Systemic Educational Change Through

Focused, Continuing Professional Development

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Poll three teachers at the high school level to describe their ideal professional development program and you are likely to get three completely different responses. Traditional content-first high school teachers may ask for department level professional development that provides time for collaboration with department colleagues and a greater focus on their craft. Another teacher may ask for their department to be exposed to new methods and techniques for instruction within their specific discipline. A third teacher focused on his/her students and their psycho-social needs may want more social-emotional development that would allow teachers to learn about the specific students that populate their school. A final response could be as negative as a desire to be left alone so that the teachers could have time to work on their lessons, plan new labs, and do "real classroom" work.

I would argue that all these responses and the negative view that many educators have regarding their professional development occurs when a building has lacked a properly developed and executed plan that assessed teacher and student needs, planned professional development that incorporated effective teaching techniques, utilized follow-up strategies and coaching to support implementation, and reevaluated the effectiveness of the plan. This cycle would be followed by another cycle of needs assessment and planning that builds upon prior trainings and programs. Interestingly, aspects of all three elements mentioned by our fictional teachers above, when used in conjunction with each other may just be an ideal structure for Continual Professional Development. When academic professional development happens in isolation, is determined via top down dictates, and lacks follow-up, it is doomed for failure. Subsequently any positive intended changes do not occur.

The purpose of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at the high school educational level, at its most basic, must be to provide educators with the skills, knowledge, and tools to allow them to systemically improve the learning of their specific students and ensure their students long term success. Based upon the Dirkx-Austin Model (2005) for examining CPD contexts, high school CPD must provide staff development that is technical and emancipatory in nature and focused upon organizational goals and needs (Dirkx and Austin, 2005.) The skills, pedagogy, and methodology of all teachers must be in a constant state of growth and improvement. The specific components of a high school's CPD plan should focus on teaching literacy, to state standards, English Language Learners, diverse learners, exceptional students, and more. However, technical training is not enough to bring about systemic change and use of the methods. Change will only occur when an educator has experienced transformative learning. They must be provided with opportunities to reflect on their "assumptions" and be given time to formulate new assumptions that can be acted upon. (Cranton, 1996, p.2). Emancipatory learning must follow the technical learning to allow the transformative process to occur. Dirkx-Austin point out that an emancipatory focus can lead to self-reflection, self-knowledge, and possibly transformation (2005). Systemic change within a building can only occur via a transformation of teaching practices.

The content for any CPD plan within a high school should come from a thorough needs assessment that begins with the teachers who will be trained (Vella, 2002, p.66-70). "Going straight to the participants for their input gives them a hand in helping to design their own program"(Silberman, 2006, p.24). Teachers are at the ground level of

the educational experience and often have insights into needs that a person more distant to instruction may not possess. Teachers are motivated by the ability to improve their craft. They are motivated by techniques and strategies that can help them reach their most challenging and at-risk students. Teachers are also very critical of any CPD plan that does not focus on the specific aspects of their students and their school. Any CPD plan that does not address these factors from the start will risk losing its audience.

However, teachers are not the only stakeholders who should play a role in determining needs. Administrators should use student demographic data as well as student performance data to help guide CPD instruction. A major influx of Spanish speaking English Language Learners (ELL) may lead to a focus on cultural nuances that influence learning or perhaps to provide teachers with more insight on the school systems within the home countries of the new ELLs. In another example, standardized test data may show that teachers' need more focused training on literacy instruction skills such as teaching comparisons and contrast. Finally, state and federally dictated educational movements must be factored into any high school needs assessment for planning purposes. Teachers/Administrators, Student Data, and State/Federal programs should all be essential components of a high school CPD program needs assessment.

Determining the instructional techniques to use when providing CPD to high school educators is just as important as determining what should be instructed. When it comes to educating a group whose occupation is teaching, one must utilize effective instructional practices that emphasize active training techniques. Regardless of their pedagogical style, many educators do not like to be lectured to nor do most adults learn most effectively unless they "do most of the work"(Silberman, 2006, p.1). The most

important ways for people to learn is to "hear it, see it, question it, discuss it, and do it"(Silberman, 2006, p. 2). A lecture-only CPD model applies the auditory and visual levels of learning but little else. Whenever possible, active learning within groups of 25-30 learners should be sought.

Interestingly, the final stage of the active learning process, "do it", must be addressed early in the CPD training process. Once we have performed a needs assessment to determine what is going to be taught, it is essential to identify measurable objectives to evaluate the degree of success of the CPD that was performed as well as the degree of tangible change that has occurred within the program. Clear summative cognitive, behavioral, student achievement objectives must be identified for evaluation following the implementation of a CPD series (Silberman, 2006, p.41-43). I would evaluate the cognitive learning and achievement of objectives immediately following the training session via a staff survey at the completion of the training. Did the participants take away the essential concepts from the training? Do the participants feel confident in implementing the new strategies in their classrooms? Low scores on these two questions are real warning signs for any CPD program. How to ensure cognitive learning is the next stage in this CPD program. Behavioral objectives and student achievement will be discussed as part of post training support and overall program evaluation.

Patricia Cranton points out that "development requires moving beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding into questioning our existing assumptions, values, and perspectives (1996, p.76). Before an adult learner can begin to act upon the new learning they have acquired they must understand the overall objectives for the training and have had an opportunity to reflect upon and build a plan for

implementing the new learning (Cranton, 1996, p.77). The physical instruction may

include direct lecture instruction to introduce concepts. However, it is essential that a

CPD program aimed at high school teachers (or any adults for that matter) provide

opportunities for discussion, collaboration, reflection, and lesson planning to ensure that

implementation occurs. Jane Vella points out that a participatory environment is one of

the key elements necessary for success with adult learners (Vella, 2002, p. 78).

      Mel Silberman highlights a variety of active training, participatory techniques for

professional development (2006). Some of the techniques emphasized for creating an

environment of discussion include pair-shares, partner discussions, fishbowls, and calling

on the next speaker (2006, p.67-69). Use of visuals such as powerpoints, video, and

images to support main ideas are also essential for helping participants form a mental

construct of the ideas being taught. A more recent development in CPD that should be

utilized is "blended learning environments" (Silberman, 2006, p.201-203). Online

discussion threads, live blogging such as "CoverItLive", and an even more recent

technology, a "Ning", allow CPD programs to expand beyond the length of their

physical instruction periods and to provide continual support and collaboration upon a

buildings CPD plan. Program resources, discussions, and experiences can be shared and

communicated long outside the confines of the traditional CPD setting. Another

technology, a collaborative Wiki, will be discussed later as a method of providing support

as participants in a high school CDP program work to turn instruction into practice.

      It is not enough for the participants to hear, see, and discuss new classroom

strategies. They only make it their own when they are able to apply the strategies that

have been taught. Most teachers would argue that activities and strategies that can be

directly applied to their classrooms are the most worthwhile pieces they can take away

from a training or CPD event. If a CPD event progresses from introduction, to

instruction, to discussion and concludes, the participants are unlikely to apply their new

learning. Once away from the training they are much more likely to utilize established

routines and instructional strategies that are within their comfort zones. Some will state

that they simply do not have time to implement a new strategy until the following year

under the guise of utilizing the summer for planning.

A successful CPD program will follow communication and collaboration with a

period of guided practice for applying the strategies. This guided practice begins within

the training itself but expands beyond the confines of the training and into the classroom.

A structured activity that requires participants, in small groups, to create instructional

strategies during training is crucial for implementation. It serves as a simulation for the

teachers and involves the single most relevant experience in which they can engage:

lesson planning and preparation. "The single easiest way to create games and simulations

is to mimic the format and character of well-known ones (Silberman, 2006, p.134).

Regardless of the CPD, teachers are to be given a set period of time during their training

in which they must apply the new strategies to a specific student or class that they are

teaching. If it does not specifically fit their teaching context now, they can apply it to a

previous teaching scenario. They would then share what they have produced with others

within the group to identify strengths and weaknesses. The Harmony Education Center

has a variety of protocols that can be downloaded and used to evaluate lessons and

classroom products. Some are pre-assessments while others would be valuable in

evaluating student work that is the product of a CPD training. The expectation that CPD

trainings will lead to tangible, classroom pieces that can be successfully implemented can help create buy in for future CPD offerings.

High school staff members' CPD training should be followed by their participation in supported implementation of the strategies as well as their participation in action research. Cranton views this as an individual or group process of exploring and understanding an aspect of one's craft. The group (or individual) defines the problem or situation, collects and analyzes both formative and summative data, and develops an alternative (or maintain a previous) plan to guide their classroom instruction (Cranton, 1996, p. 144-145). The action research and implementation process of our CPD programs must be supported by professional development leaders and coaches, and by access to online research and supports. It is only through these post-delivery supports that true accountability and systemic change will occur.

Jane Vella looks at accountability as the teacher being accountable to the learners for teaching what they said they would teach. Likewise, the learners are responsible for "doing the work of learning (Vella, 2002, p.213). I would argue that accountability should be expanded to the teacher supporting the learner in the implementation of the learning and the "learners will implement the learning". If planners of CPD truly desire implementation and the ideas from within our trainings to expand into the classrooms, we must support it.

Peer coaching has been found to be a successful model for education (Thompson, 2010). Jane Vella routinely utilized the train-the-trainer model in implementing new strategies and techniques outside the high school education world in her "Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach"(2002). In fact, it may be the strategy most utilized for large-

scale implementation of new ideas and methods. A full CPD program should incorporate an academic coach to assist teachers in the implementation process or peer to peer implementation mentors to assist their colleagues. Each of these methods would increase the degree of accountability of the teachers/learners to each other and to applying their new learning. These coaches and mentors can assist teachers in the action research process. They can serve to help with data gathering, analysis, or in helping determine a direction to go in following one action research cycle. Action research is crucial in implementation. New strategies can often go awry when first attempted. Peer coaches and training mentors can serve to prevent poor experiences with training strategies and to help teachers refine and improve successful strategies. When teachers feel supported in experimentation, they are more likely to engage in the questioning of their assumptions and the revising of perspectives that is necessary for transformative learning and systemic change (Cranton, 1996, p. 2). An added benefit is that teachers and training mentors can serve as data collectors to determine the degree of implementation of strategies. They provide in the field knowledge about what teachers are doing in the classroom on a daily basis, not just what can be occasionally observed by administrators.

Accountability can be further supported by the use of technology as part of a CPD program. District maintained websites and CPD wikis (collaborative web pages) can be used to support, extend, and implement CPD strategies following a training and while they are being implemented. One illustration of this concept is the wiki that I created to support the implementation of English Language Learners strategies by high school teachers. MTWPELLResources allows us to highlight what teachers are doing in the classroom. Teachers can gain a sense of accomplishment from seeing their efforts

celebrated. Additionally, teachers are able to see that people within their own building are

implementing strategies successfully. Secondly, it provides for the delivery of new

content without having to wait for a new training day. After a formative assessment

meeting with members of the English department it was found that they desired more

specific strategies on teaching writing to ELLs. This information was researched and

made available on an "English and Writing" page that was added to the wiki. It allowed

our CPD program to be responsive to their needs in an extremely timely fashion. Finally,

it allows the program to maintain momentum and a presence beyond the half-day and full

day training sessions when instruction occurs. Teachers receive frequent notices about

changing content and highlights of new articles they can find there to keep the presence

of our CPD program in the forefront. (Incidentally, statistical information gathered by

the site allows the CPD leaders to know how frequently the site is being accessed and by

how many people. Content on pages receiving fewer visits can be edited and updated to

make it more attractive. Additionally, we can see what is being accessed and provide

more of that type of content.)

 For a CPD program to be successful in the long term it must evaluate its effects

summatively at the end of each CPD cycle and be responsiveness to the findings. The

findings should be a combination of teacher surveys, a focus group interview of

coaches/mentors, and an examination of pre-determined student data. All this data

should be analyzed to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the most recent CPD

cycle. It is only once you have determined what has been successful and what is not that

you can plan modifications necessary to make your CPD more effective (Silberman,

2006, p. 315). When teachers at a high school see that a CPD training's evaluation and

follow up extends beyond one calendar year, and that it is not going to be simply replaced

by another movement, it is more likely to get buy in. They must see that a CPD program

and its evaluation are part of "a continuous activity rather than an event that occurs at the

end development activities"(Kutner, 1997, p. 4). People are more willing to commit to a

program that they feel a school or district is willing to commit to as well.

Too often high school CPD plans and programs are viewed as one year isolated

cycles with the content dictated by building level and district level administrators, or even

state mandated initiatives. The best educators take what they find to be most effective

and implement it into their classrooms. Unfortunately, many others see each CPD yearly

cycle as being here today and gone tomorrow and feel little incentive to buy into what is

being offered. Systemic educational change will only occur when the needs of educators

are assessed and addressed. Buy in will occur when the programs that address these

needs are fit into long range CPD cycles of three to five years in which training and skills

are viewed as scaffolding to be built upon.   Each CPD cycle will have the assistance of

an academic coach, or coaches, who support in lesson planning and in the classroom.

This CPD cycle would take advantage of action research, data analysis, and collaborative

technology to allow people to experience the learning on daily basis in their classrooms.

With this constant support and accountability intended changes would be implemented

and systemic change could begin. Just as importantly, teachers would begin to view CPD

as part of the teaching process, not something they must attend.

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