When Practice Shapes Belief: A Critical Review of Guskey's Model of Teacher Change

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ABSTRACT

Thomas R. Guskey's model of teacher change offers one of the most enduring frameworks for understanding how professional development influences instructional transformation. Departing from earlier belief-first paradigms, Guskey proposed that genuine, lasting change in teacher attitudes emerges only after educators implement new practices and observe measurable improvements in student learning. This paper provides a critical review of Guskey's model across its major formulations (1986, 2002, 2020), synthesizing empirical research that validates the sequence of practice → evidence → belief. Drawing on studies from school and higher-education contexts, it examines how observable student outcomes catalyze teacher belief revision and how institutional and cultural factors mediate this process. The paper also identifies key critiques—such as the model's linearity, its limited attention to sociocultural variables, and the underrepresentation of teacher identity and emotion—and highlights the model's continuing relevance for designing effective, evidence-based professional development. Implications are discussed with particular reference to EFL and higher-education systems in Oman.

Key words: Guskey's Model of Teacher Change; Professional Development; Teacher Beliefs; Educational Change; Evidence-Based Practice; EFL; Higher Education; Oman

1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, most models of educational reform and teacher development have assumed that meaningful change begins with a transformation of teachers' beliefs and attitudes. Once teachers adopt new conceptions of teaching, it was believed, changes in classroom practice would naturally follow and eventually yield improved student learning. This linear assumption - *beliefs first, practices second, and results last* - has long guided the design of professional development programs[1] (Fullan, 1991; Joyce et al., 1976).

Thomas R. Guskey (1986, 2002) challenged this traditional logic by proposing a model that inverts the assumed order of change. In his view, lasting alterations in teachers' beliefs and attitudes occur only after teachers implement new practices and witness tangible improvements in their students' learning. As he put it, "significant change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in student learning"[2] (Guskey, 2002, p. 383). This reversal was not merely a theoretical provocation; it represented a paradigm shift that placed empirical classroom experience - rather than abstract conviction - at the heart of teacher development.

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[1] Joyce and Showers (1980) later extended this early model by emphasizing coaching and feedback as the missing link between training and classroom transfer, a principle that aligns closely with Guskey's later focus on evidence-based reflection.

[2] This statement is among Guskey's most cited formulations of the model and encapsulates his reversal of the prevailing belief-first paradigm.

The model emphasizes that teachers' beliefs are grounded in experience. Educators rarely sustain changes based solely on persuasion or training; instead, they must *see results* to internalize new practices. In his later reflection, Guskey (2020) summarized this principle succinctly: "Don't expect teachers to believe before they see results. Help them see results so they will believe" (p. 3). His framework situates teacher change as a process driven by evidence and experience, where practice and success precede belief.

This reconceptualization has important implications for professional learning design. If attitudes evolve only after observable success with students, then workshops that focus solely on theory or motivation are insufficient. Effective professional development must provide teachers with opportunities to apply new strategies, receive feedback, and witness student improvement first-hand. Change, in this sense, is not an event but a sustained process requiring time, reflection, and evidence of impact.

The present article examines Guskey's Theory of Teacher Change as a foundational framework for understanding how professional development leads to genuine transformation in teaching and learning. It traces the model's evolution from 1986 through 2020, explains its theoretical underpinnings, and explores its implications for contemporary contexts—particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and higher-education settings, where teacher attitudes toward professional development remain crucial to institutional growth and reform.

2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF GUSKEY'S MODEL OF TEACHER CHANGE

2.1 Origins and Core Assumptions

Guskey's early work, *Staff Development and the Process of Teacher Change* (1986), emerged at a time when staff development initiatives were often criticized for their lack of sustained impact. He argued that most programs failed because they misunderstood "the process by which change in teachers typically takes place" (p. 6). His alternative framework proposed a temporal sequence of three interrelated outcomes:

1. Change in teachers' classroom practices,
2. Improvement in student learning outcomes, and
3. Resulting change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes.

This sequence overturned the dominant model derived from early change theorists like Lewin (1935), which presumed that altering teachers' beliefs would lead to changed behavior and improved results. Guskey instead demonstrated, through empirical and theoretical reasoning, that teachers' attitudes are more likely to evolve *after* they experience success with new instructional approaches. Teachers "retain and repeat practices that work … and generally abandon practices that don't work or fail to yield any tangible evidence of improvement"[3] (Guskey, 1986, p. 7).

The model thus identifies demonstrable student improvement as the pivotal link between practice and belief. Belief change, in Guskey's view, is not primarily a cognitive act but a validation of experience. When teachers observe that a new approach leads to better engagement, higher achievement, or improved classroom climate, their internal convictions adjust to align with that evidence. Conversely, if results are ambiguous or negative, attitudes remain unchanged or regress.

2.2 Refinement and Empirical Validation

By the time Guskey revisited the model in *Professional Development and Teacher Change* (2002), he had accumulated considerable empirical support. Drawing on studies by Huberman (1981), Crandall et al. (1982), and his own research on mastery learning (Guskey, 1984), he confirmed that "neither training alone nor training followed by implementation was sufficient for affective change; attitude and belief changes occurred only when training and implementation were combined with evidence of improved student learning" (p. 385).

He also clarified that "the experience of successful implementation - not the professional development per se - changes teachers' attitudes and beliefs" (Guskey, 2002, p. 383). This insight reoriented professional development from being an information-delivery activity to a practice-based learning process. Teachers learn through doing, reflecting, and interpreting outcomes - mirroring the experiential cycle of adult learning.

Furthermore, Guskey (2002) broadened the notion of *student learning outcomes* to include not only cognitive achievements but also "students' attendance, involvement in class sessions, motivation for learning, and attitudes toward school, the class, and themselves" (p. 384). This inclusive view underscores

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[3] Guskey's empirical grounding in mastery learning (Bloom, 1968) provided the foundation for this pragmatic orientation toward observable success.

that evidence of success need not be limited to test scores; any observable improvement that teachers find meaningful can reinforce new practices and solidify belief change.

2.3 Continuity and Contemporary Reaffirmation

In *Flip the Script on Change* (2020), Guskey extended his earlier framework into a practical guide for leaders of professional learning. Reflecting on decades of implementation research, he argued that many reform efforts fail because they attempt to alter teachers' attitudes directly—through persuasion, confrontation, or emotional appeal. Such strategies, he noted, "rarely produce significant and enduring change" because "emotions, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs are not formed intellectually … they are driven by what people have previously known and experienced" (Guskey, 2020, p. 18).

Reiterating the logic of his 1986 and 2002 models, he maintained that experience precedes conviction: only when teachers encounter positive outcomes in their classrooms do their perceptions shift[4]. He emphasized the importance of *changing teachers' experiences*, not merely their minds: "Meaningful change in teachers' experience is key to significant change in their attitudes and beliefs" (Guskey, 2020, p. 23).

The 2020 paper also articulated four enduring implications:

1. Efforts to change attitudes directly rarely succeed. Modest skepticism is natural; commitment follows demonstrated success.
2. Change is gradual and difficult. Teachers' anxiety and workload must be acknowledged.
3. Feedback on results is essential. Regular, trusted evidence of student improvement reinforces change.
4. Ongoing support and follow-up are indispensable. Sustained feedback and encouragement transform tentative trials into durable habits (Guskey, 2020, pp. 24–27).

These insights underscore the continuity between Guskey's early model and its later refinements. Across three decades, his theory has consistently portrayed teacher change as a recursive, evidence-driven process: professional development leads to new practices; effective practice produces improved learning; and positive results transform teachers' beliefs, which in turn sustain further innovation.

2.4 Conceptual Significance

Guskey's model stands out because it anchors attitudinal transformation in evidence of impact. It bridges the psychological and practical dimensions of teaching, showing that professional growth depends less on persuasion and more on verifiable experience. In contrast to models that treat belief as a prerequisite for action, Guskey's theory invites a more *empirical humility*: teachers' faith in new methods must be earned through results.

This orientation situates his work within the broader literature on educational change but gives it a distinctive empirical grounding. By privileging evidence over ideology, Guskey's framework provides a powerful explanatory lens for understanding why many reforms fail—and why those that succeed often do so only after teachers experience their effectiveness first-hand.

3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND APPLICATIONS OF THE MODEL

3.1 Empirical Support from Foundational Studies

Since its first articulation, Guskey's model has received consistent empirical corroboration from diverse educational settings. Early ethnographic and longitudinal investigations demonstrated that teachers rarely adopt new instructional approaches because of persuasion alone; instead, their commitment develops *after* they observe concrete learning gains among students. Bolster (1983) noted that "new ideas and principles about teaching are believed to be true by teachers when they give rise to actions that work" (p. 298), confirming that experience, not ideology, underpins acceptance of innovation.

Large-scale dissemination studies likewise reinforced this experiential sequence. In the *Study of Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement* (Crandall et al., 1982), teacher commitment to novel programs increased only after classroom implementation. Attempts to generate enthusiasm beforehand through surveys or motivational sessions produced little enduring change. Teachers "became committed to the new practices only after they had actively engaged in using them in their classrooms" (Guskey, 2002, p. 385).

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[4] This principle echoes experiential learning theories, notably Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, though Guskey applies it specifically to professional change rather than general adult learning.

Huberman's (1981) case study of a district adopting the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction program showed a similar trajectory: initial anxiety and confusion gave way to conceptual understanding only once teachers achieved behavioral mastery of the new routines. As Fullan (1985) observed in summarizing the study, "changes in attitudes, beliefs, and understanding generally followed, rather than preceded, changes in behavior." Guskey (1984, 1986) further validated this through research on mastery learning, finding that teachers who saw measurable student improvement reported higher professional satisfaction and stronger beliefs in their instructional efficacy, whereas those who saw no improvement showed no attitudinal shift.

3.2 Subsequent Theoretical Corroboration

Later frameworks in educational change have echoed Guskey's logic. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) proposed the *Interconnected Model of Professional Growth*, which conceptualizes teacher learning as movement among four domains: the external (PD experiences), personal (knowledge and beliefs), practice (classroom experimentation), and consequence (student outcomes). Their cyclical "enactment and reflection" process effectively operationalizes Guskey's sequence, illustrating how evidence of student success acts as the catalyst that reinforces teachers' personal domain.

Desimone (2009) similarly affirmed that high-quality professional development exhibits five core features—content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation—yet emphasized that PD effectiveness is ultimately evidenced through changes in teacher practice and improved student achievement. Her widely cited framework thus extends, rather than replaces, Guskey's principle that observable impact mediates belief change.

Further meta-analytic evidence by Opfer and Pedder (2011) likewise affirmed that sustainable teacher change arises from the interaction between professional learning experiences, contextual supports, and observable evidence of student progress. These findings collectively reinforce the empirical credibility of Guskey's model, showing that belief transformation follows—and depends upon—evidence of success in the classroom.

Meta-analyses in the following decade continued to uphold this relationship. Timperley et al. (2007) and Avalos (2011) reviewed dozens of PD studies and concluded that sustained impact depends on iterative feedback loops connecting teacher experimentation with student evidence. Although terminology has evolved - from "teacher learning" to "professional inquiry" - the empirical pattern remains aligned with Guskey's assertion that "it is not the professional development per se, but the experience of successful implementation that changes teachers' attitudes and beliefs" (Guskey, 2002, p. 383).

3.3 Applications in Diverse Educational Contexts

General Education: in K–12 settings across North America and Europe, Guskey's model has been applied to evaluate large-scale initiatives such as literacy reforms, mastery-learning programs, and formative-assessment training. Studies consistently show that when teachers receive timely data on student progress, confidence and belief renewal follow (Stallings, 1980; Guskey, 1997). Conversely, reforms that emphasize compliance or ideology without demonstrating classroom-level gains often fail to produce sustained change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Higher Education: in universities and colleges, the model has informed faculty-development programs aimed at improving instructional quality. Amundsen and Wilson (2012) found that academics' pedagogical beliefs evolved only after implementing new approaches and perceiving positive feedback from students, aligning precisely with Guskey's experiential premise. The model has also guided evaluation of faculty workshops, where post-training observation of improved student engagement, rather than satisfaction surveys, served as the authentic measure of success (Postareff et al., 2008).

EFL and TESOL Contexts: within English-language teaching, numerous studies parallel Guskey's findings. In-service EFL teachers often attend professional development under administrative requirement rather than intrinsic motivation, yet belief transformation occurs only when teachers witness better learner outcomes - improved fluency, participation, or confidence - in their own classrooms (Borg, 2015; Wedell, 2009). In Gulf and Middle-Eastern higher-education contexts, research indicates that externally mandated PD rarely changes attitudes unless teachers perceive direct pedagogical benefit (Al-Asmi & Al-Seyabi, 2017). This observation strongly resonates with Guskey's view that "evidence of improvement or positive change in the learning outcomes of students generally precedes, and may be a prerequisite to, significant change in the attitudes and beliefs of most teachers" (Guskey, 2002, p. 384).

3.4 Recent Empirical Reaffirmations

In *Flip the Script on Change* (2020), Guskey synthesized decades of implementation data to reaffirm that "emotions, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs are not formed intellectually… they are driven by what people have previously known and experienced" (p. 18). Contemporary studies of professional learning communities, lesson study, and data-driven instruction provide corroborative evidence. Teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry report greater commitment once student assessments confirm progress (Vescio et al., 2008; Datnow & Park, 2018). Conversely, when data reveal minimal change, enthusiasm wanes—illustrating again that belief is sustained by evidence.

Moreover, research into online and blended PD since the COVID-19 era has shown that digital programs are effective only when participants can translate learning into classroom results and receive rapid feedback (Trust et al., 2022). The persistence of Guskey's experiential loop across such diverse modalities underscores its conceptual robustness and adaptability.

Within the Omani higher-education system, institutional frameworks such as *EJADA*[5] place considerable emphasis on performance evaluations and accountability measures. Based on the author's ongoing doctoral research, Guskey's model offers a valuable interpretive framework for analyzing how such evaluation-based professional development influences teachers' motivation and engagement. Teachers' willingness to participate meaningfully in PD often depends on perceiving its *relevance and impact*. When initiatives fail to produce observable classroom results - or when outcomes are neither measured nor communicated - participants may regard PD as obligatory rather than transformative. Conversely, programs that enable instructors to pilot new strategies, collect evidence of student improvement, and reflect collaboratively on results tend to yield more lasting attitudinal and behavioral change.

3.5 Synthesis and Implications

Across nearly four decades of research, empirical evidence consistently validates the central tenet of Guskey's model: teachers' attitudes and beliefs change after - and because - they experience success in improving student learning. This insight carries profound methodological implications. Evaluations of professional development must look beyond immediate participant satisfaction to evidence of practice change and student outcomes (Guskey, 2016). For policymakers and institutional leaders, the model suggests that sustainable teacher growth depends less on motivational rhetoric and more on designing PD environments where teachers can experiment safely[6], gather credible evidence of student progress, and interpret that evidence collaboratively.

In EFL and higher-education contexts such as Oman, where professional development is often system-driven (e.g., linked to quality-assurance mechanisms like EJADA), Guskey's model provides a powerful analytical lens. It explains why mandated workshops may produce attendance but not transformation: without observable classroom impact, belief change cannot take root. Conversely, when EFL lecturers implement strategies that demonstrably enhance learner engagement or assessment outcomes, their confidence and willingness to adopt further innovations expand—a living confirmation of Guskey's experiential sequence.

4. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GUSKEY'S MODEL

While Thomas Guskey's theory of teacher change has become one of the most influential frameworks in professional development research, it has not been without criticism. Scholars have praised its clarity, empirical grounding, and practicality but have also questioned its linearity, context-neutrality, and limited attention to social and organizational dynamics. This section examines the main critiques of the model and discusses how subsequent theories have expanded or nuanced its claims.

4.1 Linearity and the Complexity of Teacher Change

A major critique concerns the model's implicit linearity. Guskey (1986, 2002) proposed that professional development leads to changes in classroom practice, which then produce improvements in student learning, culminating in changes in teachers' beliefs and attitudes. Although he later acknowledged the cyclical and reciprocal nature of this process (Guskey, 2002, p. 386), the model still tends to be

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[5] *EJADA* is Oman's national quality assurance and performance evaluation system, under which professional development and appraisal cycles are structured. The framework emphasizes measurable teacher performance indicators aligned with institutional accountability.

[6] The importance of psychological safety and experimentation in teacher development has been supported by later research on reflective practice and trust-based professional cultures (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

interpreted as a sequential chain of causation. Critics such as Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) argue that teacher change is better understood as an interconnected, non-linear network of influences, encompassing personal, practical, and external domains[7]. Their *Interconnected Model of Teacher Professional Growth* portrays change as a dynamic process with multiple entry points, feedback loops, and contextual mediators.

This reconceptualization addresses a limitation in Guskey's early framework—the assumption that all teachers experience change through the same sequence. In reality, belief and practice often interact in complex ways: for some teachers, conceptual understanding precedes practice; for others, experiential success reshapes belief. The distinction between these paths is crucial, especially in diverse teaching contexts where professional identity, prior experience, and institutional culture may modify the direction of change (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

4.2 Limited Attention to Contextual and Cultural Factors

Another recurring critique is that Guskey's model, developed primarily in North American school settings, underplays cultural and institutional variables. As Avalos (2011) and Kennedy (2016) note, professional learning is deeply embedded in sociocultural systems that shape how teachers perceive authority, collaboration, and evidence. In collectivist or hierarchical cultures - such as many in the Gulf region - teacher change may depend less on personal experimentation and more on institutional endorsement or collegial consensus[8].

In Omani higher education, for example, where professional development is frequently linked to institutional evaluation frameworks like *EJADA*, teachers' engagement is often influenced by external accountability rather than internal motivation. As observed in the author's ongoing doctoral research, PD activities may be perceived as compliance tasks unless they result in visible classroom benefits and collegial recognition. Guskey's model helps explain why teachers' attitudes shift only when they see improvement in student outcomes, yet it does not fully account for how institutional structures, incentive systems, or cultural norms mediate this process. Integrating contextual dimensions - such as leadership style, collective efficacy, and organizational trust - would enhance the model's applicability across global contexts.

4.3 The Role of Emotions, Identity, and Agency

A further limitation lies in the model's limited treatment of teachers' emotional and identity-related dimensions of change. While Guskey (2020) acknowledged that emotions and beliefs are grounded in experience rather than persuasion, his framework does not explicitly address the affective tensions teachers face during innovation. Day and Gu (2007) and Kelchtermans (2009) have shown that teacher identity, moral purpose, and professional agency are central to sustained change. Emotional dissonance—arising from fear of failure, workload pressure, or conflicting pedagogical values—can influence whether teachers persist long enough to observe the positive results that Guskey's model assumes will eventually emerge.

Additionally, the model does not elaborate on how peer collaboration and professional dialogue contribute to belief transformation. Later research on professional learning communities (Vescio et al., 2008) and situated professional learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) highlights that teachers often change through social interaction, not only through private observation of results[9]. This relational dimension complements but also complicates Guskey's primarily individualistic conception of change.

4.4 Measurement and Evidence: The "Student Outcomes" Question

Guskey's insistence that teachers' belief change depends on evidence of improved student learning has been widely supported but also contested for its methodological ambiguity. Critics question what constitutes sufficient "evidence" of improvement and who determines its validity. As Kennedy (2016) argues, linking teacher change exclusively to student outcomes risks oversimplifying the complex ecology of classroom learning. Student achievement may be influenced by numerous factors outside teachers' control—such as socioeconomic background, institutional resources, or assessment design.

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[7] Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) Interconnected Model remains the most influential alternative to Guskey's linear sequence, often used in comparative frameworks of teacher professional growth.

[8] This dynamic is particularly salient in collectivist cultures, where teaching is viewed as a community practice rather than an individual pursuit (Hofstede, 2001)

[9] This reflects sociocultural perspectives on learning, particularly the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who conceptualized professional learning as legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice.

Moreover, in higher-education and EFL contexts, outcomes are not always quantifiable. Teachers may interpret improved student participation, confidence, or motivation as success, yet such gains may not be immediately visible in grades or standardized measures. Guskey (2002) recognized this by broadening his definition of learning outcomes to include behavioral and attitudinal indicators, but the challenge remains in developing reliable feedback systems that capture these nuanced effects. Without such mechanisms, teachers may fail to perceive progress, thereby halting the belief-change process the model describes.

4.5 Theoretical Integration and Contemporary Relevance

Recent scholarship has sought to integrate Guskey's ideas with broader frameworks of professional learning. Desimone (2009) incorporated the "evidence-based feedback" principle into her model of effective PD, while Opfer and Pedder (2011) emphasized the systemic interplay between teachers, schools, and learning environments. Similarly, Avalos (2011) positioned Guskey's theory within a wider "learning-as-practice" perspective, acknowledging that teacher change occurs within organizational and cultural networks rather than in isolation.

Despite its limitations, Guskey's model remains foundational because of its pragmatic clarity and empirical durability. It offers a testable hypothesis about the relationship between professional development, teacher practice, and student learning. Even its critics build upon its core logic - particularly the notion that successful experience drives belief change. In contemporary applications, the model continues to serve as a diagnostic framework: it helps researchers and PD designers identify *why* some initiatives fail (lack of follow-up, feedback, or visible results) and *how* teachers' experiences can be structured to promote sustained transformation.
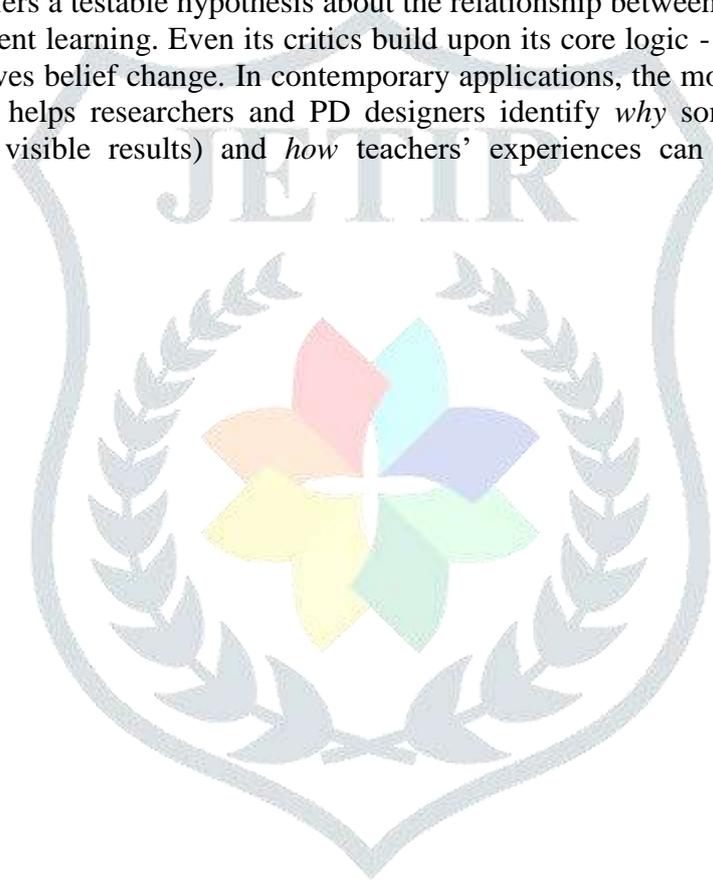
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