

Professional Reading Reflection EPPSP Phase II

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Summary: Jennifer Gonzalez put out a call on Twitter for people to submit alternative structures for professional development, expecting to see that many districts still had all teachers listening to a speaker. Instead, she received so many innovative ideas that she was overwhelmed and encouraged by the ways that schools are adapting to tailor professional development opportunities for their staff. Gonzalez proceeds to summarize nine different ways to structure professional development, how they work and what they might look like in practice.

The first is “Unconferences,” where the attendees provide the content instead of outside experts. This gives teachers the opportunity to run sessions, anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour, on anything that they have to share. Gonzalez’s examples highlight that this format gave teachers the opportunity to both have choice in what content is addressed and to bond with other teachers in their building. Another strategy, “Peer Observation,” gives a different way for teachers to learn from each other, but through watching each other teach, and debrief on what was seen. A similar but more focused approach is “Lab Classrooms” where a specific strategy is modeled and observed in an authentic environment.

“Intentional PLCs” are a spin on the professional learning community that does not rely on teachers sticking with their grade level or content area teams. Teachers are instead able to choose a topic of interest or growth for them, creating teams around these goals instead of the context. Teachers are then able to take ownership of their professional development, having deeper conversations with their community due to their shared interests and goals.

A practice used for students, “Choice Boards” are a compilation of several resources that teachers are able to choose from and then work through on their own. This gives time and flexibility for self-guided learning. Sometimes these are provided over shorter periods of time (a few hours) and others move through the school year. This allows for more specific and relevant professional development because teachers can find what they need. Because of the increased amount of resources available, teachers began to do more than was expected of them or have unprompted collaborative conversations about these topics. Similarly “Microcredentials” provides a self-guided approach where teachers work through professional development materials independently in order to “earn badges.” These two practices often employ a third: “blended learning.” This structure allows for asynchronous and online learning. Sometimes this has a synchronous and/or in person component, but this is not necessary.

Instead of being given professional development resources, “Personal Action Plans” have teachers find them on their own based on their goals. Teachers choose goals and develop a plan to reach those goals.

This is often accompanied with time to research their interests and goals, as well as reflect with their peers.

In order to relieve the pressure from the entire staff, “Voluntary Piloting” gives teachers the choice to try out new strategies, curriculum, etc.. Buildings have seen there is an increased benefit because the pilot teachers volunteer to be a part of this group and bring their findings back to the whole staff. This had led to teachers emerging as leaders with new practices, and others not included in the pilot group following their example.

Reflection: Gonzalez’s nine strategies are focused on teachers, but each one alluded to the way that students directly benefit from successful professional development. The examples throughout the podcast included teachers seeking independent professional development, increased collaboration, emergent teacher leaders, and a renewed interest in professional learning. The importance of this is embedded throughout each example: teachers are able to find what works best for them. We know from Howard Garner that each individual is made up of multiple intelligences and we do not all learn in the same way; if we want teachers to differentiate lessons and give students opportunities to follow their interests, administrators must do this for teachers as well.

The examples given of each method show a direct correlation to instruction and achievement: when teachers are invested in their professional growth, there is an increase in positive results. After implementing the choice board strategy, an instructional coach said that “many teachers talk about their instruction [with me] more than what is required.” Almost each strategy included examples of teachers doing more than what was requested of them, something that is almost unheard of with what Gonzalez calls the “one size fits all strategy” - all teachers participating in the same presentation.

As a leader, it is important that we find ways to make teachers feel as though their time is valuable. This is embedded in the element of choice, which is present in almost all nine strategies discussed. The “voluntary piloting” strategy stood out to me in this regard. It is built off of the idea that not every individual needs to participate in every step. If only those who would like to participate in a certain activity are allowed to do so, it eliminates those who are not invested and provides a more positive environment for the volunteers. This will then provide a trickle down effect: the focus group can report back on what is realistic with the strategy which will directly increase teacher buy-in.

It was also striking that each of these strategies does not require much more preparation than what is already going into a traditional professional development presentation. There were no platforms or curricula necessary to implement. In fact, almost all of them promote the use of already available resources: the teachers in your own building. As we know from implementing similar strategies with students, allowing teachers to showcase their best practices will increase their own morale, as well as increase the likelihood that their peers will give these practices a try. Gonzalez highlights that the teachers in our building are already experts. Seeing what is happening down the hall gives teachers the chance to learn something new that can be implemented immediately.

Gonzalez’s list proves that finding ways to personalize professional development will more than pay off. This will then strengthen the collaboration of teachers across an entire building, as opposed to just within grade or content level teams. It will empower teachers to try new things immediately because they have seen or discussed the effects in a relevant context. Teachers will feel valued and inspired, as opposed to forced to sit through something that may not be achievable or relevant to them.