Characteristics of Effective Professional Development: A Checklist

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Abstract

This article summarizes current research on effective professional development and offers a checklist for school leaders to use when designing learning opportunities for teachers. Effective professional development engages teachers in learning opportunities that are supportive, job-embedded, instructionally-focused, collaborative, and ongoing. When guided by these characteristics, school leaders can design meaningful learning experiences for all teachers.

As a group, adult learners are self-directed, ready to learn, experienced, task-centered, and intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1983). They typically prefer open-ended learning opportunities and a voice in the direction and pace of their learning. They approach learning with clear goals in mind, and they use their life experiences to make sense of new information. Additionally, adult learners tend to be intrinsically motivated by opportunities to address problems – and create solutions – that relate directly to their lives.

Because professional development has become a necessary expectation in today's schools, understanding the characteristics of adult learners is an important starting point. What else must school leaders keep in mind when planning professional development for teachers? This article summarizes current research on effective professional development and offers a checklist for school leaders to use when designing learning opportunities for teachers.

Supportive

Intrinsic motivation is a necessary prerequisite for learners of all ages (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Maslow, 1965). Research shows that effective professional development for teachers supports teacher motivation and commitment to the learning process. It combines the needs of individuals with school or district goals (Flores, 2005; Fullan, 1995; Guskey, 1995; King & Newmann, 2004; Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991), and engages learners from all levels, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators (Guskey, 1995; National Staff Development Council [NSDC], 2009a; Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991). Moreover, it is designed to address the learning needs of specific schools, classrooms, grade levels, and teachers (Quick, Holtzman, & Chaney, 2009). To this end, teachers' personal and professional needs are considered (Flores, 2005; Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991), and their individual learning styles and preferences are accommodated (NSCD, 2009a; Tate, 2009). In addition, effective

professional development integrates teacher input regarding what and how they will learn (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008) as well as teacher choice regarding learning pace and direction (Fritz, 2000; NSCD, 2009a; Porter et al., 2003).

Combining individual needs with school or district goals, engaging learners from all levels of the school, and addressing teachers' specific learning needs strengthens teacher commitment to professional development and increases their motivation to learn (Porter et al., 2003; Smith, Kleiner, Senge, Lucas, Cambron-McCabe, & Dutton, 2000). Once support for teacher commitment and intrinsic motivation is established, effective professional development engages teachers in learning opportunities that are job-embedded, instructionally-focused, collaborative, and ongoing.

Job-embedded

Effective professional development for teachers is job-embedded, which makes it both relevant and authentic. Teachers deem professional development relevant when it directly addresses their specific needs and concerns (Guskey, 1995), or when they see a connection between a learning experience and their daily responsibilities (Flores, 2005; Tate, 2009). Under the best circumstances, teacher learning is made authentic through seamless integration into each school day (Fullan, 1995). Professional development within the context of the school, such as coaching, mentoring, and study groups, promotes active learning and builds coherence more than traditional learning venues (Quick, Holtzman, & Chaney, 2009). In other words, job-embedded professional development engages teachers in learning through their daily activities and responsibilities, and requires that they take time to consider possibilities, try out new ideas, and analyze the effectiveness of their actions. Even when professional development takes the form of a more traditional in-service or workshop, follow up activities such as a job-embedded projects

or action research increase teachers' perceptions of relevance and authenticity which in turn supports professional learning (Tate, 2009). One particularly effective follow up activity is written reflection (NSDC, 2009a). Reflection is most effective when written shortly following a learning experience and reviewed again at a later time (Tate, 2009).

Instructional-focus

Effective professional development for teachers is instructionally-focused because it emphasizes subject area content and pedagogy as well as student learning outcomes. Undoubtedly, the ultimate goal of professional development is to increase student achievement (Mundry, 2005; Porter et al., 2003; Quick et al., 2009), and instructionally-focused professional development supports teachers toward that goal. One recent study found that emphasis on instructional strategies over subject area content is not as likely to result in improved student learning outcomes (Quick et al., 2009). However, most research shows that effective professional development centers on both subject area content and how to teach it (Lambert, Wallach, & Ramsey, 2007; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Porter, et al., 2003; Mundry, 2005; NSDC, 2009b). This is because teachers must know their subject area content well enough to anticipate student misconceptions and engage students in learning through a wide range of instructional strategies (King & Newmann, 2004).

Emphasis on subject area content and how to teach it addresses individual needs and school/district goals by differentiating professional development to accommodate varying teaching assignments, career stages (Fessler, 1995), and teacher responses to educational innovation (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Instructionally-focused professional development is effective because teachers consider the emphasis on subject area content and pedagogy relevant and authentic to their daily responsibilities. In addition, instructionally-

focused learning connects to teachers' experiences, which is more likely to result in changed behavior (Knowles, 1983; Porter et al., 2003).

Collaborative

Effective professional development for teachers is collaborative because it emphasizes both active and interactive learning experiences, often through participation in learning communities. Effective professional development is active when it engages teachers physically, cognitively, and emotionally through activities such as problem solving (Knowles, 1983; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008), sharing and discussion (Knowles, 1983; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Mundry, 2005; Quick et al., 2009; Tate, 2009), simulations and role play (Knowles, 1983; Tate, 2009), visual representations (Tate, 2009), application and follow through (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Porter et al., 2003; Quick et al., 2009), and reflection (NSDC, 2009a; Quick et al., 2009). Especially when it requires physical movement, active learning supports attention and memory (Tate, 2009) and capitalizes on teachers' prior knowledge and experiences (Knowles, 1983). One study asserts that active engagement supports teachers in remembering 90% of what they experience through professional development (Tate, 2009).

Effective professional development is interactive when it engages teachers socially through regular opportunities to share problems, ideas, and viewpoints, and work together toward solutions (Guskey, 1995). Research shows that teachers value opportunities to learn from and with one another (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008) toward common goals such as planning instruction, analyzing student work, and peer observations (Mundry, 2005; Quick et al., 2009). In fact, one study found that teacher-to-teacher coaching and mentoring was more likely to result in higher-order learning experiences for students than traditional professional development activities (Quick et al., 2009).

The social nature of effective professional development facilitates teacher participation in learning communities. Learning communities are defined as "ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving" (NSDC, 2009b, p. 1). They can be organized by department, team, or grade level, by school, or through a network of schools (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; NSDC, 2009b). Learning communities are supported and sustained when 1) school leadership is shared between principal and teachers, 2) professional development is guided by shared mission, vision, and language, and 3) the school environment is characterized by trust, collaboration, accountability, and willingness to take professional risks (Flores, 2005; Lambert et al., 2007).

Peer feedback is a particularly important aspect of collaborative professional development. Research shows that teacher learning is strengthened when teachers share their practice openly with colleagues and willingly accept feedback (Lambert et al., 2007; Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2008). Moreover, regular feedback supports teacher learning by helping teachers build strengths, clarify ideas, and correct misconceptions (Guskey, 1995; NSDC, 2009a; Porter et al., 2003; Quick et al., 2009). It is also an important precursor to objective self-assessment, the "cornerstone of lifelong learning" (Senge et al., 2000, p. 44).

Ongoing

Finally, effective professional development for teachers is ongoing, which involves a combination of contact hours, duration, and coherence. Research shows that the more time teachers spend engaged in professional development, the more likely their teaching practice is to improve (NSDC, 2009b; Porter et al., 2003; Quick et al., 2009). Reform-style professional development activities, such as study groups, mentoring relationships, and task forces that require active, collaborative participation over time have been found to be particularly effective

(Porter et al., 2003). However, one study found that the type of professional development did not matter. Even traditional forms of professional development such as workshops and in-services had a positive effect on teaching practice and student learning outcomes when they engaged teachers for many hours (Quick et al., 2009).

Closely related to number of contact hours is the duration of professional development. Effective professional development provides teachers with many opportunities to interact with ideas and procedures or practice new skills (NSDC, 2009a). Research shows that teacher learning and changes in teaching practice involve a recursive and continual process that takes place over time (Fullan, 1995; King & Newmann, 2004; Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992; Senge & Lannon-Kim, 1991; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Senge et al., 2000). In fact, lasting change typically takes a minimum of three to five years (Guskey, 1995; McCarty, 1993; Quick, et al., 2009). This is because teachers often need several months or even years to transition from personal concerns about a new innovation to planning, implementation, and management concerns aimed at addressing student needs (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Effective professional development is coherent because it is connected to clear goals such as a school improvement plan or state learning standards (King & Newmann, 2004). When teachers' varying professional development experiences are related to each other as well as to school goals or state learning standards, they are able to see the "big picture". This causes teachers to perceive their learning experiences as more valuable (Quick et al., 2009), which makes them more likely to change their teaching practice to positively affect student outcomes (Porter et al., 2003).

Conclusion

This article summarizes current research on effective professional development and offers a checklist for school leaders to use when designing learning opportunities for teachers. Effective professional development engages teachers in learning opportunities that are supportive, job-embedded, instructionally-focused, collaborative, and ongoing. When guided by these characteristics, school leaders can design meaningful learning experiences for all teachers.

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Characteristics of Effective Professional Development: A Checklist

	Yes	Partly	No
Supportive			
• Does it combine the needs of individuals with school/district goals?			
• Does it engage teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators?			
• Does it address the learning needs of specific schools, classrooms, grade levels, and/or teachers?			
• Does it accommodate varying teaching assignments, career stages, and teacher responses to educational innovation?			
• Does it accommodate individual learning styles and preferences?			
• Does it integrate teacher input and allow teachers to make choices?			
Job-embedded			
• Does it connect to teachers' daily responsibilities?			
• Does it include follow up activities that require teachers to apply their learning?			
• Does it require teachers to reflect in writing?			
Instructional-focus			
• Does it emphasize improving student learning outcomes?			
• Does it address subject area content *and* how to teach it?			
• Does it help teachers to anticipate student misconceptions?			
• Does it equip teachers with a wide range of instructional strategies?			
Collaborative			
• Does it engage teachers physically, cognitively, and emotionally?			
• Does it engage teachers socially in working together toward common goals?			
• Does it require teachers to give and receive peer feedback?			
Ongoing			
• Does it require a high number of contact hours over several months' time?			
• Does it provide teachers with many opportunities over time to interact with ideas and procedures or practice new skills?			
• Does it "build" on or relate to other professional development experiences in which teachers are required to engage?			