

What can
motivate
teachers to
learn?

ASK THEM

By Michelle Vaughan and James McLaughlin

“**W**hat kind of preparation or ongoing learning is required if teachers are to provide the best possible reading instruction for all students in their classrooms?” (Bean, 2004, p. 12). This foundational question is one that all schools should consider in planning professional development that will give teachers the knowledge and skills they require to address student needs.

While professional development has taken on many forms throughout the years, from one-day workshops to action research, it is still the main component of school improvement plans and recertification programs. After examining professional development experiences of six teachers in four elementary schools, we propose that the traditional definition of professional development should be expanded to include any learning opportunity that provides teachers with new skills, competencies, or ways of thinking needed



for improvement within the classroom.

We conducted a case study in four elementary schools that demonstrated consistent gains in reading achievement, despite their failure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress. By examining the professional development experiences of six teachers in these schools who reported high levels of change on a wider survey, we aimed to identify what type of professional development is required for teachers to provide exemplary instruction. While research in the field of professional development has outlined the components of professional development that most often relate to teacher change (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001), it has also determined that many professional development opportunities still lack the characteristics and content necessary to promote a change in teacher practice (Bean, 2004; Fullan, 2007).

We saw significant evidence that it was the intentions



teachers took into professional development experiences that had the greatest impact on teacher change. In any given year, teachers experienced professional development offered by an institution (i.e. state, district, school), professional development teachers sought out themselves to fill their gaps in knowledge, and learning experiences that were serendipitous moments of growth.

The institutionalized professional development was intended to acquaint teachers with new programs or textbooks, outline new reforms adopted by the district

or state, or familiarize teachers with new school or district procedures. However, it was the intentional actions of the teachers within those institutionalized experiences that determined the impact on their learning and growth. While each teacher had a path of professional development that was unique to their goals as an educator, they all encountered situations that accelerated their learning or served as a detour from their paths. What follows is a profile of each teacher that provides a context for their learning and connects their experiences within a larger framework exploring the challenges that educators must successfully navigate.

PROFILES

- Sally Owen's classroom is a bright room filled with a myriad of posters and words in English and French. Owen is from Guadalupe and is the only dual-language teacher on her grade level, teaching a class of 11 children in English and French. Owen's classroom mirrors her personality and work ethic as she strives for efficiency in her teaching. Her room is structured in a way that best suits how her children work throughout the day.

- As you enter Betty Galt's classroom, you cannot be sure which wall represents the front of the room and which is the back. Lines are blurred between student and teacher work areas. There are 21 students packed into this small area, a vast difference from Owen's tiny class roster. Galt speaks openly of the difficulties this class faces, where 18 of her 21 students are either retained, English language learners, or special education students. She has students who are nonspeakers as well as students who, according to their age, should be graduating from elementary school by now.

- Heather Penney is a National Board Certified teacher who also serves as a mentor for teachers new to the school or to teaching. She is considered a veteran on her team, although she is still relatively new to the grade level. Along with the team leader, she does the majority of the planning for the team and makes decisions that affect the direction their curriculum takes. Despite all these accomplishments, Penney depicts herself as a novice teacher who is still learning the ropes of her career.

- Walking into Sue Perch's classroom is a vastly different experience than being in Penney's room; however, the outcome is similar. Perch's classroom is filled to the brim with stimulating posters, charts, easels, books, and teacher supplies that leave one wondering where to look first. Every available space on the front board is filled with writing, and the topics represented in the front of the room range

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from science to social studies to grammar. All of the items in Perch's room are geared toward assisting her students in their academic success.

- For Virginia Park, teaching is a second career. Born into a family of teachers, Park graduated college with a music therapy degree and then entered into the business world to begin her career. A few years later, Park left the corporate world and jumped into teaching “feet-first without really knowing anything, just taking tests and passing them,” she said. Although it was a scary prospect, Park has transitioned into a well-rounded educator who continues to seek additional endorsements to build her base knowledge of education.

- Mary Pratt has been a familiar face in her school since the opening of the community elementary school. She has spent more than 12 years teaching in the school, 10 of them as a member of the 3rd-grade team. As a veteran teacher, she could have easily fallen victim to a routine and lesson plans that remain unchanged year after year. However, Pratt believes that “time changes with children” and that a teacher must change as well in order for students to be successful.

ON THE PATH

The teachers in this study reported a high level of change in their practice within the previous three years. The question is: Why do these teachers choose to change? What professional development do they encounter in a given year that incites change and moves them towards their goals for professional growth? Through in-depth interviews and observations, each teacher discussed her intentions for professional development and how the intentions of administrators and peers impacted her growth.

Professional development that stemmed from personal intention had a significant impact on changes in instruction. For teachers like Galt, who attended her teacher education program in another country, she hopes that she will be able to align her knowledge with the techniques emphasized by her county. For Park and Owen, who came into teaching as a second career, it is the drive to obtain the knowledge they missed without an education degree. For Perch, Pratt, and Penney, it is the students they teach, who often are not prepared for the grade they are in and

lack the support to close the gap at home. Every teacher, like each child in a classroom, is motivated to learn and change for a different reason.

In one school within this study, there was an unusual blend of institutionalized professional development and personalized professional development. The intentions of the teachers within this school influenced the decision making about professional development. Perch explained how, through careful collaboration and teacher autonomy, the personal intentions of her peers

drove professional development decisions. Perch calls herself a product of her community. Raised in a rural agricultural community that had the highest rate of AIDS infection in the mid-1980s and the second-highest violent crime rate in the country in 2003, she is proud that she has stayed in her town to improve the education of the children in her community. Her school is a beacon of success in the district, boasting high test scores and a commitment to learning that visitors feel the moment they enter the building. She attributed much of her growth and success to the support from her principal. “We have a real good rapport with our principal,” Perch says. “She says that we know our students, and she lets us do what we need to do with our students.” This autonomy has provided a space for Perch and her colleagues to experiment with instructional models and strategies that fit the specific needs of their children. They are not only supported emotionally, but financially as well. They have a stake in the purchase of resources and make a habit of selling their ideas to the principal to obtain the necessary funds to implement them. In addition, Perch takes her development a step further by volunteering to teach in a model classroom set up for peer observation. Instead of bringing in outside staff developers on short professional development days, the faculty built a mock classroom and take turns modeling lessons for each other. This type of staff development and the support of administration served as a catalyst for teacher change for Perch and her colleagues.

All teachers interviewed spoke at length about the role their peers played in their development. Within many schools, groups of teachers intentionally reshaped the institutionalized professional development mandated by their district or school to fit their needs. Whether it was in the form of problem solving about a struggling student or sharing resources, teachers used the mandated forums of learning team meetings to collaborate and meet their professional development goals. Learning team meetings were mandatory data analysis meetings held every seven days in Galt's school. She spoke about how her team altered the topics of those meetings to meet their needs: “Learning team meetings help me, too, because then we sit together and we do best practices. So I hear what is going on next door and I try it, and sometimes it works; sometimes, it's not really my style.”

Galt felt that she could experiment with her instructional style and valued the advice from her team members because they endured the same struggles that she faced each day with her students. Both Galt and Perch grew as educators for different reasons, but they are both moving forward on their individual growth paths and teach in environments that serve as catalysts for change.

DETOURS

The journey of teacher change is filled with detours, and the teachers within this study spoke about the frustration they

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felt when asked to deviate from their chosen direction. Detours came in the form of both federally and district-mandated initiatives that involved changes in curriculum and pedagogy, and district-mandated professional development.

Most teachers can recall a professional development session that left them feeling uninspired or confused. For Penney, the mandated workshops produced an amalgam of curriculum changes that added to her frustration level and muddled the learning objectives she was teaching. Many of these workshops addressed specific areas of the Reading First curriculum, required by the state department of education, and implementation was checked closely by local and state officials. In a school that dedicated \$25,000 to professional development that year, Penney reflected on her perception of the sessions she was attending: “In 30 minutes, how much are you going to learn? Really, these trainings are a quick 45 minutes or whatever — ‘here and try to go do it.’ How much can you really go back to use it (if) you don’t have time or they start in the middle of the year?”

Every teacher in this study repeated this message. The short, one-time required workshops actually deterred them from their development. Coupled with implementation checks following these often-expensive workshops, the teachers were left confused and stressed about what was expected of them.

Worse than the short workshop model was the “train-the-trainer” model the district used to implement new curriculum approaches in schools. In this staff development model, a few teachers would attend an off-site session, where they learned about a new instructional approach and then would offer the session to their peer at their schools. This model was flawed, for several reasons. First, the presenting teacher was not an expert on the information they were being asked to transmit and thus could not address questions and provide follow-up appropriately. Also, the buy-in from the staff was extremely low because they were not provided with a firsthand explanation of why the changes were being implemented at their school. Perch talked about her frustration with being held accountable for implementation without proper training: “If we could have that hands-on person to be there when we have questions, someone always there to answer our questions, it would make it much easier when we go to our learning team meetings. We just need a model — just don’t give it to us and say, ‘You need to do this.’”

Most of the administrators in this study served as detours to teacher change instead of as catalysts. The most prevalent challenges were high turnover within the main office and conflicting ideologies concerning curriculum and instructional practices. At Park’s school, it seemed that as soon as she was beginning to get comfortable with an administrator, that person would be replaced and goals for the school and the teachers would shift.

“It is unfortunate because there has always been a change in our administration,” Park says. “It’s either been the principal or assistant principal; it’s never been a cohesive two people for a long period of time.”

READING THE ROAD AHEAD

Despite the detours they experienced, the teachers in this study reported a high level of change in the previous three years of instruction. How and why do teachers persevere and grow in spite of their circumstances?

All detours eventually end. Whether it is a state-mandated program that is no longer supported or an administrator who leaves the school, teachers re-evaluate their paths and read the road ahead to determine how their professional development goals align with student needs. At the end of each detour, teachers must question how their instruction changed and determine what adaptations they will keep or discard. Interestingly, all the teachers viewed these questions through the same lens: the needs of their students. Galt says, “I keep thinking of my students. They are my priority, and I think that whatever there is for me to do to help them move on, that’s what they need to do.”

Since student needs change from year to year, the intentions for professional development change along with them. Teachers continue to seek new information to meet those needs or adapt the institutionalized professional development to fit their goals. The teachers within this study took control of their learning and made their experiences work for them. Instead of being hampered by the mandated 30-minute workshop, they recognized its flaws and altered its components. The intentional influence participants have on their learning has propelled their growth forward and redefined what is considered professional development at their schools.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

At the state and national level, stakeholders need to address teacher involvement in professional development. Teachers felt confined by the restrictive methods they were asked to use from mandated programs, such as the Reading First program, and did not understand the rationale for required changes. While the district in this study carries an A rating according to standardized test scores, some schools continue to fail year after year without proper remediation. The four schools profiled here have slowly and steadily increased reading scores, yet all teachers discussed the district as a power that seemed to work against them instead of with them. An increase in flexibility and trust by district decision makers may result in more productivity and innovation in the classrooms.

Also, the “one-size-fits-all” method of professional development and implementation is not working for these teachers. Teachers are expected to differentiate to meet students’ individual needs, yet their professional development is not differentiated to their needs. Teachers within this study reported

a higher level of change when they had ownership over their learning and a role in the decision making.

We also recommend that school administrators re-examine professional development topics addressed at their schools. Each teacher mentioned the community in which their students live as a challenge to their learning. Providing professional development in instructional techniques and methods that relate to and engage the community of the student population is an intriguing enterprise. By creating a partnership between teachers, parents, and community members, districts could develop a plan that focuses on how to understand the community, modify traditional practices to maximize the strengths of each community, and examine how teachers and parents view students' problems at school (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008).

Good teachers consistently develop collaborative relationships with their peers and enrich their knowledge base through personalized professional experiences outside of the institution. The teachers in this study intentionally sought out their professional development or altered institutionalized professional development to meet their needs. They expanded our definition of what constitutes professional development to include any learning opportunity that provides them with new skills, competencies, or ways of thinking needed for improvement within the classroom. These six teachers navigated the detours placed

in their path and are now rejoining the main road. There will be other detours ahead for the teachers to navigate, but we are confident that their strong intentions for meaningful learning will carry them closer to the goals they have for their growth and the growth of their students.

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