

Six Practical Suggestions for Beginning Teachers' Professional Learning

By Jeff Kuntz and Jim Parsons

Jeff Kuntz has experience as a teacher, an instructional coach, a consultant, and an administrator. He is a doctoral student in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta.

Jim Parsons has been teaching for 42 years: 36 of them in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. He is Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta.

Abstract

Drawing on recent research, literature and observations as teachers and school improvement advocates, this article offers suggestions for beginning teachers on how to recognize and explore the big questions related to teaching and learning, how to build on success and learn from missteps, and how to ensure a rewarding career based upon collective and individual inquiry. The six suggestions include addressing student engagement, sharing expertise, building trust and relationships, establishing routines, focusing on the process of learning, and practicing self-advocacy.

Introduction

Groucho Marx, ever the cynic, once asked: "Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?" We believe the answer is both and that it is often beneficial to look again, through someone else's eyes.

At the 2012 Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) Conference in Edmonton, faculty from the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge hosted education students from undergraduate programs around Alberta. This offered an opportunity to see the conference differently: through the eyes of undergraduate pre-service teachers.

Those who work for a long period of time at the same place in the same role can often forget the excitement of innovation and commitment. Happily, this was not so for these students who returned from conference sessions bursting with ideas. "You know what teachers are doing in that school?" said one student. "I am so trying that when I do my placement in a couple of weeks!" Another remarked that the convention was great, but almost overwhelming. "I hear words like differentiated learning, student engagement, assessment for learning, metacognitive awareness, inclusive learning, instructional coaching, and inquiry and my head starts to spin. Where do you start as a young teacher? What advice could you give?"

In order to maintain relevance, teacher educators must be cognizant of these sorts of 'big' questions, understanding that there is no single recipe for effectiveness. All teachers navigate their ways through the profession, building upon successes and learning from mistakes.

Yet, successful teachers and successful practices are generally easy to spot. In this regard, as popular Hip Hop group Common sings in “The Light”, “It don’t take a whole day to recognize sunshine.” (Harris et al., 2000) Parsons and Harding’s (2011) work with student engagement and instructional coaching, blended with our AISI experience and insights, have resulted in six suggestions that may help early-career teachers negotiate and sustain a successful teaching career.

Suggestion #1: Go Deep! Engage your students and yourselves

AISI helped to teach that real learning comes from ‘being in the zone’; that is, becoming so engaged with a task that everything else fades away. Specific to student engagement, this is often characterized by activities such as inquiring, examining, interacting, connecting, and exploring. In reviewing transcripts on student engagement from student focus group sessions conducted in four different school districts throughout Alberta, we noted some important considerations for teachers who want to help their children get into this “zone”. Students made suggestions related to:

- Preparation
 - Get us ready to learn.
 - Make us curious, connect learning to *our* world!
- Modeling
 - Be excited about your subject and about learning!
 - Learn with us; share your questions and your discoveries.
- Challenge
 - Let us learn at our own pace.
 - Give us time to figure it out, ask a friend, or re-read.
 - Support us but don’t do the work for us.
- Support
 - Provide direction and interactive examples.
 - Give us timely and meaningful feedback.
- Choice
 - Consider us; let us make decisions about our own learning.
 - Let us ask questions!

These suggestions bear strong correlation with much of the literature associated with assessment for learning (providing timely feedback and beginning with the end in mind), differentiated instruction (giving respectful tasks that consider learning styles and readiness) and inquiry learning (engaging students in real world issues) (Alberta Learning, 2004, Davies, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003). Modeling is especially important. Our AISI experience suggests that engaged students usually have engaged teachers. Successful teachers are passionate about their own learning; they have a sense of wonder and they aren’t afraid to go deep.

Suggestion #2: Seek out and share expertise

One significant contribution of the work of AISI over the last twelve years has been opening classrooms and moving toward job-embedded, site-specific collaborative learning. In many schools, staff members have formed learning teams in which teachers work together on educational issues that promote differentiated learning, improved literacy and numeracy, and that tackle site-based problems to achieve site-based goals. This quality of this collaboration is dependent upon several cultural factors, including:

- Creating a safe place to learn and ask questions; (Angelle et al., 2011; Klentschy, 2005)
- Taking an active interest in other's experiences and being flexible; (Bowman, 2004; Levine, 2010)
- "Being there" and making a commitment to professional learning; (Dufour & Eaker, 1998)
- Putting aside ego and focusing on learning and students; (Dufour, 2004; Reeves, 2008) and,
- Establishing a routine of holding each other accountable. (Dufour, 2007; Fullan, 2006)

The most powerful learning teams include cross sections of teachers with various conceptual understandings, skills, and interests. Beginning teachers and teachers new to schools provide fresh perspectives; accordingly, young teachers need not to fear asking the big or obvious questions. Rather, they can greatly benefit from engaging early and often in learning conversations.

Suggestion #3: Build lasting relationships

Recent research on instructional leadership (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2011) suggests that relationships are the key to successful schools. Indeed, quality teaching is, at its core, about relationship building. Students who often see their teachers more than their parents or siblings need to be seen, heard, and appreciated. When asked to consider their own best experience in schools, many pre-service students single out a teacher who made a real difference in their lives by taking time to find out who they were and what made them tick.

Relationship building should not stop at the student-teacher level. Parsons and Harding (2011) found that successful schools, teachers, and administrators put people first – as a non-negotiable. They also found it important for teachers to build relationships with those in their teaching community: other teachers, support staff, and administrators, as well as students. Especially important are relationships with parents. Parents put a great deal of trust in teachers and are often forgotten stakeholders. Teachers who effectively and regularly communicate with parents, who invite them to engage in their children's learning, or who take time to explain changing assessment practices or suggest books that might spark young interests, recognize the importance of community in meeting the needs of the whole child. Such teachers build relationships that endure.

Suggestion #4: Set aside times and places to learn

Teaching can be busy and stressful. Planning lessons, meeting deadlines, supervising, providing feedback to students, and keeping up with home-school communication can leave little time to think deeply about teaching. Teachers who have experienced sustained, fulfilling teaching careers, find it effective to block off regular times to read about, reflect on, discuss, and debate the big ideas of teaching. These actions can be done independently, however, collaborative learning is often more powerful (Parsons, McRae, & Taylor, 2006). Young teachers can help shape their

school's learning culture, working to establish goals, rituals, shared language, and a growth orientation about practice and pedagogy.

It is often the case that relentless promises from experts can overwhelm beginning teachers in a tsunami of educational innovations, jargon, and buzzwords. Accordingly, it is important that beginning teachers develop a 'filter system' to help them critically examine the implications of the latest methods and practices for their students. This requires young teachers to be open, yet critical. Regular conversations among thoughtful colleagues can be powerful tools to assess the potential of educational promises (Parsons, McRae, & Taylor, 2006).

While AISI has impacted site-based professional learning, other avenues provide support for early-career teachers. In addition to school-based and district-based professional learning, teachers can access learning opportunities through regional consortia, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta Assessment Consortium, and various colleges and universities. New teachers should do their best to become aware of these possibilities and carefully consider what learning opportunities will optimize their professional growth.

Suggestion #5: Focus more on the process than the product of learning

Too often, beginning teachers focus exclusively on the *what* of learning rather than the *how* of learning as they feel compelled to cover the curriculum or teach to standardized tests. Many find efficient ways to march students through specific learning outcomes, carefully checking off each outcome. But efficient isn't always effective; effective teachers focus on process and pedagogy rather than exclusively on content. Teachers have been charged with helping students learn how to learn, not with filling them like cars at gas pumps. Content is important, but is best learned when students take charge of their learning and their learning process.

Many AISI initiatives provide language and support for building learning processes. For example, assessment for learning practices challenge students to set learning goals and ask teachers to provide timely and constructive feedback, encourage classroom conversations about what it means to learn, and suggest how to go about learning. As another example, inquiry and project-based learning requires students to acquire agency of their learning by developing research skills and immersing themselves in quality content and rich contexts. Inquiry approaches give students choice, respectful challenges, support, feedback, and relevant problems to investigate. These "conversational pedagogies" (Parsons, in press) are highly dependent upon relationship building. AISI research (Parsons & Harding, 2010) suggests that teacher and student engagement is improved by relationship building in such conversational pedagogies.

Suggestion #6: Practice self-advocacy

The first years of teaching can be busy, challenging, and lonely. Beginning teachers often lack the confidence to open up about what is happening in their classrooms since they are often acutely aware of any inexperienced missteps. New teachers are eager to advocate for their children, yet reluctant to advocate for themselves.

Beginning teachers have very real needs: to enjoy teaching and learning, to contribute and collaborate, to be valued and validated by colleagues, and to grow in understanding their practice. These can be met by sharing interests, concerns, successes, and questions with colleagues. To do so effectively, early-career teachers must be plugged-in to the community, sensitive to the needs of colleagues, and value and validate themselves and their work.

Everyone makes mistakes. The problem is not making mistakes, rather it is not learning from them. The strength of error is that, when assessed wisely, it is a most powerful teacher.

Summary

In summary, beginning teachers can benefit from focusing on self-engagement and student-engagement, relationship-building with colleagues and students, providing space and time for their own learning, teaching that engages both process and content, and self-learning. Taken together, these become the grounding of teacher professional learning and efficacy.

Reference

- Alberta Learning: Learning and Teaching Resources Branch. (2004). *Focus on Inquiry*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education. Retrieved from: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/313361/focusoninquiry.pdf>
- Angelle, P., Niles, C., Norton, E., & Nixon, T. (2011). Increasing organizational effectiveness: An examination of teacher leadership, collective efficacy, and trust in schools. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the UCEA Annual Convention, Westin Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.*
- Bowman R. F. (2004). Teachers as leaders. *The Clearing House*, 77(5), 187-189.
- Davies, A. (2007). *Making classroom assessment work*. (2nd ed.). Courtney, BC: Connections Publishing.
- DuFour, R. (2004). "What is a professional learning community?" *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 6.
- DuFour, R. (2007). Professional learning communities: A bandwagon, an idea worth considering, or our best hope for high levels of learning? *Middle School Journal*, 39 (1), 4-8.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Fullan, M. (2006). Leading professional learning. *School Administrator*, 63(10), 10.
- Gregson, J., & Sturko, P. (2007). Teachers as adult learners: Re-conceptualizing professional development. *Journal of Adult Education*, 36(1), 1.
- Harris, N., Lynn, L., Malament, B., & Yancey, J. (2000). The Light [Recorded by Common]. On *Like Water for Chocolate* [CD]. New York, NY: MCA/Universal Records.
- Klentschy, M. P. (2005). Designing professional development opportunities for teachers that foster collaboration, capacity building and reflective practice. *Science Educator*, 14(1), 1-8.
- Levine, T. H. (2010). Tools for the study and design of collaborative teacher learning: The affordances of different conceptions of teacher community and activity theory. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 109-130.
- Parsons, J. (In Press). Conversational Pedagogies and the Gift of Diversity. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*.
- Parsons, J., & Beauchamp, L. (2011). *Living leadership for learning: Case studies of five Alberta elementary school principals*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Teachers' Association.
- Parsons, J., & Harding, K. (2010). *Little bits of goodness*. Edmonton, AB: School Improvement Press.
- Parsons, J., & Harding, K. (2011). Research Reflections About When Schools Work Well: Twenty-one Specific Activities for Improving Schools. *e-Journal of Organizational Learning and Leadership*, 9(1), 97-108.
- Parsons, J., McRae, P., & Taylor, L. (2006). *Celebrating school improvement: Six lessons from Alberta's AISI projects*. Edmonton, AB: School Improvement Press.
- Reeves, D. (2008). *Reframing teacher leadership to improve your school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2003). *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.