

Chapter 3

Sharing Labs: Building Collaborative Culture Through Teacher–Led Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Asking teachers to lead professional development (PD) for their peers is a complex request. Leading PD requires purposeful skill development for facilitators and thoughtful approaches to adult learning. This chapter proposes four practices for implementing teacher-driven, teacher-led PD: 1) soliciting staff input and involvement, 2) dedicating time to common planning, 3) creating a teacher-leader support structure, and 4) developing a culture of co-thinking with common shared language. These practices grew out of an urban public school's experience with implementing small-group, mixed-grade, mixed-subject PD. This teacher-led PD, called the sharing lab, empowered teacher-leaders and staff to feel valued as professionals, learn from each other using structured conversations, and apply their learning to their practice. Recommendations for future sharing labs include expanding focus to community and culture dilemmas, incorporating student voice, and aligning the sharing labs to other PD so they fit within a consistent arc of learning.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6500-1.ch003

INTRODUCTION

Too many educators have had the experience of walking out of a PD session and saying, “That was a waste of time!” or “Why did we spend 2 hours talking about that?” Often, traditional PD falls flat because educators do not have a say in what they learn, they have trouble applying learning from PD to their own classrooms or work with students, and there are no follow-up opportunities to practice and continue the learning (Grimm, E.C., Kaufman, T. & Doty, D., 2014). To have meaningful learning, the learner must be engaged. In particular, adult learners have specific conditions that must be met in order for learning to take place. One must take these considerations into account when developing PD.

This chapter will address what teacher-led PD means and how to implement four practices that support authentic adult learning through examining the evolution of teacher-led PD at the Josiah Quincy Upper School (JQUS), a pilot school in Boston Public Schools (BPS) that serves grades 6-12. First, staff must be involved in the early stages of the planning process to self-identify needs and give input in order to establish investment and sustainability. Next, dedicated common planning time must be carved out with backing from administration to focus on authentic and meaningful peer learning. Third, effort must be spent on growing a teacher-leader support structure and collaborative culture for effective peer learning. Finally, developing a culture of co-thinking with common shared language is how teachers can lead each other. By using these four practices, JQUS teacher-leaders created the “sharing lab”, a specific format of cross-grade and cross-subject teacher-led PD that enables staff to learn from one another as they discuss individuals’ problems of practice and work toward improved student learning.

BACKGROUND

What is Traditional Teacher Professional Development?

The National Staff Development Council (2009) defines “professional development” as “a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement.” The goal of professional development is to improve student performance through professional learning that is aligned to state standards for student learning in well-facilitated regularly scheduled meetings of established teams of educators. Professional learning typically takes place through courses, seminars, workshops, institutes, or conferences (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010).

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