

## START WITH THE PASSION THAT FUELS A TEACHER'S SOUL

I had a conversation recently with a friend, a former English teacher now working at the district level providing staff development geared towards creating alignment in the language arts curriculum. Alignment and quantifiable evidence of impact on student learning seem to be the dual holy grails in schools these days. For my friend, however, convincing teachers to change their curriculum and instruction has been frustrating. He has encountered the very real phenomenon of teacher resistance to outsiders — a resistance he admittedly projected when he was a classroom teacher.



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Inspired by Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), I asked my friend whether there was any talk about passion and integrity at staff development sessions, or if the focus was solely on mandates and standards. After six years as a high school teacher and nine years as a researcher of and with teachers, I must ask: What most supports teachers amidst broader efforts to create change? I have realized, as Palmer illustrates, deep speaks to

deep. And when it comes to professional development, deep passion must speak to deep learning.

I saw this concept come to life at an urban high-poverty school where I spent a year researching teachers engaged in an ambitious effort to reform middle school education. Despite the staff conceptually believing in the school's progressive model, there was widespread discontent. For months, teachers complained that the meetings and staff learning days were too "agenda-driven" and did not help them think through pedagogical challenges they faced. Further, they felt that speaking about any classroom-level difficulties was taboo, indicating a deficiency in themselves rather than communicating the challenges of bringing abstract ideals into particular practice. Ultimately, with no deep discussion, there was no deep teacher learning.

Then in February, one of my participants shared a video of her teaching to all interested staff and asked those

who showed up to help her think through her research question. As she pressed "play" and the screen lit up with young faces and bodies in motion, the realistic complications of the school's learning model were suddenly in front of everyone's eyes. Although still a staff meeting about model implementation, this was the first time that students were there, if only virtually. The video showed that some students were successfully learning, while some were not. The classroom was full of chaos as well as savvy teacher orchestration. After the video, the staff engaged in some of the most stimulating conversation I witnessed the entire year. Teachers and administrators collectively engaged in deep reflection, thinking, analysis, and discussion focused on complex situations involving particular students and learning events. You could also see the passion in the teacher's work. Furthermore, several asked if they could have their classrooms videotaped as well.

There is something fundamentally different about a teacher leading a teacher learning event rather than an outside consultant or even a principal. When done well, such an event hits the integrity nerve, the one that signals teaching is hard but worth it, and that a generous teacher is willing to say, "Here is something I tried that made things a little bit better." My recent investigations into teacher leadership have illuminated the ways that new approaches are more openly received when grounded with actual teacher and student artifacts. This keeps things real. I have also seen teacher leaders engage colleagues on an emotional level by using humor, putting colleagues at ease even as they promote change, and inviting others to make their own adaptations to a suggested collective endeavor. These emotionally attuned learning events appear to be most influential on practice, perhaps because most teachers cannot separate their hearts from their heads. These teachers can't accept blindly, as some policy makers would hope, someone else's version of their kids and classrooms, no matter how threatening the mandate.

To ask someone to inspire without inspiration, or promote learning while in a state of stagnation, is both foolish and wasteful of human resources. Perhaps in every professional learning experience for teachers, we need to ask in some way: Why do you love what you do? Why do you love what you teach? Starting with the passion that fuels the soul of a teacher will allow deeper professional development to speak to deeper learning — for teachers and students. ■

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