LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

# Democratizing Professional Growth With Teachers

## From Development to Learning

I n efforts to create classrooms that represent microcosms of U.S. democracy, teacher education encourages culturally sustaining pedagogies, development of the radical imagination of youth, the creation of personal and engaging learning experiences, and the use of authentic assessment that recognizes individual and collective growth, all within communities of practice. However, teachers themselves are not often afforded the same opportunities for their own professional learning.

Often, teachers must submit to the very type of instruction (e.g., in workshops, conferences, webinars) that teacher educators ask them *not* to use with their students. Teachers are not engaged as active learners with their own questions and goals. Instead, they are treated as if they need to be *developed*, an idea that we need to problematize, challenge, and reconsider if we wish to create empowering and equitable experiences with teachers. This shift requires that we democratize professional learning.

## The Pitfalls of Typical Professional Development

One model of professional learning for teachers, often called *professional development* or *PD*, is conceptualized and delivered by professional organizations or experts with the goal of providing new information and ideas related to teaching and learning to an audience of educators who, ideally, would absorb the information and take it back to their own classrooms. Teachers are rewarded by earning professional credit (often in the form of clock hours), which may or may not lead to an increase in pay or other tangible benefits.

This kind of PD often leaves educators feeling uninspired, de-professionalized, and at a loss for how to implement a number of disconnected strategies presented in a one-shot fashion. Both intellectually and emotionally unsatisfying, there is no significant growth in teacher practice. Although this type of PD has been in place for decades and has become institutionalized through policy and local practices, there is little to no evidence it leads to long-term growth in the literacy achievement of students served by these teachers.

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## Possibilities for Professional Learning

There is an alternative: Look at teacher growth from a learning perspective and recalibrate what teachers do to grow their practice as *professional learning* rather than professional development. Immersing teachers in professional learning (PL) offers them opportunities to embrace their own agency and to draw upon the collective expertise of their colleagues.

PL is grounded in the notion that teachers are also learners, able to model and enact the processes of active inquiry, critical thinking, and problem solving with their students. Teachers are not just cogs in the industrial education machine; rather, they are active agents in an immersive, sustained process of learning. Enabled by social media and other technologies for collaboration, teachers are now able to define their own learning networks and engage in substantive dialogue and inquiry with other educators both in their own school and beyond.

Still, the tension remains. On the one hand, local, state, and national goals demand student improvement, often measured solely by standardized test scores, and this type of control creates PD that is delivered *to* teachers. On the other hand, the civic and aspirational goals teachers set out for their students, measured through active inquiry and authentic assessment, should also be the types of PL opportunities offered *for*—and *with*—teachers.

If society wants to grow and nurture youth into active, vibrant citizens, then we need to improve the conditions under which their teachers collaborate, learn, and grow their own knowledge and their practice. To do this, we need to understand and continually move toward a more democratic form of PL for teachers.

## Honoring the *Professional* in Professional Learning

PL experiences begin with the premise that teachers—who have invested a great deal of time, energy, and money in their own education—bring knowledge and experience to any conference, workshop, webinar, or other PL event they attend. Just as we would want these teachers to recognize the experiences and abilities of their own learners, so too must teacher educators, literacy coaches, administrators, and others who prepare PL experiences for the educators we serve.

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Research is clear on the type of PL that supports growth in professional practices, namely PL grounded in theories of learning (e.g., communities of practice) and theories of change. It is process based, as learning for change is gradual and is difficult for some teachers.

## Core Tenets of Professional Learning

There is a set of core tenets to consider when implementing democratic PL *with* (and not only *for*) teachers. For example, teachers must volunteer to participate in PL, have choice over its content, and be active learners within the event. They must be allowed to engage in new information (e.g., recognize and start with what they know and build toward the unknown) that is meaningful to them and is based on the work of their students. Videos of their teaching, for instance, can assist them in deconstructing, planning, and reflecting on their practices. PL content should be co-constructed with teachers and not conveyed to them, and it should be connected to their daily classroom routines. The facilitator of the PL should provide opportunities to reflect and engage in conversations with other teachers and with their literacy coaches.

## Learning Environments

Learning environments are also a critical component of PL for teachers. The options include face-to-face, online (synchronous and asynchronous), and hybrid formats. Teachers can be engaged in a variety of learning structures such as individual learning, PL communities, and schoolwide learning. Teachers can consider the amount of learning time they want to spend, such as a short burst (5–15 minutes), a modest investment of time (a few hours), or extending over long periods of time (such as a full day or multiple days). Such environments foster complex learning, stimulate reflexive thinking, and encourage risk taking inside teacher practices.

## Assessment and Professional Learning

Empowering PL gives teachers discretion and allows them to use their professional judgment to make substantive decisions both in their classroom and at their school. Teachers are informed about current assessment practices, changes in curriculum and policy, and the many different opportunities for representing their own confidence and that of the learners in

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their classrooms. Teacher assessments can then be conducted from a stance of appreciative inquiry instead of being used as punitive measures for issues of evaluation or retention. PL invites teachers to make decisions about their own classrooms in conversation and collaboration with a team of knowledgeable peers.

## Democratizing Professional Learning

Although the goals of democratizing PL with teachers are ambitious, they are not impossible. Schools, districts, and professional organizations that create spaces where PL occurs in democratized ways lead to successful learning in classrooms. Approaches include the following:

- Teacher inquiry (through teacher-directed questions and cycles of practice-based research) offers affordances for teachers' questions to be explored over time and with a variety of data sources; this invites teachers to understand the roots and rationale of their practice while moving toward critical change in their classrooms.

- Literacy coaching for transformation (versus coaching for fidelity) can support teachers in their shift away from hegemonic practices.

- Teacher study (and writing) groups offer opportunities for teachers to come together as an affinity group to search (and search again) for ways to grow their practice with peers who have similar interests and inquiries.

- Field trips to other classrooms and schools invite teachers to observe and interact with other professionals who are engaging in similar practices, in turn providing opportunities for teachers to imagine and embody new practices in their own classrooms.

- Ambient PL, or PL that takes place within the milieu of a teacher's school, offers ongoing, daily affordances for teachers to engage in discussions about their practice with like-minded peers as well as peers who differ philosophically.

- Alternative structures for PL are emerging, too. "Unconferences," where teachers meet and build their agenda together for a day of PL, have become increasingly popular. Peer coaching allows teachers to work together in a sustained partnership. Even on their own, personal action

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plans provide teachers with an opportunity to develop their own goals for PL.

Moreover, the prevalence of digital technologies enables teachers to pursue PL that meets their needs at the time on their own terms (i.e., on-demand PL). Social media networks offer the affordances of professional learning networks, or PLNs, with informal gatherings in digital spaces. Many teachers find themselves engaged in the digital presence of other teachers who post and share resources (using tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, or Instagram), as a form of PL. These environments are safe spaces for teachers to engage in conversations with their colleagues, as well as with literacy researchers and teacher educators, around topics that concern the real-world, lived experiences of teachers.

## Next Generation Professional Learning

Despite the challenges, it is an exciting time to be involved in teacher education, and in PL *with* teachers. In fact, this brief will be published around the same time as the updated standards for the preparation of literacy professionals, which also uses the term *professional learning*. In order to move into the next generation of considerations for PL of literacy teachers, there are several potential changes that our field must consider.

Teacher educators and those who deliver workshops to teachers must reimagine PL by inviting teachers to participate in its planning and implementation. There is no other way. Likewise, literacy education researchers must shift from a stance of inquiry "on teachers" (e.g., research on best practices of teacher education) to a "with" or "within teacher education" perspective. The monopoly on research on teacher education needs to be decentered by inviting teachers into the act of research.

Looking ahead, research *with* teacher PL should be imagined as part of an evolving social process, one in which we (teacher, teacher educator, educational researcher) convene and convoke the social processes of research in order to democratize our practices.

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## MOVING FORWARD

- Connect with someone in your school or district to learn more about technologies that can be used to pursue PL on an informal, ongoing basis.
- Pursue alternative structures of PL such as "unconferences" or classroom visits with colleagues and others in your PLN.
- Advocate for improved PL opportunities for yourself and your colleagues.
- Volunteer to participate in the planning and implementation of PL.

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