INVESTIGATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES AND THE INFLUENCE THEY HAVE ON THE DEPRIVATIATION OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

Traditional workshop-style professional development (PD) opportunities typically don't support the on-going, in-context learning that teachers need to improve student learning (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). These workshops often fail to recognize or build upon the knowledge and skills teachers already possess even though this recognition is known to be a strong motivator for the learning process (Lipton & Wellman, 2007; Valli & Hawley, 2002).

In this action research project, I set out to investigate the influence collaborative PD structures (such as "rounds" and peer-visits) have on increasing deprivatized practice and creating a collaborative culture of teaching and learning at Tyee Middle School. My findings indicate that structures for deprivatized practice are not enough to change the culture of our school, nor are they sustainable in the face of changing administration and teaching staff. Administrators and teacher leaders need to pay close attention to how and if teachers are making professional connections outside of required PD, and how well the importance of deprivatization is communicated as a cultural norm.

Research Questions

The questions I intended to investigate were:

- Can structured group classroom observations and facilitated debriefing opportunities during a full release day lead to a more open teaching culture where risks in the presence of colleagues are embraced?

  - Will these observation sessions help teachers feel safer about having open discussions about teaching practice that is rooted in observed classroom evidence?

  - Will these observation sessions lead to a greater desire for incorporating peer-visits as a form of PD?

- When students see teachers observing practice to learn, how does this shift students' thinking (if at all) about learning as a collaborative endeavor?

After initial data analysis, I found that I needed to shift my research questions to better understand:

(1) How teachers currently value these structures?

(2) What, besides time, inhibits utilization of these structures?

(3) How these structures influence staff perceptions of deprivatized practice?

I felt that findings related to these questions would better inform our Instructional Leadership Team on what changes need to be made to allow greater utilization of deprivatized structures and/or additional changes in how the structures are implemented.

> *"For classrooms to be cultures of thinking for students, schools have to be cultures of thinking for teachers."*   - Ritchhart, 2007

Relevance

The quote by Ritchhart has framed professional learning for myself and my middle school colleagues over the last 4 years as we strive to understand best teaching practices that nurture the development of deep thought processes for students in all content areas. With the vision and guidance of our administration, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) at Tyee Middle School in Bellevue School District has rallied staff buy-in around a goal of "Making Thinking Visible" (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011), both for our students and our own teaching practices. With the belief that deprivatized practice makes classroom learning visible and usable as evidence for collaborative reflection around best practice, our ILT strives to provide opportunities for all teachers to have access to "best practices" by going into the classrooms of colleagues.

Methods: Data Collection

<u>Staff Survey:</u> This initial baseline survey consisted of 13 Likert-scale statements (with responses ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") and open-ended questions.

<u>Focus Groups:</u> Voluntary focus groups were conducted with 3 groups: rounds participants, PLC facilitators, and students who observed their teachers engaged in rounds. Below are examples of the questions asked to each group.

<u>Post-rounds Feedback Forms:</u> After the rounds session teachers are asked to complete a feedback form consisting of a 5-point Likert Scale, from Poor to Exceptional, rating the value of the day as professional development and space to explain the rating.

<u>Informal Data:</u> As a researcher and a member of the staff (i.e., a participant-observer), I collected and analyzed the following additional informal data such as notes from spontaneous conversations with colleagues and transcripts of informal interviews

Methods: Intervention

Intervention	Inhibiting factors addressed
Coordinate rounds with members of PLC groups	• Use of overly broad "common" problem of practice that a random sample of teachers could collaborate around • Lack of continued collaboration after rounds • Members of rounds may not have developed professional trust prior to rounds
Visit classrooms of teachers that are actively engaged in utilizing the practices that the rounds group is studying	• Visited classroom may or may not have practices aligning with the interest of the rounds group • Diversifies classrooms visited to see a greater range of teaching practices from experienced to novice
Include visited teacher in observation debrief	• Feedback not given to visited class • Feedback is in context to the learning that the visited teacher is engaged in and actively reflection on
Offer PD for use of Peer-visit Protocol	• Teachers are unfamiliar with Peer-visit Protocol (30% of staff are in their first of second year of teaching at Tyee) • Staff don't know who is interested in peer visits

Implications

Although this research has revealed vital next steps for our ILT and myself, in hindsight, I would have changed parts of my implementation plan to gain more insight into how the rounds structure could be used as a tool for our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). I did not invest enough time and effort in communicating with staff, PLC facilitators, and administration the impact the rounds structure can have on making the work that is already happening gain more traction. I also didn't create a detailed plan about how to communicate to PLCs how the structure can work for them to make the decision to use the structure easier.

As a Teacher Leader, I was most interested in finding that although teachers may want to connect around instructional practices, the structures and systems we have in place do not nurture or easily facilitate these connections. In an effort to open practice at Tyee, I am working to create a community bulletin board in our staff lounge for teachers to post "visitor wanted" ads. In this way teachers can connect with colleagues around similar interests in problems of practice and student growth goals or just be a collegial partner interested in professional reflection.

As a teacher, I was able to think deeply about the value of deprivatized practice for understanding teaching to improve the learning of my students. As a result, I have set personal goals around connecting with colleagues that I am unfamiliar with and participating in reciprocal peer-visits at least once per month. I see tremendous value to gain from using observed evidence from the classroom to reflect on the learning of students. I am interested in venturing out of my personal comfort zone of working with staff that I am already familiar with and who think similarly about their practice. Looking into different ways of teaching, and engaging in reflective dialogue about alternative perspectives on instruction, will open my practice to a broader understanding of how to best help students achieve.

Findings

The most common perception for many teachers of the usefulness of "open practice" (such as Instructional Rounds) is the ability to gain insight into teaching practice through observation of peers.

Students' perception of how teachers collaborate to learn mirror common teacher perceptions.

Providing structures for visiting classrooms isn't enough; teachers also need opportunities to facilitate meaningful connections with their peers.

Rounds as a structure for increasing Deprivatized practice and influencing school culture is limited in scope at our school, and may not be sufficient to meet diverse teachers' needs.