Finding Value in the Answers


What if you found a book that sparked endless ideas of possible variants on the educational setting and environment for your students? Would you read it? Of course you would! The book What If?, edited by Rita Dunn and Shirley Griggs, does just that. What If? is a series of short vignettes based around the premise of student learning styles as identified by Rita and Kenneth Dunn in the 1970s.

Each of the contributing authors delves into a different “what if” scenario. One of my favorite vignettes is by Thomas C. DeBello: “What if Principals Understood Each Teacher’s Learning Style?” In this essay, DeBello provides the reader with a variety of alternatives to the traditional way of staff management, such as varying the times of the weekly staff meetings, using teacher portfolios instead of the traditional observation, and using DVDs and CDs to aid in the delivery of professional development topics.

Some of the other “what if” topics covered in the book include at-risk students, school violence, and gender grouping, as well as an assortment of topics that relate to working with teachers. Although some of the subject matter of the various essays is set in a secondary or postsecondary educational environment, I still was able to find great value in them and found myself asking, “How does that apply to an elementary school setting?” A great example of this is Christine Mangino’s “What if We Taught College Students the Way They Learned?” As I read this essay, I realized that not only does this apply to college students but also to students at every level of education. The question for me then became, “What if we taught elementary school students the way they learned?”

If you are looking for a great book for you and your staff to broaden your professional knowledge, then What If? is a book you will want to read.

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Jump-Starting Learning Communities


Great schools learn how to view change as a continual crafting process coupled with periods of high creativity and problem-solving. They actively create the vision of excellence in their school as an ongoing, living process rather than a mission statement set in one time-frame.

Have you ever wondered what it takes to create true, sustainable learning communities in your school? Are you looking for ways to encourage your teachers to talk about their work? In Teacher Teams that Get Results, the authors offer a guidebook for schools of any grade level to help make this happen. The book provides 61 strategies to develop “collaboration, teacher teams, or professional learning communities”—terms the authors use interchangeably.

With higher stakes placed on the performance of all students, teachers must play an increasingly vital role in curricular and instructional leadership. Through the development of effective collaborative teacher teams, teachers gain deeper understandings of standards, curriculum, and best instructional practices. This resource book provides information about how adults learn, how groups develop, how to sustain teamwork, how to initiate and sustain change, how to develop learning communities, and more. Within each chapter are 14 to 16 strategies for making it happen.

For example, if teachers have a tendency to work in isolation, and look only to the principal to provide information and training, the principal may wish to create a culture in which teachers discuss pedagogy, develop curriculum maps, and share instructional strategies. The first chapter, “Creating a Growth-Oriented Culture,” is the place to go. Here, the authors provide groundwork for creating a positive climate conducive to continuous growth. If a more effective climate for addressing issues of diversity is needed, the authors provide a strategy to help faculty members embrace the diversity among themselves and their students.

This is not a book to sit down and casually read, but is a great resource to have in a principal’s professional library. Each chapter offers useful insights and activities to jump-start learning communities in any school.

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