



Professionalism and The Profession as a Change Agent

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Introduction

The themes of the TESOL 2017 Summit were

1. Futurology,
2. English in Multilingualism,
3. Reimagining English Competence and
4. The Profession as Change Agent.

Each theme presents challenges, as a diverse global audience must grapple with how to apply new ideas and knowledge about language learning to the many and varied TESOL contexts around the world.

However, it became apparent through the rich discussions of the Summit that it is through Theme 4, The Profession as Change Agent, that the innovations in TESOL presented in the other themes can find their way from theory to policy and finally to practice.

The purpose of this paper is to describe ways in which we can utilise the professional expertise of TESOL teachers in the pursuit of the educational change agendas which were presented at the Summit and are detailed in the accompanying Summit papers.

Background

Everyone has a story of the teacher who made them feel or think differently about themselves, and the consequences that shift had in their life journey.

Yet the voices of teachers are curiously absent as informants in TESOL policy and practice.

If the voice of an individual teacher was so important in individual lives, why are systems so reluctant to recognise the collective wisdom of all teachers, and how can we shift this?

Levels of change

In order to understand what is possible for the profession to change, it is useful to view the educational landscape through three lenses – the micro, the meso and the macro.

The 'micro' is the work of individual teachers in their classrooms. Their work has the potential to change the lives of their students.

The 'meso' is the systems that teachers work within. These systems may be governed by private or public organisations, but at the heart of their operations are their policies which frame the way language teaching is viewed, valued and implemented within their system.

The 'macro' is the society within which individual teachers and education systems operate. Importantly this includes parents, the community and employers. They rely on the expertise of those at the 'meso' and 'micro' levels to ensure the delivery of quality language education.

Making the most of opportunities for change

The micro level of professional change is well acknowledged - everyone has a story of the teacher who inspired them, and influenced their life journey for the better. The Summit produced a myriad of such powerful stories, and it is clear that the work of individual teachers can have a significant impact upon those they work with.

However the influence of the profession in effecting change at the meso level is less tangible, and the Summit participants noted this as a lost opportunity. Teachers' voices, whether individually or in groups, are less evident at the system level. Without a teacher voice in the development of policy and curricula, it is difficult to achieve a macro impact upon broader societal inequities, challenges or opportunities.

It is a curious paradox that systems, bureaucracies, administrators, politicians, and very often the media, place so little faith in teachers' voices, skills, experiences and knowledge as informants in language policy and practice. The voice of an individual teacher is important in individual lives, yet the collective wisdom of all teachers appears to be an unrecognized and under utilized resource.

David Nunan, using the voice of the teacher collective, noted in the post summit discussions,

Influencing policy makers is one of our major goals, and probably our greatest challenge.

It is a sentiment echoed in the literature. Donna Wiseman (2012, p.90) predicts,

The public and political rhetoric will continue, and it is safe to say that during the coming years, educators must be prepared to participate in the debates in an informed and reasoned manner. It will be up to us to contribute scholarly solutions to the policy questions and issues.

How can teachers be prepared to participate in public policy and advocacy work, when that work that is not part of their preservice or inservice teacher education?

Although increasingly stringent codes of professional conduct in the workplace can limit the kinds of protests teachers can make in response to policy directives (Adoniou, 2015), summit participants felt that teachers underestimate their

influence and power. They wrongly believe they have little to contribute to broader policy discussions. A recurring theme in the summit discussions was the need to build teacher self-esteem and self-efficacy in order to learn how to be influencers and change agents.

In my presentation at the Summit, I suggested that teachers' voices are amplified, and individuals are emboldened, when they sing as a choir. Professional teachers' associations are the ideal vehicle for amplifying choirs of teacher voices. Professional teachers associations can build self-efficacy amongst teachers, through the provision of professional learning in advocacy.

Harry Kuchah reminded us in his post summit discussion, that self – belief is important in empowering teachers, but so is their professional knowledge. He wrote,

Practitioners can jolly well influence policy.... but I would argue that in addition to encouraging policy makers to empower teachers, teachers themselves will need to take the initiative and responsibility of transitioning from mere agents of policy implementation to informed practitioners capable of articulating the principles which guide their practice and providing evidence that their practices produce quality learning.

Teacher professionalism and commitment to staying abreast of developments in the field is as important as feeling confident to speak up and speak out. Professional teachers associations have an important role to play in curating and disseminating new knowledge.

Teachers associations also provide a space for teachers to speak with one another, to share their experiences and their expertise. This not only builds collegiality, but importantly it builds a common message, synchronizing voices so that they can speak clearly to those at both the meso and macro level and say:

This is who we are and this is what we know, this is what we do and this is how we make a difference.

Speaking to the 'macro' is important because this is the socio-cultural milieu within which students, teachers, educational institutions and systems sit.

'Culture eats policy for breakfast' is a quote that Richard Elmore (2016) attributes to a US career public servant, Fred Salvucci. It is an apt observation. When policy fails to take account of societal and cultural contexts, policy is doomed.

It is important then that teachers associations, and others operating at the micro and meso level, work actively with parents, employers and communities in their work. They are an important audience for communiqués about the work of teachers, and what constitutes optimum conditions for teaching and learning.

We are all in this together

Throughout the Summit discussions, both online and face-to-face, and across all the themes, participants noted the challenges of change. However, cooperation,

communication and collaboration were posited as the ways to overcome those challenges. Meera Shrestha, President of the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) neatly summarized the thoughts of many Summit participants,

*All the stakeholders - learners, parents, administrators, local administration , the government and teachers associations - must join hands and work together.
Partnership - local and global - is the need of the day.*

It is incumbent upon all stakeholders to review the extent and the manner in which they engage with each other. We are better able to effect positive educational change at micro, meso and macro levels if we strengthen the ties that bind us by listening to our collective and contextual wisdoms.

The summary of the roundtable discussions of this theme at the Summit offers valuable advice for all stakeholders as we seek new ways of partnering that enable the voices of the profession to be heard, respected and acted upon,

If we are to be change agents, we must stay true to our core values, professional knowledge & agency. Being a change agent means being an innovator, being ethical, being steadfast & patient.

References

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