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Transforming teachers' professional development: From the traditional model to contextual workplace learning

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The article analyses the transformation of teachers' professional development from traditional training models to contextual workplace learning. The aim is to develop a theoretical model that conceptualises professional growth in the work environment, distinguishes between traditional and emerging paradigms, and identifies effective and sustainable learning conditions at individual, group, and institutional levels. The study addresses key problems: how these models differ, what conditions support sustainable development, and how contextual learning can be integrally understood.

Research methods: A narrative methodology is used to analyse scientific literature. Using the snowball sampling technique and systematic selection criteria, both theoretical and empirical sources from ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases are examined to trace the transformation trajectories in professional development practices.

Process of argumentation: The study applies a comparative lens to analyse traditional and contextual learning models. It highlights conceptual shifts in learning forms, content, methods, the participants' role, and organisational context. A theoretical model is proposed that integrates the individual, social, and organisational dimensions of learning. The model underlines the recursive nature of professional development as an ongoing cycle of reflection, activity, and outcomes.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The proposed model demonstrates that professional growth is dynamic, systemic, and context-dependent. It emphasises the interaction between learning, practice, and result-orientation across all organisational levels. This perspective contributes to educational sciences by supporting a shift towards more sustainable, practice-based professional development.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Professional development should be continuous, contextual, reflective, and cooperative. A move away from episodic, standardised training towards integrated workplace learning is recommended. Strengthening schools as learning organisations and fostering cultures that support teacher growth through reflective practice, learning communities, and sustainable support systems should be prioritised.

Introduction

Rapid societal, technological, and cultural changes create an environment full of uncertainty and complex challenges. Information flows force not only individuals but also the education system to adapt. In this context, teachers have a dual responsibility: to be educators and constantly learning professionals, able to reflect on their activities, change them, and respond to changes in educational realities (Caena, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Porter et al., 2000).

Teachers' professional development is a key factor in the quality of the entire education system. Research highlights the limitations of one-off, passive learning events (Evans, 2008; Guskey, 2000; Illeris, 2003; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Korthagen, 2004). Increasing attention is being paid to workplace learning that is based on reflection, analysis of practical activities, and collegial cooperation in real educational situations (Bruce et al., 2010; Eraut, 2007; Hindin et al., 2007; Leu, 2004).

The traditional model of professional development is based on the view that teachers need to be provided with certain knowledge and skills,

and the process itself is carried out in external seminars, where teachers act as passive recipients of knowledge (Korthagen, 2001). In recent decades, there has been a growing debate about the need to recognise teachers as active learners who construct knowledge based on their own experiences and interactions with colleagues (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Pylväs et al., 2022; Taylor, 2020).

Professional development is increasingly being replaced by personal professional growth, the formation of professional identity, and the concept of teacher effectiveness. Professionalism becomes inseparable from personal values, self-esteem, and character traits, forming the basis for pedagogical knowledge and skills (Evans, 2014; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Despite apparent changes in the educational paradigm, many professional development activities remain formal, episodic, and insufficiently impactful.

Although the differences between traditional and contextual models of professional development have already been highlighted in the scientific literature (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), most studies analyse these differences at the level of programme design or effectiveness. Less often, they are conceptualised as a fundamental shift in the concept of professional learning: from a transmissive, episodic model of knowledge transfer to contextual learning rooted in the workplace and supported at the organisational level.

Furthermore, although the conditions for effective professional growth have been widely discussed (e.g., Avalos, 2011; Kyndt et al., 2016), they are often examined in a fragmented manner, separately at the individual, collegial, or institutional levels. Therefore, there remains a need for a theoretical synthesis that allows these levels to be integrated into a coherent structure and reveals their interaction as a dynamic, recursive process. This article aims to contribute precisely through such a conceptual integration.

While the contribution of this study is primarily conceptual and incremental, it also significantly extends existing research in several key ways. First, it reconceptualises the divide between traditional and contextual professional development models not merely as differences in form

or effectiveness, but as fundamentally distinct paradigms rooted in unique epistemological and organisational assumptions. Second, it unifies previously fragmented perspectives on professional learning conditions by systematically connecting individual, collegial, and institutional levels into a cohesive and interdependent framework. Third, the proposed theoretical model advances prior approaches by explicitly highlighting the recursive and dynamic interplay between learning, practice, and outcomes within workplace contexts. Through this, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' professional growth and provides a robust conceptual foundation for both future research and practical implementation.

Research questions:

1. What are the key differences between traditional and contextual models of teachers' professional development?
2. What conditions lead to effective and sustainable professional growth through workplace learning at the individual, group, and institutional levels?
3. Based on the scientific literature analysis, how can a theoretical model of contextual workplace learning that reveals the integrity of professional development processes be developed?

Aim: To develop a theoretical model conceptualising teachers' professional growth based on contextual workplace learning, comparing traditional and contextual models of professional development, and identifying effective and sustainable conditions for workplace learning at individual, group, and institutional levels.

Methodology

This study uses a narrative literature analysis methodology, which allows for a conceptual examination of the transformation of teachers' professional development from a traditional model to a contextual workplace

learning model. Narrative analysis is flexible and suitable for studying interdisciplinary phenomena when the literature is fragmented or presented in different contexts (Hammersley, 2001; Snyder, 2019).

The literature analysis began with theoretical sources, which formed the basis for further thematic expansion. The following international databases were used for data searches: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. To ensure consistency and transparency in the selection, the following criteria were applied: (1) publication period is from 2000 to 2024, (2) the language is English, (3) texts are theoretical or empirical, clearly related to teachers' professional development, and (4) publications are peer-reviewed. The exclusion criteria were as follows: articles limited to the technical implementation of tools without a learning dimension; studies that address topics unrelated to professional development; or studies that only describe the infrastructure of formal education without analysing teacher learning processes (Tranfield et al., 2003). Conceptual analysis was carried out to identify recurring motifs, theoretical tensions, contradictions, and connections between changes in professional development models and broader educational transformations.

Traditional model *versus* new paradigm of professional development

For a long time, the traditional model of professional development was based on the top-down principle: training courses were initiated by external institutions or experts in line with national education priorities. They were organised as episodic events where teachers acted as passive recipients of knowledge (Evans, 2008; Guskey, 2000; Illeris, 2003).

Previous studies have already described the differences between transmissive and cooperative professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017); however, they are usually presented as comparisons of different practical forms or indicators of effectiveness. In this article, the contrast between the models is interpreted more broadly as different epistemological and organisational premises about what professional

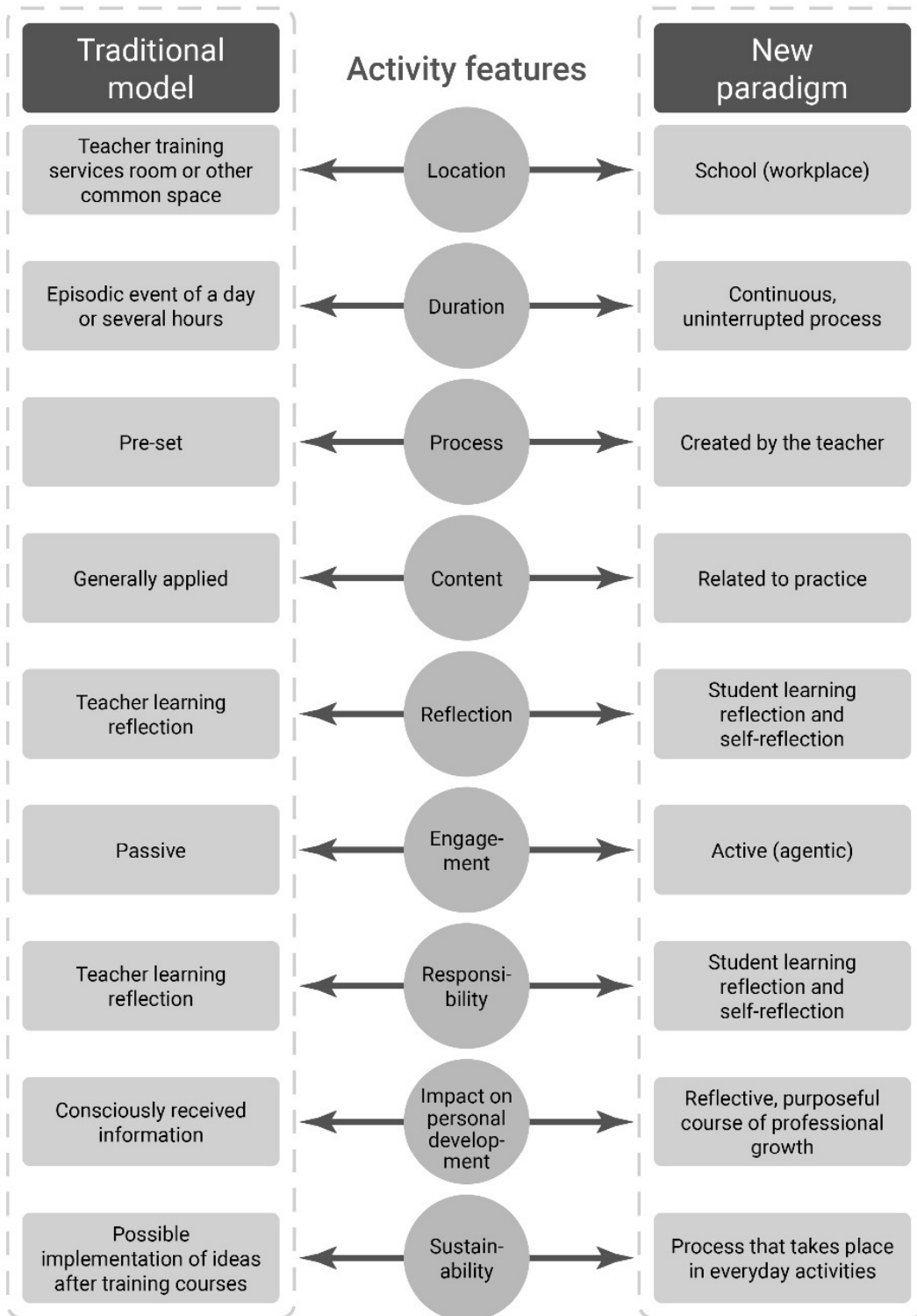
learning is, the role of teacher agency in it, and how professional growth is related to institutional culture. This perspective allows traditional and contextual models to be treated not only as alternative forms but also as different paradigms of professional development.

There is an increasing focus on professional development based on teacher engagement, motivation, and collegiality. Effective forms include reflection, cooperation, and continuity; however, standardised programmes often limit self-expression and do not help develop professional identity (Boyle et al., 2005; Leu, 2004). The problem is exacerbated when training is not conducted in the classroom but in seminar rooms, led by experts who lack a contextual understanding of the specific school (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Bruce et al., 2010). Many teachers still prefer these forms for their simplicity or out of habit (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Only models in which teachers become active participants, taking part in dialogue and making decisions about their own development, provide real benefits.

Critical professional development offers an alternative, emphasising co-creation, reflection, and teacher agency. This model is based on teacher autonomy and meaningful engagement with the organisational culture and requires changes in both the content and the organisation of learning (Kohli et al., 2015). The main differences between the paradigms are highlighted by comparing their performance indicators (see Figure 1), drawing not only on critical professional development but also on broader theoretical and empirical frameworks of teachers' professional learning that emphasise shifts from transmissive to contextual, collaborative, and practice-based models (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Sustainable professional development must take place consistently and with a long-term perspective (Borko et al., 2010; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). It is based not only on new knowledge but also on the transformation of attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses. Reflection, cooperation, and practice exploration are key elements through which teachers not only learn but also create knowledge (Borko et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Modern learning models increasingly rely on constructivist

Figure 1. Comparison of traditional and new professional development paradigms



and situational approaches that emphasise the active, dynamic, and social nature of learning (Eraut, 2007).

Quality professional development is characterised by a clear focus on improving student learning, time for reflection, analysis of practice, support from colleagues, and cooperation with external experts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). This is supported by organisations that enable non-formal learning and gradually build a culture that promotes professional growth (Malcolm et al., 2003; Tannenbaum et al., 2009). Conscious self-assessment and the ability to adapt one's behaviour based on insights into personal abilities and career goals become especially important (Van der Heijden et al., 2009).

To achieve sustainable professional growth, it is important to integrate various forms of learning (formal, non-formal, and informal) that reinforce each other and enable meaningful change. Smith and Gillespie (2007) emphasise that teachers' professional progress is most accelerated by combining formal training with workplace-integrated development, where knowledge is applied in real practice and reflected on in co-creation with colleagues. The contextual workplace learning conditions that lead to the successful implementation of such a model are explored in the next section.

Characteristics and conditions of contextual workplace learning

Professional development is continuous and embedded in daily activities that strongly depend on the social environment, cooperation, and reflection (Hindin et al., 2007). A school culture focused on learning can significantly enhance teachers' professional growth (Postholm, 2012). Development is not only an externally provided, formal activity, but also an internal practice integrated with the work process and focused on real educational challenges (Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

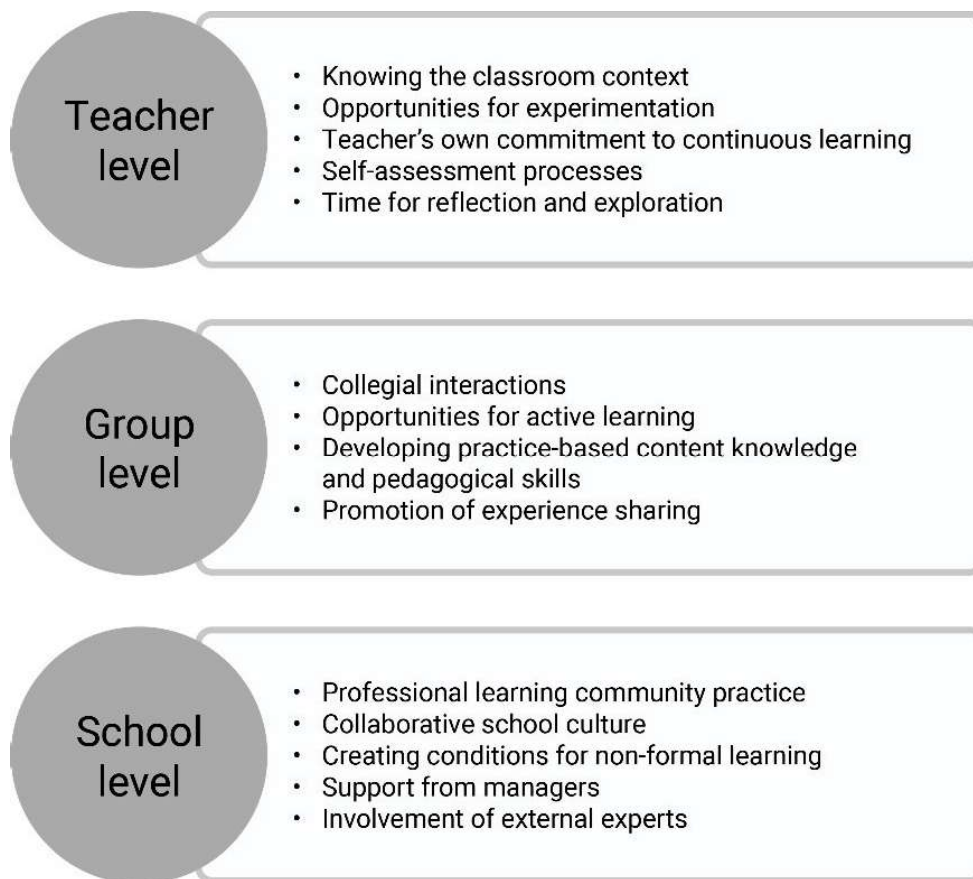
Although the literature identifies the main factors of workplace learning as cooperation, reflection, and non-formal learning (Kyndt et al., 2016),

they are often analysed as separate variables. This analysis interprets them systematically, revealing how individual teacher activity, forms of collegial interaction, and organisational structure constitute an interdependent learning ecosystem. Thus, professional growth is understood not as the sum of individual factors, but as a contextually conditioned and constantly renewing system.

Teachers know best what content issues are relevant to their practice. Therefore, their active participation in professional learning processes is essential (Borko et al., 2010). Today, the quality of teachers is linked to the overall quality of education (Leu, 2004), and their learning should be focused on an active, problem-based, and research-based process. Non-formal workplace learning is considered an important tool for teachers' professional development. A learning culture in an organisation requires conditions that encourage exploration, openness, and feedback (Sessa & London, 2015). Managers should ensure not only formal training opportunities but also space for informal cooperation, daily knowledge exchange, and processes of learning from experience (Noe et al., 2010; Taris et al., 2003).

There is a special focus on cooperative professional learning communities that respond to the needs of schools and teachers more than external experts (Harris & Jones, 2017; Thompson et al., 2004). Effective communities have a positive impact on both teacher performance and student achievement (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). Learning activities are divided into individual (e.g., reflection, independent searches for information) and cooperative (e.g., sharing experiences, participation in collective research) (Kyndt et al., 2016). For effective contextual workplace learning, it is necessary to create conditions that promote professional growth at all levels: individual, group, and organisational. According to previous research, professional growth depends not only on personal traits but also on the social and institutional context (Pylväs et al., 2022).

Figure 2. Conditions for contextual workplace learning



The analysis of scientific sources made it possible to distinguish the conditions for contextual workplace learning at the teacher, group, and school levels. The teacher level is associated with internal motivation and active involvement in the processes of reflection, research, and self-analysis. The group level highlights the importance of collegiality. Effective learning is promoted through cooperation, where mutual trust, openness, and shared responsibility for improvement are important. Sharing experiences, discussions, and deepening pedagogical knowledge help form common learning attitudes, promote the search for innovative solutions, and improve professional competence. The school level emphasises the importance of institutional and systemic support. Professional learning communities, a strong culture of cooperation, and the development of non-formal learning opportunities create the prerequisites for

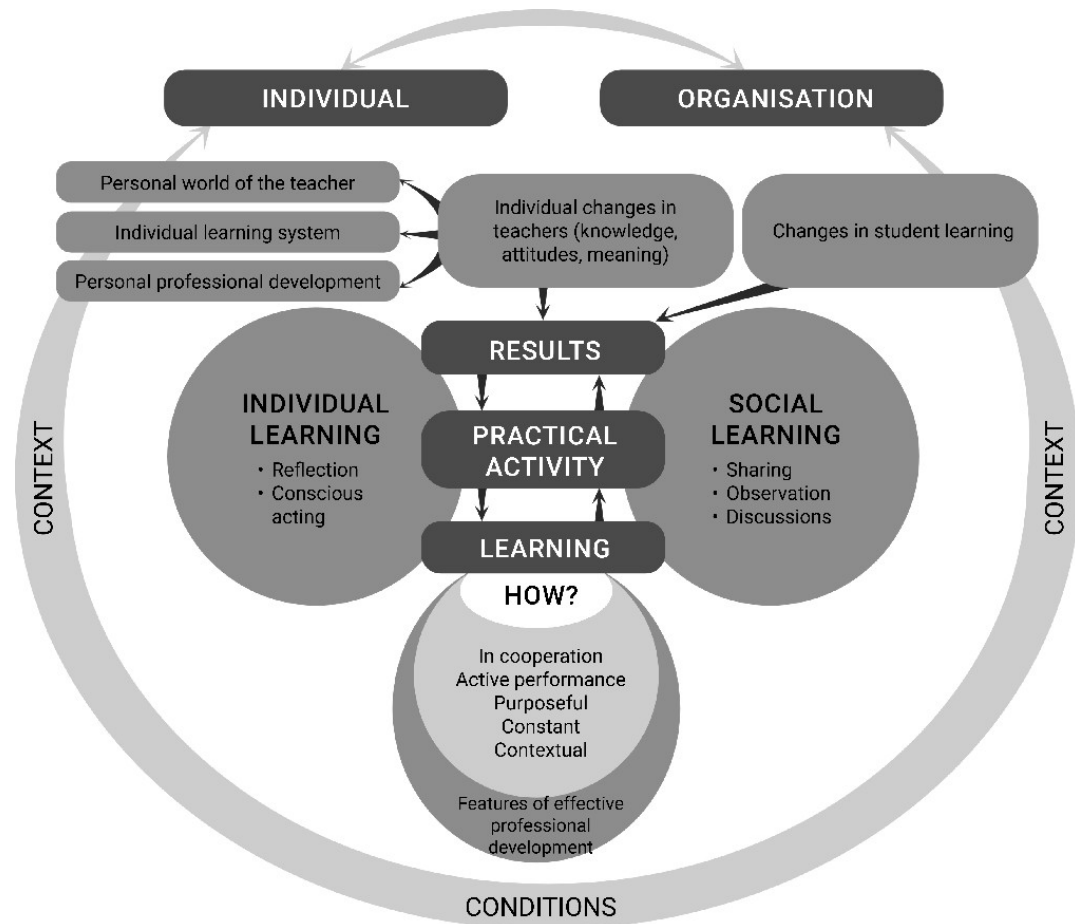
continuous change and the improvement of the quality of education. Managers' leadership becomes a key factor in creating structures that support learning, promote autonomy, and ensure continuity. The involvement of external experts is also important when done purposefully, adapting content to the real needs of the school.

All these conditions make it possible to construct an environment where professional development is not episodic or formal but becomes an organic part of everyday school activities. The school community can independently develop practices that integrate individual and collective development, thus ensuring long-term benefits for both teachers and students.

Theoretical model of professional growth through workplace learning

Contextual learning is defined as continuous professional development that takes place in the work environment and is strongly linked to the development of the human resources of the organisation (Collin et al., 2012). It requires not only individual motivation but also a supportive system created by the organisation, because efforts on one side alone do not allow for significant results. Based on an analysis of professional development models (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Desimone, 2009; Evans, 2014; Opfer & Pedder, 2011), Figure 3 presents a model that summarises the insights from the previous subsections and reveals the structure of professional growth that occurs through workplace learning.

Figure 3. Theoretical model of professional development and growth through workplace learning



The model highlights two main directions of teachers' professional growth – individual learning and social learning – which are understood as the key dimensions of professional development that organise the entire learning process (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Individual learning involves reflection and conscious acting, which are activators of change (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Social learning is based on sharing, observation, and discussions. Both of these aspects are strengthened through cooperation with colleagues in which teachers can test new methods, plan joint activities, observe each other's work, share experiences, and discuss effective pedagogy (Pylväs et al., 2022). The third level, the institutional (organisational) dimension, covers the whole system: both individual

factors (teachers' experiences, values, personal qualities) and organisational aspects (structure and culture of the educational institution). The model emphasises that professional growth is inseparable from learning in a real work environment (Pylväs et al., 2022).

At the centre is a constantly recurring and dynamic combination of three activities: learning, practical activity, and results. Teachers learn in various ways: they acquire and create new knowledge, which they apply in practice through theory, experimentation, reflection, and adjusting activities. At the social level, this interaction unfolds through collegial sharing, observation, and discussions, and at the individual level, it unfolds through personal reflection and conscious acting (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

The results can be understood in two ways: as changes in teachers, i.e., the transformation of knowledge, attitudes, and meanings, and as progress in student learning. Although many authors (e.g., Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002) emphasise the link between teacher development and student achievement, Evans (2014) argues that student achievement should not be seen as an integral part of professional development. The model's structure is non-linear; it emphasises the dynamics and recursiveness of professional growth. According to Opfer and Pedder (2011), professional learning is shaped through the relationships between three interacting systems: teacher, school, and learning activity.

The model emphasises that learning must be cooperative, active, purposeful, contextual, and continuous (Desimone, 2009). Social learning is influenced by organisational and cultural factors: structure, communication, and responsibility sharing. Opfer and Pedder (2011) distinguish a supportive learning environment, self-assessment, value-based discussions, and knowledge management as conditions that support both individual and collective development.

Individual professional development is also emphasised in other models: Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) refer to the 'personal world', Opfer and Pedder (2011) single out the individual teacher as one of the parts of a recursive system, and Evans (2014) emphasises micro-level experience in consciousness. Guskey (1986) argues that consistent changes in attitude are necessary for effective improvement, and Evans (2008)

elaborated on the domains of behavioural, attitudinal, and intellectual change that enhance professionalism.

The model treats workplace learning as a continuous process based on practice, reflection, and the pursuit of results. This process becomes effective when it is supported by school heads, creating an environment conducive to learning, promoting professional growth, and enhancing organisational progress. A reflective school culture, grounded in continuous reflection and mutual support, becomes a key condition for high professional quality within a community.

Conclusions

The traditional model of teachers' professional development is based on pre-set, episodic events organised by external institutions. Teachers act as passive recipients of knowledge, and learning is often disconnected from everyday school practice. The content is often generic, standardised, and rarely responds to real teaching challenges or teachers' professional needs. In contrast, the contextual model is engaging, continuous, and based on cooperation with colleagues, reflection, and analysis of real work situations. This paradigm sees teachers as active participants who learn in the workplace through practices that they can directly apply and improve.

At the individual level, professional growth depends on teachers' intrinsic motivation, reflective skills, willingness to learn, and experimentation with practice. At the group level, collegial cooperation, trust between teachers, sharing experiences, and finding common solutions are the most important. At the institutional level, leadership is necessary to ensure not only formal training opportunities but also a learning culture that encourages reflection, creativity, and continuous performance analysis. Schools that integrate formal and non-formal learning create a sustainable context for professional growth, where professional development becomes a natural part of everyday activities.

The model shows that professional development is a complex, recursive process consisting of individual and social learning directions and

organisational context. Three main activities can be distinguished: learning, practical activities, and the pursuit of results. These constantly interact to encourage reflection and application in practice, generate knowledge, and improve teaching quality. Professional growth only occurs when teachers reflect on their practice, collaborate with colleagues, and have a supportive organisational context.

The model conceptualises professional growth as a recursive process in which individual learning, social interaction, and organisational context function as interrelated parts of a system. This makes it possible to go beyond descriptive comparisons of models and justify a paradigm shift towards contextual workplace learning. The model can be applied in practice as an analytical and planning tool for school leaders, education policymakers, and teacher trainers seeking to develop sustainable, systematic, and context-sensitive professional development strategies. It will also help stakeholders evaluate professional growth initiatives in a structured way, identify interactions between different levels, and strengthen schools as learning organisations.

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