

Differentiated Learning for Teachers

When I reflect on my early years as a principal, I'm convinced that teachers learned in spite of—rather than because of—my efforts at supporting professional learning. As a teacher, I embraced Carol Tomlinson's work on differentiation. I recognized that good teaching involves challenging students in diverse ways and in supporting them to meet those challenges.

When I transitioned to the principalship, I carried these lessons with me. I supported teachers' efforts at differentiating for their students. Staff development days delved into topics related to differentiation and how students could navigate various paths to mastery, and our faculty frequently discussed on ways to differentiate for students.

But I neglected to realize that differentiation benefits learners—adults and kids alike. When I planned a professional learning session, I wrongly assumed that teachers were less diverse as learners than students. Even though I recognized that teachers had different strengths and weaknesses in the classroom, I failed to consider how professional learning could be structured to meet the diverse needs of adults.

Today I study professional learning and work with aspiring principals and district leaders. Looking at current research through the lens of a decade of administrative experience, I've learned a few things I'd take with me if I were to return to the principalship.

Lessons Learned

Intensity. Educators now know that concentrated time on task is as important for supporting teacher learning as it is for supporting student learning. Some who study teacher professional development call this a measure of “intensity” while others talk about a “threshold” of 15 or more hours before new learning triggers lasting changes in practice. Teachers need time to get used to new ways of thinking, to try out new knowledge and skills, and to get feedback on early efforts.



“Differentiation matters for all learners—grownups included.”

With this in mind, I'd rethink the “smorgasbord” approach to professional development that offers a lengthy menu of learning options (rarely supported by follow-up) on two to three designated professional development days per year. While the format may have provided multiple learning opportunities, it likely did little to support the sustained rigor needed to catalyze changes in classroom practice.

Relevancy. Just as learning needs to be relevant for students, new learning for teachers needs to be highly relevant to the jobs they do every day. Teachers don't just want to know how a new skill or insight fits with teaching in general—they want to know how it fits with teaching first graders to read or with constructing an art program for

middle school students. They need—and want—explicit connections so they can understand how new learning will work in their respective classrooms.

Armed with the realization that relevance is essential to changes in practice, I'd look for ways to embed learning into the everyday work of teacher collectives (such as grade-level, departmental, or interdisciplinary teams), rather than expecting teachers to generalize to their content area from a broad-scale event.

Relationships. Relationships are essential learning supports for adults and students alike. Michael Fullan's numerous books speak to the importance of healthy, collaborative groups of educators working toward improved practice. Experientially I know this to be true: I learned more from my faculty at Bill Brown Elementary School—informally—than the teachers ever learned directly from me! Our relationships allowed for the frequent and honest sharing of knowledge.

New Priorities for Professional Learning

As a teacher of aspiring educational leaders, I hope that my students will be able to lead for professional learning in ways I never imagined. Among the current priorities we emphasize:

Working collaboratively to identify teachers' learning needs. Rather than assuming teachers have significant areas of overlap in learning needs, we talk about crafting annual (or more frequent) processes that inquire about teachers' needs, so that learning opportunities can be thoughtful and responsive.

For example, in working out ways to better support teachers' use of data, I've heard educators say, “I'd like to know more about the data system.” When I press for specificity, I find that one teacher needs to be walked through querying reports, but others are far beyond that—they want to know how to link interpretations of data to available programs and services. Professional learning structures must account for and meet these diverse needs.

Creating structures that allow teachers to build on strengths and support colleagues. We talk about honoring and encouraging innovation in professional learning. If a teacher wants to create an app or series of video tutorials on an instructional strategy, why not make use of that interest to enrich others' learning experience? Some teachers—like some students—want to read about the strategy or skill first, and want access to written materials (e.g., “cheat sheets” or checklists). Like students, teachers need to be involved in directing their own learning, and they need the freedom to build on prior knowledge in a way that makes sense to them as learners.

Making better use of professional learning communities. Because only a small fraction of authentic learning happens in workshops or meetings, we discuss ways to support inquiry-driven learning communities. This means creating structured space for PLCs, and protecting them from the administrivia that can cause PLCs to devolve into team or department meetings. In *Leaders of Learning*, Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano describe how PLCs can support teacher-led inquiry in ways that promote change for entire schools.

Respecting Teachers as Diverse Learners

Differentiation for teachers doesn't mean “multiple offerings to meet myriad interests.” Rather, it means identifying instructional priorities and discovering what prior knowledge teachers bring to the table. It means supporting the collaborative efforts of those teachers to construct and share new knowledge in a variety of formats. It means modeling in professional development what we expect teachers to do in their classrooms.

Differentiation isn't just “kid stuff.” It matters for all learners—grownups included. **P**

Jo Beth Jimerson is assistant professor of educational leadership at Texas Christian University.

Mentoring Minds

has the right tools to make your
Common Core Standards
transition easy!

Students build valuable problem-solving and critical thinking skills with Motivation Math and Motivation Reading. These Common Core aligned learning resources unpack complex CCS standards, creating solutions your teachers can use with confidence.



Call **800.585.5258** for your free sampler today!

www.mentoringminds.com/principal

Critical Thinking for Life![™]
Mentoring Minds



Real Classrooms. Real Results.[™]

No Common Core Standards tool box is complete without Professional Development from Mentoring Minds.

Schedule yours today!