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Individualized Professional Development

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Abstract: A one-size-fits-all professional development program may not be beneficial to all of the staff in an educational setting. The following professional development program offers an alternative solution to traditional professional development methods, by allowing teachers to determine the strategies that they want to implement into their classroom. The implementation of these strategies and the reflection that goes along with it in the form of action research, allows staff members to determine which methods are most beneficial to them and the students in their learning environment.

Keywords: professional development, action research, strategies

Introduction

As the leader of professional development in my school, I spent many hours staring into the eyes of uninterested teachers last year. I also spent time fielding different variations of the question “Does this apply to me?” Every time I fielded these questions, I was transported to the previous year and the 14 years before that in which my seventh and eighth graders would ask me the same question when I taught them how to solve equations.

Even though the information and strategies that I shared with the teachers at my school were researched-based, effective strategies, because the teachers did not buy into them, the strategies were not as effective as they could have been. So, my principal and I discussed how we could make professional development more meaningful for teachers. Through our discussions and research, we decided to make the professional development more individualized. The most surprising part of the research was learning that individualized professional development for teachers is not a new idea. In 1982, Portner carried out a study for a school district in Connecticut in which teachers determined a personal action plan that included a topic, objectives, activities, and benefits. The teachers worked to complete their goals and objectives with support from their supervisor and a consultant (Portner, 1982).

Action Research

With the wide range of content areas, experience levels, skill levels, and will levels, we decided that implementing an individualized professional development plan in which

teachers could seek out and find strategies that work for them would be beneficial for everyone involved. Teachers and support staff would find strategies, implement them into their classroom, reflect on the implementation in their classroom, and have discussions with their peers, coaches, and administrators. This process is a type of research and professional development called action research. This form of research is meaningful to teachers because it provides opportunities for them to find strategies that work for them. Instead of choosing a one-size-fits-all professional development model, teachers can engage in an action research model to seek out and find strategies that work for them.

Action research is an effective research model because it not only produces research, it also produces results. Rauch, Schuster, Stern, Pribila, and Townsend, 2014 state that “research which produces nothing but books will not suffice” (p. 14). They go on to describe action research as the process of educational practitioners applying research to their practice with the intention of improving both the research and the practice (Rauch et al., 2014, p. 7). The strategic implementation of a research-based strategy and the analysis of the results will drastically improve the practice of education practitioners. The solutions that result from an action research study are solutions that are proven to cause a “beneficial change for the people whose lives and work are affected by that research” (Rauch et al., 2014, p. 8).

Action research is an essential tool for educational reform, whether it focuses on teaching methods or learning methods, the practice of implementing a strategy, analyzing its outcomes, reflecting, and sharing with peers, yields strategies that could change the course of an educational organization. Because action research brings together literature, quantitative data, qualitative data, and practice, it is an innovative way to bring about change in an organization. The action research process provides “increased clarity and understanding that provide the basis for resolving the problem [or improving the practice] on which the study focused” (Stringer, 2014, p. 71). There are vast amounts of studies that use the theory of action research to explore and research educational methods; these studies have paved the way for educational organizations to provide optimal learning experiences for their students.

The Process

After determining that using an individualized professional development approach would be most beneficial to our staff, several studies and formats were explored. To ensure that the process met the needs of all of our staff, we decided to create our own process, which would be a conglomeration of best teaching practices and additional components that would help

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our staff gain as much as they could from the process. We also decided that the use of action research would allow teachers to seek out and apply strategies that were most beneficial to their classes.

In this individualized professional development plan, teachers looked for a strategy based on a specific topic and implemented the strategy into their classroom. After the strategy was implemented, the teacher then shared the strategy and a reflection with others. Strategies were shared in a variety of methods and included a reflection. The methods that teachers used to share their results and reflection with the organization were created and outlined for them by the instructional coach. However, teachers were also allowed the autonomy of coming up with additional ways of sharing and reflecting on their learning.

Initially, we planned to allow staff members to determine the topic that they researched; however, after some guidance from our district leadership team, the process was modified to include a common topic for each staff member based on observational data. The observational data would be collected in the form of instructional rounds, carried out by district personnel, administration, and instructional coaches. This revision to the process provided additional structure to the process and further incorporated data into the process.

After the leadership team chose the topic for the month's professional development, teachers researched the topic and chose one or two strategies they could implement in their class. After they implemented the strategy(s) in their class, teachers then reflected on the strategy implementation using a variety of ways. The three ways that teachers were able to reflect were:

Learning Lab

Teachers research strategies and methods to improve in the month's area of professional development. This could include reading scholarly articles and books, observing pre-approved teachers, and/or working with an academic coach. The teacher then implemented this strategy(s) in his/her classroom, keeping a log of how often they used the strategy(s). After the strategy was implemented, the teacher then reflected on the process using a written narrative. Once the strategy was successfully integrated into the teacher's class, the teacher then chose another strategy.

#TMSPD

Teachers create their own social media post or interact with an educational social media post made by a fellow educator. The teacher then reflects on the content of the post and responds. Responses should include the hashtag #TMSPD.

Video Log

Teachers reflect on professional learning such as information from a conference, professional development that they attended, or personal research and create a video log based on that reflection.

As the person in charge of professional development, I was responsible for reading and responding to the reflections. I also chose exemplars and strategies that were beneficial to the teacher that used them in his/her class and shared them with the school.

At the time of writing this article, we have been through several cycles of this professional development. Some of the areas that we have chosen as topics are formative assessment, questioning, and differentiating instruction. Teachers have researched, found, and implemented hundreds of strategies that have improved their teaching practice. For example, during the month of September when teachers were asked to research formative assessment, one teacher found a strategy called "Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down, Wave Hand". He gave the following reflection, "This week, I tried hand signals to assess student understanding. Thumbs Up for I understand and can explain, Thumbs Down for I do not yet understand, Wave Hand for I'm not completely sure about it. Most students give accurate signals. There are some students who give a thumbs up, but do not really understand. It allows me to group students who may be struggling with students who understand a concept. This frees me to assist small groups instead of getting held with one student for an extended time" (Gardner, 2020, personal communication).

Another teacher implemented a website called Pear Deck into her classroom as a formative assessment strategy. Pear Deck is a website that allows teachers to incorporate engagement and formative assessment in the classroom setting. "I did some research and implemented Pear Deck for the first time this past week. This resource allowed me to check in on students throughout the lesson on their computer. They were able to provide responses and comfort levels with the material. At the end of class, I was able to have them write or draw two things they learned from class that day. It was a really great resource and allowed for instant feedback" (Duncan, 2020, personal communication). These teachers along with the other teachers in our building have incorporated strategies that have positively impacted their teaching practice and shared these strategies with each other.

Conclusion

We feel that we are still in the beginning stages of implementing this professional development plan. However, teachers enjoy the autonomy of the individualized professional development and the reflections produced have been insightful. The staff are learning great strategies that are positively affecting the learning environment. In addition, the dialogue teachers have with the instructional coach and with each other is meaningful and serves as a way to further deepen the learning of all of the staff.

Professional development in the middle school setting spans a variety of specific areas that include but are not limited to instructional planning, teacher content knowledge, and content delivery methods (Lee, Robinson, & Sebastian, 2012). Meeting the needs of all teachers in this area is impossible with a one-size-fits-all professional development model is extremely challenging; however, allowing teachers the

opportunity to determine their own needs in a specific area and research strategies to meet these is an innovative way to meet all of the needs of the entire staff.

We have found that this professional development method produces effective strategies that work not only for our teachers, but also for our students. We have tried many professional development formats in the past, and this one has helped us to get closer to our vision of what we would like our school to be for all of the stakeholders involved. We would like for our professional development to be a place where students and teachers can learn through research, practice, and reflection. Based on principle 3 of Turning Points 2000, schools should be a place where teachers “improv[e] learning, teaching, and assessment for All Students” (Jackson, Davis, Abeel, Bordonaro & Carnegie, 2000, p. 8). Our system of professional development allows teachers to meet this standard. Teachers can research a strategy that will work in their classrooms, implement it, reflect on the process, and share their learning with their peers. Other design points and principles included in Turning Points 2000 are the use of instructional strategies that help all students be successful and the creation of a school culture that helps to support student achievement (Jackson et al., 2000).

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Dr. Thea Dirton is an Instructional Coach at Tanglewood Middle School in Greenville, SC. She taught middle school math for 14 years prior to moving into this position. She has a passion for the incorporation of interactive content delivery methods into the middle school classroom in order to get students engaged in learning. To see more from Dr. Dirton, visit

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