**Growing as a Teacher Leader By Facilitating Professional Development**

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**Introduction**

As the budget crisis of education continues, fewer funds are available for schools to offer professional development workshops for educators. However, due to increased mandates from both the local and national level, teachers need time to learn new methods of instruction and data collection techniques. This is an important issue facing schools because when teacher do not have access to enough professional development opportunities, it can affect teacher retention and job satisfaction (Taylor, Yates, Heyer, and Kinsella, 2010, p. 85). As a result, many schools are looking at the wealth of knowledge available among their staff and allowing those expert teachers to lead professional development sessions within their own buildings. This is beneficial not only for the school, which is creatively finding ways to give the teachers the professional development they require, but also helps teachers within the classroom take on new responsibilities that help them to become leaders within the school without having to leave the classroom to take an administrative position. Teachers who choose to take advantage of these leadership opportunities do face obstacles in their path to effective leadership. Strong support from the administration as well as knowledge of how to effectively deal with difficult situations can help fledgling teacher leaders make the most positive impact on their school community.

At the beginning of the school year, my district offered a “Train the Trainer” workshop for the Daily Café reading program. This method of organizing instruction is being adopted by my district for the 2012-2013 school year. All materials distributed by the school district will align to the teaching practices and structures outlined in Boushey and Moser’s (2006, 2009) books, *The Daily 5: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades* and *The Cafe Book: Engaging All Students in Daily Literary Assessment and Instruction*. This program encourages establishing a community within the classroom that promotes trust, independent work habits and clear routines so that students are constantly engaged in beneficial literacy activities, even if they are not working directly with the teacher for the entire literacy block. This allows the teacher to work with small groups and tailor instruction to the individual child rather than providing a “one size fits all” lesson to the whole group. The program revolves around a menu of reading strategies that should be taught to students as needed and when appropriate for their level of reading instruction. I have been utilizing the Daily Café program in my second grade classroom for the past two school years and felt passionate that this method of instruction was beneficial to the students in my classroom. I believe in the structure and organization of the program and wanted to share this knowledge with others. The best project “often focuses on how to do a better job at giving students the skills to enjoy that passion as much as the teacher does” (Zemelman & Ross, 2009, p. 36). I knew that Daily Café worked in my classroom and I wanted others to see that it would work on their classrooms as well. This was not just another initiative that was being handed down by the central office that was of little benefit to the teachers working in their classrooms. If teachers were given the opportunity to see first hand the successes that another educator had with the program, I believed that they would come to enjoy this method of teaching as I did. So, I decided to attend the workshop to prepare myself to train the staff of my school on the ins and outs of how to set up a Daily Café structure in their classroom.

**The Leadership Project**

**Preparation and Presentation**

I attended the *Daily Café* “Train the Trainer” Workshop in November with Mrs. D., another teacher from my school. After the winter holidays, we were approached by the Instructional Resource Teacher to put together a *Daily Café* workshop for the teachers in my elementary school during the spring. As a “second stage teacher,” one with 4 years experience, I was excited to share my knowledge and experience with the other members of the staff and to make connections with other educators who believed in *Daily Café* as much as I did (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007). While slightly nervous about making a presentation to my staff, I was fortunate that my partner for this project was a former literacy coach for the district and had several years of experience in delivering professional development sessions to other staff members. I felt that this partnership was one that would not only help to make this professional development session successful but also gave me a chance to learn from a veteran teacher and develop my own leadership skills (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster & Cobb, 1995). She viewed me as an equal partner in this planning process and that helped me to learn from her and gain confidence in my abilities.

Although we had been given materials during our “Train the Trainer” workshop, Mrs. D. and I wanted to make this professional development session as beneficial for our participants as possible by tailoring it to their needs. We decided to make this training completely voluntary. In our school, several of the grade levels, especially the primary grades, had extensive experience with Daily Café. We did not want to force them to sit through information they had already mastered. Marzano (2012) suggests that professional development is effective when it is very specific and tightly aligned to personal goals of the participants. We hoped that those teachers who signed up to participate were eager to learn about this method of instruction and truly wanted to be there.

While participation in this professional development was voluntary, Mrs. D. and I were pleasantly surprised that groups of colleagues from the same grade level, as well as entire grade levels in some instances, signed up to participate. This was important because when learning a new skill or method of instruction, doing so in isolation can be overwhelming and teachers are less likely to use the new information they learn. Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi and Gallagher (2007) stated, “Teachers often report that participating as a group in professional development can give focus to collegial interactions and motive working through problems of practice together” (p. 930). We had some teams that had been using Daily Café techniques in their classroom as we as people who were brand new to this instructional method. The more experienced participants were able to answer questions and give insight to the information we presented to the group.

There were several goals we wanted to accomplish when delivering our instruction. We knew that when addressing adult learners we could not simply present information and expect our participants to take it back to their classrooms and use it. We had to give them time to interact with the material, use it, experiment with it and realize the value of it for themselves rather than taking the presenters’ words as truth. Penuel, et. al. (2007) recommend multiple cycles of presentation so that participants have the opportunity to use and reflect on their knowledge while receiving ongoing support thought sessions (p. 929). Teachers are more likely to integrate their new knowledge into their classroom practices when they study it over a period of time. Mrs. D. and I decided to offer four sessions of instruction once a week after school for forty-five minutes. This would allow us to present the information in manageable pieces so that the participants would not be overwhelmed.

Additionally, we wanted to build in activities to our presentation to allow the participants to connect the material they were learning to their own classroom practice. Opfer and Pedder (2011) stated, “Teachers learn most effectively when activities require them to engage with materials of practice.” (p. 385) We designed activities to allow them to compare the reading strategies promoted by the Daily Café to the Common Core standards for literacy being used by the district next year. Teachers were able to see that these strategies were very similar to the Common Core standards, thus making a relevant connection to what they were already expected to implement in their classroom. This showed the teachers that adopting the instructional practices laid out in the Daily Café would relatively easy rather than just another things added to their plates because the two aligned very closely.

**Outcomes**

Overall, the professional development sessions went well. Most teachers appeared to appreciate the time they had to explore this new instructional method and discuss it with their colleagues. Several participants who were already implementing some of the Daily Café principles reported taking their information back their classrooms and adjusting their practices to more closely align with the information we shared. Teachers enjoyed the comparison activity and the result was as we intended, to show the participants that this new initiative by the district was not radically different from what they were already expected to be doing. I am interested to see how much of an impact these professional development sessions have in the coming school year for teachers who have never used the Daily Café.

While I believe that the overall effect of this professional development was positive, Mrs. D. and I did encounter some obstacles. Despite the fact that this was a voluntary professional development, some of the participants, particularly those without any experience with Daily Café were very reluctant to adopt some of the core strategies and practices used in the Daily Café method. Their skepticism, I believe, was due largely to the fact that they had not seen it being used with success with a teacher on their grade level. While our school has had great success using the Daily Café in the primary grades, the intermediate grades had yet to see it implemented in their classrooms. However, with several of the team members from each grade level participating in this professional development, I hope that they can be a system of support for each other to help each other obtain success.

We also had difficult obtaining resources for this course. Several of the teachers had not read the books by Boushey and Moser (2006, 2009). The school was in the process of purchasing books for the teachers to have as a reference, but they had not been delivered in time for our professional development sessions. I think that had teachers had more in depth information at their fingertips that they could reference on their own, the new information would not have been as overwhelming. Finally, some of the teachers participating appeared to resent the changes being made to the curriculum and the resources that the district was planning to provide for the upcoming year. This frustration and resentment at times appeared as hostility toward me and the other presenter. We were at time not able to answer questions regarding why the district was adopting this particular policy and what the resources from the district would look like and how readily they would be available. Additionally, the principal and instructional resource teacher did not have the answers to these questions either, which further escalated their feelings of being overwhelmed and frustrated.

**Future Implications**

I think that additional supports need to be organized to help those teachers who are brand new to the Daily Café instructional practices to help them to integrate the ideas they learned in our professional development session in to their daily practice. For someone who has never studied the principles of the Daily Café or read the corresponding books by Boushey and Moser (2006, 2009) it was probably overwhelming to absorb all of the information we presented. We tried to present the information in manageable sections, but this professional development was geared towards being an overview and not a session that you can walk away from and implement the instructional practices immediately. I would like to approach the principal to see if I can organize a Daily Café “Support Group” at the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year. Through this group, I envision teachers with more experience with the Daily Café mentoring more novice teachers and helping them to problem solve experiences they are having within their classroom. I think this would be effective because it provides teachers a nurturing setting to have ongoing access to teachers who are part of a system of expert practices (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 391). The benefit would be twofold, for both the teachers who are experiences and inexperienced with the Daily Café model of instruction. The experienced teachers will have informal opportunities to step up as exemplary models of teaching and inexperienced teachers will have access to a wealth of knowledge they can use to improve their teaching methods.

**Conclusions**

The process of designing and implementing a professional development session has truly helped me to grow as a teacher leader. Novice teacher leaders face significant obstacles when creating their own path toward effective leadership. Interacting with other adults, especially adults who may have more years of experience can be challenging. However, finding ways to develop confidence in oneself is key to success as a teacher leader.

Some of the challenges that I faced during this experience were due to the culture of teaching that exists within my school. The past few years have been filled with upheaval and changed for the teachers. We have had a new principal, budget cuts, reductions in staff and several new initiatives from the district in addition to the daily struggles teachers face in their classroom. As a result, many in my school work independently from their teams and it is very much an “every man for himself” type of environment. Personally, I don’t view my school as having a lot of collegiality. People are just angry and frustrated with all of the change taking place in our profession. While we have some teacher leaders, becoming one is not always looked on as being a positive. The staff can be very critical of teachers who take risks or try out leadership roles. Phelps (2008) explains, “Those teachers who do not become leaders are not typically satisfied with the status quo, easily discouraged, sometimes cynical, perhaps burned out, and may engage minimally in professional development activities” (p. 122). It was difficult to share my enthusiasm with some of my colleagues, including those on my grade team because they felt they already knew how to run their classroom and did not need to learn new techniques or methods to reach their students. It was hard to speak up and talk to people who did not want to be open to new ideas. I did not want to be the topic of their lunchtime criticism.

To me, and other teacher leaders as well, relationships with colleagues are very important. However, as Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) stated, “The egalitarian norms among teachers do not encourage a teacher to take on leadership roles….violating this expectation may be to suffer rejection from peers” (p. 91). I knew I needed to find the right approach to advocate for my passion as well as maintain positive working relationships with my colleagues who may have felt threatened or jealous of the leadership role I was taking. Johnson and Donaldson (2007) offered several suggestions to overcome this type of challenge. One that resonated with me was to “work with the willing” (p. 11). While this helped me to reach the people who genuinely wanted to learn, it did limit my overall impact on the school. The voluntary participation helped keep the focus on learning about the Daily Café rather than a session where the participants complained about another change they were forced to make in their classrooms. Working with people who are receptive to help is a step in the right direction. I believe that as I have more success and work positively with other staff members, I can begin to expand my sphere of influence.

Support from the administration in a school is crucial to the success of teacher leaders. I believe that my principal is supportive of efforts of teachers to become leaders throughout the building and not just in their individual classrooms. Mangin (2007) states that “teacher leaders require significant support from school principals” (p. 347). My administration showed support by allowing us to purchase some resources for our professional development and by attending our workshop sessions when they were able to do so. I noticed a difference in the attitudes and type of questions directed toward me when the administration was present. It was less hostile and more constructive than some of the negativity and criticism of the program when they were not present. “The principal is the lynchpin in creating and supporting a school climate in which teacher leadership can flourish” (Helterbran, 2010, p. 367). I hope that when I present my ideas for ongoing professional development on the Daily Café that the administration will continue to support me and help to foster a climate where teachers are encouraged to lead and share successes with their collagues.

Personally, this experience facilitating professional development helped me to develop confidence in myself as a leader. I know that I have excellent ideas and practices to share with my colleagues. I just needed the venue to do so successfully. Volunteering to lead this professional development was a risk for me. I am not normally they type of person who takes risks or tries to promote my viewpoint, even if I have had success with it. I am much more likely to lead by example as a quiet leader than one that presents to an audience. As Barth (2001) states, “To learn is to risk’ to lead others toward profound levels of learning is to risk; to promote personal and organizational renewal is to risk” (p.197). I am glad I took this risk. I found as my professional development sessions progressed, I become more comfortable in my role as a presenter. I was able to answer participant’s questions and deflect statements that were negative. I learned that I am a leader and that what I have to share with my colleagues is worthwhile. “Teachers teaching teachers is the highest form of professional development” (Barth, 2001, p. 61). I have not only deepened my understanding of the Daily Café and what I do within my classroom but have grown as a leader within my school. This I think is a valuable lesson that I was fortunate enough to learn early in my career. I hope to build on this experience and continue to share my enthusiasm and knowledge with my colleagues, no matter what the obstacle.

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