Professional Learning for Teachers:
A Reflection on One Team's Experience

By Jeff Kuntz

Jeff Kuntz is a doctoral student in Secondary Education at the University of Alberta, investigating the dimensions of Teacher Leadership. He has been a classroom teacher, a school administrator, a consultant, and an AISI coordinator. Jeff is an AISI University Partner, providing support to districts throughout Northern Alberta.

Abstract

This article reflects upon the work of a school based learning team and examines the factors that led to sustained and meaningful professional learning. The paper stresses the importance of ownership and agency in the formation and maintenance of learning teams and concludes that successful learning teams are built upon the principles of effective adult learning.

Introduction

In my previous role as an AISI consultant, I had the opportunity to work with a small group of beginning teachers at a secondary school close to Edmonton, helping staff and students deal with some of the innovations suggested by the district's three-year plan and supported by AISI. At the time, the district AISI project was a very ambitious one; schools were to improve learning through enhanced assessment, differentiation, literacy, and inquiry practices. It was a formidable goal, complicated by the fact that all stakeholders – staff, students and parents – were struggling to come to terms with some contentious changes related to assessment practices and reporting. In particular, issues surrounding outcome-based report cards, the awarding of zeroes, and flexible deadlines for the completion of assignments were the subject of acrimonious debate in the district's secondary schools. Many teachers openly expressed their belief that students needed accountability, not coddling; some felt that all the emphasis on differentiation and assessment for learning was just another way to make teachers do more work while students did less.

From the beginning of the AISI cycle in the secondary school that is the subject of this article, I worked with the administration, made presentations to the whole staff, worked with individual teachers and tried to promote the formation of smaller learning communities based on interest. I began full of confidence that I would be able to facilitate several learning teams, supplying each with support materials, substitute relief, and in-class coaching. Although the process was slow at first, I maintained my hope and my enthusiasm. Soon, however, it became obvious to me that the school administrators were overly wary of more "traditional" staff members, and unwilling to offer more conscripted professional learning to a group of teachers who were already resistant to it.

Sensing it would be risky to force the issue, I went back to one of the mantras I had learned when I first became a consultant: "Work with the willing." I had an established professional relationship with several of the teachers, so I "found" more reasons to be at the school – to drop off books, to visit a classroom, to ask for support. Soon, I was engaged in a

productive dialogue with a group of Social Studies and Language Arts teachers anxious to form a professional learning community to look at aspects of the district's three year plan that were causing them considerable concern. Two of the teachers had several years of experience, while five were in their first or second years. All were considered to be capable, and all were open to new ideas.

We began to meet for one half-day every month. Although the group initially intended to examine practices related to differentiated instruction, we soon found ourselves exploring a wide variety of educational issues. In the course of our meetings, questions would arise about topics as varied as parent relations, reporting, motivation, staff culture, leadership, and classroom management. At times, I would feel confident enough to offer some limited opinion about an issue; more often, I would turn questions back to the group for general discussion.

A favored strategy for seeking answers to our questions was to encourage one or two members of the group to do more research and come back to the next meeting with more information. Danuta (a pseudonym), the most experienced teacher, kept detailed notes that she would send to all the next day. These notes included "action lists" so that everyone would be clear about what promises had been made.

In between meetings I visited the teachers in their classrooms. Each teacher introduced me to their students as "their teacher" (A flattering thought!) and explained how, as teachers, they were never really finished with learning. In this warm, collaborative climate I was able to observe lessons, provide feedback, and demonstrate various strategies for differentiated instruction and adolescent literacy. I was constantly impressed by the openness, humility and commitment to students displayed by these teachers.

I came to see them – and myself – as members of a "learning team" willingly making an effort to improve aspects of their professional practice through sharing with, and supporting each other. They valued the time they had together, explicitly requesting that our team meetings should take place *away* from the school site. They were very much aware of how tempting it could be to use meeting time to check email, saunter to the staff room, or get caught up with a student in the hallways. They did not want intercom announcements or any other sorts of interruptions interfering with their "time to learn".

In practice, this group did not function as a "professional learning community" as DuFour (2007) and others would characterize it. There were times when we looked at PAT (Provincial Achievement Tests) and PDE (Provincial Diploma Exams) results and explored how we might make changes to assessment practices, but our work was most certainly not data-driven. However, it was inquiry-based. If someone raised a good question, we made it our responsibility to find some answers.

Lessons Learned

In reflecting back on this experience I am reminded of the assumptions about adult learning put forward in the 1970s by Malcolm Knowles (2005) – that successful adult learning is tied to need, self-concept, foundation, readiness and orientation. The professional learning of these teachers was best facilitated by:

- Starting where these beginning educators were rather than working directly from the "agenda" of the school or district. (need)
- Valuing and validating their experience (self-concept)
- Providing quality resources and experienced mentorship (foundation)
- Working on timely and practical applications (readiness)
- Participating in shared inquiry and encouraging a growth mentality (orientation)

In addition, I have come to understand that this particular group experienced success and satisfaction for the following reasons. They

- Enjoyed a safe place in which they could learn and ask questions
- Took an active interest in the experiences of others
- Made a public commitment to their professional learning
- Made their learning needs known
- Put aside their own egos and focused on the learning and their students
- Established a process for holding each other accountable, while putting into practice an ethos of shared responsibility.

In my work with teachers, I have often had the pleasure of witnessing reluctant team member's turn into enthusiastic participants. In this case, I experienced what it can be like to work with a group of teachers whose levels of awareness, readiness, and commitment were high from the start. This group of teachers asked for their opportunity and, at every stage, they demonstrated the importance of ownership and agency. *They* established the group, *they* committed to growth, and *they* believed that what they did would have an impact on their students and their practice. As the representative of the school district, I was able to capitalize on their initiative, contribute to their empowerment as teaching professionals, and honor their efforts.

References

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