Teacher and Principal Experiences of
Effective Professional Development

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Dedication

As I reflect on the journeys that I have taken in my life, whether in education, in my career, in athletics, or in the day-to-day efforts to raise a family, I have never been without the support of my phenomenally patient parents, loving husband, and beautiful daughter.

It was my mother's dream that I continue my education and achieve an advanced degree. For one reason or another, I never had the time, desire, or both to complete this arduous task. I continued to make excuses until, unexpectedly, my incredible mother passed away. As this was the one thing that was left undone, I began my Master's degree, nearly 20 years after my undergraduate completion, to honor the request of the woman who had given me so much. During the pursuit of that degree, I met some of the most inspirational professors who ultimately opened doors for my future. What can I say? Mom was right, again. In fact, she was so right, that I knew I needed to take it even further.

My father has instilled in me the drive and work ethic that has carried me through marathons, Ironman competitions, higher education, and the extraordinary responsibilities of being a school administrator. I was raised with the ideals of tenacity, focus, and a "lead by example" attitude that applies in every important decision I've faced. He is my wise counsel and my strong shoulder when I need it, and occasionally when I don't know I need it.

My daughter, Catherine, and I have done homework together for the last several years. She is my constant source of amazement as I have watched her grow into a beautiful, intelligent, and capable young woman. She will begin her own

college journey in the fall, with the goal of becoming a teacher. I am looking forward to the day when we will share over coffee our stories of students and classrooms.

When someone describes a spouse as the "better half," he or she is referring to my husband, Nigel. While he was fighting in Iraq, and had reason to be preoccupied, he encouraged me to stay the course. Shortly after, in a time when Nigel could have been selfish, when he was battling Stage 4 cancer, he encouraged me to finish my studies. The vows "for better or worse" are words that Nigel has honored; he has supported my goals and our daughter's goals regardless of the difficult situations he has faced.

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The professors at The George Washington University create an unusual bond with their students. They are available, dependable, and encouraging. There was never a time when I felt as though I was going through this process alone. To Dr. Logan, I appreciate your consistent care and insight. To Dr. Lemasters, I continue to learn from you. I am honored to walk the final steps of this journey with you, and I look forward to new paths.

In the 25 years I have spent working as an educator, I have been fortunate to have great mentors and role models. In the last several years, I have worked with Dr. Donald Robertson. Saying that Dr. Robertson has been a role model to me would be, possibly, the biggest understatement ever made. He is, by far, the most influential person I have met in my career. I am fortunate to call him a colleague, even more fortunate to call him a friend.

Finally, I work in the most incredible school division around. I could not have accomplished this study without the approval of my superintendent, without the cooperation of the principals and teachers interviewed, and without the fine work that

occurs daily in our schools. As the names of the schools and participants must remain

anonymous, I will refrain from naming them specifically.

Abstract

Teacher and Principal Experiences of Effective Professional Development

Professional development practices have been in existence for generations; however, there have been concerns relative to the effectiveness of these programs for almost as long. Recognizing the limitations of early practice and the frustration of too many "fads" in reforming education, researchers have investigated best practices to improve the delivery of effective professional development. Quality professional development as a tool for improving student achievement, and subsequently future generations of workforce, is paramount in the current responsibilities of educational leaders.

This dissertation involved the examination of professional development in education as experienced by both teachers and principals in an effort to define the characteristics of effective practice. Using the tenets of high-quality professional development, as developed and summarized by educational leaders, this researcher addressed several prevalent problems associated with current professional development practice, including the structuring of professional development communities, the organization of professional development experiences, the lack of alignment between existing professional models and the research-based characteristics of effective models, and the logistical dilemmas inherent in providing adequate professional development.

The purpose of this study was to explore how a structured, organized, logistical, and aligned professional development program improves teacher performance, ultimately improving student learning and achievement. The following questions guided this study: What are the characteristics of effective professional development? How do the

professional development experiences of teachers compare with those of principals?

How does professional development enhance performance of teachers and students?

This researcher used qualitative methodology in a descriptive case study. Teachers and principals from three of eleven southeastern Virginia high schools, within one district, were studied to determine the methods and effectiveness of the professional development within their district and, specifically, within their respective schools. The three schools were purposefully chosen based upon data from a survey identifying specific strengths in technology, balanced assessment, or response to intervention. Three focus groups of teachers and three semistructured interviews with principals were conducted.

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Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

Background

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared educational reform to be an inherent part of the government's mission to provide equal access to education. Because of racial discrimination and high levels of poverty, Johnson believed the time was right to fight for social reform, beginning with education. It was during this time that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed, emphasizing a need to provide high standards and accountability in schools (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). In 2001, a restructured and reworked version of ESEA grew into the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The onset of the federally mandated NCLB Act brought a proposal to educational systems across America, "dramatically expanding the law's scope by requiring that states introduce school-accountability systems that applied to *all* public schools and students in the state" (Dee & Jacobs, 2010). The legislation enacted theories of standards-based education reform, the foundation of which was the belief that instituting measurable goals and high standards, through high-stakes testing and accountability, would improve education for all participants. Additionally, NCLB required improving teaching quality based upon the belief that excellent teaching was fundamental to improving student achievement:

> The new program gives States and LEAs (Local Education Authorities) flexibility to select the strategies that best meet their particular needs for improved teaching that will help them raise student achievement in the core academic subjects. In return for this flexibility, LEAs are required to demonstrate annual progress in ensuring that all teachers teaching in core academic subjects within the State are highly qualified. (United States Department of Education, 2001, p. 3)

In 2004, President George W. Bush stated,

This [bipartisan education reform] blueprint represents part of my agenda for education reform. Though it does not encompass every aspect of the education reforms I plan to propose, this blueprint will serve as a framework from which we can all work together to strengthen our elementary and secondary schools. (Bush, "No Child Left Behind," 2004, para.1).

The need for highly qualified teachers challenged programs throughout the country and resulted in LEAs' scrambling to meet the requirements. PRAXIS tests that measured teachers' knowledge of content, new teacher mentoring programs, and professional development emerged in a greater capacity than ever before. Assessment and accountability became the newest educational paradigms (Skrla & Scheurich, 2004). In today's administration, President Barack Obama's vision to transform the nation includes the commitment to give every child access to a quality education and focuses on teacher quality as part of that goal (Carroll & Doerr, 2010; Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009). Since the early 1990s there has been a push to improve staff development, moving away from the traditional in-service model, for the specific benefit of student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Little, 1999; National Staff Development Council [NSDC], n.d.).

Throughout the world, a newfound importance on education has emerged. Individual and societal success is ever-more dependent upon the quality of instruction provided in schools. Consequently, the world has engaged in intensive reform movements, particularly in the realm of improving teacher education and professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2005). In the United States, licensing standards have been strengthened to ensure teachers' ability to assist learners from a variety of backgrounds and aptitude levels; however, according to Darling-Hammond, 50,000 individuals that lack the training needed to be successful enter the education arena each year. Oftentimes, these are the individuals hired to work in the nation's poorest districts

(Darling-Hammond, 2005). "In the NCLB era of high-stakes testing, school administrators are facing their toughest challenge ever. They are being held accountable for the performance of their schools; yet current systems in public education typically fail to provide them with the appropriate tools to manage effectively" (Hershberg, Simon, Lea-Kruger, 2004, p. 10).

As part of his current educational initiative, President Obama prepares to focus not merely on supporting existing schools but on stimulating innovation, not on blindly investing money but demanding reform (Whitcomb et al., 2009). Although NCLB's highly qualified requirements have bolstered preparation in content area, there is still much that needs to be accomplished with regard to improving teacher effectiveness in the classroom (Cunningham, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2007). Professional development and in-service training are needed to assist teachers in best practices, such as teaching strategies, assessment, follow-up coaching, use of technology, and curriculum development. In many districts, professional development often is comprised of one-shot workshops, rather than more effective problem-based, sustained, collaborative learning (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Villano, 2008). The delivery of these workshops is often "hit or miss" and there is no sustainability. "Experts variously say that [professional development] lacks continuity and coherence, that it misconceives of the way adults learn best, and that it fails to appreciate the complexity of teachers' work" (Edweek Research Center [ERC], 2004, p. 1). Survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) showed that only a small minority of teachers (between 10% and 20%) perceived that their training was connected to school improvement, received significant follow-up materials or activities, or believed that the

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training significantly affected their performance. Despite these findings, the workshop method of professional development is a common system of delivery. "It's no secret that many teachers view the professional development opportunities available to them as uninspired, if not bordering on demeaning" (ERC, 2004, p. 1).

Although research has scrutinized the characteristics of quality professional development, according to much of the literature, the professional development strand of reform in schools has made small strides in the past 20 years. For many instructional leaders, the significant barrier to implementing professional development programs is the high cost associated with it; including, but not exclusively, sending teachers to conferences, procuring substitutes, travel cost, and hiring outside consultants (Bradburn, 2004; Sanborn, 2002). Add these costs to the time and effort of planning the sessions, and the professional development very well may never get done (May & Zimmerman, 2003). Proponents of professional development have argued that the expensive one-time trips and high-profile speakers are not an essential factor in the program. Rather, these proponents suggest that successful professional development initiatives are job embedded, occur within the work day, and include a cadre of teachers and administrators who communicate throughout the process (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hinson, Laprairie, & Cundiff, 2005; Hunefeld, 2009; Lezotte, 2005; Richardson, 2003; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Sparks, 2003). Further research in this arena indicated success with school-university partnerships (College of William & Mary, 2004; Goodlad, 1990; The Holmes Group, 1986; Stallings & Kowalski, 1990), professional development coaches (NSDC, 2000), and take-over models (Ediger, 2004).

Richardson (2003) wrote,

Most of the staff development that is conducted with K-12 teachers derives from the short-term transmission model; pays no attention to what is already going on in a particular classroom, school, or school district; offers little opportunity for participants to become involved in the conversation; and, provides no follow-up. (p. 401)

Sustained improvement, therefore, requires a change in culture. "Reform that produces quality teaching in all classrooms requires skillful leadership at the system and school levels" (Sparks, 2003, p. 1). Because leaders are essential to school transformation, they must consider changing their own actions prior to considering how their staff needs to change. "[Instructional leaders] must examine how their own assumptions, their own understanding of significant issues, and their own behaviors may be preserving the current practices [in their buildings]" (Sparks, 2003, p. 1).

Pink (1989) and Richardson (2003) described further barriers to innovation effectiveness, which remain applicable in today's school systems. Among the barriers noted were (a) too little planning time for teachers to adequately learn new skills; (b) lack of sustained central administration support and follow-through; (c) management of the projects through central office, rather than a focus on school-specific needs; and (d) lack of awareness regarding limitations within the school, technology, and teacher ability. Furthermore, the practice is expensive, takes a substantial amount of time to organize and execute, and can take an element of control away from the leaders in the school. Regarding the topic of professional development, research suggested that the aforementioned needs, specifically sustaining follow-through measures, should be addressed.

Although there are many schools across the nation that experience success in their training and professional development experiences, the research has maintained a

compelling argument that there is a need to change the philosophy of professional

development in schools. Schlechty (2001) argued, "In spite of numerous waves of

reform U.S. schools are not much different—either for good or ill—than they were fifty

years ago" (p. xi). Although reform has touched many school districts, the result is often

fragmented and unsustainable (Schlechty, 2001). Because of the redundancy, cost, lack

of buy-in, time, and effort associated with professional development in today's practices

(Brennen, 2001; Catelli, Padovano, & Costello, 2000; Delisio, 2006; National Center for

Education Statistics, 2001; Smith & Gillespie, 2007), it is evident that new methods of

delivery are essential (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Sparks, 2002). "If public

schools in the United States are to continue to play a vital role in the education of our

children, educational leaders must learn how to create schools and school systems that are

adept at supporting and sustaining innovations while introducing new practices into the

system" (Schlechty, 2001, p. xi). Creating professional development opportunities within

a school, therefore, requires the use of extensive data illustrating the value to the

individuals that will be using it.

Statement of the Problem

Each year there are dozens of studies focused on improving the nature of

professional development within education; however, little improvement has been noted

in the field (Sparks, 2002). According to Garet and Yoon (2009), there are gaps in

research evidence linking school improvement initiatives, such as professional

development, with student achievement. Additionally, more rigorous study is needed to

determine the effects of key features associated with professional development, including

job-embedded delivery, motivation of teachers and staff, incentives, accountability, and feedback (Garet & Yoon, 2009).

Given all of the expectations that are placed on teachers today, there is a lack of direction in professional development programs. Although research has identified successful models of professional development, no link has been noted between sustained teacher growth and increased student outcomes. Without a clear resolve regarding what an effective professional development model looks like, efforts to help teachers help students are inadequate. Professional development in schools, in general, continues to be unstructured, unfocused, and unfulfilled.

"The problem is [educational leaders] don't know what to do that is different from what they have always done" (Wagner, 2003, p. 28). Although the characteristics of solid professional development have been publicized for nearly 30 years, the overwhelming majority of professional development practices have gone virtually unchanged. "Sit and get," "cafeteria style," and "check-the-box" experiences have yielded very little improvement with regard to teacher performance. "In too many districts, time and money for professional development are squandered because efforts are sporadic and not aligned to a few carefully chosen improvement priorities that are informed by and monitored with data" (Wagner, 2003, p. 30).

The first problem involves assembling professional development communities. Often, these "communities" are built on a surface-level understanding of the commitment (Fullan, 2006). Without clear communication between the educational leaders and the teachers with whom they are working, cynicism can take root among the stakeholders. Often the "flavor-of-the-month" mindset will challenge the initiatives of the principal

(Fullan, 2006). It is essential that the building leaders collect data specific to the needs of the teachers and students within their community (Richardson, 2003).

The literature further implicated the lack of success that is embroiled in professional development opportunities. Fullan (1991) argued, "The greatest problem faced by school districts and schools is not resistance to innovation, but the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence resulting from the uncritical acceptance of too many different innovations" (p. 197). Teacher dissatisfaction and lack of buy-in have been evidenced throughout studies. Likewise, Seashore-Louis (n.d.) argued that there are no references to *how* a school can conduct reform-making professional development opportunities.

A second problem addressed in the literature is the construction of professional development practice. In the review of successful schools, much of the educational literature points to a top-down hierarchy. Principal (and superintendent) support in any educational reform movement is an inherent factor in determining whether an initiative is long lasting. In the case of professional development, however, evidence demonstrates that a thriving program depends on a more collaborative structure in which there is cohesion among principals, teachers, and central administration staff (Southeastern Regional Vision for Education, 2007).

Aside from the noncollaborative nature of the top-down hierarchy, one might also consider the generation gaps existing between administrators and teachers, leading to a greater difficulty in communication. "Right now, significant changes are happening in the K-12 classrooms, in the teacher corps, in the administration offices, in homes and in state and local governance as the older generation is gradually giving way to its

successors" (Strauss, 2005, p.10). The older, "baby-boomer" generation comprises the

veteran school staff, exhibiting a great deal of experience along with the traditional

methods of pedagogy. The younger, "Gen-X" generation exhibits the newer, more

collaborative, technology-literate teachers (Strauss, 2005). Although each generation has

a significant amount of knowledge, members also have much to learn from each other

despite the generation gap's remaining a barrier to communicating.

According to Brophy and Good (1997), an effective professional development

program is more concerned with teacher performance collectively than individually,

indicating that the work of many is greater than that of one. Brennen (2001) described an

effective professional development experience as one that takes into consideration the

needs of the entire school. Concentrating on individual teacher needs does not effectively

address the challenges of a school. "Staff development will have a greater impact on

school performance if teachers work collectively to improve it" (Brennen, 2001, p. 4).

"Collaboration is a means of invigorating the lives of teachers and of teacher educators,

as it provides the opportunity for individuals to have access to one another's area of

expertise" (Stephens & Boldt, 2004, p. 704).

A third problem related to professional development is the lack of alignment

between existing professional development models and the standards that have been

determined to be the chief components of a successful program. According to the United

States Department of Education, there are 10 principles of professional development that

constitute a high-quality experience; high-quality professional development (a) focuses

on student learning, (b) improves collegial–organizational interactions, (c) respects

leadership capacity of educators, (d) is research driven, (e) develops essential strategies