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# Teacher Professional Development in One K-12 School District in Rhode Island: A Study of Perceptions

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**Teacher Professional Development in One K-12 School District in Rhode  
Island: A Study of Perceptions**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the qualitative phase of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of professional development and the extent to which teachers believe it expands their knowledge and skills and improves student learning.

Teachers from an urban ring district in Rhode Island were asked to participate in a focus group discussion. A thorough analysis of the content of the responses to focus group questions was completed.

In general, teachers felt that the most effective professional development experiences had been on topics of their choice and those facilitated by teachers. According to focus group results, collaboration and relevancy were two additional characteristics of effective professional development.

The results may assist districts, policy makers, and designers of professional development in the quest for more personalized professional learning.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to explore teachers' perceptions of their professional development experiences from one public school district in Rhode Island. This research also provides information about teachers' present attitudes and future expectations of professional development. Data obtained through this study may assist districts, policy makers, and designers of professional development in the quest for more personalized professional learning, and adapt these experiences to teachers' individual needs. Additionally, an increased awareness of the availability of various models of professional development for teachers became evident. This awareness may assist school districts in an exploration of models that fit individual learning styles and may warrant further study.

Subsequent monitoring of the impact of professional development on instruction and student learning may lead to a more thorough evaluation of professional development for educators.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Employers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century expect problem solving, critical thinking, innovation, and effective communication as essential skills of their employees, today's students (Wagner, 2008). Mastery of the basic skills of reading, writing, and math is not enough for success in any job beyond what the minimum wage will pay.

In today's highly competitive global "knowledge economy," all students need new skills for college, careers, and citizenship. The failure to give all students these new skills leaves today's youth, and our country, at an alarming competitive disadvantage. Schools haven't changed; the world has. Our schools are not failing. Rather, according

to Wagner, they are obsolete - even the ones that score the best on standardized tests (2008).

According to results of the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA, 2006), the United States ranked 21st out of 30 countries in science and 25<sup>th</sup> of 30 countries in math when compared to other nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010). These rankings drop when Eastern European and Asian nations are added to the list (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The PISA assessments require students to apply their knowledge to new problems and situations. Curriculum and assessment systems of other high performing nations emphasize the transfer and application of student learning rather than the rote memorization of facts common in most assessments in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

If today's educators are to make an impact on the outdated educational system and teach students the skills necessary for success, they must change what they do.

According to Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, and Orphanos (2009), "...teachers must learn to teach in ways that develop higher-order thinking and performance" (p. 46).

School districts must find more effective methods of professional development for their teachers that will improve teaching and learning.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative phase of this study consisted of one focus group in which all certified teachers ( $N = 946$ ) from one school district in Rhode Island were invited to participate.

Three hundred sixty two ( $N = 362$ ) teachers responded to an online questionnaire for the quantitative segment of the study. From those participants, eleven ( $N = 11$ )

volunteered and participated in the focus group. Included were: eight ( $N = 8$ ) elementary teachers (including two math coaches), one ( $N = 1$ ) middle school reading consultant, one ( $N = 1$ ) high school history teacher, and one ( $N = 1$ ) life skills teacher who teaches in a transition program at the high school. “If some individuals recruited for a study decline to participate, the remaining individuals in the sample should be considered “volunteer” participants” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 186). The focus group was conducted in one afternoon for approximately one and one half hours.

Eight major questions, with additional probes, for the focus group were developed by the researcher to investigate teachers’ perceptions of professional development and the extent to which teachers believe their professional development experiences have enhanced their instructional skills and improved student learning. The questions were based upon emergent themes from responses to the close and open-ended questions on the survey questionnaire. “The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p. 386).

The researcher completed a detailed and specific approach to the analysis of the qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, the transcription of the audio recording of the focus group discussion was read three times from beginning to end to look for overall meaning and tentative major categories or themes that may have resulted. Next, the transcription was read again, with the researcher highlighting possible categories and listing them beside the word or phrase in the left margin of the page. On the right margin some notations were made relative to the segment and category and to add clarity. Once several major categories were identified, another

read was completed to search for more detail and sub-categories. This strategy was utilized to seek more inferential information and was coded as such. Once similarities, differences, consistencies, and inconsistencies were identified and coded the researcher was comfortable with the justification of the categories and themes that had emerged (1994).

## **Results**

The qualitative results of this research are outcomes of the questions and discussions among focus group participants. The findings have been reported according to resulting themes.

### **Collaboration**

Focus group participants were asked for their feedback regarding the affects of professional development on teachers' instructional skills.

Many teachers responded that teaching skills improved by sharing and collaborating with colleagues. One participant responded:

I think that I learn a lot from other people doing the same thing that I do in the same field and I think sometimes I have a lack of opportunity to get together with those people because we're all in our little areas and we can't leave and it's really hard to meet.

A math coach continued:

I have found that teachers will mention that they miss grade level meetings. They always say that it is something they wish they had again. Because, again, they were with each other; working with colleagues or sharing ideas and not an instructor; just a facilitator.

Another focus group participant shared:

Years ago, workshops were presented by teachers, by our colleagues. Teachers were enthusiastic about it because they would learn from their own colleagues. They would know what was going on in the classroom.

Focus group participants that had some experience with online professional development also stressed that sharing ideas and asking questions of teachers online from all different areas was a very positive experience. As one respondent explained:

You talk to people from all over the country and what they're doing in their schools. It's really good.

Another participant's perspective was,

You have live chat with other people taking the course. So you are online chatting with the same people going through the same thing. I had never done this before and it was interesting".

A focus group participant who had engaged in an online course through the Annenberg Project reported,

They would send us student work ahead of time and we had to tell what math the kids understood and what was lacking and how we could help the child, which was really good and it was with teachers all over the country and that was a wonderful experience.

## **Choice**

Another theme that became apparent from the focus group discussion was that teachers felt the greatest impact on their instructional skills when they had a choice of topics and input into the topic covered in their professional development.

A participant made a reference to the Science curriculum that was currently being written with teacher input.

The teachers have ownership of it so it is not coming top down, it's theirs; they feel more comfortable with it so you have teacher telling teacher instead of administrators saying, "You need to do this; this needs to get done".

Another teacher had an opportunity to choose an area to improve upon and chose writing instruction. She explained:

I wanted to improve on writing; and then to video tape myself doing writing lessons and the first three (videos) I tossed and would never submit to anybody, to look at some of the stuff that I was doing with my kids and even some of the phrases I used. I could see that I wasn't clear with kids; but I think the thing that has changed my teaching the most is the opportunity to video tape myself and say, OK, I thought I was better than that.



Another focus group participant responded:

I get more out of it and I find it more positive if I'm choosing to be there. Again, not just because someone is mandating I need to be there but because I say here is a need that I have.

Several participants reported that a major advantage to online professional development is that, "...it's individualized to you". One respondent reported that they had learned:

...a new way to look at the data...after this webinar, we were able to look at it differently and I feel it's changed the classroom just in two weeks because my small groups are now different. That was a good webinar. It allowed you to have input.

### **Relevancy**

Several elementary teachers discussed a graduate math course that had been offered through the school district in which they had participated. They all agreed that the course had a positive affect on their math instruction because it focused on higher-level thinking and problem solving skills, which is directly aligned to the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills taught in their present curriculum.

As explained by one teacher:

If you teach someone to think, it doesn't matter what kind of problem you give them because they'll be able to problem solve it and think it through.

Several focus group participants had engaged in various online courses that had required reflection papers. They reported that those courses were the most rigorous of all they had ever been engaged in. As one participant reported:

Anything that makes me more reflective about my teaching makes me better in the classroom. I have to think about what I did; how I did it; what were the responses; how can I anticipate the next time being better at that. Anything that forces you to do that more, it makes you a better teacher in the classroom.

Another participant who had participated in a different online course reported:

These reflection papers, they work. And honestly; it was a two-credit course; it was one of the most rigorous courses I've ever taken".

Another comment recorded and related to the relevancy theme was:

You want to see how this is going to affect your teaching life and feel like you walked away changing something the next day in your classroom.

The respondents reported that because the content of the professional development was relevant to the teachers, it had a positive affect on their instructional practice.

When referring to an ineffective professional development experience, one teacher explained:

We were literally asked to cut and paste; cut things out and put tabs on pages; we would spend over an hour doing that. That was the professional development. The presenter was not a teacher. He was a representative from the book series that gave us busy work and it was insulting.

### **Additional Qualitative Findings**

Additional qualitative information was an outcome of the following focus group question, “Have you collected any evidence that a particular professional development activity or experience has had a direct impact on student learning?” This question is directly related to research question 2, “To what extent do teachers believe that professional development improves student learning?”

Many participants responded with a variety of professional development experiences that they felt were positive; however, with the exception of one math coach, most teachers did not respond with specific examples of improvement in student performance.

The math coach explained that she had observed her school’s math scores on the state assessment had improved as a result of a specific math program in which she had training. She illustrated:

When I had taken Discrete Math and brought it back to the classroom it wasn’t just computation; it wasn’t just arithmetic and it was new to the kids. Very little was depth of knowledge #1, where you ask questions that only require quick recall from them. I noticed Math scores went up quite a bit. The first thing that happened when a child opened up the booklet she said, “This is so easy”.

An elementary teacher who had participated in writing the new science curriculum described it as a positive professional development experience but did not offer evidence of student learning. She explained:

I think working with the Dana Center and writing the science curriculum has made me more technology based; more hands-on because we don't have any books that match the curriculum. It definitely has made me more technology savvy trying to find websites for the kids to interact with. It's helped me create many more hands-on lessons. The kids love it. They think everything is fun.

Another participant shared a positive professional development experience she had participated in, but did not offer substantiation of student learning. She stated:

I thought the pd offered on the use of rubrics really helped me out with a lot with IEP's. I go over with each student the IEP and goals that we have set. I actually go over it with the student; it's something that's really meaningful. That when I show them, this is what we're trying to work on and how do you feel you're doing on it? It's very helpful for them as it is for me.

The final qualitative data were collected following the focus group question: "Please describe any type of online professional development activity that you have experienced. Explain how it influenced your teaching and your students' learning." This question directly relates to research question 3, "How do teachers perceive the value of online professional development as it relates to their knowledge and skill enhancement?"

Many of the focus group participants reported that they have participated in some type of online professional development. There were some who had never participated and reported that they felt uncomfortable and not knowledgeable enough about technology to pursue online professional development at the time.

For example:

I don't have the comfort level thing for it yet. I still like that instructor in front of me. The few things that I've done online are webinars and they've turned out... where the person is just reading exactly what's right in front of you to give you the same information you could have gotten if you read the brochures yourself.

An additional response was:

...I don't think that I'm technology savvy. So for me to sit in front of a computer and worry about something going wrong or losing something and there's nobody there. That's the other piece of it. How comfortable I am with the computer itself.

However, the majority of teachers who have had the experience expressed many advantages to online learning.

A focus group participant's response:

Online's more self-directed. You've brought yourself to the computer and you know where your heading and it's individualized to you. It's tailored to you as opposed to you trying to fit yourself into a workshop that you don't even need.

A different participant added:

...the human element does lend itself to distractions and non-productivity. Whereas, if you're doing it and you need to get it done and it's yours, and you own it, you're more inclined; more motivated to get more out of it.

Convenience was stated as an advantage to online professional development:

I like the independence of online, if I have my kids crying, I can go to them. I'm not thinking that I have to pick them up at this time at child care.

### **Findings from Open-ended Survey Questions**

The open-ended items on the survey questionnaire were added to support and confirm the qualitative findings of this research. Participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questionnaire item: "In your experience, what factors contribute to effective professional development?" The responses to this open-ended question corroborated results gleaned from the focus group responses.

Many respondents replied that working with their colleagues and sharing ideas had the greatest impact on their instructional practice. This included: the development of common assessments, examination of student work, attendance at book clubs, co-teaching, collaboration with same grade level or content area teachers, and sharing common planning time with colleagues. Examples of comments made by respondents included:

Collaborating with other teachers.

Collaboration among teachers, cross-grade level meetings, principal involved in planning.

Collaboration and resource sharing.

Collaborative effort at department level to ensure consistency of resources used.

Effective professional development consists of teams of grade level teachers, professional coaches, and administration all working together...

These statements support and confirm the theme of collaboration that had emerged in the qualitative data gathered from the focus group participants.

Choice was another theme that emerged from the qualitative data. The following are statements made in response to the same open-ended item on the survey questionnaire: "In your experience, what factors contribute to effective professional development?"

Ability to choose topics that are appropriate for your job.

Allowing teachers to decide what is needed, offering choice.

An effective professional development is when we can choose what we want to go to and not mandated to attend certain ones since those might not apply to everyone.

ASK the teacher!

An additional theme that emerged from the qualitative focus group data was the construct of relevancy. The following statements are examples from the open-ended item that has confirmed this theme:

A PD that gets me excited about bringing back to my students because it will make them excited about learning.

A series of PD's that present information and allow faculty to bring back in the field and apply what has been learned and then return to discuss successes and challenges.

A topic that directly relates to the field I work in.

Being actually able to use the information in the classroom.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Teachers must meet their students' needs while connecting students' experiences to the goals of the curriculum. At the same time, teachers must understand the learning process and engage in effective instructional practices (Wei et al., 2009). School administrators and teachers find themselves as recipients and/or facilitators of professional development programs. While educators may consider some experiences as time well spent, many professional development programs are now recognized as ineffective and disconnected to the core work of teaching and learning (Joyner, 2000).

The acquisition of 21st century skills and concerns about China and India surpassing the U.S. in technological skills is a "hot topic" in the literature today. Many researchers suggest that the answer to the success of our students depends upon the teachers' professional learning (Guskey, 2003; Wei et al., 2009). Research suggests there is "evidence that professional development can lead to improvements in instructional practices and student learning" (Borko, 2004, p. 3).

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of professional development. Since there are a plethora of professional development activities offered and often mandated for teachers, this researcher sought teachers' input as to what constituted effective professional development.

Qualitative data revealed three emergent themes about teachers' perceptions of professional development as reported by focus group participants. Collaboration, choice, and relevancy were characteristics teachers felt were important to include as part of their professional development. According to the literature, these factors do contribute to effective professional development and an increase in student learning,

although they are not mutually exclusive (Dufour et al., 2005; Easton 2008; Fullan, 2005; Wei et al., 2009). If teachers choose to collaborate, that is, plan, examine student work, develop common assessments, and problem solve together, the activities become relevant and directly related to their classroom practice. These practices are commonplace in countries where higher student achievement has been recorded (Wei et al., 2009).

Results of this study suggest that many teachers perceive their recent experiences of professional development as successful and effective. The literature suggests that the effectiveness of professional development should be systematic and based on student improvement data (Guskey, 2000). This research also suggests teachers seek more collaboration with their colleagues as well as a choice of topics relevant to their classroom practice. The literature suggests those characteristics contribute to the formation of professional learning communities, which leads to improvement of instructional practices and student learning (Easton, 2008; Schmoeker, 2004; Wood, 2007).

Results of the focus group discussion suggest that those teachers who had participated in online professional development included online courses with live chat sessions, examination of student work, and reflection papers. Most focus group participants reported that online professional development had a positive influence on their teaching practices.

Open-ended questions supported the qualitative results by supporting its three emergent themes: collaboration, choice, and relevancy. Responses confirmed that working with colleagues was the most preferred and most effective professional

development with specific examples of collaboration cited. In addition, the notion of teachers having a choice of professional development topics is substantiated by responses to the open-ended question. Findings from the open-ended question also confirm the qualitative theme of relevancy of professional development activities.

## **Educational Implications**

### **District Policymaker Recommendations**

- Develop a policy for school based professional development based on individual building school improvement plans.
- Provide time for district-wide teacher collaboration among and across grade levels and content areas.
- Adopt or develop a research-based model of evaluation of professional development using student achievement as a measure of effectiveness.
- Provide considerable district-wide time for effective professional development, that is well organized, carefully structured, purposefully directed, and focused on content, pedagogy, or both (Birman et al., 2000; Guskey, 2000).

### **School Leader Recommendations**

- Configure a building schedule to allow time for teacher collaboration. Activities may include lesson planning, examination of student work, development of common assessments, and problem solving. Time should be structured and well organized, with a well-defined purpose.
- Connect professional development to school improvement planning, to standards and the curriculum. Include teacher input as to the content, process, and product of the activities.



- Provide feedback, coaching, and support for teachers from the school leader following the introduction of new content and pedagogies.
- Ensure that professional development activities should be relevant to each individual teacher so that each may utilize concepts, theories, and/or newly acquired skills directly to his/her circumstance.

### **Teacher Recommendations**

- Participate in the development of the building's school improvement plan and incorporate teacher professional development content and processes as components of the plan.
- Collaborate with colleagues, including lesson planning, examination of student work, development of common assessments, and encourage professional conversations among teachers.
- Request feedback, support, and coaching of new content and pedagogy from school leaders.
- Document student learning which is a result of recently acquired content or pedagogy in order to assess the effectiveness of a professional development activity.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Questions

#### 1. Opening Question (all participants will be asked to answer):

In just 60 seconds, tell us who you are, where you teach, and what you most enjoy doing when you are not teaching.

#### 2. Introductory Questions:

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase “professional development”?

#### 3. Transitions Questions

Please describe a professional development experience that you have had recently or in the past two years?

In general, what have been your impressions of professional development?

#### 5. Key Questions

Thinking back to a positive professional development experience, what did you find most helpful?

(Probe) Please explain how your teaching skills are different because of the experience?

(Probe) How has students' learning increased as a result of the positive professional development experience?

(Probe) What evidence do you have to support your statement?

Thinking back to a not-so-positive professional development experience, what did you find most frustrating?

Please describe any type of online professional development activity you have experienced.

Describe, with evidence to support your statement, how your teaching skills are different because of the online activity.

Describe, with evidence to support your statement, how your students learning increased as a result of the online activity.

What would you say about the difference of outcomes between online versus traditional face to face professional development?

What is your preferred model of professional development and why?

## **6. Ending Questions**

What advice would you give to a designer or facilitator of professional development?

Is there anything more that you would like to say about the topic of professional development for teachers?

Thank you so much for participating in this focus group!