



Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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Book Reviews

Teacher development in action

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In *Teacher Development in Action*, Magdalena Kubanyiova addresses the complexity of language teachers' conceptual change by analyzing the "failure" of a teacher development (TD) course. With its solid theoretical foundations, this book might be of prime interest to researchers, especially those who acknowledge the immense complexity of teacher development. At the same time, it also holds relevance for a broader readership including teacher educators, policy makers, school administrators, and even language teachers themselves, seeking to gain insights into the problems they face in their own areas of work. As the author admits, this book does not offer nice, easy solutions; what it offers instead as a takeaway for everyone is a heavy sense of recognition of the empirical messiness of education, human learning, and human change. As a reader who primarily belongs to the first category, that of language teaching researchers, I was particularly intrigued by the process whereby the author rigorously and deliberately attempted to approach this very messiness to account for her participant teachers' failure to experience fundamental conceptual change as a result of TD input. Framed within a bigger picture, her inquiry

into the psychology of these teachers contributes greatly to the growing body of research that posits the centrality of psychological factors in the study of language education and stresses the importance of approaching such factors in a nuanced, holistic, situated manner.

The book consists of ten chapters. Chapter 1 convincingly presents the author's rationale for writing a book on failure. As soon as we open the book, we are invited to share the author's genuine question. Why did this TD course fail to inspire real conceptual change in spite of all of its "right" conditions for success: conscientious, hard-working and highly qualified teachers; course content informed by the latest developments in applied linguistics as well as developed with a recognition of the teachers' experiential knowledge; and delivery of such input in a caring and supportive environment? To answer this question, Kubanyiova decided not to settle on easy explanations such as individual differences in teacher learning, the unfavorable sociocultural context or an ineffective course design; instead, she chose to conduct an in-depth anatomy of the failure with the belief that it would open up a new space for exploration into the complexity of the issue. This rationale well resonates with Hattie (2009), who pointed out the absence of any real impact of "so many published articles, so many reports providing directions, so many professional development sessions advocating this or that method" (p. 3; this is also cited by Kubanyiova on p. 3). As readers, we immediately recognize the potential value of this endeavor because we can probably identify in our own lives at least a few—in my case a great many—examples of failure of this kind.

The next three chapters are dedicated to legitimately situating this book in academic research. We explore in Chapter 2 the concept of *teacher conceptual change* as the author guides us through the general education and education psychology literatures. Among some key notions we come across in this chapter is the difference between *assimilation* and *accommodation*. The former is regarded as rather superficial change where new information is simply added to the teacher's existing knowledge, whereas the latter is more "significant and worthwhile" in that it involves the restructuring of the teacher's conceptual system. It is specifically the latter that Kubanyiova calls *conceptual change*, and this book is all about her investigation into why it is so difficult to make this happen. With a good grasp of the concept in question, we then move on to Chapter 3 to see comprehensive reviews of three theories of learning and change in psychology: attitude change, conceptual change, and possible selves. Those with a research-oriented motivation in choosing this book might be interested to see how Kubanyiova synthesizes these frameworks to develop a theoretical model of *language teacher conceptual change* (LTCC), whose full explanation is provided in Chapter 4. LTCC draws mainly on the *cognitive-affective model of conceptual*

change (CAMCC; Gregoire, 2003), which, according to Kubanyiova, is the most comprehensive theoretical model for teacher conceptual change currently available. LTCC complements CAMCC with some additional constructs such as the process of reform input appraisal (i.e., whether input leads to the teacher's systematic cognitive scrutiny), the self-implication mechanism (i.e., whether reform input induces compatible future self images), and the dynamic and cyclical nature of the concept change process (i.e., whether the initial *accommodation* state is sustained overtime).

In Chapter 5, we see a thorough description of the research methods used in the study on which this book is based, and I believe this makes an informative methodological resource for qualitative researchers. Then we finally reach the results section in Chapters 6 to 9. The author employs LTCC to fully analyze some cases where the TD course brought about no *true* conceptual change (i.e., *accommodation*) in her eight research participants. Chapters 6 to 8 present three prototypical paths to "failure," and the essence of each of these routes is neatly captured in their metaphorical labels, "nice-but-not-for-me," "couldn't-agree-more," and "nice-but-too-scary." These three chapters demonstrate the explanatory power of LTCC as a theoretical model, proving with empirical evidence its potential transferability to other teacher education settings. However, we realize a true strength of this model in the next chapter, where Kubanyiova uses LTCC to illuminate the evolving, dynamic, multifarious nature of two participant teachers' developmental paths. Here we witness "messy" life-size pictures of teachers who start engaging with new ideas to make deep connections among the reform input, their future visions, and their teaching contexts. Kubanyiova shows us how LTCC can accommodate this messiness and allow us better, if not full, understandings of the complex phenomenon of teacher change. To conclude the book, Chapter 10 introduces *complexity theory* as a helpful conceptual framework for further inquiry into language teachers' conceptual change.

One of the most impressive features of this book for me was the fact that it challenges the complexity of teacher development deliberately (in the sense that the author joins this battle armed with solid theoretical foundations and rich empirical data), and at the same time humbly (in the sense that she consistently acknowledges her inability to win the battle completely). On the humble side, the depth of her discussions in Chapter 9 about the cyclical and dynamic process of teacher conceptual change made me reconsider my own definition of the "success" of teacher education courses. If change is an inherent part of life, then the effects of any TD input might need to be evaluated for the span of teachers' career and lifetime trajectories. Not only that, we should also keep in mind the micro- as well as the macrocontexts of the classroom which influence teachers' minute-by-minute practice. Given these, it seems indeed

impossible to claim any concrete conceptual change after any particular TD input. A great contribution of this book relating to this point is that it offers us an empirically validated theoretical tool, LTCC, not to help us find clear-cut answers to all the emerging questions in our inquiry, but to guide us in our sustained wondering. This is in no sense a surrender to the tremendous complexity of the object of our inquiry. Modest as it is, it is also a courageous attitude for a researcher to take, and it is this balance between humbleness and boldness (both based on the wealth of her academic expertise) she maintains from cover to cover that makes this book so rich, deep, and convincing.

This book also has a lot to offer to those who are not particularly interested in the psychology of language teachers. For one, it provides an opportunity to learn about the social, historical and cultural macrostructures of English education in Slovakia. What is depicted in the book was quite different from what I have experienced as an English teacher (and as a researcher of English teachers) in my own country. Anyone engaged in the language teaching profession would be interested to get a glimpse of this socially and historically unique setting to be reminded of the immense diversity of language teachers' experience, which resonates well with the author's call to expand the geographical scope in language teacher research. In addition, I must not forget to emphasize that the richness of the empirical data of the eight participant teachers is the most fundamental constituent of this book. Their interview excerpts especially amazed me with their openness about their self images, their perceptions of the TD course, and the issues in their teaching contexts. The author skillfully weaves these teachers' voices (and also her own voice as a researcher and teacher educator) into her analyses of their development. Like many other well-written in-depth case studies, the mid-chapters of this book fascinate us with engaging stories of real teachers—their careers, life goals, motivations, struggles, and aspirations. These lively images helped me make connections with those teachers, like myself, who live on the other side of the globe but still engage in the same teaching profession and struggle every day with similar issues. The images have also encouraged me to wonder how they are evolving as teachers *today* even after the end of this research project, and I find myself doing this with a sense of hope. Dealing initially with stories of "failure," *Teacher Development in Action* is not a book on defeat, but as Kubanyiova herself claims, is one on hope. It is a steady step forward toward success.

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