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Professional Development Partners

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

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Professional development is integral for improving teaching and learning. This paper highlights research from a mixed methods study on the potential impact of a partnership providing teacher Professional Development (PD) at a school in Southern Alberta. In this paper, three main findings will also be discussed: (a) scheduled time for PD; (b) a culture of pressure and support; (c) changes in teaching practices. This research is valuable for leadership and those considering innovative ways to provide PD through partnerships.

Keywords: partnerships; professional development; sustained; Canada; K-12

PROVISION OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In Alberta, one of the recommendations for improving student learning outcomes is to improve instruction (Alberta Government, 2010). Instruction can be enhanced by offering teachers effective professional development (PD) opportunities (Fogarty & Pete, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Joyce, 2002; Killion & Hirsh, 2013; Showers, 1990). Although principals play an important role as instructional leaders in teachers' PD (Honig, 2012; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, & Peetsma, 2012), some suggest PD leadership should be shared and extend beyond the school to include other actors (Mulford, 2008; Spillane, Diamond, & Jita, 2003). This can include permanent coaches, consultants, or external experts interested in partnering with schools to deliver job-embedded PD. The value of these partners facilitating PD is that they can offer new insights and additional expertise. Such partnerships are an alternative way to provide PD in schools (Killion, 2011;

Thomas

Neumerski, 2012; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2009) and are worth exploring as an innovative approach to leading PD.

CONTEXT

In Alberta, parents have several choices for schooling, including alternative programs. Alternative programs emphasize "a particular language, culture, religion, or subject-matter" or use "a particular teaching philosophy" (Alberta Education, 2003, p. 1). In this study, a formal society was established for the alternative program at the school in order to provide leadership and form a partnership with a school district (Alberta Education, 2003). Alternative programs can charge tuition (Alberta Education, 2003), and some of these funds covered the costs of PD activities at the school and the salary of employees who led the PD in this study. These employees of the formal society represented the partners. The partners provided leadership for weekly job-embedded PD at the school, which was attended by both teachers and administrators.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods design was followed for this study, which drew upon the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research question explored in this study was as follows: What are teachers', administrators', and partners' perspectives about the impact of sustained PD provided through a partnership at an alternative school for K-12 in Southern Alberta? The impact of the partnership was explored through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Once ethics approval was obtained, population sampling was used to study the whole population. 29 teachers, three administrators, and three partners chose to participate. The participation response rate was as follows: teachers (73%), principals (100%), and partners (100%). The qualitative data (i.e. interviews and focus groups) was analysed through iterative thematic coding. The quantitative data consisted of quantified qualitative data (i.e. frequency and ranking of each

theme) and pre-existing numeric data identified during document analysis (i.e. accountability pillar and school review data). The numeric data from the document analysis was used to describe and discuss trends in order to explore the partnership's influence. The qualitative and quantitative data were then analysed by taking the qualitative inductive categories and quantitative data and reviewing the literature for overlapping themes. The quantitative data was also integrated and compared with the qualitative data. The use of these different forms of data allowed for triangulation and strengthened the accuracy of the study.

FINDINGS

Three broad themes were determined through content analysis and frequency of coding. These frequencies were then used to rank the themes and their subsequent categories. Each theme and their subsequent categories are listed in order of their prevalence. The three broad themes were: (a) scheduled time for PD; (b) a culture of pressure and support; and (c) changes in teacher practice. Scheduled time for PD was ranked number one, and the three related categories were collaboration, direct instruction, and implementation. A culture of pressure and support was ranked number two and included four categories: challenge and accountability, vision, soft landings, and access to one-on-one support. Changes in teacher practice was the final theme, and this was ranked number three. This theme consisted of four categories: alignment to practice, teacher thinking, student-centred, and transferability. During document analysis, the pre-existing quantitative data presented in the School Effectiveness Review (2009 & 2013) and Accountability Pillar (2008-2014) were integrated where applicable and relevant. These documents showed a possible connection between the partnership and positive impacts on student learning.

Thomas

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The participants' perspectives offered insight into the influence of the partnership and PD at the school. They also hi-lighted the perceived impacts on teaching and learning and the partnership's potential influence on school culture. The key findings related to the partner-led PD will be discussed using the three broad themes: (a) scheduled time for PD; (b) a culture of pressure and support; and (c) changes in teacher practice.

Scheduled time for PD

The first theme – scheduled time for PD – hi-lighted that scheduled time for PD supported teacher collaboration, and this generated synergy and cultivated joy. Others report the benefits of collaboration such as increased job satisfaction (Viel-Ruma, Houchins, Jolivette, & Benson, 2010), lower stress, increased confidence (Schlicte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005), and a reduction in teacher workload (Guskey, 1991). This scheduled time also allowed for direct instruction and was important for modelling concepts to teachers. Regular PD seminars have been shown to support teachers in changing their practices (Showers & Joyce, 1996), and providing scheduled time for PD contributes to teacher buy-in (Fogarty & Pete, 2009). Furthermore, time for practical implementation of the PD content appeared to make a difference in changing teacher practices. Joyce and Showers (2002) also suggest that modelling best practices for teachers during PD aids in implementation. Providing teachers time to think and create is valuable in order to support adult learners in their need for both reflection and dialogue (Merriam, 2008).

Thomas

Culture of pressure and support

The second theme – a culture of pressure and support – suggested teachers needed to be challenged and held accountable for changing their practices, while at the same time given support to do so. Professional learning needs to offer both challenge and support to be effective (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008). A strong vision for the PD was evident, and teachers were challenged with clear goals. Core leadership practices such as setting direction (Leithwood & Louis, 2012), establishing goals, and forming high expectations (Robinson, 2011) are recognized as integral to seeing school improvement and increasing organizational commitment (Brynjulf Hjerto, Merok Paulsen, & Petteri Tihveräinen, 2014). This positive pressure was important for most teachers, although some were uncomfortable with this approach. Applying this external push is recognized as necessary for teachers to be critical about their practice (Levine, 2011). There was variation in response to the pressure of high expectations, but this was balanced with supportive conditions. A culture of "soft-landings" was promoted where teachers felt supported to take risks. They also had one-on-one access to the partners, who were onsite daily. Robinson (2011) suggests leaders should encourage teachers and reward them for making mistakes, which connects to the notion of "soft-landings." Giving teachers the help they need when they need it is noted as important for PD (Fogarty & Pete, 2009), and having daily access to experts supports classroom implementation of teaching strategies (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Even so, some teachers needed additional encouragement to take advantage of these supports.

Changes in teacher practice

The third theme – changes in teaching practice – indicated that the sustained PD offered by the partners was influencing teaching. Teachers were implementing what was taught and modelled to them during the PD, and this was a sign of teachers changing their practice. Change in teacher

practice is noted as an indication of successful PD (Killion & Hirsh, 2013), and taking action by implementing ideas is evidence of adult learning (Merriam, 1987). Not all of the teachers were moving forward at the same rate, but the partners accepted this as normal and were comfortable with this variation. Rogers (1995) explains the rate of adoption of new innovations and notes a similar variation. Teachers who were moving forward were also more comfortable with changing their practice, indicating a change in teacher thinking. These teachers were more efficacious and willing to take on the challenge. Bandura's (1989) work on self-efficacy, the efforts individuals exert, and their willingness to overcome challenges links to this finding. Changes in practices, from teacher-centred approaches to student-centred approaches, showed potential for impacting student learning outcomes. Although no direct correlation was noted between the Accountability Pillar data and the PD, the trends were mostly positive, suggesting the PD was making a difference in student learning at the school. Linking PD to student learning is essential to see changes in teaching practices (Guskey, 2012), and determining what measures to use is strongly advised for successful PD (Guskey & Sparks, 1996). Moreover, some teachers needed additional individual support and further opportunities to work together in order to transfer the ideas from PD and change their practices. Collaboration is valuable and aids in this transferability (Fogarty & Pete, 2009; Fullan, 2008). As noted earlier, having access to one-on-one support can also assist in the transferability and implementation of new practices.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests partnerships are an innovative way to offer leadership for PD in schools and uncovered three key aspects related to this: (a) scheduled time; (b) a culture of pressure and support; and (c) changes in teaching practices. The PD partners (PDP) in this study illustrate how other actors or informal leaders can play a role in the oversight of PD in schools. Although there is a

Thomas

lack of generalisability in this study of one school and one partnership, there are transferable elements that leaders can use to see what is possible in their own contexts. An implication of this research is to explore who could act as potential PD partners in schools (i.e. universities, district leaders, coaches, consultants, teacher-leaders, etc.). Another consideration is for school leaders to examine the key aspects of the PD presented in this study that seemed to be effective. Leaders can look at finding ways to provide scheduled onsite time for PD and work towards creating a culture of pressure and support to promote changes in teacher practice.

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