Learning through Teaching: exploring the narratives of teachers involved in programmes of professional development

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This paper is concerned with teachers as learners. It draws on the theoretical notion of cultural and personal knowledge (Eraut 2004), which suggests that the knowledge teachers develop in formal continuing professional development (CPD) programmes can be seen as cultural knowledge. However, in the ‘hot action’ (Scribner 1999) of the classroom, teachers tend to draw on their personal knowledge much more than the cultural knowledge developed in CPD activities. The question this paper addresses is ‘How and why is the cultural knowledge transformed so that it becomes part of the personal knowledge of the teacher and hence available in a usable form in classroom teaching?’

The research evidence suggests that for new knowledge and approaches to become embedded in practice teachers need to try them, to reflect on their experiences of trying them and to reconcile them with their previously held beliefs about teaching and learning. For example: Clarke and Clarke (2005) and Garet, Porter et al. (2001) suggest that amongst the critical factors in teacher professional development are the use of new activities and approaches in the classroom and Jaworski (1998) emphasises the importance of reflecting on classroom experiences whilst Swan (2006) stresses the importance of addressing teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. So the short answer to the question above is that new knowledge and approaches must be used in the classroom and embedded in classroom practice in order for any transformation of the teacher’s knowledge to take place. Our interest, however, is not to provide further support for these findings, but to develop an understanding of the narratives of the teachers who become involved in processes of change in their practice, and particularly of the ways in which they effect transformations between cultural and personal knowledge. We are interested in the knowledge gained from the CPD, which can be seen as cultural knowledge, and the knowledge they draw on in the classroom, which can be seen as personal knowledge. In this way we develop an understanding of the relationship between their cultural and personal knowledge.

In this paper we draw on data from a major research project, ‘Researching Effective CPD in Mathematics Education’ (RECMEM) in the UK, to explore the processes described above in the cases of individual teachers. The project is studying over thirty different continuing professional development initiatives for teachers of mathematics from many different regions of England involving a total of over two hundred and fifty teachers of learners ranging between three years old and adults. We have collected data about the nature of the different CPD initiatives involved and this paper focuses on the accounts that some of the teachers involved have co-constructed with us about their involvement in the programme of CPD and its effects on their classroom practice.

Methodology or Methods/research instruments or sources used
Our data will be gathered from questionnaires sent to all the participants in our project and the information about the histories of individual teacher’s experiences of CPD gathered from this source will be augmented with instances from interviews from a smaller sample of the teachers. Using an iterative approach, we, together with the teachers, have co-constructed understandings of how and why teachers have transformed their knowledge through teaching and reflecting. We also address the question of barriers that may have prevented teachers from transforming their knowledge.

Conclusions, expected outcomes or findings
This research is ongoing but early indications are that, as expected, using cultural knowledge in classroom situations is a crucial part of professional development. Opportunities to experiment, try things out and reflect on what took place in the classroom were valued by teachers and it was through these processes that their cultural knowledge seemed to become more personal.

However, what is clear is that the process is not straightforward or without barriers.
References


