult learning and effective professional development. Experienced teachers or professional development leaders in each state, recruited and trained by the research staff, facilitated the professional development.

Findings

We had two measures of change (our dependent variables): 1) Overall amount of change (thinking and acting on and off the topic of the professional development—learner persistence), and 2) Type of change (thinking and acting on the topic of learner persistence).

How much did teachers change? Most teachers, even dropouts, changed at least minimally through gains in knowledge or actions in their classrooms; relatively few experienced no change at all. Almost all (90% of the whole sample, 95% of completers) gained some knowledge on the topic, but for many it consisted of only one or two concepts. The majority (78% of the whole sample, 87% of completers) took some action, on or off the topic, but for many it was very minimal.

In what role did teachers change? Changes were most often seen in teachers' roles as classroom teachers (53%), rather than their roles as program members (20%), learners (7%), or members of the field (1%).

In what ways did teachers change? The research identified four types of change: 1) no to minimal change, 2) thinking change (changes in thinking were greater relative to changes in acting), 3) acting change (changes in acting were greater relative to changes in thinking), and 4) integrated change. The four types of change represent the direction of "preferred change": from "no or minimal change" at one end of the spectrum to "significant integrated" change at the other. However, we made no qualitative distinction

between "thinking change" and "acting change"; both are preferable to "no change," but less preferable than "integrated change."

Therefore, we combined these four types of change into a three-category spectrum of change: (1) no change, (2) nonintegrated change (thinking or acting changes), and (3) integrated change. The majority (72%) of the 83 completers demonstrated change, most of which was nonintegrated change. Teachers who fell into the "integrated change" type (24%) also demonstrated a higher overall amount of change. They showed more sustained change, and in more arenas (classroom, program, and field).

What factors influenced teacher change? Multiple factors interacted to influence teacher change as a result of participating in professional development. The most important individual factors that related to change in our study included teachers' motivation to attend the professional development, years of experience in the field of adult education, venue of first teaching experience, and level of formal education. To a somewhat lesser extent, teachers' level of commitment to the field played a negative role in change.

The most important professional development factors included hours of professional development attended, and the quality of the professional development (both as rated by researchers and as perceived by teachers). Model of professional development in which the teacher participated was not a significant factor, although there were differences in patterns of change among the models. Whether teachers participated in professional development with other teachers from their program was another somewhat important factor that affected change.

The most important program and system factors included teachers' access to benefits and prep time through their adult education job, and program's history in addressing learner persistence coupled with teachers' access to decision-making in the

program. To a lesser but still important extent, other factors influencing teacher change included teachers' access to paid professional development release time, collegiality, number of working hours, and freedom to make changes to the curriculum used.

Recommendations

While there are limitations to the generalizability of these findings outside of the New England area, professional developers should consider these findings and advocate for teachers to spend a greater number of hours participating in well-designed professional development. Program directors should consider how to: provide access to professional development, allow teachers greater say in decision-making, provide more opportunities for teacher sharing, and create well-supported jobs for their teachers.

Teachers in Our Sample

Gender and Race: The majority of participants were white females.

Age: About two thirds of the teachers (67%) were between 41 and 60 years old.

Education: Approximately half of the teachers had completed formal education higher than a Bachelor's degree (either a Master's or Doctoral degree) and less than 8% had either an Associates degree or high school diploma or GED.

Teacher Preparation: 53% had not completed any formal coursework in adult education.

Professional Development Time: 23% reported receiving no paid professional development release time during the previous year; 73% received fewer than 3 days a year.

Teaching Experience: 65% had taught in the K-12 school system. Teachers ranged from less than one year to 34 years of teaching experience.

Teaching Status: 24% were full-time (full-time = working 35 hours or more a week across all adult education jobs).

Teaching Conditions: 48% of the teachers received benefits as part of their adult education job, and 54% received paid prep time.

Specifically, we propose the following recommendations, for policymakers in programs and states, for professional developers, and for teachers themselves.

For Program Directors and States

- *Improve teachers' working conditions, including access to decision-making in the program.*
- *Pay teachers to attend professional development.*
- *Increase access to colleagues and directors during and after professional development.*
- *Establish expectations at the state and the program level that all teachers must continue to learn.*

For Professional Developers

- *Ensure that professional development is of high quality.*
- *Offer a variety of professional development models for teachers to attend, including program-based professional development.*
- *Help teachers acquire skills to build theories of good teaching and student success.*
- *Add activities to each professional development session to help teachers strategize how to deal with the forces that affect their ability to take action.*

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Portland State University, and Rutgers University. NCSALL is funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, Award Number R309B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

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For Teachers

- *Expect high-quality professional development.*
- *Recognize the need to develop a philosophy and theory of good teaching and student success.*
- *Work to increase opportunities for collegiality and teacher decision-making in their programs.*
- *Advocate for paid prep time, professional development release time, and benefits as part of their adult education jobs.*

This study is important to the field of adult education because, unlike K–12 research on professional development, it provides information about factors unique to adult education, such as program and working conditions, that influence teacher changes in thinking and acting after participating in professional development. Professional development is necessary but not sufficient by itself to help teachers learn about and adopt new practices that promise to improve the quality of service, and policymakers at the federal, state, and program level will need to understand and address these factors in an era of accountability that stresses improved student outcomes.

To learn more about NCSALL's Professional Development Study and its products, please visit the NCSALL Web site at:

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