

Embedding Thinking Skills in professional practice: Can teachers' utilisation of CPD opportunities be explained by a Meta-Activity Framework?

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Abstract

This study sought to understand the processes by which teachers utilise Thinking Skills Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. A case study in an independent school in London, the research was split into two parts: one-to-one CPD with the researcher, focused on integrating Thinking Skills strategies into the classroom, then small group CPD, part of an Assessment for Learning school initiative. This was included as part of the Thinking Skills approach due to some important overlaps in pedagogical stance. The main data was collected as Field Diary, semi-structured interviews and recordings of the dialogue in one-to-one CPD sessions and small groups.

Following a Grounded Theory perspective, themes emerged initially that were linked to a Social Dynamic approach to understanding the organisational influences which impact utilisation of CPD. However, as the study progressed, it emerged that this approach had limited use as a specific analytical tool. A stronger theme emerging was the concept of a Meta-Activity (engaging in the CPD) as well as an Object-Activity (integrating the CPD into the classroom). This was formalised into a framework utilising Vygotsky's Triangle of Mediation, doubled to represent both the Meta-Activity and the Object-Activity.

The Meta-Activity Framework explains the process of teacher interaction with the presented opportunity and the way in which dialogue subsequently evolves to characterise the emerging paradigm. The Meta-Activity framework offers an understanding of boundary brokering of the new paradigm, identifying the specific point at which failure or success in embedding Thinking Skills in professional practice occurs. The extent to which teachers engage in the Meta-Activity process forms patterns characterised as Activity Engagement, Activity Refusal and Activity Sabotage. Of particular interest is that teachers who appear to obstruct engagement with the Meta-Activity tend to have unresolved problems in implementing CPD, stemming from systemic priorities and social dynamics of the school.