THE DRIVE TO STRIVE

AN ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL REFLECTS ON A CAREER BUILT ON CONSTANT LEARNING

By Tameka Osabutey-Aguedje

At different stages of my career, I have experienced, supported, and facilitated professional learning efforts. As an assistant principal, I find that I have learned something of value at each stage. Professional learning that effectively challenges educators at every level resembles the mystique of a firefly (Bibbo & d'Erizans, 2014). And like the blinking of a firefly's light, effective educators attract and inspire others to support professional goals and create a climate that bolsters student achievement and community success.

Just as instructional rounds are important to medical training, instructional rounds in schools are important as well, helping teachers address distractions, routines, and incidents that prevent effective instruction. Moreover, instructional rounds allow teachers to try best practices that increase student engagement. As teachers, leaders, and support staff work together to perform this type of school-based inquiry, followed up with clearly communicated feedback, schools can set specific goals that help staff members improve their own practice by implementing professional learning.

Professional learning jump-started the early years of my career. In 1999, urban schools were a hotbed of research funding for technology integration and the development of professional learning communities. Although I didn't aspire to leadership, the skills I developed made me a teacher leader on a mission.

Shortly after relocating to the Atlanta, Georgia, area to teach at a new middle school, I found myself in a cadre of robust, knowledgeable new teachers with a passion for at-risk students. We relied heavily on the best practices present in the literature on social policy and the needs of the middle school child. We created a professional learning culture that examined student work and dug into the data of the students we served. We contributed time and supported each other's professional growth. These experiences turned out to be assets we took to our respective schools throughout our successive roles.

A FULL PLATE OF RESPONSIBILITIES

An educator's typical day is composed of a series of 15-minute problem-solving segments interspersed with interruptions of tragedy, hilarity, anger, and noise.

As an assistant principal, I aspire to set the school's vision, increase parental engagement, know the names of all the students, know the birthdays of all the children of faculty members, know the number of students on free and reduced lunch (by gender and ethnicity), develop strategies for increasing test performance, and protect the constitutional rights of every student.

Add to this my participation in teacher observations, with preconferences and post-conferences, and the hours required to type up the observation. The paperwork associated with the evaluation routines for a large faculty is astonishing. And principals are expected to be at every athletic event or club meeting and participate in the civic life of a community after the school day is over.

To these expectations, add the paperwork required by the central office as well as staying up-to-date on the latest instructional materials, teaching methodology, and discipline strategies.

With the increasing emphasis on responding to email and returning telephone messages promptly, a 21st-century principal's skills also include measuring the response time from when a parent makes a request and that request is answered (Zepeda, 2014).

My responsibilities measure up to those of teachers, students, and parents working to develop a collaborative vision that encompasses and addresses the responsibilities of our roles. I am confident that my experience will help me create a climate of learning at my next school.

— Tameka Osabutey-Aguedje

We tried to mirror the research on how to bring one's school environment to life (Reeves, 2006). Working together on a few shared goals that were important to us, we were able to focus on school improvement

before any of us really understood what that structured process was.

FIGHT FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Educators quickly realize that professional learning consumes a large portion of their time because of the array of state requirements, district rollouts, and schoolwide initiatives that are part of their duties. The decision to maximize expectations and fight for student success is dependent on charting a path through these duties, requests, and obligations, which seem to affect operation of the school each day.

Professional development at various stages should address difficulties students, teachers, and principals face — issues such as student relationships, grant writing, or home-to-school triage, which are difficult to simulate in meaningful ways (Dunaway, Bird, Flowers, & Lyons, 2010).

Using professional learning, online resources, and mentors to examine my daily practice drove my improvement. I realized that it was important to learn and grow rather than just try to survive on the job. Learning as a way to improve professional practice became the message that I shared with team members, new mentees, or any panel that I joined.

Taking a broader learning approach to professional improvement helped with long-range planning and conveyed to others that I was willing to listen and support ways that could improve our school. By providing constructive feedback, such as encouraging the development of a personal growth plan as well as stressing the importance of identifying personal resources, the teachers with whom I interacted were able to develop as instructional leaders.

Now when I encounter those 7th-grade teachers who started their careers at the turn of the century, we reflect on the all the solutions we had employed for various problems.

PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE PRACTICE

When I started as a teacher, I was exposed to innovative practices during my university practicum in Detroit (Michigan) Public Schools. I wanted to help my toughest students become passionate about science. I appreciated receiving advice from veteran teachers, but most of them were cautionary instead of reflective.

I know those old-school educators were trying to be supportive, and I respected how they provided a listening ear and became the devil's advocate for all the "new" innovative practices that I had suggested. Fortunately, I also encountered professionals who helped me grow instructionally by sharing their best practices.

I reflected on their insights and began to perform the same checks for understanding and responsibility with other teachers and school leaders. I began to look for good teaching practices and left the "but ifs" at home. The decision to stop growing or avoid connections that improve professional practice is not an option that leads to success (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999).

Educators can't help others grow by working in isolation. I joined professional organizations, participated in a math and science partnership grant, and followed professional learning networks on social media to learn strategies and share practices that might aid our school processes.

These activities I now recognize as embedded professional learning. The educators I partnered with believed that instructional leadership skills, the development of a long-term institutional perspective, and the encouragement of networking skills would aid our confidence and ability (Gurley, Anast-May, & Lee, 2015).

SUPPORT FOR NOVICE TEACHERS

As a teacher leader, I was expected to convince co-educators with little desire to solve school problems that they should do so — and without additional pay (Whitaker, 2003). Developing the skills to build consensus, create meaningful adult learning opportunities, and remove obstacles to quality instruction were complex journeys that spanned multiple positions.

Teacher support specialist training gave me a framework for presenting meaningful coaching techniques as a means to support personalized learning. This not only contributed to personal growth but also moved the school district toward its goals (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015).

Gordon, Jacobs, and Solis (2014) describe time and work management as an important aspects of professional learning for all teacher leaders. These known work virtues include skills for organizing people, resources, programs, and activities. They form a discipline that, if not mastered, will throw a monkey wrench into the lives of educational leaders as they ascend.

Those who go from good to great can have a more positive impact on any organization because they have the ability to introduce professional learning skills to new teachers within the context of a meaningful relationship. In addition, leadership team members must learn how to mentor ineffective teachers, which requires a different approach than novice mentorship (Springfield Public Schools, 2014).

As an aspiring school leader, I took great pride in being included in the orientation of new teachers to the school and community. Preparing novice teachers for the first weeks of teaching, understanding the problems experienced by teachers, and presenting problem-solving scenarios for the school day was a professional challenge.

Taking each day as a fresh start, meeting each person where they were instructionally, and steering toward a balanced relationship helped prevent negative criticisms (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004). My growth goals centered on providing tools that would further a teacher's progress to prepare for interactions with students in the classroom, with colleagues, and with parents.

The personalization that surfaces in schools comes from

teacher leaders and principals setting an example through their daily practice. Helping new teachers build relationships with experienced colleagues is another avenue for developing multiple modes of communication, which keeps the professional vision for the school alive.

PULLING THE PIECES TOGETHER

As a female assistant principal, I strive to be resourceful and agile in order to help teachers focus on the total child. Many of the skills that are pivotal to all leadership roles are sometimes perceived as divisive.

Melissa Nixon, a former school principal, writes: "Many times when participating in meetings with teachers and staff about data, lesson planning, and best practices, teachers would often say they were frustrated with my being involved with 'everything.' I was being perceived as a micromanager — a common stereotype about women principals. I countered this stereotype by explaining that, as a principal, I was also the instructional leader of the school who guides the staff team towards the common goal of improving student achievement. Parents and staff then began to see me as an inclusive team member, rather than an intrusive outsider" (Nixon, 2013).

Making the transition from professional learning coach to teacher leader and other roles presented new challenges for me, but when I became an assistant principal, I encountered barriers that made professional coaching more difficult. This was another chance for me to grow and develop as a leader.

The act of communicating clear expectations becomes challenging when staff members have experienced abusive leaders or relied on administrators not having the time to follow through. In those situations, I've found that building relationships around finding solutions to classroom concerns that improve teachers' workloads creates the trust that I'm in it for the long haul.

I invited the faculty to learning opportunities or small-group sessions where we would go over particular strategies for that department (Gupton, 2010). By doing so, we transformed staff culture a few fireflies at time.

Discussing problem-based learning scenarios with specific students or parents during collaborative planning forms the primary pedagogy for aspiring instructional leaders. The goal is to create mini action research projects around known situations, building the motivation needed to surmount problems. This is a must for teacher teams (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

The roles, skills, and attitudes that I developed while supporting and working with others throughout my career played a part in my effectiveness as an instructional leader on multiple initiatives (Short & Jones, 1991). My principal supported my professional growth through opportunities to gain realistic knowledge of practices normally performed by school principals (Dunaway et al., 2010).

Success will depend on my ability to listen to the teachers, students, and parents who know the ropes and have concerns. Together we will develop a collaborative vision.

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