Fostering Professional Learning through Relational Teacher Development: Reconceptualizing the Delivery of Professional Development

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of relationship in professional development and professional learning. The four-year relationship between the Kitchen and an experienced elementary school teacher is examined. Central to the research puzzle is how the relational stance adopted by the Kitchen contributed to the dramatic professional renewal of the teacher. Field notes and journal entries are primary sources of data for this narrative inquiry. Relational teacher development, seven learnings identified as contributing to their shared professional growth, is used as a framework for analysis of the data and is then interpreted in relation to continuing professional learning and school improvement.

Professional learning is most effective when it is ongoing, addresses issues identified by teachers, and is situated in relationships and contexts that support teacher learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Wenger, 1998). Despite this consensus among educational researchers, professional development practices have not shifted from a paradigm focussed on knowledge dissemination and training to one centred on the advancement of professional learning and practice among the teachers (Webster-Wright, 2009). Studies of continuing professional learning (e.g., Day, 1999; Jarvis, 2004; Webster-Wright, 2009) provide insights into professional knowledge and ways in which teacher learning and practice can be supported over the long term.

I came to similar understandings through an unintended intervention in the life of a classroom teacher. For my doctoral thesis (Kitchen, 2005; 2009a), I inquired into the personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) of teachers attempting to accommodate computers in their classrooms. After several weeks, I focussed on a single Grade 4/5 teacher, Bob Fitzgerald of Lippincott School (pseudonyms are used throughout). Shortly after I began, Principal Lois Dexter observed Bob’s class as part of a performance review process. She said that he was “flying by the seat of his pants” and demanded that he improve his planning of lessons and assessment of students (Field Notes, October 28, 1998).
This professional crisis prompted Bob to turn to me for encouragement, support and professional development advice. By the end of January, Bob had earned a positive final evaluation from the principal. By June, the principal spoke in glowing terms of his improvement. A year later, Bob declared, “Everyday is a pleasure” (Field Notes, October, 1999), and, in 2009, he remains an enthusiastic teacher four years after qualifying for retirement at full pension. Both Bob and the principal credited my support with creating the conditions for Bob’s professional learning. In earlier papers (Kitchen, 2005; 2009b), I focused on how Bob came to renew his own practice through the collaborative relationship we developed. I employed the term relational teacher development to describe the professional learning dynamic that contributed to Bob’s renewed confidence and professional practice. I suggested that that professional learning can be more effective when the helper and the teacher engage in an authentic and respectful relationship guided by the professional needs and interests of the teacher.

This experience helped me realize that a paradigm shift from professional development to continuing professional learning needs to be accompanied by a reconceptualization of the roles of the provider of professional development. I propose that professional learning can best be accomplished through helping relationships (Rogers, 1961) in which there is relational knowing (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl & Minarik, 1993) between the helping professional and the teacher. I use the seven characteristics of relational teacher development to examine how my relational stance as an accidental professional developer helped create the conditions for Bob’s professional renewal. I then consider the implications for staff engaged in deliberate efforts to improve professional learning.

Theoretical Framework

My understanding of professional learning and the role of professional development staff are informed by John Dewey’s (1938) conception of learning as experiential, holistic and situated. Just as teachers are asked to develop classroom relationships that nurture “experiences that lead to growth” (Dewey, p. 40), attention needs to be paid to developing authentic contexts for teachers’ continuing professional learning.

Professional Development and Professional Learning

Professional development presentations and workshops, even when led by knowledgeable and highly skilled practitioners, are generally inconsistent with Dewey’s conception of learning. As Webster-Wright (2009) notes, such activities focus “on expert intervention to ‘develop’ professionals rather than on supporting ongoing PL [professional learning]” (p. 711). While such professional development has a role to play, it should be regarded as merely one component of effective professional learning continuum for teachers.

Continuing professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009) conveys a more complex understanding of professional growth as it “avoids a dichotomy between formal PD courses and everyday professional growth” (p. 705) by recognizing that professional learn from “a diverse range of activities from formal PD programs, through interaction with work colleagues, to experiences outside work, in differing combinations and permutations of experiences” (p. 705). Underlying
this approach is an understanding that even effective delivery of information and strategies is usually insufficient to lead to effective implementation in classrooms and schools. A growing consensus among educational researchers affirms that knowledge must be linked to personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) and become embodied knowledge (Webster-Wright); address issues identified by teachers (Hawley & Valli, 1999); and be situated in authentic teaching situations (Darling-Hammond, 1997) within the professional knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which teachers work.

**Relational Knowing**

“Good teachers are centrally concerned with the creation of authentic relationships and a classroom environment in which students can make connections between the curriculum of the classroom and the central concerns of their own lives,” writes Beattie (2001, p. 3). A body of scholarship has emerged that emphasizes the importance of caring and relationship in student learning. “To care and be cared for are fundamental human needs,” writes Noddings (1992, p. xi). She continues:

> Caring cannot be achieved by formula. It requires address and response; it requires different behaviours from situation to situation and person to person… Schools, I will argue, pay too little attention to the need for continuity of place, people, purpose and curriculum. (pp. xi-xii)

Building on Noddings work, Hollingsworth, Dybdahl and Minarik (1993) identified “relational knowing” as crucial to meaningful interactions between teachers and students. While their key finding was that “knowing through relationship to self and others is central to teaching the child” (p. 8), they also identified personal conversation among teachers as a highly effective tool for enhancing teacher passion and commitment in classrooms. “Relational knowing” resonated for me as I sought to assess the significance of our relationship in Bob’s renewal process.

As I pondered the importance of relationship in Bob’s professional renewal, I was drawn to the work of humanist psychologist Carl Rogers. Rogers (1961) writes “This book is about me, as I sit there with that client, facing him, participating in that struggle as deeply and sensitively as I am able” (p. 4). He then outlines his life history and work with needy children before explaining the simple wisdom that guided his life and practice. As I grappled to make meaning of my experience working with Bob, I became increasingly aware that I often acted as an expert judging the practice of teachers using external criteria rather than as a “helper” (Rogers) celebrating experience and seeking to help teachers discover order in the flowing, changing process of life. “Floating with the complex stream of experiencing”, Rogers came to regard experience as the highest authority and discovered that “what is most personal is most general”, (pp. 26-27). Qualities such as “empathic understanding” and “unconditional positive regard” resonated with my work with Bob and led to a reconceptualization of my experiences (Vygotsky, 1979) beyond Lippincott.
School. In addition to examining Bob’s experiences, I looked backward to my personal and professional experiences as I sought to understand Bob’s professional development.

Relational Teacher Development

“Relational teacher development” is a term used to convey the key learnings about authentic helping relationships that emerged from my work with Bob (Kitchen, 2009a; 2009b). More important than specific characteristics is sensitivity to the role each participant plays as teacher and learner in the relationship, the milieu in which each lives and works, and the need to present one’s authentic self in relationships which are open, non-judgemental and trusting. Relational teacher development is a reciprocal approach to enabling teacher growth that builds from the realization that we know in relationship. Underlying such relationships is respect for teachers as curriculum makers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) who draw upon their personal practical knowledge to inform their classroom practice. Working in a helping relationship with Bob, I learned that developing a relational stance is critical to enhancing continuing professional learning among the teachers receiving professional development support.

In this paper, I examine the role of the professional development provider. In particular, I focus on the importance of adopting a relational stance as a helping professional. I recount, analyze and interpret my accidental experiences in this role in order to highlight the importance of:

1. Understanding One’s Own Personal Practical Knowledge
2. Improving One’s Practice in Teacher Development
3. Understanding the Landscape
4. Helping the Teacher Face a Problem
5. Respecting and Empathizing with the Teacher
6. Conveying that Respect and Empathy
7. Receptivity to Growing in Relationship

Methodology

Over the course of a four-year narrative inquiry, I puzzled over the ways in which my assistance and caring contributed to Bob Fitzgerald’s professional renewal and my understanding of teacher learning (Kitchen, 2005; 2009a). Working from detailed field notes from frequent visits from 1999 to 2002, as well as my impressions recorded in journals, Bob’s recollections and teaching documents, I have constructed “hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings, after the fact” (Geertz, 1995, p. 2). During the first year, when the critical events occurred, I visited Bob at the school 56 times, with most visits lasting from four to eight hours. In total, I visited the school 91 times in four years and conducted three lengthy interviews with Bob. By telling, retelling and reliving (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) the experiences recorded in these field texts, and checking my understanding with Bob, a picture emerged of our relationship. For this paper, I then considered the implications of my accidental involvement in professional development, using the seven characteristics of relational teacher development as a frame for
Fostering Professional Learning through Relational Teacher Development

Professional development is often divorced from the practical realities facing classroom teachers, and professional development staff are often too engaged in the dissemination of knowledge and strategies to attend to any individual’s unique continuing professional learning needs. While new professional development strategies are necessary for improved professional learning, they are not sufficient. The staff involved in professional development—e.g., workshop leaders, consultants, administrators and mentors—also need to look critically examine their professional identities and shift towards a more relational stance in their work with teachers. The seven characteristics of relational teacher development, derived from Rogers’ (1961) understanding of humanistic psychology, are used as a framework for exploring how was transformed through my work with Fitzgerald. Afterwards, the implications for professional development are considered.

Understanding One’s Own Personal Practical Knowledge

I recognized that the relational stance I adopted towards Bob played an important role in his renewal. As I puzzled over my involvement, I looked backward and inward to examine how my experiences and my reflections on these experiences may have prepared me to enter into a helping relationship with Bob. In particular, I considered how my metaphors of teaching and learning informed my practice. Clandinin (1986) suggests that genuine development by teachers occurs only after they understand how their experiences and values, crystallized as images or metaphors, underlie their practice. Metaphor is “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of how we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). Rather than being explicit theories, these images are implicit theories that are lived out in our practice.

The heroic quest metaphor had resonated for me years earlier when I sought to construct meaning from my stories of experiences and weave them into a narrative (Kitchen, 1994). Reflecting on my experiences, I discovered that I had implicitly conceptualized my life as an arduous journey and had developed a coat of armour to protect me from the dangers along the path. I wrote:

I have lived my life obstructed by a suit of armour. Naked, exposed and conscious of my vulnerability, I began to clad myself in armour at an early age...Although it has been adapted to let me grow beneath its protective embrace, the armour has also constricted and distorted my progress towards wholeness, both personally and professionally...Yet, it denied me many satisfying experiences. Over the years, with friends, family and my partner, I shed some of the armour but much still clung to my flesh.

By reflecting on the power of this image, I recognised its constraints and began to move towards a different way of living my life.
This conception was also evident in my metaphor of the teacher as tour guide to students on intellectual and life journeys. In one passage, I wrote:

As a teacher, I see myself as a tour guide for my students. The tour guide, like the good teacher in Dewey’s work, constructs events so that the educative potential of the experiences is maximized for his charges. Indeed, both spend a great deal of time researching and preparing tours so that they are rewarding and flow smoothly. Each must practice their craft to become more effective. Each must engage the group as a whole and have it work as a unit. Each must also get to know the individuals and try to connect the new discoveries back to the knowledge and interests of the followers. (Kitchen, 1994)

This reflection helped me understand my identity as I entered into a helping relationship with Bob. My commitment to facilitating personal growth rather than directing the learning based on my criteria, is in my effort to “connect the new discoveries back to the knowledge and interests” of each individual and my awareness of the limitations of the tour guide image.

This conception of learning as a personal journey facilitated by a guide seems to have informed both my involvement with Bob. Prior to the crisis, I helped simulate Bob’s interest in computer applications by demonstrating ease of use and benefits to students. I was also sensitive to “the frustrations that continually greet people as they use computers” and Bob’s evident “reluctance to invest huge amounts of time” when he had competing interests and priorities (Journal, October 15, 1998). When Bob expressed self-doubts after the principal’s visit, I automatically sought to construct this as an educative experience. I assured Bob that I regarded his practices as fundamentally sound, while also suggesting that there might be room for improvement in his planning, lesson delivery and assessment practices. I offered to act as a guide by providing emotional and practical support.

The quest motif and the guide metaphor that underlay much of my teaching practice and academic studies also seemed to inform my work with Bob. Understanding my personal practical knowledge deepened my self-awareness as a teacher-researcher helping Bob confront a crisis and grow as a teacher. Being aware of the complexity of my own narrative of experience, I was more receptive to Bob’s personal professional knowledge and to the importance of “knowing through relationship to self and others” (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl & Minarik, 1993, p. 8).

**Improving One’s Practice in Teacher Development**

I arrived in Bob’s classroom with a range of teaching experiences—positive and negative, inside and outside the classroom—which informed my understanding of teacher development. In this section, I briefly consider an incident that illustrates how my practical knowledge of classrooms and experience implementing new curriculum approaches contributed to my capacity to support Bob’s professional development.

In 1996, I engaged in action research on a unit I developed for Grade 9 History on poverty and welfare. Inspired by my study of global education, I
experimented in a “transformative” approach to empowering students and making them aware of social injustice (Pike & Selby, 1988). My rationale was to provide students with a contextual framework for understanding issues of poverty and welfare during a time when the government of Ontario was significantly curtailing welfare benefits. While students enjoyed the opportunities for debate and the experiential activities, many resisted my overt political agenda. This led to a number of awkward moments in the class, punctuated by a student stating that people on welfare were subhuman. Fortunately, this distasteful remark led other students to reconsider their silence or complicity in resisting my efforts to influence their thinking.

This experience taught me many lessons about teaching. I came to appreciate the importance of milieu, as the tensions in the class were a reflection of the tensions in the community. Teaching the unit deepened my appreciation for authentic and experiential activities, such as a shopping expedition and the welfare diet. At the same time, I felt uncomfortable with the advocacy role I adopted; while I remained committed to challenging student thinking, I wrote in my journal that I was “reluctant to foist an overt political agenda on my students”. Indeed, this experiment reaffirmed for me that the best learning occurs when students feel that their voices and experiences are respected, even as their assumptions are being challenged.

As a teacher who had confronted the challenges of incorporating new techniques into my practice while meeting the day-to-day challenges of classroom teaching, I was better able to empathize with Bob Fitzgerald’s anxieties and draw on my experiences to offer constructive practical advice. Also, my experiences with students such as Robert helped me to respect Bob’s priorities and provide him with professional scaffolding and personal support at a crucial time in his career.

Although these reflections deepened my understanding of learning and teaching, there remained an unresolved tension between my respect for teachers as curriculum makers and my interest in school reform. Over the years, my focus expanded from the classroom to the school and beyond. My widening interests caused me to pursue doctoral studies in order to satisfy my interest in curriculum, teacher development, and school improvement. As I developed my understanding of teachers’ personal practical knowledge and deepened my appreciation for teachers as curriculum makers, these lived in tension with my commitment to school improvement.

This tension was reinforced as I became involved in evident in my leadership roles in several school-based change initiatives. In particular, my involvement in a lighthouse project (Kitchen, 2001) designed as beacons for systemic educational reform (Fiske, 1992). Although the project emerged from sound pedagogical principles and an understanding of societal trends, it faced considerable staff resistance as many felt that this project was being imposed on them from above and that it was part of the new administration’s hidden agenda of radically reshaping the school. Staff members valued the school’s traditional academic program and many did not share my sense of urgency regarding renewal. Indeed, I suspect that many may have felt that their work was not valued and acted defensively in response to the “burden of having a torrent of unwanted, uncoordinated policies and innovations raining down on them from external
hierarchical bureaucracies” (Fullan, 1999, p. 39). Reflecting on my sense of isolation in the role of change agent, I was able to empathize with the isolation and anxiety of colleagues who resisted this project. This also enhanced my understanding of Bob’s sense of being besieged by his principal.

While Bob focussed on the classroom, I was highly cognizant of the curricular reforms and school improvement initiatives that were affecting his classroom world. Also, my reflections on my lighthouse experience had reinforced the importance of offering safety and support to teachers involved in change. While my commitment to Bob as curriculum maker was not always present in my “knowledge as expressed in practice” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 157), I was able to put aside my doubts, respect his personal practical knowledge and attend to his self-identified needs.

My background in teaching and teacher development proved important in providing Bob with support. As important was my capacity to enter into a helping relationship. While I am sure I would have been more effective if I had had more training in facilitation, my empathy, respect and willingness to reflect on my personal practical knowledge and commitment to improving my practice in teacher development proved sufficient to make a difference. Relational teacher development is the distillation of my understanding of how to improve one’s practice in teacher development.

My approach to helping Bob was also informed by my experiences of community in university, where I found a community that respected teachers’ personal practical knowledge and employed personal experience methods in a professional development community. Learning in relationship, through conversations and letters, provided me with positive experiences of collaboration and practice helping others in their professional development. These experiences, along with my experiences as a teacher and an advocate for change, played significant roles in the development of my understanding of teaching and teacher development before my collaboration with Bob.

Understanding the Landscape of Lippincott School

During my first months as an observer at Lippincott School and Bob Fitzgerald’s classroom, I became familiar with the life of the school, the students of Room 28 and Bob’s knowledge, principles, images and practices as a teacher. I puzzled over the four commonplaces of teacher, learner, curriculum and milieu (Schwab, 1971) in order to better understand the interactions and situations (Dewey, 1938) involving Bob (Kitchen, 2006). I was then able to draw on my emerging understanding when called upon for assistance. For example, my appreciation of school routines and understanding of the principal’s interactions with staff proved valuable as I helped Bob to adapt his practice in response to her expectations. Also, my familiarity with the dynamics within Bob’s classroom enabled me to help Bob frame the problem and offer suggestions that were respectful of the classroom and sensitive to his personal practical knowledge.

Helping the Teacher Face a Problem

For a helping relationship to be successful, it is important that the client perceive the problem as serious and meaningful (Rogers, 1961). Bob invited me into his
classroom to assist with computers because he perceived that they were becoming an important tool in classrooms, or at least increasingly emphasized by administrators. His focus on adjusting to a new school and establishing a rapport with students, however, sometimes frustrated me as I sought to draw his attention to the potential of computers in education. Although I was pleased when Bob expressed gratitude after I supplemented a graphing lesson with a computer-assisted activity, I was disappointed that I had not inspired him to invest more time and energy to learning this computer application. I had hoped to be able to link computer use to his pedagogical principles, but became increasingly aware that there were simply too many other ways in which Bob could enhance student learning without devoting countless hours to mastering basic computer skills and developing lessons involving technology. While Bob remained curious, learning computers was not an immediate professional development priority, and not a problem he regarded as serious or meaningful.

The principal’s visit on October 28, 1998 ensured that his moderate interest in computer-assisted instruction would be put aside in order to concentrate on addressing the principal’s concerns regarding his performance. Bob became highly committed to facing a problem, what Rogers (1961) describes as “an uncertain and ambivalent desire to learn or to change, growing out of a perceived difficulty in life” (p. 282). After the principal’s visit, Bob confided to me the details of her evaluation. In the days that followed, Bob appreciated the validation I offered as he struggled to meet these challenges. Whereas the principal had framed the problem in terms of deficiencies in Bob’s planning and assessment, I helped Bob re-frame it in more positive terms. Drawing on my observations of the classroom dynamics in Room 28 and my understanding of the images, beliefs and procedures that informed Bob’s practice as a teacher, I proposed to Bob that his teaching practices, while fundamentally sound, could be enhanced if he polished and updated his planning and assessment procedures. I then encouraged Bob to articulate his priorities for professional development. Once the problem was defined in a more manageable way, Bob set out to develop improved lesson plans and a system for tracking student performance. While computers in the classroom remained a low priority, learning to use the computerized report card program became important, both practically and symbolically, as Bob sought to prove himself to the principal. When I readily agreed to assist him in meeting this self-identified challenge, we began the process of building a strong collaborative relationship.

In a non-directive manner, I encouraged Bob to identify the problem and then supported his efforts to understand her criticisms and adapt his practice. While the immediate crisis was a poor evaluation, my involvement helped Bob realize that he needed to sharpen his day-to-day practice in order to bring to the surface his core beliefs and underlying strengths as a teacher. My trust in his “basically positive direction” (Rogers, 1961, p. 26) and regard for him as a curriculum maker capable of identifying his own learning needs was an important factor in Bob Fitzgerald’s positive response to the crisis.

**Respecting and Empathizing with the Teacher**

Another characteristic of our helping relationship was the empathic and respectful manner in which I supported Bob’s development. Congruence,
unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding—three conditions
Rogers (1961) regarded as critical to helping relationships—are employed as
interpretive lenses in this section.

My empathic understanding of Bob Fitzgerald is in no small measure due to
my grounding in narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry has made a considerable
contribution to the understanding of teacher knowledge. A large body of work
documented the lives of teachers, the ways their personal practical
knowledge informs their practice, and their relationship with the professional
knowledge landscape. Narrative inquirers are engaged in an empathic process as
is evident from their narrative accounts. For example, in her account of Stephanie
and Aileen’s images, Clandinin (1986) demonstrated respect and empathy for
two participants with very differing perspectives regarding teaching. By
immersing themselves in the lives of others and puzzling to understand them
from within, narrative inquirers attempt to suspend judgement, empathize with
their participants, and document teacher narratives with sensitivity. This
immersion in Bob’s professional life helped me shift from the “grand narrative”
(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of delivering expertise to teacher-technicians to
relational teacher development.

In my work with Bob, I committed to observing closely and without
judgement. While this was not easy, my narrative perspective helped me move
from the criticism of specific actions to an understanding of the complex
dynamics faced by teachers. I chose Bob as my participant because I felt a strong
congruence with him. I trusted my gut in selecting Bob as the one participant
with whom I would work; this gut response stemmed from an intuitive sense that
we could each be ourselves and understand the other. Early in our relationship, I
struggled with my identity as a researcher, found myself at times judging Bob,
and sought to interest him in experimenting with computers. At the same time, I
sought to be receptive to his needs. Later, as I became less eager for immediate
results, congruence increased, as did Bob’s progress. We shared our personal,
teaching and research experiences as our relationship broadened to include our
lives beyond the classroom.

Along with congruence, I generally felt a positive regard for Bob from that
first October morning when he arrived laden with packages, speaking of Frankl
and searching for a copy of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. While I questioned
Bob’s performance in the immediate aftermath of the principal’s visit, I
increasingly demonstrated unconditional caring and acceptance of both Bob’s
negative and positive feelings as I became more patient in my roles as researcher
and teacher developer. This type of relationship, according to Rogers, results in a
“safety-creating climate” in which significant learning can take place. While I
formed my own perceptions and ventured my own opinions, I strove to respect
the qualities he brought to the classroom and genuinely sought to understand his
practice and assist him in his efforts to respond to this critical incident. When he
praised me for providing practical tips and personal support in learning how to
use the computerized reports, Bob was showing appreciation not for pre-
programmed resources but for the positive regard that led me to offer him my
evenings and weekends to help. While my positive regard was not unconditional
in the first few months, my efforts to accept and support were appreciated. In the
second half of 1998-1998, as my regard became less conditional, we became closer.

I also found it equally important that the helper “is experiencing an accurate, empathic understanding of the client’s world as seen from the inside” (Rogers 1961, p. 284). I sought to enter into Bob’s internal world by observing his classes closely, searching for images of teaching that emerged from his practice, listening to his stories of experience as a learner and teacher, asking questions, recording observations and impressions, and restorying these accounts through the filter of my own experiences. My empathic understanding was informally mirrored back in conversations with Bob and, more recently, by sharing with him drafts of this thesis. I recall with pride that Bob, after reading the first two chapters in the summer of 2001, said that I had conveyed his feelings as if I were reading his mind.

**Conveying that Respect and Empathy**

While respect and empathy are important, my relationship with Bob taught me that it is vital that “the client should experience or perceive something of the therapist’s congruence, acceptance, and empathy” (Rogers, 1961, p. 284). While expressing his pride at completing the second set of reports independently, Bob said:

> I could not have done this without you! You helped me out in the Fall, when I could not have prepared the reports on my own. You encouraged me in using the computer. I am lucky that you came into my classroom. (Field Notes, February 19, 1999)

I responded, “I stopped urging you to use the computer…I simply decided to accept you as you are.” Bob, who had intended to write his doctoral dissertation on Rogers, said that he appreciated my “positive regard” and “empathic understanding” (Field Notes, February 19, 1999).

Four years after his arrival at Lippincott School, Bob continued to renew himself and sustain relationships with his students, peers and the principal that helped nurture his ongoing development. Indeed, Bob remarked that he felt his best years were yet to come as he was continually thinking of new ways to address the needs of his students (Field Notes, July 12, 2002). As a result of my experiences working with Bob, I believe that professional development is more likely to be successful when teachers are committed to facing problems and confident that those offering assistance will demonstrate congruence, acceptance and empathy.

**Receptivity to Growing in Relationship**

My involvement with Bob helped me become more sensitive to the power of relationships in teacher development. It led to much self-examination as I reflected on the tensions that emerged from my experiences both in the field with Bob and in other educational settings. My experiences as a helper engaged in an authentic relationship has led me to wonder if receptivity to growing in relationship may be the most important characteristic in teacher development.
Whereas Rogers (1961) would participate in the client’s “struggle as deeply and sensitively as I am able” (p. 4), helping professionals in the twentieth century have often adopted the grand narrative of expertise, in which the professional assumes the role of expert responding to unskilled clients. The use of this model in education has generally resulted in teacher-centred instruction and professional development that directs teachers to adopt the latest educational theories or solutions. The sporadic and limited success of school improvement efforts (Cuban, 1988; Fullan, 1993) demonstrates their limited value to teachers and, by implication, to teacher development.

I struggled as deeply and sensitively as I was able to collect meaningful information about Bob’s experience. Rather than being a technician mechanically applying an equation to the complex algorithms of life, I was engaged with a teacher in the common pursuit of new meaning and enhanced practice. Puzzling over teaching and learning was a fascinating process that enriched my knowledge and understanding as a professional involved in teacher development. I have also learned that the discovery of order in experience, when combined with recognition of the uniqueness of each individual and situation, deepens understanding and enriches my ability to assist others.

This receptivity helped me to circumvent Bob’s cover stories in order to respond to his secret stories as a teacher whose passion and practice had diminished. Being authentically present, as a person rather than an expert, opened me to a more empathic understanding of teachers and enhanced my capacity to help, in a non-judgmental manner, teachers find their own solutions. In turn, I have discovered that “it is highly rewarding when I can accept another person” (Rogers, 1961, p. 20).

Each experience of puzzling over classroom situations, understanding teachers and helping teachers face their problems has added to my store of experiences. Drawing on the authority of this store of experiences, informed by the educational literature, has helped me discover patterns of meaning in a dynamic ever-changing world. Entering into an authentic and meaningful relationship with Bob has deepened my understanding as an educational researcher and a teacher educator. Personal, professional and relational elements have joined together to improve my practice as a researcher, while deepening my engagement in the puzzles presented by teachers.

**Conclusion**

The principal’s intervention was crucial to motivating Bob to face problems in his practice, yet the source of his renewal was the richness of his personal practical knowledge and capacity for growth through self-directed learning. While Bob possessed the latent potential to become a more dynamic and caring teacher, it is far from certain that he would have revitalized his practice if left to his own resources. Based on his response to the principal’s pressure and support, it is possible that Bob would have made surface changes without a change of heart or despaired of winning her approval. After restorying and reinterpreting these events over the past five years, I think that my relational stance towards his continuing professional learning was vital role in reawakening Bob’s delight in teaching.
Although much has been written about teacher knowledge and teacher development, factors that contribute to continuing professional learning renewal are not well understood. While my relationship with Bob Fitzgerald is particular to us and our situation, it does seem to affirm the fundamental human need to care and be cared for (Noddings, 1992) and the importance of knowing in relationship (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl & Minarik, 1993). While I intervened only in modest ways, these proved significant as I was aware of my own personal practical knowledge, reflective about my practice, sensitive to Bob’s professional landscape, helpful in framing the problem, respectful of Bob’s professional knowledge, conveyed my respect and empathy, and demonstrated receptivity to growing in relationship. While the precise reasons for Bob’s renewal remain elusive, relationship seems crucial to nurturing “experiences that lead to growth” (Dewey, 1938). As Rogers (1961) writes, “Significant learning may take place if the teacher can accept the student as he is, and can understand the feelings he possesses” (p. 287).

In this paper, relational teacher development is offered not as a formula but as way of conceptualizing and practicing professional development that is relational and respectful of the continuing professional learning of teachers. This need is increasingly being recognized by educational researchers committed to sustaining teacher learning within local contexts during tumultuous times (Clark, 2001).

**Educational Significance**

The professional learning of teachers is critical to the ongoing improvement of education. Administrators have devoted considerable resources to implementing new curriculum and improving schools. Underlying these efforts is the increasingly discredited assumption that targeted efforts can lead to substantive changes in teacher practice. Ball and Cohen (1999) note professional development “sessions and workshops…are often intellectually superficial, disconnected from deep issues of curriculum and learning, fragmented and non-cumulative” (pp. 3-4). Fullan (2008) concedes that “reculturing is proving far more difficult than previously realized” (p. 114). Bob, who oblivious to professional development activities and school district priorities, proved receptive to professional learning when it was responsive to his immediate needs as a classroom teacher. The impact on Bob and the implications for the professional learning of teachers are examined more fully in Kitchen (2009b). Based on my work with Bob, I concur with Spillane (2004), who suggests that continuing professional learning is far more responsive to day-to-day practice because it is “constructed through conversations with teachers, administrators, and external experts” (p. 60).

Perhaps professional development and school improvement need to be recultured in order to better support teachers as curriculum makers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) able to adapt curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of learners in their classroom contexts. Such reculturing might begin with a recognition that teaching is highly complex and that professional development needs to be responsive to these challenges, sensitive to the needs of individual teachers, and respectful of the knowledge teachers bring to their practice (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Anthony Alvarado, an innovative district leader in
New York who recognized that “[t]he worst part of bureaucracy is the dehumanization it brings” (Elmore & Burney, 1999, p. 271), cultivated “a culture based on norms of commitment, mutual care, and concern” (p. 271).

Relational teacher development is a way of responding to the continuing professional learning needs of teachers in a manner that is respectful and caring. It is not a formula but a way of thinking about professional development relationships. As each person and situation is different, there is a need for a conception of professional development delivery that celebrates experience and helps teachers discover meaning in their personal and professional lives. This is increasingly being recognized by educational researchers committed to sustaining teacher learning within local contexts during tumultuous times. Mentor teachers, principals, professional development staff, and academics interested in fostering continuing professional learning are encouraged to consider incorporating the seven characteristics of relational teacher development into their philosophy and practice.

Many years ago, Schön (1983) critiqued technical rationality as unsuitable to examining the complexity of knowing in practice. Professional development practitioners need to reflect on their own identities as educators and educational leaders, as I did when I explored my personal practical knowledge and understanding of teacher development. As my experiences illustrate, studying our own experiences is a critical first step towards being responsive to the professional learning of others. We also need to reflect on and in action (Schön) as we observe and listen to teachers in classrooms in order to help them identify and address issues. While expertise in curriculum and pedagogy are important, my story illustrates that it is more important that professional development providers respect and empathize with the teachers they work with. This is vital, as teachers are not as responsive when they and their conditions are not understood.

Perhaps, most important of all for the individual provider is being a reflective practitioner receptive to continuing in one’s own continuing professional learning in teacher development through our relationships with teachers. While individual relational teacher developers can make a significant difference to the teachers with whom they work, systemic change is unlikely until school district administrators recognize that the best way to enhance learning and improve schools is by cultivating cultures based on norms of commitment, mutual care, and concern. The literature on professional development provides a strong case for shifting the emphasis from professional development workshops to the continuing professional learning of teachers. Relational teacher development can help professional development providers and educational leaders in shifting reflecting on their practices and shifting their approach to teacher development.

**References**


