On-Site Professional Development: The National Writing Project Model

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Do you sit in anticipation for the end of the school day, rushing to the front center seat in the multipurpose room of your school with your pen and notepad ready to equip your teaching toolbox with the newest findings of your teacher’s edition? Do you gain a richer, deeper understanding of how you’re going to scaffold your instruction to meet all your students’ needs while reviewing the endless pages of your Site Strategic Plan? Are there “ah ha” moments that realign your philosophy of education bringing forward new resources and confounding research while discussing your school’s bell schedule and homework policy? During your school’s professional development, do you collaborate with your colleagues about their knowledge of teaching and reflect on how you may bring in similar strategies into your classroom? Are you given a voice to discuss the professional growth in which you desire? Nor am I.

Through this discovery of what has been lacking in my professional career, I knew I wasn’t alone. I couldn’t recall a single time in which I heard the words, “Staff meeting! Oh, goody!” I began to talk; seeking out those from a variety of school sites, ensuring myself that my two previous schools weren’t two of a kind. I found myself in conversations that could last hours. Teachers with passion, fervor, drive...frustrated. Recalling folding a piece of paper the same way every professional development, or signing in as if we needed to call out “here” when attendance was being taken; remembering asking themselves, “what does this have to do with my students?” In all of these discussions, no one mentioned the context of the professional development, the need for what was being discussed, or if they ever implemented anything. Why do we all feel the same way about professional development provided by our schools?

A glimpse into vocabulary instruction that is included in your state-adopted textbook does not lead to collaboration of implementation. Looking at test scores and bar graphs showing which population of students is still not hitting proficiency does not create or adopt a new practice to better reach students. Discussing what our essential questions would be if this was the lesson we were going to teach does not provoke a time to experiment, reflect, and change. For most of us, these courses of professional development don’t leave the room in which they were presented.

Even No Child Left Behind recognizes the value of professional development and requires that it be extended “beyond short-term workshops or conferences.” Rather, it defines high-quality professional development as being “sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher’s performance in the classroom” (Nagin, 60). Think of the type of professional development provided by your school site...is it sustained? Intensive? Classroom-focus? Does it have a positive and lasting impact? How is it that we are so focused on what NCLB forces us to do with standards and test scores, yet we seemingly look over the one aspect of the act that could expand and enrich our practice?

Reflecting on my own experience and growth through the Summer Institute (SI) and listening to others also describe it as a “life changing experience,” it comes with no surprise that through my research most studies pointed to the National Writing Project Model as being an “exemplar of an educational improvement infrastructure” (St. John & Stokes, 2008). Every day I left the SI, I felt challenged to view my students and teaching with a new perspective, employed with new strategies of instruction, equipped with the most confounding recent research in educational issues, and supported by a network of teachers teaching teachers.

This school year, I have been more prepared than I have ever been. The SI’s framework of professional development provided me numerous opportunities to learn from fellow colleagues, witness their reflective process, experience for myself how these strategies work, and collaborate with others on how to integrate such ideals into our own classrooms. Due to the SI’s nature, it was consistent and intense. It forced me to examine and reflect on my practice, beliefs, and pedagogy.

The National Writing Project Model “represents a fundamentally different approach to investing in the improvement of education” (St. John & Stokes, 2008). Numerous studies have been done to examine the effectiveness of professional development. The studies are clear. Forty-five minute workshops, presentations, and/or conferences provided by most schools are significantly less effective than those “which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment, and change” (Nagin 57). Findings from research indicate specific qualities in successful professional development implementation: it must be sustained and intensive, encourage professional communication and collaboration, be inquiry based in order for teachers to construct and investigate for themselves, and provide the opportunity to experiment and follow up (Maldonado, 2002).

“Unlike short term projects that address a singular issue and build little sustainable capacity, the National Writing Project appeared to more closely resemble an ongoing and evolving educational improvement infrastructure for teacher development—one that can address many different challenges and, year by year, continue to increase its own capacity to support teachers across the country” (St. John & Stokes, 2008). This approach to professional
development provides a forum of collaboration on teaching practices to further all teachers' knowledge and understanding. It validates teachers as professionals and provides a safe environment to experiment, reflect, and change their instructional practices. It is not a simple “sit-n-git” approach. It requires teachers to constantly evaluate their practice, identify areas of growth, seek out resources, and collaborate as a group of professionals how you are going to embark on the journey together. Every member has an equal status; a learner, a teacher. “Teaching is a noble profession. Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation” (NWP, 2011). Each member of this community has something to bring and something to learn. It is a constant state of growth.

San Diego Global Vision Academy (SDGVA) has embraced the National Writing Project Model. Their educational provost shared with me their charter, which states, “The NWP professional development model understands that improved teaching practice is not accomplished in a single afternoon session. If teachers are to learn effectively from their colleagues and expert teachers, they need to participate in an in-depth program, one that allows them to try out in their classrooms what they learn from one another and share what they find out.” SDGVA teachers, along with their educational provost, have spent this past year working and developing under this model. I asked how the teachers responded to this type of professional development;

“I have never had higher expectations of myself as a professional and of my students as learners. I have never been in a teaching situation when I've had to give so much of myself each and every day. And I've never been happier or felt so motivated as a professional.”

“All staff members support one another and are willing to go above and beyond job responsibilities in order to ensure students’ needs are being met. The staff makes decisions based on what is good for kids, not what is convenient for adults.”

“At SDGVA, we are a family. We support each other and band together when things get tough. We are flexible, preventative, and dedicated. When challenges arise we face them head on instead of just complaining about what isn't working.”

“I am not afraid to not know the answer to something because I have a team that spans grade-levels and I know they have my back. I am daily reminded that I do not know it all and it gives me a sense of urgency to learn more. Bottom-line is I feel like I am valued as an educator, a learner, and as an individual.”

SDGVA teachers have taken the National Writing Project Model and proven that professional development can be sustained, intensive, classroom-focused and have a positive lasting impact. The use of this model is not limited to only writing instruction instead it is the “guiding model for implementing professional development for a variety of content area instructional methods and strategies that support academic achievement” (SDGVA, 2009). This model allows for teachers to have a voice, teach each other, act as each other's resources, and reflect on practices together through all content areas.

We need our school sites to reevaluate their current professional development, listen to their teachers, and put their resources into providing a framework like that of the National Writing Project Model. Teachers need to feel like professionals that have a say, not proletarians being told. “There is simply no substitute for a good meeting – a dynamic, passionate, and focused engagement – when it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team” (Lencioni, 2004). Let's face it, the NWP model is a whole lot better than talking about bell schedules and homework policies!

Works Cited


About the Author:

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