

A Strategic Focus for Educational Leaders: The Factors that Impact Transfer of Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions face many challenges in identifying and sustaining the next generation of strategic leaders who will affect future learners. Fullan and Scott (2009) identified the criticality of developing and improving teachers' practices through authentic, problem-based professional development (PD) programs. PD is critical for educators to stay current in the instructional best practices that improve student achievement (Barrett, Butler, & Toma, 2013; Desimone, 2009). While school, district, or state level PD offers teachers easy access to the instructional techniques that will enhance student learning, the effectiveness of these expensive programs is seldom measured (Yeh, 2009). The federal government spent \$1.5 billion on K-12 teacher professional development in 2004-2005 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). With such an investment in PD programs, the knowledge and skills gained by the participants should be justifiable from both financial and pedagogical perspectives. It becomes incumbent then that participants transfer their learning from these programs into their classroom instruction (Desimone, 2009). Often it is the responsibility of school or district administrators not only to determine the content of the PD programs, but also to evaluate whether their faculty transfers the knowledge gained from a PD program into their classroom instruction (MacDonald, 2012; Yeh, 2009). Frequently the administrators who conduct these evaluations do not have a background in measuring transfer of learning or a full appreciation of the complexity involved in transferring learning (Holton & Naquin, 2005; Hutchins, Nimon, Bates, & Holton, 2013). Understanding all the factors involved in the transfer of learning is essential in the design of PD programs. To benefit the participants and ultimately the students they serve, PD programs need to implement and promote the skills and strategies that foster learning transfer. This is an area of strategic leadership on which educational leaders need to focus to enhance their faculty's ability to engage students in learning.

PD programs are a common method for educational institutions to develop, update, and rejuvenate their employees' instructional skill sets (Chen, 2011; Curran, 2014; De Rijdt, Stes, van der Vleuten, & Dochy, 2013). Gaining deeper insights into how educators transfer their learning from a PD program to their classroom instruction can have both pedagogical and financial ramifications for educational institutions and school systems (Chang & Lin, 2011; Curran, 2014; Demir, 2010; De Rijdt et al., 2013; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). This is especially relevant as many American school districts are currently considering instituting merit pay for teachers based on their students' academic performance (Ritter & Jensen 2010).

Most prior research (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010; Grossman & Salas, 2011; Holton, 1997, 2000, 2005; Kirwan & Birchall, 2006) on the factors that inhibit or facilitate transfer of learning examined how adults transfer their learning from workplace training programs to their jobs in a business environment rather than in an educational environment. Transfer of learning (TOL) occurs when learners can communicate and apply their education or training from its original context to another situation

especially their workplace (Dirkx, 2008; Harris, Lowery-Moore & Farrow, 2008; Haskell, 2001; Perkins & Salomon, 1988, 1992, 2012). TOL focuses on the features of the learning task, the learners' intent, the organization, and the social context of the transfer (Harris, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow, 2008; Haskell, 2001; Perkins & Salomon, 1988, 1992, 2012). Transfer of learning is the goal of all instruction, but it is vital in any PD program designed to increase trainees' workplace skills (Haskell, 2001). Many factors can impede or enable transfer of learning such as a program's transfer design, the participants' workplace environment, their motivation, and/or their ability to transfer their learning to their work (Holton, 2005; Holton et al., 1997; Holton et al., 2000; Perkins & Salomon, 1988, 1992, 2012). As transfer of learning is at the heart of education, it is important for educational leaders to study all that can influence this process.

Teachers' intent to transfer learning from a PD program to their workplace is at the heart of Post-secondary and Adult Education (PAE) as PD is one of the primary vehicles for professional growth for educators during the school year (Barrett et al., 2013; Desimone, 2009). Many teachers who attend PD events are motivated to use the methods they learn during PD to improve their instruction (Van Duzor, 2011). Hutchins, Nimon, Bates, & Holton (2013) stressed, however, that during training employees already know whether or not they would use the training back at their workplace. Teachers often encounter circumstances within their schools which constrain them from implementing the techniques and strategies learned (Yeh, 2009). The impact of the support or lack of support from supervisors and peers has a significant effect on whether employees use the new skills learned during training in their jobs (Holton, et al., 2000). Their enthusiasm to use the PD knowledge and skills can be diminished by factors outside of their control such as supervisor and/or peer support or non-support, lack of access to the tools and materials necessary to implement the learning, or a less than accommodating workplace climate (Barrett et al., 2013; Herrington, Herrington, Hoban, & Reid, 2009; MacDonald, 2012). As a result, it is important to examine the influence that these factors have on teachers' transfer of the training to their jobs (Holton et al., 2000). No matter how meaningful and pertinent the training program content, if the workplace or transfer system is not supportive of the learning, the employees are less likely to transfer the learning.

Three theories of learning illuminate some of the factors that encourage or discourage transfer of learning. Ajzen (2011) stated in his theory of planned behavior (TPB) that our attitude toward a behavior was based on our perception of the attitudes of others towards that behavior plus our sense of personal control over that behavior. TPB focuses on underlying volitional assumptions that influence intention (Ajzen, 2014). The theory of goal setting links to TPB and transfer of learning through its conception of motivation. Researchers studying the theory of goal setting contend that the more motivated people are to set and achieve a goal, such as transferring learning, the more in control they feel and thus the more likely they are to succeed (Coutinho & Neuman, 2008; Locke & Latham, 2006). Locke and Latham (2006) emphasized that an important element in setting and achieving a goal was to make the goal challenging yet attainable. The level of motivation teachers feel about transferring their learning would influence the goals teachers would set for themselves.

Research in the theory of interpersonal behaviors has found that relevance, learner confidence, and effort significantly affect how people transfer learning (den Brok, Levy, Brekelmans, & Wubbles, 2002). When people recognize that certain learning has relevance to their work, they feel more confident about using that learning, which in turn leads them to make the effort to transfer that learning. Examining teachers' relationships with the PD trainer and their colleagues could also affect their effort to transfer the learning. Sivan and Chan (2013) maintained that interpersonal behaviors affect the instructional relationship between educator and student (i.e., the PD participants). A PD trainer's presentation style can influence the participants' confidence and effort to use their learning (den Brok et al., 2002). Coldren and Hively

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