

Teacher-Led Professional Development: A Proposal for a Bottom-Up Structure Approach

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This article uses current research recommendations for teacher-led professional development as well as qualitative data from a set of grassroots conferences to propose a new model for bottom-up teacher-led professional development. This article argues that by providing a neutral space and recruiting expertise of local experts, a public sphere can be created that allows participants to tackle challenging topics and learn new ideas in a manner that promotes teacher efficacy. Findings from the data indicate that participants enjoyed this model mainly due to practical topics, a positive academic environment, and a diverse group of presenters. Considerations are provided for this model as well as seven simple necessary steps to accomplish it.

Keywords: bottom-up; professional development; public sphere

Introduction

Current trends in education reflect a growth in teacher-led professional development. This approach has been utilized by various sources including private industries, school districts, and non-profit organizations. Organizations such as *Time to Teach*, *Whole Brain Teaching*, *EdCamp*, and even the *California Teachers Association* have found success in providing trainings that boast classroom teachers as trainers. Additionally, many school districts have shifted to promoting their own teachers to full time professional development or coaching roles. While these are effective, there is still the lingering element of lack of option or input from participants since they typically consist of workshops designed around a toolkit that is mandated by employers—in other words, a top-down structure.

This article argues for a model for teacher-led professional development that utilizes a wider range of expertise and input through a bottom-up structure. In contrast to a traditional top-down model, a bottom-up structure implies that classroom teachers are making decisions, selecting topics, and designing workshops outside of the pressures of employers' goals. Instead, teachers plan their own conference that serves the needs they feel are most relevant. This model for teacher-led professional development can promote engagement and positive communities among teachers. This model allows participants to engage in a neutral space and therefore tackle issues in an authentic manner with a diverse group of colleagues. Evidence to support this model is drawn from a review of literature as well as surveys and questionnaires contributed by participants of a set of small grassroots conferences that offered free professional development to teachers. The data was analyzed to determine what benefits participants perceived from participating in this unique educational conference.

Context

This conference was a series of three events, which started with humble beginnings. The first event began out of two basic needs. As the author and researcher, at the time I was in a unique scenario of being both a Visiting Assistant Professor of Education and a high school teacher at the same time. As I spent my days teaching in the K-12 world and my evenings in higher education, I saw some needs I could potentially address with my connections in both worlds. One need I found as a new faculty member was that my students had few opportunities to network with other teachers. In addition, as a classroom teacher, my colleagues and I had been grappling with implementing the Common Core State Standards (which were new at the time). With little guidance from our school district, many educators were doing their best to share resources, lessons, and ideas for how to implement the new standards into our classrooms. A common teacher's lounge conversation would begin with "My friend works in this other district and she has been doing...." Teachers were desperately seeking examples of good Common Core lessons. As a sort of human bridge between K-12 and higher education, I saw an opportunity to meet both of these needs. I planned to hold a teacher conference where my colleagues could share ideas about how to implement Common Core and my teacher candidates could learn from and network with these experienced classroom teachers.

The first conference consisted of about 20 participants. The day was simply focused on sharing examples of quality standards-based lessons from a variety of subjects and grades. There were 3 school districts represented. Since it was my first effort to put together such an event, the presenters were all my personal friends and colleagues whom I asked to lead a workshop. My colleagues at the university sent out emails to their students and contacts in school districts. We did not gather data at this first event, due to the informal nature of the experiment. We all left rejuvenated by the experience of learning from colleagues from other school communities and the preservice teachers found new mentors.

After the success of the first event, it was clear that all of us wanted to do another one. One year later we held another. The conferences were held in the Spring semester, three years in a row. The second event was similar, but increased in number to about 30 participants. This event featured a wider variety of topics including more presentations on Common Core standards, presentations about college readiness, and a panel of high school students who shared their own experiences as students in the foster system. Additionally, the presenters were a variety of classroom teachers, administrators, and college professors. This range of topics and presenters seemed to appeal to participants. The neutral space of a university allowed for educators throughout the community to share ideas and construct new ones as they tackled tough issues. This dynamic seemed to add a sense of validity for participants since presenters had tested their strategies in other nearby schools. Participants expressed a very positive response to the inclusion of other community members such as students and administrators as well.

Often, the dynamic of professional development for teachers involves administrators who also represent a supervisory role and the training is required (top-down). In contrast, this event allowed teachers to hear perspectives of administrators from other sites, thus removing the authority element and promoting more authenticity for discussion. Similarly, most teachers only interact with their own students. Having a panel of local students allowed teachers to interact with these young people outside of the classroom environment and to discuss educational experiences without the element of personal roles clouding the interactions. The success of this

second event prompted the planning of the third event to follow the following year. This third event included these groups of participants and added parents to the mix.

By the time the third event took place the following spring, the conference had grown to about 45 participants. The presenters included all sorts of educators including new teachers, counselors, administrators, university faculty members, several experienced teachers, and a local parent organization. Topics covered were implementation of educational technology, strategies for teaching content vocabulary to English learners, culturally relevant instruction, using geospatial software, college readiness, and parent involvement. Possibly the most important aspect of each conference was the one hour block of time reserved at the end for reflection, discussion, and collaboration. This time to process allowed participants to leave with new theories about what may work in their schools.

A Review of Literature on Professional Development

This section describes bottom-up structures, the need for teacher-led professional development, and the elements of effective teacher-led professional development.

Bottom-Up Structures

There is little research on bottom-up structures in educational settings. One study offers analysis of the various kinds of teacher communities (TC) and situates each on a continuum between top-down and bottom-up, each with varying degrees of those characteristics. The researchers define top-down TCs as those in which, “the main stakeholders include government officials; teachers are mostly reduced to executors of top-down prescribed ideals” (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt 2017, p. 5.2.1). They go on to add that, “in the bottom-up end of the continuum teachers are the main stakeholders. In these types of TCs, the focus is more on teachers' empowerment and learning, as these TCs originate from schools' and teachers' own concerns” (Vangrieken, et al., 2017, p. 5.2.1).

The Need for Teacher-Led Professional Development

There are three main reasons why teacher-led professional development is needed. The first is to address major shifts in education. The second reason is the emphasis on accountability in the field of education. The third reason is the establishment of a public sphere.

Shifts in education. The most impactful shift in public education recently has been the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. This change was adopted to increase rigor across content areas and promote college and career readiness. However, Jenkins and Agamba (2013) argue that the missing element with the Common Core Standards was professional development. The researchers argue for collaboration among K-12 teachers and higher education to implement the new curriculum and expectations. Additionally, collaboration and collegial activities among teachers has been found valuable when dealing with large shifts such as state-mandated curriculum changes or assessments (Babione, 2010). Changes that trickle down from the political level such as this, may be better addressed with teacher-led training to promote ownership.

The age of accountability. Over the past two decades, there has been considerable frustration and disappointment associated with high stakes testing. Teachers started to feel more like technicians than practitioners with less power over their own classrooms or, as some researchers called it, a shift “from agents to objects” (Laguardia, Brink, Wheeler, Grisham, & Peck, 2002). Laguardia et al. (2002) found that even experienced educators felt that their professional development opportunities were reduced to simple workshops in which they were offered toolkits to prepare for state testing. Over the years accountability has brought frustration for teachers who witnessed these changes.

This age of accountability and the emphasis on testing that it produced does not reflect the academic creativity encouraged in most teacher training programs, which highlights a stark contrast between how teachers are trained and how teachers must work. Even Arne Duncan (2011) acknowledged the difficulty in addressing the need to “simultaneously create a system of real and meaningful accountability that doesn't lead to narrowing of the curriculum” (para. 9). This contradiction produces a variety of public opinions on the role of teachers, opinions that are often negative and not always grounded in truth. Unfortunately, classroom teachers bear this burden as they try to balance the need to carry out the latest policy or curriculum changes and the task of creating positive meaningful learning experiences.

One factor that is not often addressed in the political media is that teachers play a central role in the public opinion. Tyack and Cuban (1995) described the complicated intricacies of educational reform and how practitioners dealing with unwanted reform grow to resent policymakers due to their lack of realistic understandings of how schools work. They assert that it is practitioners who ultimately make a reform successful or not by way of implementation. This cycle continues as politicians often accuse practitioners of not being competent. The concept of measuring teacher effectiveness is often a subjective idea that is dressed up as facts and adorned with misleading statistics to fuel the fire of politics. Regardless of how we got to the point where education is a focal point of political debate, there is an increase in accountability that is now a part of our culture. Given that this aspect of American education will likely not end, the real task is to address it in a proactive and professional manner so that teachers have ownership over the outcomes of which they are held accountable.

In order to make sense of the variety of opinions and attitudes concerning education reform, it is important to re-examine the purpose for reform. Darling-Hammond (2010) points out that advocates of standards-based reform hoped that the use of standardized testing would improve curriculum and instruction by highlighting areas of need and ultimately allow a reallocation of resources to produce better equity. Unfortunately, over the last two decades the mismanagement of resources and poor interpretation of policies has resulted in a steady decline in overall access and progress, particularly in California (Darling-Hammond, 2010). There must be an ongoing re-examination of our reforms and the theories that drive them. However, teachers must be at the center of this process.

Establishing the public sphere for educators. Since a free public education is one of the shining elements of a successful democratic society, American educators must strive to maintain not only the democratic values of justice throughout our profession, but also create spaces and opportunities for theoretical discussion and practical collaboration that reflects the democratic process.

By nature, teaching is a political act and represents a manifestation of our democratic values. Even our Social Studies/History standards repeatedly describe the need for learning democratic values and the responsibility of citizenship. One facet of teaching as a political act that can easily maintain its integrity is the process of sharing and constructing theories in a public sphere. Brookfield (2005) argues that the decline of the public sphere is a problem. This public sphere is “the informal arena in which citizens meet to talk through societal crises and issues” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 219). It seems that mandated training by an employer would not reflect the informal arena Brookfield described. Instead, the model proposed in this article would involve a neutral space to serve as a public sphere.

This public sphere is necessary for people in a democratic society to theorize about their world. Brookfield (2005) defines theorizing as “generating provisional explanations that help us understand and act in the world...we theorize so we can understand what’s happening to us and so that we can take informed actions” (p. 4). This process of theorizing in a public sphere is needed to adapt to problems in education. Brookfield (2005) explains that theory and practice are conjoined. He wrote, “all practice is theoretically informed...theory always contains practical implications” (p. 349). However, without the public sphere to collaborate, half of our pedagogy is diminished. We face the danger of becoming all practice and no theory.

Effective Teacher-Led Professional Development

In an argument for teacher-led learning, Dyer (2013) describes a few elements that make this process worthwhile for participants: choice, flexibility, incremental steps, and supportive accountability. Many more models for teacher growth feature these elements now. It seems that the field of education is beginning to trust teachers with more responsibility. In fact, many administrators see a larger return on investment by having teachers train one another due to a heightened collegiality, professionalism, and pride (Education World, 2015).

Patton, Parker, and Tannehill (2015) criticize many of the traditional teacher workshops for failing to follow through, support, and give opportunities to teachers to make appropriate growth. They advocate for teacher-led professional development because it can promote professional capital for teachers. These researchers listed several core features of effective teacher-led professional development. Trainings must (a) be based on teachers’ needs, (b) acknowledge learning as a social process, (c) include collaborative opportunities, (d) provide sustainability, (e) treat teachers as active learners, (f) enhance teachers’ pedagogical skills and content knowledge, (g) offer facilitation that reflects objectivity and care, and (h) focus on learning outcomes for students (Patton et al., 2015). These core features provide criteria for constructing quality teacher-led professional development.

The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (NFIE, 2000) advocates for the creation of centers that can function as a virtual or physical place for teachers to work together and collaborate. One key point made in an NFIE (2000) report was that successful centers are often created by unions, partnerships, or universities, and are held at locations that are not directly affiliated with school districts. Additionally, the report advocates for the involvement of parent groups, businesses, and other partnerships that can support professional development for teachers (NFIE, 2000). This element of neutral spaces and parties seems valuable and is often left out by many traditional professional development trainings.

Diaz-Maggioli (2004) compares and contrasts the characteristics of traditional professional development with the visionary elements of teacher-led professional development. According to Diaz-Maggioli (2004), positive elements of teacher-led professional development

are that they are collectively constructed, inquiry-based, feature tailor-made techniques, and use context-specific programs. These elements are consistent with the perspective of Dyer (2013) and the NFIE (2000) report in that the best professional development trainings are created by teachers for teachers and conducted in a comfortable and perhaps neutral environment.

Methodology & Data Collection

Given the grassroots nature of the beginning of these conferences, there were no data gathered at the first conference. By the end of that first event, it was clear I had to be more intentional about my planning and gather some data to better inform the planning of future conferences.

This qualitative study utilizes participant evaluation surveys administered to all participants at the end of the 2nd and 3rd conferences, and online questionnaires to four presenters. These four presenters were selected because they had each participated in more than one conference and therefore had experience with the outcomes of at least two of these events.

Each response from both evaluations and questionnaires was coded by topic to generate common themes. Both sets of data were analyzed to determine participants' perspectives about the event to determine the benefits of a bottom-up structure.

Conference Participants & Presenters

These conferences were held at a university. The use of this neutral space, as opposed to a district-sponsored event, allowed participants from all over to attend. In fact, there were teachers, parents, and administrators from several communities that spanned about 80 miles at the third event. Although the location may not have been as neutral for professors who worked at this university or preservice teachers who were students at this university, it should be noted that this event was completely optional; faculty were not required to participate and students were not offered any points towards grades for attending. A majority of the participants who attended each event were educators from outside of the university. Additionally, support for the events were provided by a local non-profit organization. It is also important to note that while this non-profit organization served educational purposes, it was not directly connected to the university or school districts prior to this event, thus maintaining a neutral position in regard to the workshops and trainings offered.

For the purpose of this data, the term *participants* refers to all people who attended the conferences. All people who attended the events completed evaluation surveys. This includes presenters, since they each attended other workshops when they were not presenting. The term *presenter* refers to those participants who led a workshop for a group of participants. These workshops were 45 minutes long and involved a variety of topics. The presenters offered a diverse background in role, age, ethnicity, gender and experience. Some presenters were invited to present again after successful workshops in the first conference. However, by the third event, presenters included not only these experienced educators, but also parents, new teachers, administrators, professors, and retired educators.

Presenters were selected through an online submission process. Because of the grassroots nature of the event, the first set of presenters were mostly my own friends and colleagues along with a few educators from surrounding districts who responded to a mass email sent through a university list of contacts. After this first conference, an email list was compiled of all participants. This list, in addition to university contacts such as alumni and partners, was used to

promote the second and third event. By the third event, the number of proposals for workshops grew to the point where I had to pull together a panel of other instructors to review proposals and make selections. A majority were educators who had never even been to this university before this event. Selections were made based on the quality of the proposal in relation to the relevance of the topic for practitioners and the connection to social justice themes.

Findings

The overall findings of this study indicate that the participants appreciated the neutral environment, the practical topics, and the diverse presenters. Each finding could be attributed to several factors. It is important to note that all data was gathered from participants who attended an optional, free conference on a Saturday. Therefore, it would not be fair to assume that their opinions reflect the general feelings of most educators, but rather a certain population who are seeking additional opportunities for networking, leadership, ideas, and support. Additionally, the theme of each conference revolved around social justice. Therefore, it would also be safe to argue that a certain population of educators would be drawn to such topics, and may not reflect the general teaching population.

Participant Evaluation Surveys

The evaluation surveys were distributed to all participants at the second and third event. Participants were given time to answer the following:

1. Which workshops did you attend?
2. What did you enjoy about this conference?
3. What would you like to see at future conferences?

For the purpose of this research, the majority of the analysis focuses on answers for the second question: *What did you enjoy about this conference?* While I grant that this is somewhat of a skewed question, it is important to note that data was gathered for the expressed purpose of growing the conference by identifying what worked well. The two main themes that were clearly represented in these surveys are an appreciation for the practical topics covered in sessions and an appreciation for the overall environment created by the presenters.

Practical topics. One prevalent theme found in the responses on the participant evaluation surveys described an appreciation for practical topics such as increasing parental involvement, specific teaching strategies, implementing Common Core State standards, and utilizing technology.

Parental involvement was the most common practical topic discussed at the third event. One participant wrote, "I enjoyed learning new strategies and methods on how to get parents involved." In addition, some difficult social topics were addressed by parent groups from a personal perspective. Another participant wrote, "I enjoyed hearing about different ways to get parents involved with school, especially parents who come from low-income backgrounds and speak little to no English." The added benefit in this case seems to be that parents from the low-income Spanish speaking communities were involved as presenters and shared ideas from their own experiences. This event took the unique approach of allowing parents to become experts on parent involvement.

Another prevalent topic described on the participant evaluation surveys was the use of practical teaching strategies. There were many workshops on specific teaching strategies that utilized sample lessons and strategies for implementing Common Core Standards and using technology. Each of these presentations were designed and presented by educators who have tested the strategies in their own schools. Participants seemed to enjoy the firsthand experience and original content. One participant wrote that he or she enjoyed "...putting teacher creativity and innovation at the foreground." The added benefit of sharing strategies with other local educators is the positive environment that results when sharing with those who have a similar role or experience.

Overall academic environment. The second most prevalent theme described in participant evaluation surveys was the environment. Participants enjoyed opportunities to collaborate with other educators, engage in group discussions, and network to share their ideas in the future. One participant wrote, "Being able to hear and discuss the topics and issues that are relevant and current to today's teachers, students, and parents is both exciting and very informative." Another participant wrote, "[It was] great to connect with other teachers/admin in [the] area to hear what they are doing, what works, [and] what doesn't." This event ended with a whole group discussion in which participants shared what they learned in sessions and shared ideas for implementing strategies in their classrooms and schools. This contrasts with traditional professional development that may not offer as much time for collaboration when driven by a specific top-down agenda.

An added benefit of this positive academic environment is that new teachers can glean knowledge from experienced teachers. One preservice teacher in the graduate program at this university wrote, "I really enjoyed the real-life experience as a...student. I don't really have a ton of experience in a classroom and learning different techniques is really valuable to me. The culture workshop was especially interesting for me because I want to stress individuality in my connections with students." These topics of culture and connecting with students is often covered in preservice teaching programs, but there seems to be an added benefit when local educators are sharing practical experiences as they cover these topics. The opportunity for new and experienced teachers to work side by side discussing topics helps to create a positive academic learning environment for all.

Emphasis on the diversity of presenters. One aspect of the environment stems from the diversity of presenters. An overwhelming number of respondents to the "What did you enjoy about this conference?" question answered the presenters. Some 74% of participants gave an answer that specifically pointed out the diverse background of presenters and the unique perspective gained from this factor. Participants seemed to truly appreciate an opportunity to hear from administrators, teachers, and parents from outside of their own school district. Many pointed out that the presenters created a positive environment because they were approachable and adaptable, while still being practical. It seems that the variety of school districts represented at this conference created an environment in which stakeholders could openly share ideas to others in similar communities. This is in contrast to many professional developments that are controlled by school districts; in other words, a top-down structure creates a different environment. There seems to be a comfort in knowing that a strategy worked in another school community or classroom. In a top-down structure of professional development, this unique environment would be more difficult to accomplish.

Presenter Questionnaires

The second source of data came from questionnaires administered via email to presenters from the event. Four presenters were selected to answer a questionnaire based on their prominent level of involvement with the conferences. Each presenter was asked the following questions:

1. Why did you decide to present at the event?
2. What did you feel was accomplished through the event based on what you and other participants experienced?
3. What made this event different than other trainings/workshops you have participated in?

Presenter 1. This presenter decided to present because she wanted to connect with other special education teachers who want to integrate technology as a tool to ensure that students are exposed to standards-based instruction that promotes success in general education environments. She wrote, “I decided to present because I want to share these strategies with other dynamic and new teachers that are committed to developing 21st Century Skills in their classrooms and reaching out to connect with the needs of their students....” Presenter 1 also described how she appreciated having a variety of people in her workshop.

Presenter 1 expressed an appreciation for an appropriate venue to share strategies with other like-minded educators. She used the term “outreach,” which indicates that, to her, this event served more than one purpose; rather than simply a conference for educators, the event also served as an opportunity to create positive change.

Presenter 2. This presenter described the convenience of this conference and the easy access to information. The informal environment was important to him. He wrote, “It was simply teachers sharing tools. No hype, no waste-of-time keynote that doesn’t relate to me; just tools displayed for those who are interested in using them. It was more intimate, which was pretty nice.... I felt wanted there.” This presenter went on to describe how he also appreciated the discussion time throughout the conference. His responses imply that this presenter is an educator who does not often seek out such opportunities. There are untapped teaching talents in every school community. Many educators are not seeking opportunities to present at conferences or escalate their career into leadership, but simply desire to share practical ideas with others.

Presenter 3. This presenter enjoyed the positive environment created by the conference. He wrote, “It was good to present a relevant topic to colleagues in a forum that was open and flexible.... It was a non-threatening environment attended by teachers and others who were there of their own accord and were simply looking for a positive experience.” Presenter 3’s use of the phrase “non-threatening environment” may be a comment on previous experiences or on the lack of authority involved in creating the event. All participants attended by choice, rather than being forced by their bosses. This creates an environment in which all participants can feel comfortable to express their ideas and contribute without feeling as though they will be evaluated. Just as a classroom setting is more conducive to learning without threat, a learning environment for teachers is also enhanced by this quality.

Presenter 4. This presenter described her two goals for participating in this event: mentoring new teachers and networking with other experienced teachers. She commented, “As educators we are learners—I appreciate hearing from other educators from the inland area. It is only through sharing and collaboration that we can move the entire profession forward.” Presenter 4 went on to describe an appreciation for the grass-roots feel of the conference.

Implications

Considerations for a Bottom-Up Structure

When planning or facilitating a teacher-led professional development, there are several factors one must consider before this model is adopted. The effectiveness, resources, and roles of participants should be considered in a bottom-up structure. The example provided by the series of conferences referenced in this study can serve as a basis for understanding the strengths of this model, but should not be considered prescriptive; by nature, a bottom-up structured training would be designed specifically to meet the needs of the unique needs of its community.

A bottom-up structure is one way to promote quality teacher-led professional development that also serves the democratic values of recreating a public sphere in which practical strategies can be shared. This public sphere created by these conferences seemed to encourage participants to question, share ideas, and collaborate openly. Participants discussed struggles they had in their schools, difficult topics such as race and income, and networked with others to continue sharing ideas.

Reflections on effectiveness. Using Patton, et al.’s (2015) core features of effective teacher-led trainings, the details of this conference were analyzed as an example to determine if this bottom-up structure serves as an effective model. The following chart indicates my personal reflections as the organizer of the conference concerning areas of strengths and weaknesses that could be addressed in future teacher-led, bottom-up professional development.

Table 1
Reflections on Effectiveness

Effective Teacher-Led Professional Development	My reflections on the three conferences referenced in this article
Trainings must be based on teachers’ needs	These conference topics were based upon submissions of ideas from participants. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to select which workshops they attended.
Acknowledge learning as a social process	Each conference included time for discussion after each workshop. However, occasionally the flexible nature of the conference made the schedule difficult to follow.

Table 1 Continued

Effective Teacher-Led Professional Development	My reflections on the three conferences referenced in this article
Include collaborative opportunities	At the end of the conference, participants had time to reflect and discuss how they would use some of the strategies and tools they attained. A more structured opportunity for participants to collaborate in groups could be advantageous.
Provides sustainability	Because this conference was not mandated by an employer, it is difficult to follow up with participants to support the implementation of what they learned. This could possibly be pursued through online tools.
Treats teachers as active learners	This conference structure relies completely on participants to be active throughout the learning. Participants shared, discussed, gave feedback, and brainstormed together.
Enhances teachers' pedagogical skills and content knowledge	This conference's structure lent itself to focusing on teacher-created pedagogical skills and content knowledge.
Offers facilitation that reflects objectivity and care	It is up to the coordinators of such an event to be sure that the facilitation is done with the right attitude. One element that helped support this was the theme of social justice that was weaved throughout the first conference, which set a positive tone.
Focuses on learning outcomes for students	Given that the presenters began as all local teachers who wanted to tackle the current changes to Common Core, outcomes for students was the root of the conference. Then when expanded, other presenters followed this lead. All workshops selected were focused on practical approaches that support learning outcomes.

Note. Adapted from Patton et al. (2015, pp. 29-35).

Resources. In order for a bottom-up professional development to occur, there must be adequate resources. The findings of this research indicate that creating the right environment is essential for optimal learning. One major aspect of this environment is a neutral space. In this case a university served this purpose. Other neutral spaces could include teachers' unions, churches, community centers, and other community organizations.

Another important element to consider when trying to create a positive environment is community involvement. In this case, a local nonprofit organization assisted with soliciting resources to make the event successful. For example, a bakery donated muffins and the university purchased pizza for lunch. Several local businesses participated by donating a variety of raffle prizes such as gift cards, food items, t-shirts, and classroom supplies. The representative from the non-profit organization explained to the participants that many local businesses want to help educational causes, but do not often know how. When given an opportunity to help teachers, they were excited to give. This element seems simple, but the overall meaning behind it is that educators, parents, and community members who take the time to improve schools were shown appreciation. According to this representative, “It’s not the gift card for a free cup of coffee that matters, it is the expression of support from these businesses that gives everyone a positive feeling.”

New roles for teachers. Because these conferences focused on teachers, but included parents and community members, the positionality of teachers changed. For example, at several sessions teachers shared their perspectives on Common Core and their ideas for implementing it. Parents, administrators, and other teachers had the opportunity to hear presenters’ ideas and thus teachers who are presenting take on the role of an expert and become a resource for others.

The new roles that are created through a bottom-up structure of teacher-led professional development reflect elements of leadership. As participants at such an event have the chance to listen to other educators in a neutral space, they can then react, ask questions, affirm ideas, and create new ones. Teachers who presented experienced a situation where their role changed to now include an expertise that others view as a resource. The discussions at the conference as well as the surveys indicate that participants felt they had learned something new and appreciated the alternate structure to traditional professional development. Such an event allows a normal classroom teacher to become a resource to another educator as well as the opportunity to return to their school site with new ideas, which allows the possibility of future leadership and growth. When teachers engage in such efficacy building activities, it may strengthen their optimism and adaptability, which can positively impact their overall school culture and student outcomes. (McLennan, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016).

New roles for administrators. The traditional administrator controls every major decision within a school. She or he oversees the teaching and arranges for new opportunities. When an administrator chooses to learn from teachers to take new ideas to their own school site, they are expressing several progressive values at once. First, she or he is showing respect for the profession of teachers as experts. In fact, research indicates the abilities to learn from others and seek innovative techniques are among the most common traits of successful administrators at blue ribbon schools (McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015). When an administrator attends a conference that is led by teachers, it shows that good leaders also follow. Second, this shows their devotion. This kind of a conference is not mandated by a district; therefore, leaders who attend demonstrate a commitment to improving learning above and beyond their required responsibilities. Lastly, when an administrator attends a bottom-up structured conference that includes educators from other communities, it shows that they are connected to others in the field and willing to keep an open mind to what other educators are doing. When these administrators return to their school sites with ideas, this can create a positive learning environment at their school as they lead with an open mind and a willingness to try new strategies.

New roles for community members. In a traditional professional development setting, parents, professors, business owners, and other community members have little involvement. However, these people are integral in the overall process of education. Parents often have little input in the decisions made at their local schools. Yet, their taxes pay for the resources and, more importantly, their children are the student population. If parents are invited to participate in the process of improving education on some level in each community, they are more likely to support and communicate with teachers.

Professors are experts in their field who often experience the unfortunate scenario of being disconnected from local schools. They are charged with the task of preparing future teachers, even though many of them have not been in the classroom for decades. These experts spend years researching and writing about education and are often not consulted for support after teachers complete their degree or credential. Involving them in professional development serves two purposes. First, it allows them to share their expertise. Second, it allows professors to stay connected with current classroom practices, which will create a positive cycle of better-prepared teachers.

Business owners are farthest removed from our local schools. As business owners have opportunities to get involved in improving local schools, they may feel more inclined to donate time and resources as well as raise awareness throughout the community for educational purposes.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there were clear positive outcomes from this set of teacher-led professional development conferences. Aspects of this professional development that participants enjoyed most—practical topics, comfortable environment, and diverse presenters—are factors that could most likely be reproduced in any school community. This article was not meant to discredit traditional professional development options conducted through private industry or school districts. There is no doubt that these trainings indeed serve a specific purpose of aligning practices within school communities and reaching common goals. However, at this turning point in education when standards have changed and accountability is morphing into new expectations for educators, it is essential for teachers to establish some new leadership aspects to their role within this system. Therefore, it could benefit school communities to adopt this model in addition to other options for professional development.

The Proposed Model

The model for professional development proposed in this article includes the following:

- a theme relevant to local educators;
- a facilitator that can make objective decisions regarding recruiting presenters and organizing topics;
- a neutral space in the community such as a college or community center that will ensure free entrance for participants;
- a mechanism to communicate and advertise the mission of the training to local educators such as fliers or mass email lists (it must be clear that the training is for teachers by teachers);
- time throughout the training for reflection, discussion, networking, and theorizing;
- a method to gather data such as surveys for feedback; and
- community members willing to help promote the event and donate some resources such as paper for handouts, development of a website, refreshments, etc.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that a positive academic learning environment is necessary for teachers to embrace a role of leadership. Bottom-up structured professional development seems to provide the flexibility for educators and community members to engage in meaningful collaboration and construct knowledge. When teachers lead professional development, the focus will remain practical while a neutral space can allow for a democratic forum needed to create positive change. The outcomes of these bottom-up professional development conferences imply that any community can tap into the talents of their educators and find stakeholders willing to support the learning process with resources. Such a conference does not replace other professional development, but has the potential to add richness of content, a network of new colleagues, and opportunities for efficacy building and academic engagement for educators and stakeholders. This addition to school communities can promote efficacy that reinforces efforts by district trainings or formal professional development offered through other means as teachers lead efforts to refine their practice outside of mandated trainings. While it would be beneficial for school districts to promote and support this sort of bottom-up teacher-led professional development, it would not be necessary.

In this pivotal time of change in American education with new standards and a lingering achievement gap, it seems almost necessary for teachers to reclaim this aspect of leadership and reposition themselves at the center of their school communities to not only carry out change, but also to determine the design of this change.

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