

The Impact of AISI on Teacher Professional Learning

By Jim Parsons and Larry Beauchamp

Jim Parsons is a professor in Education at the University of Alberta. He has been involved with AISI since it began.

Larry Beauchamp is a professor in Education and a former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Larry was the first university representative on the original AISI Steering Committee.

Abstract

Large numbers of Alberta teachers report that their involvement in AISI has contributed to both their professional learning and their sense of efficacy. In particular, teachers note that AISI has provided them with more leadership experiences, more opportunities for collaboration, more support to change teaching practices, and more stimulus for professional reading.

Introduction to Teacher Efficacy

In 2011, we began a research study titled “Exploring the Development of Teacher Efficacy Through Professional Learning Experiences.” The purpose of the research was to examine the relationship between teachers’ professional learning and individual and collective teacher efficacy beliefs over a two-year period in Alberta. Data were collected using a mixed methods longitudinal approach – Phase 1 involved a large-scale survey at the district level to be administered in years one and two of the study, while Phase 2 involved individual and focus group interviews at the school level. The first part of Phase 2 was conducted between October 2011 and December 2011. Teachers in ten schools, from five geographically and demographically representative Alberta school divisions, were presented with three key questions in an open-ended survey: (a) *What professional learning experience has made the most difference for your own teaching?* (b) *What professional learning experience has made the most difference for your school staff as a group?* and, (c) *What professional learning experience has made the most difference for your students?*

More than 200 teachers provided written responses to these questions. The data were reviewed, coded, analyzed and organized into themes. The most common response (more than sixty percent of teachers across the three questions) identified *collaboration with colleagues* as the professional learning experience making the most difference in their teaching. The totality of these findings will be reviewed more fully in future work; however, the purpose of this article is to review one theme that emerged from this study – the impact of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) on teachers’ professional learning. Almost ten percent of the respondents mentioned AISI as having a key impact on their professional growth.

Background of AISI

AISI is a twelve-year old cycle of research projects now entering its fifth 3-year cycle. AISI funds K-12 Alberta school jurisdictions for “projects that address local needs and circumstances to improve student learning.” AISI was implemented in all Alberta school districts in 2001/02. Several characteristics make it unique. AISI is grassroots and **based** upon site-based action research. Teachers create and direct the research, design the research methods, collect and analyze the data, and disclose findings with a third-year report that brings the project to a conclusion. AISI final reports constitute a powerful data set where communities of teachers speculate about what they have learned as they have researched school improvement together.

In this article, we review our findings from one key research question as it refers to AISI. The question asked: **What professional learning experience has made the most difference for your own teaching?** Almost ten percent of the teachers who completed a written response to this question mentioned AISI as a key to their own professional learning. Noting that AISI projects are only a small part of a division’s budget and do not include all teachers in any district or school, the number of teachers who mentioned AISI as an influence on their own professional learning is high.

Teachers identifying AISI as a key professional learning experience noted a number of reasons why AISI involvement was crucial to their own professional growth. One teacher noted that her professional growth was influenced by her involvement in her division’s AISI projects (both as teacher and leader/coach) because “the focus of this AISI work was ‘what to do in the classroom.’” The pragmatic ideas to which she was exposed had a powerful impact on her personal teaching practices. Another teacher wrote that having an AISI coach when she first started teaching was crucial to her growth. She credited the AISI coach with coming into her classroom and *transforming her teaching* by helping her develop the skills and tools she needed to be successful.

One teacher noted that involvement in AISI revealed to her the difference between being a *classroom* and a *school* teacher. She attributes AISI with opening her eyes to life beyond her own classroom. As she entered and actively participated in professional collegial relationships with other teachers, she became much more informed and interested in what was happening throughout the entire school rather than just what was going on in her own classroom. She noted that collaboration with her colleagues was vital in making teaching less difficult and more effective and efficient for her. She specifically noted that AISI encouraged modeling, coaching, and working together – all activities that proved critical to her own growth.

Another teacher suggested that her involvement in two different AISI cycles with very different foci introduced her to easily replicable activities for her classroom that helped address needs that, until her AISI experience, she did not know she was neglecting. She noted that Cycle 3 “got me into reading the literature” (she was an AISI team leader) and expanded her approach to utilizing subject area content. As well, she reported that AISI promoted visiting and interacting with other teachers which, in turn, increased her level of familiarity with the appropriate use of technology in her own teaching.

One teacher suggested that AISI encouraged and allowed her to meet, share, and exchange information and projects with teachers from the same grade level at other schools. She felt that these sharing activities broadened her insights and reaffirmed her current practices. In the same way, another AISI teacher noted that getting together with other teachers allowed her to more easily access and call on others at the same grade level and to share resources and ideas.

Several teachers noted that having and using grade/subject teams had created wonderful support and sharing experiences among teachers – both of resources and ideas. In general, teachers believed the collaborative nature of AISI Learning Teams allowed and encouraged continuous sharing that improved practice. One teacher noted, “Both schools I have taught in have approached AISI as a whole school experience. My involvement has made me a better teacher of reading and writing and helped me engage my students more effectively.”

One teacher noted, “Being an AISI coordinator allowed me to be involved in much collaboration where I read many professional books.” Another believed that AISI involvement as part of a learning coach team gave her “hands-on learning and development that continually improves my teaching.” One teacher noted that AISI project involvement actively engaged her in frequent meetings with other teachers, which led to constant reflection that resulted in refinement of her own teaching practices. And, finally, a teacher pursuing graduate studies noted that, “AISI work encouraged me to return to school.”

Summary

In summarizing these comments, the collaborative nature of AISI stands out as a highlight for many teachers. AISI has engendered teachers working together, sharing ideas and collaborating on their work. These collaborations included assuming leadership roles within their schools and districts, more engaged professional reading, and encouraging seeing schools as big-picture places that, for teachers, expand past their own classrooms. AISI, in general, has engaged teachers in expanding their visions and work. In Alberta, AISI has become a “meeting place” for teachers to share and grow professionally.

As noted, the purpose of our study was to focus on professional learning of Alberta’s teachers’ learning goals and their growth towards self- and collective efficacy. Hopefully, results from this research will provide greater insight into the impact of professional learning on teacher efficacy and teacher professional practice at both individual and school levels in a range of contexts in Alberta schools. Our research is intended to add value to Alberta school district initiatives in the area of teacher professional development and professional learning, and our goal is to provide evidence about what good professional development supports look like within districts so that we might share these insights more widely throughout the educational community.

If it is true that professional learning influences teachers’ beliefs and practices which in turn influence student engagement, we can see that AISI has been a positive influence upon teachers’ professional learning in Alberta. Although our study has just begun, the number of teachers who named AISI as a key professional learning experience attests to the impact of this initiative on Alberta’s teachers.