What Do Teachers Want from Their Professional Development? Four Emerging Themes
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Great strides have been made in enhancing the professional development opportunities for teachers, but despite these strides, a discrepancy still exists between what is offered to teachers and what they really want from their professional development. The authors examined the literature to help answer the question: What do teachers want from their professional development? In answering the question, they offer four suggestions gleaned from an examination of the literature.

Introduction
Anyone who has ever attended a professional development meeting, session, or seminar has probably walked out thinking, “I survived another meeting that could have been relayed in an e-mail.” The “sit and get” professional development of the past must become a thing of just that…the past. In a 2009 study, Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos found that 90% of U.S. teachers participated in these types of sessions, which had little to no impact on teacher pedagogical practice or student learning.

Although some school or district mandates can only be met through “sit and get” professional development, the expectation of teachers today is to instruct students via methods that will have them engaging in higher order thinking skills and applying those skills across the curriculum. If these are the expectations set forth for the teachers, then should it not be expected that teachers be provided engaging professional development in which they apply the same skills? This disposition, supported by Guskey and Huberman (1995) 20 years ago, is still important enough to recognize. Education is dynamic, and, because researchers are consistently discovering new knowledge about teaching and learning processes, practitioners “must keep abreast of this emerging knowledge base and be prepared to use it to continually refine their skills” (Guskey & Huberman, 1995, p. 1).

In this article, we asked ourselves the question: What do teachers want from their professional development? To answer this question, we examined the literature that focused on teacher development, teacher learning, professional development, and professional development reform. From these examinations, we offer four suggestions.

Thoughts on Professional Development
The most useful professional development focuses on active teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone &
Stuckey, 2014; Mizell, 2010). When sessions are designed with these elements in mind, teachers will develop the pedagogical skills necessary to impact student learning, which is a central concept in any definition of professional development (Blank, de las Alas, & Smith, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Evans, 2014; Wenglinsky, 2000). Furthermore, research also shows that professional development is a social interaction and not merely an isolated experience (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Evans, 2014).

According to Evans (2014), professional development is not always a formal experience. In other words, professional development occurs “implicitly in often unanticipated situations and in unrecognized ways” (p. 181). Furthermore, these situations occur through social interactions that, in turn, develop into learning communities. Likewise, Cunningham, Etter, Platas, Wheeler, and Campbell (2015) argued, “Teacher knowledge and development may also be successfully constructed through relationship-based approaches” (p. 62). Increasing research exists regarding the effectiveness of the relationship-based approaches, such as mentoring, peer coaching, consultation, and technological approaches (e.g., Twitter or Facebook; Callahan, 2016; Joyce & Showers, 1982; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) stated that the most useful professional development emphasizes active participation and a hands-on experience rather than abstract discussions. When teachers are engaged in these types of professional development, their motivation increases and they sense they have more control and responsibility for their professional development rather than perceiving it as mandated (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Therefore, successful professional development for teachers involves components of social interaction, not just the “sit and get.”

Keeping the social-interaction concept of professional development in mind, Evans (2014) examined the types of models used in professional development and the idea that these models were either conceptual or processual in focus. From her findings, she posed the question, “How do people develop personally—either processual or conceptual?” (p. 183). Furthermore, she stated that, for professional development to be successful, two critical factors should be considered: (a) what motivates teachers to engage in professional development, and (b) the process by which the change in teachers’ cognitive discourses occurs (p. 184). The literature indicates the support for collaboration among teachers in their professional development needs and for professional learning communities (Darling-

In their seminal work, Louis and Marks (1998) found that when school personnel develop respect for professional learning communities, the following occur: (a) higher expectations are set for students by the teachers; (b) students can count on their teachers and peers for help in achieving their learning goals; (c) the quality of the classroom pedagogy is considerably higher; and (d) achievement levels of the students are significantly higher. DuFour (2016) has compiled an extensive bibliography of research that provides evidence of these factors being significant (www.allthingsplc.info).

Professional Development Desires

From the examination of the literature, we gleaned several themes that address the desires of teachers in relation to what they wish from their required professional development:

1. Teachers want professional development learning opportunities that are interactive, engaging, and relevant for their students. Teachers want professional development to be interactive and engaging; they want it to be relevant so they do not feel they have wasted their time. Teachers want professional development sessions that will have them actively engaged in the practice of skills, strategies, and techniques. The desire for these opportunities to be modeled is a prime focus, along with hands-on practice of the skills, strategies, and techniques before teachers implement them in their classrooms.

Relevancy for students is another desire for teachers. Professional development should be constructed in a way that will prepare teachers for what their students need most. To prepare students for success, teachers must teach them to learn and, in order to do so, teachers must become active learners themselves.

2. Teachers want professional development learning opportunities that show them a more practical way to deliver content. Professional development is more successful when it is explicitly tied to classroom lessons (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Classroom lessons must be student-focused and driven by meaningful pedagogy interwoven with content. A national study regarding professional development showed that the percentage of teachers participating in sessions related to the content they taught increased from 59% in 2000 to 87% in 2008 (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). Teachers want professional development that they can use immediately to help them prepare and deliver what their students need the most, i.e., skills, techniques, and strategies that allow them to address individual needs and help them tailor differentiated learning for their students.

Changing the classroom into an environment in which deep learning and learners’ needs are valued is not easy, and teachers need assistance and support as they rethink their classroom practices. Not only should teachers be innovative and creative in their approaches to integrating the skills and techniques they are learning into their classrooms, but the professional development they receive should also include the underlying theory. Without understanding both aspects—theory and application—ensuring the success of skills and techniques within the classroom is difficult.
3. Teachers want professional development learning opportunities that are teacher-driven. Teachers want a voice in the professional development offered and should be allowed to participate democratically in the planning and delivery of professional development sessions. District leaders need to empower teachers more fully by listening to the needs and desires of their professionals. Teachers need to speak up and not be shy in voicing opinions. Both teachers and district leaders need to put more thought into professional learning needs. Learning needs are different for every teacher, and professional development should meet the needs of all teachers. In trying to meet the needs of the teachers, system leaders should tap into the talents of their teachers. Every teacher, whether new or veteran, has something he or she can offer, and these talents should be utilized.

The talents offered by teachers will enable them to create communities of practice or professional learning groups where they can develop the trust needed to collaborate and speak honestly about issues and develop professional development that will allow them to improve their practices and change classroom environments. Teachers who participate in such groups grow in practice by collaborating with other teachers from their school or with teachers from across multiple schools; they are able to discuss issues, share practices, and develop solutions. Communities of practice or professional learning communities can focus on any aspect of education, but to ensure their success, teachers need to engage purposefully in a continuous cycle of inquiry or learning that promotes the nature of collaboration and further ensures the success of the students (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

4. Teachers want professional development learning opportunities that are sustained over time. Teachers want professional development that will make them better over time, not a quick fix that will only address the issues or the current reform for a short while. In a world that changes rapidly, educators need professional development that will lay a foundation upon which they can grow. Professional growth should be a steady progression over the course of a semester, a year, or more if it is to have lasting impacts in the classroom and on student achievement. When teachers learn new practices, implementation happens in the classroom, changes occur, and success of both the teachers and students becomes evident. The effectiveness of sustained professional development depends on how carefully educators conceive, plan, and implement it. Teachers have a vested interest in wanting to be the best at what they do, and becoming better is a process—a process that takes time.

Realistically, to improve practice and student learning, teachers need close to 50 hours of professional development (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). To improve student performance, professional development should be sustained over time, and professional development sessions delivered in the “sit and get” format are rarely sustained as most are focused on a single issue. Effective professional development is “intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; is focused on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives; and builds strong collaboration among teachers” (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009, p. 5). Tapping into the talents of teachers and developing communities of practice or professional learning communities can allow teachers to develop teacher-driven professional development that scaffolds connectively from one session to another, thereby providing the sustainability of the professional development teachers desire.

Conclusion

Professional development is multidimensional. To gain the most from professional development, as well as to impact the learning of students and pedagogical and personal
practices, teachers must continue to change their attitudes, intellectual capacity, and mindsets (Evans, 2014). Because professional development is multidimensional, it can no longer be restricted to the “sit and get” model of the past but must transform to a succession of opportunities offering a myriad of possibilities aligned with the desires of teachers. Professional development should be just as dynamic as the education its participants are expected to provide.

References


