Improved Professional Development Through Teacher Leadership

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Research suggests the need to provide leadership opportunities for teachers within school settings in order to increase professional collaboration and community. This research explored one rural district's professional development model, which was evaluated to determine its potential in developing teacher leaders. This district's professional development model utilized their exemplary teachers to develop other teachers through formal presentations that were traditionally taught by non-district experts. This study utilized a practitioner research methodology to determine effectiveness of using teachers as leaders. Data were collected to determine the impact on the teacher leaders and the effectiveness of the presentations as perceived by the overall teaching faculty. The results suggest an overall positive experience for teachers, as well as an increase in collaboration. In addition, teacher presenters believed their participation in staff development increased faculty effectiveness and increased the perception of the teacher presenters as leaders within the district.

Quality professional development that leads to school improvement is one of the most important influences on student achievement that occurs in school districts (Sergiovanni, 1996). Often these efforts are impersonal, as outside consultants are utilized for the impetus toward improvement. Research posits that improving collaboration, community, and professionalism among teachers is needed (Sergiovanni, 1996). This leads to the suggestion that involving district professional teachers in local professional development activities may have the impact of spotlighting specific skills while personalizing the process.

This article explores the idea of teachers as leaders and presents findings from the use of teachers as presenters during a district's professional development. This article explores the idea of teachers as leaders and presents findings that resulted from the use of teachers as presenters in one district's professional development program. The study utilized a practitioner research methodology, framed around the concepts of (a) teachers as experts, (b) collaboration in school organizations, and (c) teacher leadership. The results of this practitioner research suggest that utilizing teachers to present before their peers provides several benefits. These include increased collaboration, teamwork, and teacher leadership. These benefits are important to all schools, but perhaps more so for rural schools that have relatively small numbers of teachers and minimal funds for teacher development. Rural schools require more efficient and effective use of limited human and financial resources.

This paper will address four topics of research that provided the justification for this study. First, there will be a discussion of the foundation of practitioner research, which represents the basis of this study. Second, there will be a discussion of teachers as experts who can offer unique perspectives to their peers. Third, the need for collaborative efforts in school organizations will be addressed. Fourth, the utilization of teachers as leaders and the unique contributions they can create will be addressed.

Practitioner Research

Practitioner research is a method designed to help create a better understanding of events within the local environment. This research takes its origins from the work of Dewey and Lewin, as well as others who have sought methods of research to bridge theory and practice. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) stated:

As school practitioners become more active in sharing their work and practitioner research becomes a broad-based movement, practitioner research has the potential to reject the dualistic hierarchies of university and school, knowledge and action, theory and practice. It has the potential to become a truly grassroots, democratic movement of knowledge production and educational and social change (p. 23).

Practitioner research integrates theory and practice, and provides the researcher the data to provide meaningful change (Anderson et al., 1994).

Practitioner research has several characteristics other than integration of theory and practice that make it appealing at the grassroots level. First, the social impact of the research is set within the historical context of the environment being studied. Second, the dialogue generated through the research personalizes the subject. Third, the research and researched become one. Fourth, the process produces a knowledge base that can be used to improve social conditions. Last, the results of the research can be used immediately to improve the local environment (Anderson et al., 1994).

Practitioner research has been further supported by the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) who stressed the value of naturalistic inquiry, a form of qualitative research that considers the importance of the researcher being directly

involved in the research problem. Lincoln and Guba questioned the need for validity, focusing instead on the trustworthiness of the data, which is established when the researchers feel data are credible based upon their experience in the research (Lincoln & Guba).

Anderson et al. (1994) wrote of five types of validity in practitioner research. First, there is democratic validity, which takes into account collaborative processes and multiple perspectives in the research. Second, outcome validity views the extent to which the action resolves the problem being studied. Third, process validity, which is related to outcome validity, determines whether the process is aligned with desired outcomes. Fourth, catalytic validity determines the extent that the action focuses participants toward a greater understanding of active knowledge. Last, dialogic validity is a review of the research by the participants through collaborative processes.

Practitioner research focuses upon the local environment, obtaining information in a naturalistic setting by researchers within the system searching for the data that may lead to organizational improvement (Anderson et al., 1994). Although there may be limits to the generalizability of the data, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the ability to generalize the data is the responsibility of the individual who takes the research to new environments.

Teachers as Experts

Classroom teachers have diverse talents and abilities. Some instructors incorporate skills, such as cooperative learning, with an artistic flair, utilizing the students to create synergistic energy. Other teachers create learning environments through laboratories, inquiry, or lecture. Belasco and Stayer (1993) described the diverse talents of any organization as intellectual capital. Intellectual capital is the source of ideas and knowledge within any institution that can improve operations if used properly. Education, with its employee base of well-educated teachers, has an enormous quantity of intellectual capital that is often left untapped.

Teachers have a practical perspective of the needs of a school that transcends the knowledge of an outside expert. This understanding of needs provides for personalized ideas designed to improve the organization. Allowing employees to participate in profound ways increases the sense of ownership that exists. According to Donaldson (2001), "In a school where every adult is both 'shaper and shaped,' each person owns a share of influence and responsibility not just over her individual job but over school-wide concerns as well" (p. 41). Donaldson further addressed a need for schools to provide teachers with leadership opportunities outside of the classroom, providing a means for growth. These leadership opportunities increase a teacher's spectrum of influence as well as provide the resistance associated with improvement.

Improvement occurs in organizations that utilize their intellectual capital because employees understand the formal and informal power associations more intimately than any hierarchical leader. Teachers and other staff members have a greater expertise of their situation, including information on students, parents, and other teachers, than most individuals in positions of formal authority (Donaldson, 2001).

Utilizing this base of expertise is important in a school, and Donaldson (2001) encourages the development of leadership in teachers along with the need for increasing collegiality, collaboration, and nurturing relationships. The creation of a dynamic that improves all of these traits can be valuable to any school wanting to improve the achievement of students through the personal development of teachers.

Collaboration in Organizations

The structure of schools often creates isolated pockets among teachers. Teachers move to their classroom and stay there for many hours during the day, devoid of adult human interaction. This occurs as an outcome of the institutional structure of schools, however evidence exists for the need to encourage teachers to work together in order to improve instruction (Hargreaves,1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Donaldson, 2001).

Collaboration provides the means for developing a synergistic dynamic that utilizes the intellectual capital (Belasco & Stayer, 1993) of the group. In order to create a climate that encourages movement toward a common goal, the opportunity for teachers to share with one another is an integral step. Schools need to have teachers who perform as a concerted unit focused upon core values and a moral purpose; therefore, addressing the needs of the institution is best accomplished in an environment of collaboration (Donaldson, 2001).

The pedagogy and professional responsibility standards include the need to work and share with other professionals. These duties include the requirement to "engage in collaborative decision making and problem solving with other educators to support students' learning and well-being" as well as "participate in decision making, problem solving, and sharing ideas and expertise" (Texas State Board of Educator Certification, p. 14). Collaboration should not be an option for teachers, but a professional responsibility. Clearly, the process of sharing ideas in a collaborative environment improves the quality of education for students.

Teachers as Leaders

The philosophy of decentralization of decision-making has achieved support over the past decade. This movement occurred due to the organizational improvements that were created through the inclusion of workers in the development of policies and procedures (Hoy & Miskel, 2001).

Decentralized decision making is effective because teachers recognize obstacles to achievement that exist in current procedures, as they work with them daily. This process is one that allows the faculty to become leaders in the school.

The collaborative process provides the opportunity for groups to participate in leadership decisions and develop a sense of ownership within organizations, but the focus is not on the individual. The teacher is the center of the school, developing the students toward success. They are the leaders of the individual classes and deserve the respect of professionals. This respect often begins with providing greater leadership opportunities in order to create the dynamic of improved personal learning as well as improving the overall school (Schlechty, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1996).

Providing teachers with leadership opportunities not only improves their classroom and the overall school, it provides the organization with professionals who may assume formal roles of administrative leadership in the future. Great organizations have a strong culture that needs to be nurtured through consistent leadership. The development of leaders within the school provides the resources for cultural development consistent with the core values of the institution (Collins & Porras, 1994).

Method

Participants

This study originated in a small rural southern school of 720 students and 62 teachers. During professional development days, nine teachers were asked to present a program that focused on a particular effective teaching practice in which they excelled based upon the evaluations, both formal and informal, of the campus administration. These teachers ranged in age from 25 to 50 years, and

spanned grade levels from 3rd to high school. The nine teacher presenters ranged in experience from 4 to 28 years. The teaching faculty as a whole taught in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth, with experience ranging from 0 to 12 years.

Data Collection

This study represented an action research of professional development opportunities during one school year. Part I of the study was a five question Likert-type scale survey given to the nine teachers who had leadership roles during professional development sessions. They were asked to rate on a scale of one to ten, with one being the least positive, their impressions of the experience of presenting to their peers, focusing specifically on the effect their experience had on creating togetherness, collaboration, leadership, and improving teacher performance. The questionnaire represented a fixed response structured interview, which was based upon process, outcome, and catalytic validity (Anderson et al., 1994).

Part II of this study was a feedback/needs assessment given to all teachers during a professional development day two months before the end of school. The open-ended survey asked teachers to respond to issues during the year. The issue of professional development was prefaced with a verbal reminder of the previous opportunities during the year, specifically mentioning the role of district teachers in presenting material. The open-ended survey represented a structured interview with democratic validity (Anderson et al., 1994).

Results/Discussion

Part I of the survey, based on a one to ten Likert scale, is shown by the range and means in Table 1

Table 1

Survey – Part 1

Question	Range	Mean
1. To what degree do you feel faculty presenters increased employee togetherness?	4 to 10	8.88
2. To what degree do you feel having faculty presenters increases employee collaboration?	4 to 10	8.89
3. To what degree did you feel anxiety in regard to presenting to district employees?	1 to 10	4.45
4. To what degree do you feel that your leadership in the district increased due to presenting?	1 to 10	6.45
5. To what degree do you feel that the information presented improved teacher performance?	4 to 9	7.00

Data indicated that peer-led professional development is strongly perceived by the presenters as increasing faculty togetherness ($M = 8.88$) and collaboration ($M = 8.89$). Also, the presenters indicated to a moderate degree an increase in leadership ($M = 6.45$) and improved teacher performance ($M = 7.00$). However, there was clearly some discomfort associated with presenting before peers ($M = 4.45$).

Part II of the study were the open-ended responses provided during professional development as to perceptions of presentations during the year, specifically those that utilized teachers. These comments were analyzed by four researchers according to themes that emerged.

The first theme to be examined was that of a generally positive experience with professional development. Analyses of the 52 responses indicated that 33 of the comments were positive, 14 were neutral, and five were constructive. In other words, 63.4% of the teachers had positive feelings about professional development when teachers were used within the district to share expertise. One teacher said, "I have loved it! Never felt it was wasted time! Very effective – needed topics – applicable." Another teacher remarked, "Great opportunity to learn new things and share ideas with other teachers." Counted within the 27% of neutral responses were those with no answer or answers such as "we need a day to communicate within departments and grade levels to prepare for the curriculum." The final 9.6% of the responses represented constructive comments such as "could sometimes be more focused." This critical feedback was considered important in improving professional development in the future.

The second theme that emerged focused on comments directly related to the benefit of seeing peers present. Over one-third of these specifically mentioned seeing fellow teachers discuss their expertise and skills. For example, one teacher wrote, "Enjoyed co-workers presenting!! I have learned some new things, but most enjoyed "seeing" or "hearing" what was going on at each campus and seeing how "what I do" effects the other campuses." Another said, "great – using teacher within the district to share ideas will help any level of teaching." Clearly, there appeared to be a positive impact among many teachers toward seeing their peers share information in professional development.

Conclusion

A goal of this school district was to develop a strong cultural identity consistent with the core value of improving student achievement. The development of this culture has at its core the desire to utilize teachers as professionals, taking into account their expertise in improving the district. In the past, many of the professional development sessions within districts have only used contracted consultants, but this district's circumstances required individual skills within the district to be showcased and several positive outcomes resulted.

Our results suggested that teachers have positive feelings from professional development led by peers. This positive feeling is important, as a good climate improves the motivation for achievement, thus providing the means for effectiveness. Even the teachers who presented indicated an overall positive experience. The outcomes of teacher togetherness and collaboration received the highest ratings, setting the base for a good feeling tone in the school and

improved effectiveness. To a lesser degree, teacher presenters, even though they indicated some anxiety, believed that their presentations improved performance of the faculty and increased a sense of leadership among peers. This indication is likely misleading, as teachers are often self-effacing in regard to accurately evaluating the effect of their actions among other teachers.

Based on the results of the study, it is suggested that districts incorporate the following six recommendations to encourage the growth of teachers as leaders:

1. Identify teacher strengths;
2. Match teacher strengths to professional development needs;
3. Develop professional development programs with these strengths and needs in mind;
4. Provide teachers with time to prepare for their presentation;
5. Provide opportunities for informal presentations to reduce anxiety and stress of presenting; and
6. Provide time throughout the year to take advantage of collaborative opportunities.

While this district continues to hire expert consultants for professional development experiences, this is in addition to the use of its own teacher experts. Clearly, the use of teachers as leaders in professional development has provided benefits for this rural district in utilization of human and financial resources. Although further research will aid in clarifying the impact, based on the practice of this district we encourage and recommend the use of teachers as leaders to supplement any current professional development in order to improve togetherness, collaboration, and climate, as well as the use of practitioner research to improve understanding of local practices.

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