Teacher-led professional development: Empowering teachers as self-advocates

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The teachers sat in the auditorium at their mandated staff development workshop. On a large screen, two women appeared, facilitators for a session on increasing student interaction in the classroom. For the next two hours, the teachers in the auditorium watched a "webinar," a web-based misnomer that lacked any direct contact with the facilitators. The irony of a seminar on student interaction that forestalled interaction was not lost on the teachers. Why were there no facilitators in the auditorium? Why were no teachers with experience in student interaction facilitating the seminar? How effective could a seminar be without any interaction? To what extent could it even be called a seminar? This real-life description exemplifies a dire situation in teacher professional development: lack of teacher empowerment.

In this paper, I identify current roadblocks to teacher empowerment, including standardized testing, scripted curricula, hierarchical school structures, teacher isolation, and the reliance on professional experts from outside of the schools providing professional development like that described here. I then offer a specific solution to countering these encroaching problems: teacher-led professional development. I will describe specific teacher-led professional development efforts in which I have participated, highlighting various methods of implementation. Finally, I will discuss how teacher-led professional development leads to teacher empowerment and call for teachers to engage in self-advocacy within their own schools.

Teacher Empowerment

Teacher empowerment can be defined as teacher autonomy to make decisions (McGraw, 1992), to make professional judgments regarding teaching (Bolin, 1989), and to have a professional voice (Simon, 1987). Empowered teachers are professionals who have the power to create curricula, administer their own lessons, and, as a result, have the ability to effectively teach their students. When empowered to direct their own professional development, teachers claim ownership of their work and invest in it accordingly. Engaged, focused, positive teachers have a tremendous impact on student achievement (Desimone, 2011). Moreover, empowered teachers are more likely to become activists for education reform within their own schools and advocates for themselves. In order for teachers to adequately be empowered, however, they need certain levels of autonomy, professionalism, and intellectual stimulation (Gutmann, 1987; Webb, 2009).

Current Roadblocks to Teacher Empowerment

Standardization: Tests and Curricula

The current focus on standardized tests is one roadblock to teacher empowerment. Webb, Briscoe, and Mussman (2009) explain that over the past several years, the federal government has created a system of surveillance, where teachers are monitored for their compliance to NCLB. The Obama administration has embraced this model, supplementing NLCB with "Race to the Top."

Webb, Briscoe, and Mussman illustrate how teachers create the illusion of compliance by developing two teaching personas, one that demonstrates the results sought by those gazing upon them and another used within the classroom behind closed doors. This "fabricated pedagogy" (Webb, 2009, p. 11) leaves teachers demoralized and students underserved. Teachers report feeling " 'paralyzed and ineffectual'" (Webb, 2006, quoted in Webb, 2009) because they are forced to prepare students for a standardized test, rather than teach actual content. In this paralysis, teachers lose their professional voice to articulate valid pedagogy. Their compliance overtakes their actual professional identity, as they lose the ability to assert their professional judgment regarding teaching.

This loss of professional judgment is compounded by districts that feel pressure to find "quick fix" solutions to standardized test scores (Wood, 1994) because of the fear of losing federal funding. As a result, administrators have resorted to scripted curriculum in a vain attempt to ensure improved standardized test scores. Wayne Au (2011) illustrates the rise of scripted curriculum in schools, particularly regarding literacy programs. He describes elementary-level reading textbooks that dictate exactly what the teacher should say during each segment of a lesson. All sense of personal creativity and professional judgment is lost. This lack of control over how instruction is implemented leads to a loss of teacher morale (Blase & Anderson, 1995).

On a more personal level, math teachers at schools where I have taught often discuss what chapter they are on and when they will test next, negotiating to make sure they are literally "all on the same page." English teachers at these same schools must teach the same works of literature at the same time. Science teachers are required to meet to align their curriculum with national science standards, dictated from outside of the district. Moreover, administrators at schools where I have taught focus on standardized test scores during faculty meetings. Administrators encourage teachers in all disciplines to begin class with an ACT-style question for students to answer, regardless of its connection to the curriculum. Teachers feel more like test preparation coaches than educators.

Recent research focuses on the role of professional development within schools and its connection with standardization. Dennis Sparks (2004) argues because of federally mandated standardized tests, a two-tiered professional development system has developed, whereby weaker-performing schools, in an attempt to increase their test scores, focus all of their professional development on preparing teachers to do test prep. The stronger schools, on the other hand, foster teacher empowerment through collaborative professional development. Thus, only select teachers have access to teacher-led professional development.

Hierarchical School Structures

Teachers exist within a hierarchical bureaucracy (Webster, 1994), where administrators, who are perceived as holding power, often do not hear their voices. With regards to professional development, administrators might ask for teacher input as to their needs, but, sadly, the input is not always to truly shape the experiences that follow. Instead, the very fact that teacher input was sought is seen as sufficient, while much of what teachers say is dismissed as unrealistic. That is, administrators use and solicit teacher voice as a means to show their processes "promote effectiveness" (Blase & Anderson, 1995, p. 129) or to increase teacher motivation for a particular program. These methods ignore what teachers actually feel is important to the needs of their students and school. For example, school district administrators may implement a behavioral improvement model known as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Improvements and Supports) without consulting teachers regarding the program's effectiveness or whether the school needs the program. Teachers are then asked to lead committees to implement PBIS, creating the illusion of teacher empowerment through leadership. These committee "leaders" articulate program goals

dictated by the external PBIS program, not goals derived from teachers within the school. Similarly, a school district in Illinois recently created a technology initiative and named 61 "teacher trainers" (Biggs, 2012) who will receive training to support others. While these teachers may perceive themselves as leaders, they are, in effect, implementing administratively-driven programs.

Teacher Isolation

Teacher isolation is another roadblock to teacher empowerment (Webster, 1994). In many schools, teachers are in a single classroom and rarely have opportunities to interact with other teachers. The issue of teacher isolation is nothing new. Goodlad (1983) discovered that in most schools, teachers worked in isolation and were not encouraged to discuss curriculum. Tye and Tye (1984) also observed a lack of connection between teachers, who often worked in a self-contained environment.

When teachers work in isolation, they are unaware of the potential collaboration and support they can receive from other professionals. Teachers also sometimes feel they will lose their autonomy if they collaborate with other teachers and create common lessons and assessments; they do not want other teachers to use "their stuff." This proprietary culture creates competition, weakening the collective voice teachers can have as professionals.

"Outside Experts"

Mary Hatwood Futrell (1994) described problems in professional development within schools that have yet to be resolved almost twenty years later. She explained that "outside experts" lead professional development workshops and ignore the localized and individual needs of teachers and students. Moreover, teachers are not allowed to cultivate professional development programs that could address their school needs and allow them to become activists for change. These outside programs ignore the professional expertise of local teachers, assuming that one-size-fits-all, expensive programs by so-called experts with no knowledge of community educational needs, can somehow reform a school with a few workshops. When school district administrators hire outside "experts," they convey to their own teachers that they are not experts, and therefore are not professionals. Lightfoot (1983) refers to this as "infantilizing teachers."

Most distressingly, reduced teacher empowerment often leads to unfortunate consequences for students as well as the individuals who teach them. Infantilized teachers often act in autocratic ways towards their students as a means to restore their power. Blase (1995) refers to this as the "micropolitics" of schools. This concept of power, rather than true empowerment, unnecessarily creates an adversarial relationship in the classroom between teachers and students, contrary to the ends of education itself. For example, some teachers emphasize rules and order as their means to control the students. They focus on dress-code violations, tardy slips, and whether or not a student has his or her pen and textbook as means of domination over students. Their power is reflected in discipline referrals, not in professional expertise. These barriers described here are deeply entrenched in schools and play a powerful role in hindering teacher empowerment. But all is not lost. Opportunities for empowerment exist within schools, especially if we actively work to seek them out and, when they do not exist, to create them. In the next section, I will explore one promising avenue for teacher empowerment: teacher-led professional development.

Teacher-Led Professional Development in Practice

Teacher empowerment can emerge within the current system through teacher-led professional development. Teacher-led professional development creates opportunities to enhance

professional autonomy, emphasizes professional judgment, and provides spaces to validate teacher voices, all essential components of teacher empowerment. According to Beane (1993, p. 11), "communities of learners" emphasize collaboration, not competition. Teachers in a collaborative setting have opportunities to share their expertise as classroom professionals, develop common practices, and assess how those practices improve student learning. How, then, does a school create and foster a collaborative community?

Adlai E. Stevenson High School, in Lincolnshire, Illinois, fosters a professional learning community and a collaborative culture following the philosophy of Richard DuFour.[1] As a teacher at Stevenson, I created curricula with other teachers and participated in teacher-led teams that focused on student learning. I led professional development workshops on staff development institute days, after school, or during school days with substitutes assigned to teacher classrooms. Shared leadership was encouraged within the school. In my experience, this leadership model, while powerful for teachers, was unfortunately created by the administration. Though teachers were treated as professionals and were brought into a collaborative structure, they did not develop the structure themselves. This led to a "fabricated pedagogy" similar to Webb's (2009) description, where teachers functioned professionally on two levels: one for administrative approval and one for everyday practice. Thus, teacher empowerment was not completely generated from the teachers.

A more authentic form of teacher-led professional development involves a national organization called Teach Plus. Teach Plus states, "The mission of Teach Plus is to improve outcomes for urban children by ensuring that a greater proportion of students have access to effective, experienced teachers. It is founded on the premise that teachers want to learn and grow in the profession, and want to ensure that their development results in increased learning among their students" (Teach Plus, 2012). In one iteration, a group of teachers, collectively known as the Teach Plus Policy Fellows, met together to develop a plan for teacher-led professional development in Chicago Public Schools. In their statement, the Teach Plus Policy Fellows explained, "Dedicating time for teacher collaboration and job-embedded professional development is now more important than ever in Chicago Public Schools (CPS)" (Teach Plus Chicago Teaching Policy Fellows, 2012). In order to address all of the responsibilities of teaching, the Fellows asked CPS "to reinstate a minimum of eleven total days for professional development and we are asking for these days to be spread out throughout the academic year" (Teach Plus Chicago Teaching Policy Fellows, 2012). These distinct demands for teacher-led professional development were generated by teachers themselves: the teachers who developed this plan recognized the necessity for teacher collaboration and actively sought reform with their schools to improve student learning. In this regard, they sought shared leadership with Chicago Public Schools administration, and took the lead responsibility for student learning. Through Teach Plus, even within a large, bureaucratic public school system, teachers foundd a way to legitimize their voice and strengthen their professionalism.

Embedded professional development and informal learning communities described by Desimone (2011) can also lead to teacher empowerment. Desimone explains that this involves teacher group discussions, book clubs that meet after school, co-teaching, or mentor teachers working with other teachers to continually reflect on student learning. Moreover, reading groups encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. Elizabeth Spalding and Angene Wilson (2006) describe how discussions between English and Social Studies pre-service teachers have increased "communities of practice" in schools. These discussions enhance teacher reflection on pedagogy, methods, and pressing issues regarding the teaching and learning of social studies. These collaborative groups are created first by the teachers themselves and supported by the administration later to maintain the teacher network.

Mascoutah High School, a school with approximately 1000 students, in Mascoutah, Illinois, where I currently teach, has likewise initiated a teacher-led professional development program. Several teachers organized a reading group to discuss the book, *I Read It, but I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani (2000). The administration supported the reading group by offering Continuing Professional Development Units (CPDUs), which are needed for teacher recertification in Illinois, and purchasing the books. Thus, administrators served as facilitators, rather than directors. The reading group was completely teacher-organized and teacher-led. The teacher-organizers sent a school-wide e-mail inviting teachers to voluntarily join the reading group. Faculty from science, math, English, social studies, and special education met on a biweekly basis to share thoughts on reading comprehension. In our discussions, we shared reading comprehension experiences in our own classrooms, and implemented reading strategies suggested by Tovani. The following week, we shared successes and struggles in implementing those strategies and how these reading strategies improved student learning. Teachers will meet in the upcoming school year to compare student assessment data from previous years to student assessment data following the implementation of reading strategies.

During one meeting, we discussed ways to encourage students to read their textbooks, and I mentioned that I used charts (or, according to some, graphic organizers). I described how my students work in small groups and use their textbooks to complete charts on particular topics (for example, antebellum reform groups in the United States). Once the students complete the charts, they have a clear structure by which to think critically about the information they just recorded. Teachers asked for samples to model in their own classes. After seeing the samples, some teachers asked to observe my class to see the activity in an actual classroom setting, and they have then met with me informally to reflect on how these graphic organizers can improve student comprehension and interaction in the classroom. In the process of our meetings, I reflected on my own students' achievements and struggles as well. Thus, as teachers, we created an informal teacher network. This teacher network continues through the creation of other book groups on other pedagogical topics. At Mascoutah, through a teacher-led book study, teachers helped foster student learning through an empowering professional development program.

Mascoutah High School also initiated teacher-led professional development during the Spring 2012 institute days. Two teachers developed three workshops on enhancing student reading comprehension and critical thinking. Both of these skills are essential to the Common Core standards, which Georgia adopted in 2010 (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). These three workshops built upon each other, beginning with a session showing teachers from each discipline how to access articles for students through our databases. In the next session, teachers were given collaborative work time to research articles within their discipline and develop student discussion questions, using Bloom's taxonomy. After one hour, teachers reconvened to share and discuss their lessons. Participants were asked to complete a voluntary evaluation of the session, and those who chose to do so commented that they felt the session was useful to their students and appreciated the time to work together and being treated as professionals. The lessons teachers created can now be implemented during the school year, allowing opportunities for teachers to assess student success. Informal assessments include grading the questions for accuracy and completion, and formal assessments include essay reflections as well as student analyses and comprehension of subsequent readings. Teacher-developed lessons, created during teacher-led professional workshops, can now be assessed within schools through assessments created collaboratively by teachers to determine student success, rather than being monitored by outside "experts." In this case, teachers have actively reclaimed their professional status as advocates for themselves.

Discussion

Overcoming Standardization

Teacher-led professional development can help overcome standardization by providing opportunities to enhance professional autonomy. Rather than being forced to embrace the fabricated personas described by Webb (2009), teacher-led professional development serves to unite the two personas by giving teachers the power to shape curriculum and generate student assessments based on analyses of local needs. Through their professional development, teachers can restore their identity as autonomous, creative teachers.

Teacher-led professional development also combats scripted curricula. Teacher-led professional development provides teachers a voice in the decision-making process regarding curricula by facilitating dialogue that focuses on assessing student achievement within the curricula. Even if teachers are mandated to implement scripted curricula, teacher-led professional development can enable curriculum adaptation or integration (Meidl and Meidl 2011). Teachers can professionally adapt the existing curricula to meet the individual needs of their students or integrate outside information into the existing curricula to "fill the gaps" (Meidl and Meidl, 2011, p. 18). These adaptive and integrative decisions can be generated through teacher-led professional development, strengthening professional voice.

Book discussions and other collaborative meetings help similarly restore the professional voice of teachers. Rather than discussing mandated curriculum or standardized test scores, these teacher-led groups provide a space for teachers to discuss more meaningful methods of student instruction and assessment. Futrell (1995) argues that teachers bring experience and expertise into professional development opportunities, and encouraging teachers to be learners can transform the educational experiences of children.

Overcoming Hierarchical Structures

Teacher-led professional development can help transform the hierarchical structure of schools by implementing programs that are teacher-driven, rather than administratively driven. Teach Plus represents a model for this transformation. Through shared leadership with the administration, teachers can restore their professional autonomy. Embedded professional development can alleviate pressures of meeting time and prevent teachers from thinking that collaboration is a burden. When professional development is embedded into the daily work of teaching, professional judgment can be restored. Teachers feel empowered to make professional decisions regarding how to spend their time outside of the classroom. Moreover, they engage in their professional voice to articulate their decisions on spending this time, realigning the role of administrator from decision-maker to facilitator.

Overcoming Teacher Isolation

Rather than reinforcing teaching as an isolated activity, teacher-led professional development, on the contrary, can enhance teacher collaboration, encourage self-reflection on one's own students, and empower teachers to work collectively to improve their practice. Teachers can meet together as autonomous individuals, each with their own personal experiences, in order to collaboratively improve the instructional methods of all. Rather than protecting their work, teachers willingly share with others and celebrate their professional work.

Collaborative, rather than isolated, teacher-led professional development also strengthens professional judgment through teacher discussions of content and student assessment. Teachers

working collaboratively to construct curriculum restore their professional judgment as experts within their classrooms and schools and learn from each other. In addition, rather than administrators claiming the voice of assessment through their discussions of standardized tests, teachers reclaim their professional voice by analyzing student achievement through their own assessments.

Overcoming the Influence of "Outside Experts"

Finally, teacher-led professional development allows teachers to reclaim their professional autonomy by becoming experts within their own schools. As teacher leaders, teachers are empowered to assist others through their own expertise in content and pedagogy, rather than an educational consultant who possesses no intimate knowledge of the district, school, teachers, or students.

Moreover, through assessing the needs of the local community, teachers utilize their professional judgment to determine what reforms and programs should be implemented. Rather than hiring expensive consultants that present in a one-time workshop, local teacher leader experts provide ongoing professional development and analysis through their own knowledge.

In addition, teacher-led professional development inspires respect for teacher leaders from colleagues within the school. Teacher leaders share their professional voice within their schools, providing analysis and reflection for fellow teachers. Teacher-led professional development restores professional autonomy, judgment, and voice, all essential components of teacher empowerment.

A Call to Action for Teachers

Teacher-led professional development is possible for teachers at all schools. First, teachers need to create a needs-based analysis of their own students and school. What does this community need? What do the students need? This analysis can involve community meetings and surveys of students, colleagues, and parents, and requires that teachers actively participate in the decision-making process. By actively engaging the community, teachers synthesize what the students actually need so as to become advocates for those students. Teachers need to be initiators in this process and encourage the administration to support their community research initiatives.

 Next, teachers can organize teacher-led professional development opportunities within their schools to specifically address those local needs. Book study groups, collaborative lesson sharing, in-service workshops, parent nights and other collaborative experiences that specifically focus on solutions to these needs create a collaborative culture of professional teachers. Proactively designing these teacher-led professional development opportunities prevents outside experts from being brought in to solve "problems" that overlook particular problems at the local level.

Finally, teachers can create collaborative assessments to measure to what extent these teacher-led professional development experiences positively impacted student success. When teachers hold themselves accountable as advocates for student success, they become integral players in the creation of the curriculum that seeks success. However, instead of some outside agency defining student success, teachers can analyze student progress authentically through teacher-created assessments based on local student needs. Teachers need to meet together and share the results of these assessments to reflect on student achievement. Created collaboratively, these assessments generate data that tracks progress that can be shared with the administration and the school board. Because teachers have power over their own lessons and assessments, if lessons prove ineffective to students, teachers have the ability to reform practices from within and

take responsibility for the results. Moreover, student assessment in this way is ongoing. Informal assessments, such as graphic organizers, can be used formatively, monitoring student progress actively throughout the semester. Formal assessments, such as essays and well-created standardized tests, can be used to validate summative quality of student comprehension. Teacher-led professional development can ensure the teacher work time needed to create lessons and assessment as well as analyze student success.

As Schacter and Thum (2005) illustrate, teacher-led professional development encourages teachers to network. These networks can be informally created from common needs, such as high school teachers focused on reading comprehension, and allow teachers to undertake needs-based analyses of their students and develop common pedagogies to use in their own classrooms and collaboratively assess the success of those pedagogies. Professional development can provide opportunities for teachers to become advocates for their students and themselves (Kelly, 1994). Futrell (1994) supported this charge in her descriptions of teacher leadership teams. She argued that teams of teachers should work collaboratively within their schools and communities to uncover issues and needs in their schools (p. 124). Teachers who have a hand in their own professional development feel compelled to address these needs because they are actively involved in identifying them and responsible for providing solutions to them. Led by the call to responsibility, teachers can become activists, designing and implementing programs focused on addressing student needs within their school's social and economic context (p. 125). Thus, teachers, as activists, become responsible for school improvement, acting in "positive political" ways (Blase and Anderson, 1995, p. 65). Through teacher-led professional development, teachers feel empowered. Teachers in all schools can become education reform activists within their own schools. Teacher empowerment will reinvigorate teacher professionalism and autonomy, strengthen teacher activism, and allow teachers to be advocates for their students.

Note

[1.] For an extensive bibliography of Professional Learning Community resources, see
http://www.allthingsplc.info/tools/bibliography.php.

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