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# **Through a tangled Wonderland: What makes transformative professional learning for teachers and school leaders**

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Teacher Practices and Student Learning

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## **Abstract**

This study travels ‘down the rabbit hole’ of story, with its unique approach to the phenomenon of professional learning. It employs narrative inquiry to examine the perspectives of fourteen educators in one independent Australian school during its pilot teacher growth intervention. Extended literary metaphor and known literary characters operate as a symbolic frame. Situated within the conversation of the global push for teacher quality and for professional learning which positively shapes teaching practice, the study generates context-specific connections between lived moments of being, becoming, learning, and leading. While the study set out to explore how educators’ experiences of professional learning (trans)form their senses of professional identity, it found that it is not just

professional learning, but epiphanic life experiences that shape professional selves and practices.

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## **Objectives**

*“Tell us a story!” said the March Hare.  
(Carroll, 2014, p.78)*

The debate concerning teacher quality for student learning is a propulsive agenda for much theory and practice around professional development. The quality of teachers and their teaching influences student achievement (William, 2016). Professional learning, as it raises student achievement by developing teachers (Drago-Severson, 2012; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007), has become a focus of schools, districts, and government

Some approach teacher development with a performativity agenda, but negative drivers of educational change develop a culture of fear, competition, and compliance (Fullan, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). These risk alienating, rather than developing, educators (Schmoker, 1999). Professional development initiatives should be based in motivation, continuous improvement, collaboration, and building the professional learning culture of schools (Fullan, 2011; Fullan & Quinn; Gonski et al., 2011; Hattie, 2015; William, 2016).

Set against the backdrop of the global push for teacher quality, and consequent worldwide initiatives in professional development, this study generated context-specific narrative interview data in order to answer the questions:

- a) What is the role of professional learning on identities or growth?;

and

b) What professional learning is (trans)formational?

In examining the catalytic context of one Australian school's professional development model, in action, it layered underexplored perceptions of teachers with views of school leaders, including middle leaders who are often absent from research literature. Insider stories illuminated what learning might be considered professionally transformative in shaping educators' beliefs and practices.

### **Theoretical framework**

The bricolaged paradigmatic stance of this study wove a social constructionist ontology with a hermeneutic narrative methodology. Extended literary metaphor and known literary characters from Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* additionally functioned as a symbolic frame; they were used to enhance meaning making and protect participant anonymity (Netolicky, 2016).

With a focus on the phenomenon of transformational professional learning, narrative inquiry was selected for this study to provide in-depth insights into teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of their learning. A narrative approach privileges humanness and the plurality of 'truths' (Riessman, 2002), harnessing remembrance and retelling as a way into understanding phenomena, and into uncovering significance in our remembered moments (Leggo & Sameshima, 2014). In this case, the study asked participants to share their experiences of professional learning across their lives and within the context of a school-based intervention.

Research was theorised as a rabbit hole portal into a land of phenomenological wondering, taking the reader 'down the rabbit hole' into a world of story. Characters from Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* emerged as fitting emblematic figures to

represent the researcher (Alice), the teacher (White Rabbit), and the school leader (Cheshire Cat). These character names, and the literary and cultural meanings attached to them, were selected deliberately to add to the meaning making of the stories: Alice as curious wonderer; White Rabbit as pressured time-watcher caught between layers of power; and Cheshire Cat as sometimes-supportive, sometimes-philosophising, disappearing, reappearing guide and advisor, often deliberately revealing only part of itself.

### **Connection to literature**

Differences in teachers make a difference to student learning (Hattie, 2009; Wiliam, 2016), and effective professional learning is crucial to developing quality teachers (Baguley & Kerby, 2012; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). This study was concerned with transformational learning which actively shifts cognition, emotion, and capacity (Drago-Severson, 2009).

Best practice models of teacher professional learning are collaborative, grounded approaches, rather than individual or top down ones: professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007); participatory action research (Grundy, 1994; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008; Timperley, 2012); and coaching and mentoring (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Costa & Garmston, 2006; Lu, 2010; Showers & Joyce, 1996). While sitting outside much professional learning literature, some have questioned the credibility of studies on teacher professional learning, calling for dedicated efforts to develop more trustworthy evidence (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Yoon et al., 2007).

The interdependent relationship between school and individual (Costa & Garmston, 2006; Sawyer, 2002) is crucial in professional learning, implying that it should address and honour the parts and the whole, the

individual and the collective. Professional learning should also be supported and resourced by schools (Sawyer, 2002).

This study contributes to identified areas for further research: the relationships of teacher professional learning with quality teaching, teacher collaboration, teacher leadership, and school leadership (Zammit et al., 2007); and the effect of school reforms on teachers themselves (Yoon et al., 2007) and on leaders.

### **Mode of inquiry: Narrative**

Narrative inquiry was selected as method, data, and product, in order to provide in-depth insights into teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of professional learning.

The context of this research site was a very specific environment with particular kinds of individuals. Lutwidge School (a pseudonymic name) is an Australian, non-selective, independent, well-resourced Pre-Kindergarten to Year 12 school, with about 1500 students from urban, rural, and international backgrounds.

Participants were drawn from a pool of those involved in the Teacher Growth Initiative, a school-based professional learning intervention which used the Danielson Framework for Teaching and Cognitive Coaching as tools for teacher-driven reflection and growth. Participants were: the researcher (also a teacher at the school and the facilitator of the Initiative), two teachers from the Initiative, six middle leaders, and five executive leaders.

Participants took part in individual, semi-structured, narrative-eliciting interviews which posed sparing, open, story-inviting questions based around the phenomenon of professional learning, threads identified in the literature, and resultant research questions. The researcher and teachers

were interviewed twice in the first year of the Initiative (2013), while the leaders were interviewed once in the second year (2014).

## **Results**

The following summary of findings outlines what participant groups revealed about professional learning: Alice (the researcher), the White Rabbit (the teachers) and the Cheshire Cat (the school leaders).<sup>1</sup> A tabulated overview of the findings around professional learning can be found in Appendix A, which shows that educators see experiences of professional learning as: professional and personal; formal and informal; in and out of educational contexts; and singular and collaborative.

### *Findings around professional learning: Professional learning as encompassing life-wide epiphanic moments*

Professional learning was viewed by Alice, the White Rabbit, and the Cheshire Cat as: collaborative and individual; occurring in life, school and work; and requiring elements of support and challenge.

Collaboration was important to participants and included teaching teams, postgraduate study groups and action learning projects. Conferences and courses were seen as opportunities, not just for individual learning, but for collaboration. Personal connections were often the most impactful aspect of those courses labelled 'professional development'. Mentors, professional friends and professional coaches provided safe, trusted places for Alice, the White Rabbit, and the Cheshire Cat to learn and grow. Online platforms such as Twitter, which flattened hierarchies and time zones, were seen as key supports for and motivators of learning for Alice and the White Rabbit, allowing them to connect, communicate and learn

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<sup>1</sup> Presenting the data as composite stories (teacher as Rabbit and leader as Cat), and the utilization of known literary characters, allowed for authenticity and anonymity of participant experiences to be preserved, while adding a layer of conceptual meaning to the stories.

from a global community of educators, including teachers, school leaders, researchers, experts, and thought leaders.

Alice and the Cheshire Cat learned through talk and conversation, including coaching meetings and the research interviews, experiences which they reflected brought their thinking to the surface and extended it. At the most executive levels, the notion of space became very important for the Cat, who found that it learned the most when given time and space to step away from the busyness of its daily responsibilities.

For Alice, the White Rabbit, and the Cheshire Cat, it is wider life experiences, as well as educator experiences, that influence their professional beliefs and practices. Examples of transformative life experiences included family relationships, work in non-education sectors, regular trips to the third world to volunteer at an orphanage, world travel, parenting, and postgraduate study. Learning experiences which involve immersion over a period of time emerged as powerfully formative.

*Findings around the Teacher Growth Initiative intervention: A school-based catalytic context for growth*

Alice and the White Rabbit were drawn to the Teacher Growth Initiative because of their alignment with its purpose, resonance with the school context, and a desire for voice and impact. While the Initiative came out of the Lutwidge School strategic plan, it was Alice-as-teacher-and-facilitator and the team of classroom teachers who enacted the intervention's early years and developed recommendations to the governing board of the school about the direction their work should take in the future.

Alice and the White Rabbit noted that their experience of the Teacher Growth Initiative led to learning, especially through its combination of self-direction and collaboration. Moments of growth tended to be those in



which they felt discomfort, but were supported.

The tools of the Teacher Growth Initiative altered Alice and the Rabbit's beliefs and practices as teachers and coaches. Developing their understanding of the Danielson Framework for Teaching impacted their classroom practice and helped them to apply more specificity in reflections about teaching and in professional goal setting. The White Rabbit's knowledge of the 'Distinguished' teaching descriptors from the Framework shaped its classroom practice, as it held these in the back of its mind when teaching.

Cognitive Coaching training and practice impacted Alice and the Rabbit's roles as coaches, but also their conversations in classrooms, teaching teams, and personal relationships. The coaching work incited Alice and the White Rabbit to reconsider the role and purpose of a coach. They reflected that what was most helpful to teachers in growing their practice was mediating thinking rather than giving advice. Alice commented that the Teacher Growth Initiative team began to use the language of the Danielson Framework for Teaching and Cognitive Coaching.

The Cat, too, felt personally aligned with the Initiative as a non-invasive, non-judgmental model of continuous teacher growth. Although the Cat had some questions around a one-size-fits-all approach to professional learning, it saw the Teacher Growth Initiative as positively shifting the professional culture of Lutwidge School.

## **Conclusions**

While this study intended to explore the ways in which educators' experiences of professional learning (trans)form their senses of professional identity, it found that it is not just professional learning, but epiphanic life experiences which shape professional identities and practices. This suggests that the definition of professional learning be

expanded from traditional school and educational learning experiences, and that the scope of studying professional learning be broadened.

The stories of this study's participants revealed that the best professional learning is more than collaborative, targeted, and ongoing, as suggested by much literature; it also deeply involves the teacher or school leader's notion of self. Learning which taps into educators' identities seems to have the most impact on belief, thought, behaviour, and practice.

The school context emerged in this study as a major player in the professional learning landscape. Participants were most engaged when they perceived organisational identity and purpose to resonate with their personal identity and purpose. This study does not propose that the Teacher Growth Initiative model, which emerged out of its specific context, be applied to other schools. Rather, other schools could work from their own contexts to research, pilot, design, and implement a teacher growth model starting from their own mission, vision, values, students, staff, and current structures, going slowly and allowing change to iterate from the bottom up, as well as the top down, as suggested by Malone (2015).

## **Significance**

*"It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."*

*Alice (Carroll, 2014, p.115)*

In delving into what teachers and school leaders perceive to be transformative professional learning, this study provided insights which have implications for the theorisation and implementation of professional development. It illuminated a facet of how school-based professional

learning-in-context impacts on professional identity and makes deeply transformative learning or re-forming of identity possible. Professional learning was revealed to be a lifelong process made up of epiphanic life moments which are professional and personal, formal and informal, in schools and out of schools, singular and collaborative. This finding draws together the valuing of epiphanies or critical moments (Denzin, 1989; Goodson, 1991; Riessman, 2002) with sparse professional learning literatures which suggest that informal learning be investigated further (Cole & Throssell, 2008; Holly, 1989; Smylie, 1995).

Transformation of educators' identities and practices occurred in environments which were supportive, challenging, and growth-focused, rather than evaluation-driven. Frameworks which provided a map of what good teaching looks like, through explicit shared standards, were shown to provide some commonality of language and a starting point for conversations, but were catalysts for reflection rather than models of growth in themselves. Individual and collective school change were both revealed to be messy, unpredictable, and fluid processes in which small unexpected moments can have minute and far-reaching butterfly effects.

Like Alice in her Wonderland adventures, professional learners should return from their learning journeys changed by their experiences in ways which positively impact their practice. This study suggests that transformative professional learning can occur in a wide range of life arenas.

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## Appendix A: Tabulated summary of findings about professional learning

Table A1: Tabulated summary of findings about professional learning

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Research er</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Leaders</b>	<b>Professio nal</b>	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Formal</b>	<b>Informal</b>	<b>S c</b>
<b>Watching or working with educational role models &amp; anti-models</b>			┌┐	┌┐			┌┐	
<b>Collaborative work in schools</b>	┌┐	┌┐		┌┐		┌┐		
<b>Watching inspiring experts</b>				┌┐		┌┐		
<b>Observing other teachers teach</b>	┌┐	┌┐		┌┐		┌┐	┌┐	
<b>Relationships with coaches, mentors, &amp; professional friends</b>	┌┐		┌┐	┌┐		┌┐	┌┐	
<b>Connecting with others: conferences, associations, study, &amp; online communities</b>		┌┐	┌┐	┌┐			┌┐	
<b>Reflecting, by self &amp; with others</b>			┌┐	┌┐		┌┐	┌┐	
<b>Postgraduate study</b>	┌┐		┌┐	┌┐	┌┐	┌┐		

<b>Pursuing own professional interests: professional reading &amp; online platforms</b>	┆	┆	┆	┆	┆	┆
<b>Non-educational workforce experience</b>			┆	┆		┆
<b>Times &amp; relationships with family</b>			┆		┆	┆
<b>Travel</b>	┆		┆		┆	┆
<b>Tragedy</b>			┆	┆	┆	┆
<b>Quiet time &amp; space to think</b>			┆		┆	┆