


# Helping Teachers Help Themselves: Professional Development That Makes a Difference

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## Abstract

For school administrators to facilitate impactful teacher professional development, a shift in thinking that goes beyond the acquisition of new skills and knowledge to helping teachers rethink their practice is required. Based on review of the professional development literature and our own continued observations of professional development, this scholarly article synthesizes findings and presents core features of effective professional development, including what those features might look like in practice. Strategies for teachers, administrators, and schools to begin to engage in meaningful professional development experiences are presented and discussed.

## Keywords

professional development, professional capital, teacher learning

Developing professional capital is about helping people [teachers] to help themselves and help their students more effectively; it is not about manipulating them into complying with externally imposed requirements or delivering someone else's vision.

—Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 169)

For teachers, professional development is both an obligation and an opportunity, serving as a forum for change and for confirmation of current practice. It is both social and individual and has become a priority for those seeking to improve students' achievement of

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learning outcomes (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000). While approaches to professional development formats have changed considerably in recent years, we continue to see one-size-fits-all workshops, offered in contexts removed from schools and students, and focused on various topics that often do not relate to teaching and student learning. The inability of these traditional development formats to result in either a change in teacher behavior or an increase in student performance is well-documented in the literature (Guskey, 2003). Instead, sustained and extensive opportunities to develop practice must go well beyond the traditional “one-shot” workshop approaches that are more commonly found in the United States (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; DiPaola & Hoy, 2014).

While we recognize that teachers must take responsibility for their own professional development, teacher learning is strongly affected by the school environment and the administration that has the responsibility for that environment (DiPaola & Hoy, 2014). To be effective, teacher professional development needs the guidance, support, and leadership of subject matter coordinators (district appointed to lead subject matter decisions), school principals (instructional leader for the school), district curriculum coordinators (responsible for districtwide leadership that includes professional development), and even the superintendent of schools who is the final decision maker on all issues related to both student learning and teachers instructional practices (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). These administrators, individually and collectively, are in a position to provide oversight for effective professional development, the funding to support professional development initiatives, and the leadership skills to encourage, support, and facilitate the collective work of teachers in a positive and growth-promoting environment.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) talk about educational change and professional development being placed in the hands of teachers themselves, acknowledging that “teaching is not just technical—it needs reality to make it authentic and applied” (p. 132). Teachers enter professional development as self-directed learners with previous experience, defined expectations for their learning outcomes, and a willingness to collaborate with teaching colleagues (Tannehill, 2014). This suggests teaching, and learning about teaching, may be most effective when done collectively in an environment that extends across a teacher’s career and involves human, social, and decisional capital, or what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) call professional capital. Allowing teachers the freedom and voice to set their own professional development goals, determine what they need to reach those goals, and providing them with the space to work together to achieve success will help form the basis of teacher development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Patton, Parker, & Pratt, 2013).

For school administrators to facilitate these types of powerful learning experiences, a shift in the conceptualization of professional development that goes beyond the acquisition of new skills and knowledge (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008) to helping teachers rethink their practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011) is required. Research suggests that achieving changes in instructional practice and student achievement requires professional development that is grounded in social learning (Hord & Tobia, 2012), coherent (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002), based on

content matter (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001), focused on instructional practice (Borko, 2004), and sustained over time (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These features provide a starting point for designing professional development programs and lead to a framework for judging whether professional development is making an impact—that is, whether it enhances teachers’ pedagogical skills and content knowledge in ways that result in increased student learning (Stoll, Harris, & Handscomb, 2012).

Based on review of the professional development literature (e.g., Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Patton et al., 2013) and our own continued observations of professional development, this scholarly article synthesizes findings and presents core features of effective professional development, including what those features might look like in practice. To determine whether teacher professional development is working, it is important to first decide how to define professional development, identify evidence-based core features, and explore strategies for teachers and schools to begin to engage in meaningful professional development experiences.

### *Defining Professional Development*

Professional development refers to a variety of educational experiences related to an individual’s work and is designed to improve practice and outcomes (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). These opportunities may be voluntary or mandatory, individual or collaborative, and formal or informal (Desimone, 2011). Nabhanian, O’Day Nicolas, and Bahous (2014) identify several embedded models of professional development that have been shown to enhance teaching practices: action research/inquiry, networking, coaching strategies, and self-monitoring/self-reflection. Examining these strategies and their possible impact on teacher development and change are a worthwhile administrator endeavor as these more contemporary iterations of professional development are considered a powerful mechanism for teacher growth and development.

While many points can be taken from the professional development literature, there are eight core features that we believe most saliently direct principals’ and other administrators’ efforts in supporting professional development that allows teachers to develop as learners who thus have the potential to enhance the learning of students. This recognizes that depending on the context and school culture within which it resides, there are numerous viewpoints on the characteristics defining effective professional development. In one instance, effectiveness may relate to teacher engagement in the professional development; in others, it might be linked to teacher development and improved practice; while in other cases, it may relate to the impact the professional development has on pupil learning. In line with DiPaola and Hoy’s (2014) goal for professional development as “building the capacity of teachers to help students learn” (p. 101), we would argue that effective professional development can be linked to teacher engagement (see core features 1-4), teaching practice (features 5-7), and student learning (feature 8). We have chosen to present the guidelines under these

three categories of effectiveness. As you read these features and examples on how they might be used in practice, you will note overlap among and between them reinforcing and enhancing teacher development and student learning.

## **Professional Development Linked to Teacher Engagement**

### *Core Feature 1: Professional Development Is Based on Teachers' Needs and Interests*

There is general consensus that to be effective, professional development should focus on transforming participant-identified needs into new knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Poekert, 2011). A distinguishing feature of effective professional development is teachers' active involvement in identifying their own learning needs and developing learning experiences to facilitate meeting those needs (Parker, Patton, & Tannehill, 2012). Providing opportunities for teachers to participate in making decisions about what they will learn, how they will learn, and how they will use what they learn has led to increased ownership of and subsequently increased commitment to professional development's success (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Deglau & O'Sullivan, 2006; Parker, Patton, Madden, & Sinclair, 2010). Therefore, teacher learning may be most relevant when it focuses on teachers' real work in schools with young people and addresses the unique context of their schools. This type of professional development acknowledges teachers' prior knowledge and experience (Patton, Parker, & Neutzling, 2012) and is delivered in a variety of formats and modes to meet the wide range of teachers' learning needs.

*What This Looks Like in Practice.* A local group of teachers formed their own working group when faced with teaching in schools with little or no facilities, with pupils who displayed challenging at-risk behavior, finding it difficult to implement the district-designed standards and benchmarks, feeling alienated from the education system, and discouraged with the lack of assistance received from the available in-service provided (Tannehill & Murphy, 2012). Over the past 6 years, this community of practice initiated by a district-mandated curriculum revision has repeatedly reinvented themselves as a result of engaging with colleagues working in similar situations to discover and share solutions to many of the issues they face. These teachers are excited about their learning, noting that the focus of their work is, as one teacher shared, "about us, our needs, how we might help our students positively engage." As one project comes to a close, the group brainstorms where to go next as they are not willing to end their collaborations and as a teacher suggests the group, "must continue in some shape or form; it is too good to discontinue." These teachers repeatedly comment on the value they place on one another's ideas about "what works in our limited settings" and how they can adapt curriculum to meet the needs of the young people with whom they work and who face difficult challenges. Their feelings of ownership, commitment, and safety as a result of working together toward their own goals provides the strength to persevere and move forward based on their own needs and interests.

## ***Core Feature 2: Professional Development Acknowledges That Learning Is a Social Process***

Professional development should build strong working relationships among teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Most important, it must be collaborative, involving the sharing of knowledge among educators rather than one individual teacher working in isolation (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Participating in informal social events (often away from school property) as an element of professional development allows teachers and facilitators to begin to know each other on a more personal basis, enhancing trust and strong collegial relationships, characterized by an ability to work together toward shared goals. The social nature of learning through the creation of a structured and human supportive environment permits intentional collective learning and the application of that learning (Hord & Tobia, 2012), thus paving the way for a transformation of teachers' thinking. These social environments are enhanced through collaborative learning and joint practice that encourages interactive feedback and discussion (Patton et al., 2012).

*What This Looks Like in Practice.* A group of teachers is gathered in the home of one member. A 10-year-old sits in the corner doing homework. There is food available and all wander in and out of the kitchen helping themselves. Much chatter takes place about personal events occurring since the group last met. It is clear the teachers have developed professional and personal relationships as there are conversations about family and school events. After about 30 minutes, food in hand, they gather in the living room—some on the sofa and others sitting on the floor. The purpose of the evening is to discuss putting together a presentation proposal for an upcoming conference. A number of topics come up as possibilities for presentation. In spirited conversation, the group comes to a decision and begin discussing details. People wander in and out to get more food. The parent checks on the child doing homework. After about 2 hours, the teachers decide a second meeting is called for to prepare the proposal. Another group member volunteers her house and others offer to bring food. This informal yet focused meeting format takes place on reoccurring occasions as they prepare for the presentation (Patton et al., 2012).

## ***Core Feature 3: Professional Development Includes Collaborative Opportunities Within Learning Communities of Educators***

Engagement in a professional community that extends beyond classrooms and school buildings has been identified as a powerful form of teacher learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Deglau & O'Sullivan, 2006; Kilbane, 2009; Lieberman, 1992). Lieberman (1992) proposes teacher inquiry communities as a setting to collaboratively examine and transform what happens in the name of teaching and learning in schools. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) indicate that by working together in a learning community, teachers form new visions of learning in the classroom, represented through collaboratively generated knowledge and teaching practices by entering into

“a common search for meaning in their work lives” (p. 294), which requires, time, substantive discourse, analysis, and writing. Teacher groups show camaraderie and respect toward one another (Parker et al., 2012), reflect on their failures, and share successful programs and practices as a result of their involvement within one another in the community (O’Sullivan, 2007). An additional essential element setting communities of learners apart from other groups is the trust and respect among members (Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009). This ultimately leads to a safe and supportive environment where teachers are more “likely to take risks and engage in challenging discussions that push them to deepen understanding and attempt new practices that will reach more learners” (p. 210).

*What This Looks Like in Practice.* Communities of educators can take many forms, including teacher groups from similar subject areas, teachers across subject areas learning with and from each other, or in some cases administrators as communities of learners. For example, a group of elementary classroom teachers from one school meet on the first Monday of every month as part of their school’s professional development. On these days, there is a reduced school day, allowing them to meet and share regularly (Parker et al., 2010). Currently, this group is focused on samples of student writing from across the curriculum. Through sharing, they discovered that some teachers were using rather generic language to encourage the development of ideas. As a result of their work, they agree on a common goal of writing more specific comments and work collaboratively through sharing and critical discourse to achieve their goal. In a second example, a group of elementary and secondary physical education teachers meet at various members’ homes or in local restaurants. Throughout their time together (9+ years), they have created a personal and professional bond while advocating for quality education in schools via state/national presentations and publications. Their focus has ranged from effective teaching and student assessment to professional advocacy. They suggest that their success resides in the community nature of their work and the support provided through collaborative engagement (Patton et al., 2012). A final atypical example of a powerful learning group involves a community of principals from a school district who gather regularly with the goal of reconceptualizing professional development for teachers and administrators in their school. This example illustrates the potential for key features of learning communities: the principals share mutual engagement in the project of improving professional development opportunities for teachers; they have agreed on this joint enterprise of working together to improve both teacher and student learning; and one of their goals is to develop a shared repertoire for responding to teachers’ learning needs.

#### ***Core Feature 4: Professional Development Is Ongoing and Sustained***

Professional development research has helped us to understand that while traditional one-shot professional development may supply some potentially valuable information, it is unlikely to help teachers become learners and thinkers in the design and delivery of instruction (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Instead, there is

growing recognition of the importance of providing teachers with professional development opportunities where learning is aligned and coherent (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Most professional development requires teachers to change some aspect of their practice, ultimately requiring them to acquire new knowledge and to use that knowledge in their classrooms to foster increased student learning (Vetter, 2012). To support teachers in this type of change, effective professional development must be ongoing and sustained over time (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007), with teachers interacting on a regular basis (Keay, May, & O'Mahony, 2014). As most teaching circumstances (working alone in the classroom) promote rather than negate isolation, and critical dialog is a rarity (O'Sullivan & Deglau, 2006), long-term professional development is accompanied by a chance to practice the change with on-site follow-up, subsequently bringing experiences back to the group for discussion. The conditions for continued teacher change and learning are supported when professional development involves professional engagement over an extended period of time.

*What This Looks Like in Practice.* A group of elementary teachers is faced with implementing a new curriculum designed to meet new state content standards and align instruction across the district. To begin to understand the new constructs, they meet for a 2-day workshop provided by recognized experts in the field. At the conclusion of the workshop, they agree it is important to explore the new concepts in more depth. They decide to each develop one unit of instruction and return in 3 weeks to share their work. This sharing turns into teaching lessons and returning to the group to reflect on the results. After 7 years, the group continues this cycle of meeting, establishing direction, implementing an idea, and returning to share their work with one another. They meet approximately every 2 months, usually in someone's home. Initially, their meetings were supported by a grant, but after the grant expired, having seen the benefits to their learning, they continue to meet. As reported in Parker et al. (2010), over the years, they have lost some members and gained others, but the group has been successful in changing the teaching practices of an entire elementary content area. They are fuelled by their observation of student responses to learning experiences and what they perceive as student learning that occurred as the result of their changing teaching practices.

## **Professional Development Linked to Teaching Practice**

### ***Core Feature 5: Professional Development Treats Teachers as Active Learners***

Opportunities for teachers to engage in active learning are also related to the effectiveness of professional development (Garet et al., 2001). Teachers themselves judge professional development to be most valuable when it provides occasion to do "hands-on" work that builds their knowledge of academic content and how to teach it to their students' context (Garet et al., 2001). Such possibilities include action research, observing and receiving feedback, group discussion, and making presentations and/or

writing for publication; as opposed to passively sitting through lectures. Whereas professional development is often designed to transmit knowledge and teachers are viewed as uninvolved recipients of ideas and curricula, effective professional development places teachers in the role of active learners, with a focus on inquiry and reflection, constructing their own meaning and understanding through collaborative engagement in relevant tasks (O'Sullivan & Deglau, 2006; Patton et al., 2012).

*What This Looks Like in Practice.* A veteran teacher provides a prime example of being an active learner by personal engagement in the planning and implementation of her own professional development. By collaborating with her pupils, this expands her own knowledge and develops her teaching practices while seeing what she perceives as positive learning outcomes for her pupils. A few years ago, when a young woman with Down syndrome joined her class, this teacher felt ill-equipped to meet the student's needs and still maintain a productive learning environment for all her students. Instead of waiting for solutions, the teacher actively sought information by consulting local experts and delving into the research on how to best integrate this young woman into her class in a productive way. She became interested in a peer-mentoring system, where her students with no disability would partner with the young woman with Down syndrome; the idea being for students to provide assistance to her in developing physical skills and motor achievement. An added benefit was expected for the mentor students by helping them become more caring individuals, aware of disability and its impact on daily life (Moran, 2011). Both the student with Down syndrome and her peers gained from this experience and noted how much they enjoyed taking part. Following the success of this peer-mentoring program, the teacher expanded it with older students in an attempt to "capture more of the process of goodwill, care and appreciation of others, knowledge on interacting with and appreciating disability while taking away some of the fear working with disability" (the teacher's comment). The outcome was a 6-week intervention of adapted sports activities taught to students in a special school for young people with disabilities (Moran, 2011). The pupils with special needs were paired with secondary-school students and experienced a range of activities with a culminating rich task tournament concluding the experience. This initiative continues today with the teacher noting how much she has developed as a professional and the amount of learning both she and her students have gained as a result of her active pursuit and implementation of knowledge.

### ***Core Feature 6: Professional Development Enhances Teachers' Pedagogical Skills and Content Knowledge***

Well-designed, effective professional development helps teachers master content, hone teaching skills, evaluate their own and their students' performance, and address changes needed in teaching and learning in their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). To accomplish this, effective professional development engages teachers in the concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the

processes of learning and development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). These tasks provide meaningful learning experiences related to their daily work as teachers, some of which relate to the specific content they offer their students and how and why that content is organized and delivered as it is (Garet et al., 2001; O'Sullivan & Deglau, 2006). It is worth noting that these content and pedagogy-specific professional development opportunities stimulate the interest of teachers and encourage their full participation as opposed to the one size fits all types of initiatives.

*What It Looks Like in Practice.* A long-term group of K-12 cooperating teachers and university faculty provide a practical example of a community focused on the enhancement of pedagogical skills and content knowledge. Designed to improve student teaching experiences of the university's teacher education program, this group was initially formed to increase the congruency of the student teaching experience with newly adopted performance assessment procedures (Parker, 1988). The group collectively examined the new teacher performance assessment tools, including how the tool is used to assess a prospective teachers' "teaching event" and subject-specific pedagogy. In addition, they continued to study effective teaching and supervision for which the teachers receive continuing education credits though informal coursework held in an off-site location. The result of the teachers' learning enhanced their practice and provided a common language for the discussion of effective teaching, teacher performance assessment, and the result of quality teaching on student learning. With university assistance, the K-12 teachers then developed a student teaching evaluation instrument they felt comfortable using while meeting the needs of the university in supporting the newly adopted assessment procedure. This process stimulated a positive move toward enhanced university-school collaboration and supervision of student teachers.

### ***Core Feature 7: Professional Development Is Facilitated With Care***

Thoughtful facilitation is a distinguishing feature of effective professional development (Poekert, 2011). Successful facilitation acknowledges how teachers actively construct new meaning based on prior knowledge and experiences, recognizes the influences of others in a nonjudgmental and social environment, and emphasizes the relevance of formal knowledge in teacher growth and development (Patton et al., 2012). Facilitation duties may fall on the shoulders of a teacher-leader, university faculty member, or principal. Regardless of the individual(s) in charge of facilitating professional development, they must guide rather than direct, question rather than show the way, and listen rather than tell. The skills of the facilitator have been referred to as the "pedagogy of facilitation" (Poekert, 2011). These individuals do not impose vision, but rather listen and hear, gently push and pull. A variety of pedagogical strategies are used by facilitators to aid teachers in becoming independent and life-long learners (Patton et al., 2013); different strategies are used for immediate knowledge acquisition, the implementation of that knowledge into practice, and long-term inquiry.

*What It Looks Like in Practice.* Armour and Yelling (2007) described the intricacies of facilitation when stating that, to be effective, facilitators “need to tread a careful line, simultaneously being leaders (providing expert input, helping teachers to work together) and followers” (p. 195). For example, a principal has served as the facilitator for a long-term learning group of elementary teachers at her school (Patton et al., 2012). During one of their regular meetings, the principal shares information about a request for submissions in a special issue of the state educational newsletter focusing on student assessment. After initial interest from the group, this information prompts informal discussion among the teachers of possible ideas that they might develop and submit. After some time, the facilitator reassures the teachers saying, “You are in charge. Where do you see it going? What do you see as important?” During a lengthy discussion among teachers the facilitator says nothing; she intently listens and takes notes. Teachers ultimately decide on the topic of involving students in the assessment process, but seem to be unfocused on how to move the planning forward. The facilitator prompts more discussion and clarity with the question, “What is the most difficult thing about involving students in the process? What part of your own experience would you want to share with other teachers?” This facilitator guidance allows the teachers to identify their own initial concerns with this topic and how they might assist others in moving forward with the topic.

## **Professional Development Linked to Student Learning**

### ***Core Feature 8: Professional Development Focuses on Improving Learning Outcomes for Students***

Research also suggests that impactful and sustained professional learning for teachers is related to student-achievement gains (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hattie, 2009). While many researchers and agencies conclude that it is the most important outcome of professional development, assessing the causal link between professional development and student achievement may be difficult if not impossible (Kerka, 2003). Professional development that is intensive and includes application of knowledge to teachers’ planning and instruction is most likely to influence teachers’ practices and, in turn, positively affect student achievement (Desimone et al., 2002; Knapp, 2003). Unfortunately, in our experience, professional development is too often planned and conducted based on a new teaching practice or other ideas rather than the consequences of its impact on student learning. In fact, few studies move beyond self-reports of positive impact (Vescio et al., 2008), as research on the specific aspects of professional development that contribute to such improvement is “in dreadfully short supply and that dedicated efforts to enhance that body of evidence are sorely needed” (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; p. 498). This means that discussions about the specific goals of professional development, what evidence best reflects the achievement of those goals, and how that evidence can be gathered in meaningful and defensible ways must become the starting point for all planning activities (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

*What This Looks Like in Practice.* Recognizing the benefits of a level of health-related fitness to children and youth well-being and its importance for daily life, a teacher planned and implemented a fitness program for her students (Hunuk, Ince, & Tannehill, 2012). This program involved fitness assessment and discussion with students on their fitness levels and knowledge as to how to improve them. This was followed by an activity program designed to help students set and achieve selected fitness goals. In talking with the students, the teacher discovered they did not share their fitness assessments results with their parents and she began to wonder if parents having this knowledge would provide support to young people in their quest to be more active and gain higher levels of fitness. To investigate this question, the teacher undertook an action research project where parents received a copy of the physical education program for the year and a physical activity report on their child's results. At the parent-teacher meetings, each set of parents completed a questionnaire on their response to the report, if their child's behavior had changed as a result of the report, and if they were willing to take part in assisting their child in improving his or her fitness levels. Results of this project were positive from the teacher's perspective and have encouraged her to continue and even extend this work. Parents appreciated hearing what was taking place in this aspect of their child's education and seeing the individual results of the fitness scores. Thus, they felt they could enhance their child's learning at home through support of what was being done at school.

## **Engaging in Meaningful Professional Development**

DiPaola and Hoy (2014) highlight the critical role of the principal in facilitating teacher's professional growth and development to meet their individual needs and those of their students. They suggest that the goal of professional development is to build teacher capacity. These eight evidence-based core features of effective professional development and applied examples are intended to guide principals' and other administrators' efforts in supporting effective professional development.

Teacher learning is a continuum; not a finite event (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). The professional development described here is, in most cases, remarkably different than the usual practice. It is not a neat and tidy dissemination model. Instead, encompassing a wide variety of formats, processes, and organizational arrangements, it is often messy and uncertain, as it rejects the passive view of teachers, the reliance on outside experts, and disregard for the contextual aspects of teaching (Lieberman & Miller, 1978). The core features presented provide evidence of the diversity of possibilities as well as difficulty and complexity of effective professional development. They also reinforce that there are no easy or simple solutions to the challenging issue of designing effective professional development that can meet the needs of all teachers (Makopoulou & Armour, 2011). Despite this complexity, when done well, professional development holds the potential for serious conversations resulting in teacher learning and the creation of professional capital; using "best and next" practices together (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 51).

### *Teachers With Human Capital*

Teachers with human capital have the necessary skills and knowledge to teach effectively (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). These teachers know children and their content area, and they know how to teach it well. Teachers with human capital are empowered, believing in their own competence and ability to reach the needs and interests of their students through well-designed and challenging learning experiences appropriate for the context in which they are delivered (Tannehill & Murphy, 2012). Most important, they have a passion and commitment to teach all students (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

### *Teachers With Social Capital*

“The quantity and quality of interactions and social relationships among people” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 90) defines social capital. Teachers with social capital learn from and with each other through accessing other teachers’ human capital. These teachers work together to teach, plan, and inquire about teaching. Success for teachers where social capital is present is defined not in terms of mastery of new strategies “to employ in the classroom on Monday,” but in terms of the impact that changed practice has on outcomes such as student learning.

### *Teachers With Decisional Capital*

Teachers with decisional capital make discretionary judgments about teaching and learning in complex situations (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This decision-making capacity is what makes an effective teacher so effective. Fuelled by the social capital within a school, teachers with decisional capital are life-long learners. They are not afraid to make mistakes, they have pride in their work, they accept feedback, and encourage conversation about teaching. Instead of viewing the incorporation of new ideas and teaching strategies as something forced on them by others, these teachers constantly seek experiences that encourage them to ask questions, make mistakes, and help them discriminate what is important to know and do. Long-term situated professional development has the potential to engender teachers with these capacities (Parker et al., 2012). These teachers create rather than react to change.

## **Getting Started in the Creation of Effective Professional Development**

The task of creating professional development opportunities with the capacity to support teacher learning is daunting and seemingly risky, often requiring the partnerships of schools, universities, and unions (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). DiPaola and Hoy (2014) propose that school culture is the framework within which effective professional development must take place. With the principal’s role as instructional leader in the school, DiPaola and Hoy (2014) suggest three school characteristics important for

student success that must be considered in any professional development plan: trust, collective efficacy, and academic optimism. They talk about trust as reciprocal between students, teachers, and parents and teacher efficacy as a common shared perspective among teachers that they can make a difference to students and their learning. Academic optimism is viewed as a concept that incorporates both trust and teacher efficacy and is focused on academics within the school. As the instructional leader, the principal must take the time to plan appropriate and critical professional development that builds on the trust, collective efficacy, and academic optimism within their school context. The best practices presented all serve, in some way, to enhance and grow school culture through trust, collective efficacy, and academic optimism.

Hellison and Kallusky (1999) offer four, seemingly simple, but often overlooked, strategies for pursuing change that seem pertinent here: start small, start smart, start, don't quit.

### *Start Small*

Do not try to change the world all at once by demanding (or expecting) extraordinary things from yourself or others. Immediately revitalizing all professional development in your school or district is unrealistic, as are instant results. You may want to explore ways of recreating professional development with one content area or in one building by asking teachers what they want and need in terms of professional development. Remember that most learning is social and providing time during school hours at an off-site venue for them to pursue their plans will allow for increased chances of success. By starting small, you can try different things without having to labor over some of the details and the contributions of the group are easier to detect.

### *Start Smart*

Start with teachers who you know can work productively and engage in a project that has to be accomplished or in the study of a topic of interest to the group. Ask teachers who they would like to help them with their learning and contact the local university to see if faculty would like to be engaged in the project, not once, but over time. Though the examples in this article are teacher-centered, all require the support of administrators; namely principals. With both bottom-up and top-down support, the suggested strategies have a better potential for success (Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006; Parker et al., 2010).

### *Start*

It is one thing to talk about change and doing things differently; it is another to do it. As the popular mantra states, "just do it." While the notion of getting started with the thoughtful and systematic design of an effective professional development program may sound simplistic, there is not a better time to start than now—or little will change in schools and with student learning.

## Don't Stop

Change associated with professional development is difficult and barriers impeding teaching and teaching change are well-documented (Bechtel & O'Sullivan, 2006). In fact, things often look dismal before they significantly improve. Instead, make professional development a priority and do not lose sight of it when pulled in multiple directions. If we gave up on the various groups of teachers with whom we have worked when things got difficult, then the significant changes we have witnessed and benefits to students would not have been realized.

## Closing Thoughts

Among other things, continuous teacher development is a coherent set of actions to help teachers learn and move forward (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Yet, regardless of how good the professional development is, what happens between sessions is equally important. In short, the process is often as important as the product itself. Many of the core features presented support teachers in trying out new ideas and reporting their findings and experiences in subsequent professional development sessions. Learning in professional development needs support for teams of teachers to learn to together; they need social capital. As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) indicate,

The key variable that determines success in any innovation . . . is the degree of social capital in your own school. Learning is the work, and social capital is the fuel. If social capital is weak everything is destined to failure. (p. 92)

Currently, professional development most often does not meet the needs of teachers or learners. To continue in the same vein is much like Einstein's notion of insanity—doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. “The time comes to take the risk of trusting the process of teachers innovating together, and of standing back to let this happen” (Hargreaves & Fullan, p.169).

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