

Trapped by Central Administration's Focus on NCLB: Teachers Struggling with  
Professional Development in an Urban Middle School

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**Annotation:** A doctoral field study research team comprised of a faculty member and doctoral students collaborated with teachers and administrators in a low performing (non-Adequate Yearly Progress) urban middle school to identify and understand teacher and administrator perceptions related to professional development at the middle school. The research results revealed causes for the struggle with professional development at the middle school and provided hope for the future.

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding professional development at a non-Adequate Yearly Progress urban middle school with a predominately Hispanic student population.

A qualitative embedded case study research design was used with 31 teachers and two building administrators. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and the left-hand right-hand column case method, and document review were used to collect data.

The findings indicate that teachers found professional development as effective and relevant; were overwhelmed by information overload; lacked available time for practice; lacked voice in professional development decisions; and, believed that district's professional development did not meet the needs of the predominately Hispanic student culture.

The research team concluded that deeply embedded systemic communication issues separate teachers and district administrators. Excellent professional development training in the district may produce the intended results if teachers were more deeply involved in the decisions related to professional development training at the building level.

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*Purpose of the Study*

A university doctoral field study team entered into a collaborative research partnership with a Midwestern urban middle school to identify and understand teacher and administrator perceptions regarding professional development training at the middle school. We refer to this middle school as Martinez Middle School (MMS), symbolizing its high Hispanic population. The middle school was one of four Title I schools out of 103 schools in the school district placed on Title I Improvement for failing to meet established Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets.

Although the reasons for not meeting AYP are complex, one central aspect is teacher effectiveness. The classroom teacher's effectiveness is an important component of student achievement since teachers, in the end, determine the content, how the content is taught, set standards for achievement, and either facilitate or detract from student learning (Berry et al., 2003; Hawley & Valli, 1998). Although teaching quality is important at all levels of education, in urban middle schools the quality of teaching may be critical.

In urban middle schools, teachers have lower expectations of minority students and use ineffective pedagogical strategies and passive forms of instruction; moreover, in general, there are few highly qualified teachers who want to teach in urban schools (Camblin, 2003; Staples, Pagauh, & Himes, 2002). Given these factors, greater emphasis is placed on professional development activities to provide teachers with dispositions and the pedagogical skills for culturally responsive teaching in an urban middle school

environment (Lockwood & Secada, 1999).

### *Theoretical Framework*

We framed the issue of teacher professional development in the theoretical constructs of organizational culture (Sarason, 1996). We then examined the process of change within organizational culture and professional development (Schein, 1994).

#### *Organizational Culture*

Every organization has a multifaceted culture (Scholl, 2003). For some, it is a mixture of an organization's artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1992). Others view organizational culture as a place where people generatively create and recreate their work space (Morgan, 1986). Yet, others view organizational culture as an expression of the organization that can be studied separately from the organization (Lewin, 1999). For our purposes, we view organizational culture as a multifaceted construct that acts as a stabilizing force that resists change and survives the transitions of its members.

The organization's resistance to change is often caused by the highly enduring nature of the organization's culture and subculture that have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the ways people think, act, and feel (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Organizational culture is complex and is rarely overtly manifested (Alvesson, 2002). Subcultures are created as members divide into groups that share values and practices (Schultz, 1995). These values and practices affect the organization's efficiency and performance to the degree that the culture exerts pressure on its members to conform to cultural norms and behaviors (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). Lewin (1999) believed changing culture required unfreezing beliefs, re-education, and creating new

beliefs that lead to new norms and behaviors.

### *Organizational Change*

We considered change as the active process the organizational member experiences. Learning is viewed as the process that is both active and reflective before, during, and after the change process where members of the organization process new information that leads to an increase of personal and organizational knowledge and abilities (DiPaolo, 2005).

Change occurs at multiple levels through the modification of beliefs and values and the relationships that exist between and among groups and sub groups, whether it is personal or organizational (Dilts, Hallbom, & Smith, 1990). Change, however, may occur at a cultural level when the change is outside the traditions of the system or when change requires a fundamental reorientation to the environment (Schlechty, 2001). Moreover, the relationship of the person or the organization constructing the change interacts with all aspects of its context, causing any change to affect its entire context. As a result, all change is complex.

The pace and process of change are affected by the complex nature of change-driven interactions. The pace and process may be traumatic if the amount of change is inversely proportional to the required knowledge and time needed to process the new knowledge and implement the change (Schein, 1994; Siegelman, 1983).

Schon (1971) suggests it is human nature to desire a sense of sameness and to resist change. Efforts to change may cause organizational members to feel threatened. This sense of threat, in some ways, is ironic since all social groups are in a process of continuous change. Some refer to this as adaptive change (Senge, 1990). Social groups

that successfully adapt to change are able to learn and apply their learning to their evolving context. The group's ability to change may also be related to cultural norms (Barkdoll, 2004). Changing requires a culture that supports change.

Examining the works of Lewin (1999), Calabrese (2002) suggested that the change process requires the organizational structure to support the desire to change. Sustaining the change process requires that those most involved in the change process participate in the planning and implementing stages. The change process is committed to re-education and training to solidify the change. In this sense, change directly relates to learning. Schools, as organizations, use professional development as a primary means for creating change in the pedagogical strategies and dispositions commonly held by teachers.

### *Professional Development*

Professional development has been the subject of extensive research (Lieberman, 1995). According to the U.S. Department of Education's Professional Development Team, the mission of professional development is to help all students achieve to high standards through preparing and supporting educators (Education, 2001). Effective professional development affects the knowledge, aptitudes, and dispositions for learning that occurs within the organization (Murphy, 2000). Many school districts continue to use traditional professional development approaches for professional development training of teachers (Walsh & Gamage, 2003). The traditional approaches to professional development are the subject of sustained criticism from multiple sources (Fullan & Steigelbauer, 1991; Little, 1997). In spite of the criticism, professional development appears to be the most popular strategy employed by school districts to increase teacher

instructional competence.

Increasing teacher competence in content knowledge and pedagogy may be linked to higher student achievement scores, especially for minority students in urban schools (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004; Williamson, 2000). Researchers suggest that increasing minority student achievement is particularly crucial in urban middle schools because many at-risk behaviors for dropping out of school or failing in school are first observed at this level (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone III, March 2002). Moreover, professional development in urban schools is increasingly important given the nature of high stakes testing and the demands of NCLB (Cook, 1997). NCLB requirements for performance-based licensing intensifies the need for teachers in urban settings to expand their knowledge of content and pedagogy (Cicchinelli, Gaddy, Lefkowitz, & Miller, 2003; Corcoran, 1995). As a result, we worked with teachers and administrators in a low performing (non-AYP) urban middle school to identify and understand teacher and administrator perceptions regarding the professional development training at their middle school.

### *Methodology*

We applied an appreciative inquiry theoretical research perspective to a qualitative embedded case study research design to identify and understand teacher and administrator perceptions regarding the professional development training. Appreciative inquiry focuses on the assets of the organization and its stakeholders. As a result, those who participate in an appreciative inquiry driven process are unlikely to have a defensive reaction formation when discussing their challenges (Berry et al., 2003).

*Data Analysis Procedures*

The units of analysis were 31 teachers and 2 administrators. Some teachers at MMS served a dual role: classroom teacher and teacher trainer. As teacher trainers, they provided the bulk of professional development training at MMS. We used semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and the Left hand – Right Hand Column Case Method (LHRHCCM); we also reviewed pertinent documents. The LHRHCCM was developed by Argyris and Schon (1996) to identify governing values, defensive routines, and undiscussables. We analyzed and triangulated the data using content analysis and narrative summary analyses and focused on an iterative process involving open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In the following section, we address the findings of this study. The findings were generated by dividing the data into six categories to establish major themes within subgroups of 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade academic teams, an exploratory team of teachers who taught non-core subjects across all three grades, teacher trainers, and administrators.

*Findings*

We identified five major findings: 1) Teachers found professional development to be effective and relevant. 2) Teachers felt overwhelmed by the amount of information. 3) Teachers decried the limited available time for practice. 4) Teachers lacked a voice in professional development decisions. 5) Teachers believed that district directed professional development training did not respond to the dynamic needs of their predominately Hispanic student culture.

A gas explosion at MMS occurred during the data collection period. Because of this disturbance, the findings may have been mitigated. MMS was closed for repairs for



two months. During the time that the repairs occurred, the school district's administrators made the decision to transfer the middle school administrators, teachers, and students to two vacant school buildings in different parts of the city, separating administrators, teachers, and students. Teachers were required to park their cars at MMS and ride school buses with the students to one of the two locations. At the end of the school day, teachers returned to MMS on school buses with the students.

### *Effective and Relevant Professional Development*

According to MMS teachers, professional development was relevant to the students' needs. One teacher stated, "That's what I'm working on (for professional development). What do we have control over? What do we do to make them (the students) successful?" Teachers acknowledged the efforts to link professional development to increasing student achievement. A teacher commented, "I think the most effective thing I learned from the training was to have high expectations for the students."

The teachers' professional development training was well planned at the district level. One teacher explained, "Every math teacher went downtown for quarterly meetings...they have a leader at every building...they train us." Teachers cited the flexibility of days and times when training occurred, including nights and weekends. A teacher shared, "I could have taken the time during class time and gone, but they made an opportunity to go from 4-7 p.m. tomorrow night and get the training."

Some teachers believed that professional development training provided opportunities to collaborate, observe peers, and participate in coached practice. One teacher stated, "Staff development at MMS seems to be abnormally good. You don't see the quality or as much of it at other schools as you do here. I mean it's a well thought

[out] plan.”

Teacher trainers understood that offering activities in support of teacher choice and interest was beneficial to the training process. They wanted teachers to see the utility in the training and to integrate the training into their classroom instructional strategies.

One teacher trainer commented:

We asked teachers what they wanted. The first time we presented...how we thought people could use it in different curricular areas. The second time, we asked what they want us to talk about. The next time that we meet with them, we are going to plan for the next training (in collaboration with the teachers).

Teacher trainers wanted to balance the school site's unique needs with the district's efforts to meet federal and state mandates. The trainers made efforts to provide relevant and effective professional development for teachers.

### *Information Overload*

Teachers felt frustrated with the overwhelming amount of information that emanated from professional development activities. A teacher exclaimed, “There's so much information that I have to look back, Oh yeah, I forgot about that! or Oh shoot, how can I use this?” While the information is relevant, teachers claim it is impossible to apply all ideas or materials disseminated through the panoply of professional development offerings. One teacher expressed, “You give us all that information. What am I going to do with it? What do I do with it now?”

Demands from the school district's administration to increase student achievement contributed to the escalation of professional development requirements for teachers. A teacher recounted, “And before you know it, you're at another one (training)

and you forgot everything (from the previous training) and you're getting brand new information and it's so much information that it piles up."

Many teachers were frustrated by information overload. A teacher stated, "We've been given four, five, six things in a three hour period. I go home and grumble and moan and I think, "How will I implement all of it?" Although teachers articulated their belief in the quality of the professional development, many identified a divide between acquisition of new knowledge and skill transferability. The teachers required more time to process and implement their new knowledge and more time to adapt new strategies and decision-making regarding the professional development offerings. A teacher trainer shared the following on information overload:

You give me this idea, and then you give me THIS [emphasis speaker] idea, and then you give me THIS [emphasis speaker] idea, and then you give me THIS [emphasis speaker] idea, and three weeks later you still have to merge it with my own time. Kids need to have time and practice to use something correctly...The only way to plan well is to have the time. I may have ideas but if I don't have time...

The teachers felt that school district administrators did not understand their information overload. They required more time to process and implement the information from the professional development training sessions. The teachers believed that training sessions offered too much information, too fast, and too often. They believed that the overload of information occurred because they were not involved in the professional development decision-making process. One teacher stated, "Who selects professional development topics?" Another added, "They decided. We don't decide."

*Relevant Time Issues*

Teachers believed their team planning time gave them a chance to collaborate; yet, they believed that control of this time was not theirs. Moreover, they felt that lack of control over their time undervalued them. A teacher bemoaned, “They just figured we don’t do anything. You know, we kind of feel like we’re not really respected ...”

Non-teaching duties consumed the teachers’ time and energy. The teachers suggested that time associated with non-teaching duties be modified and applied to professional development and collaboration. One of the teachers said, “You know, the district has taken team time [collaboration] away and so we don’t team together. We just thought it was a bit ironic that the last district in-service was about teaming and they had taken our team time away.”

The criticisms associated with time issues were common complaints for teachers across all grade levels at MMS. Teachers said that they did not have the time to observe the successful classroom skills of other teachers who were skilled in a pedagogical strategy. A teacher stated, “It does help us know what’s going on in the other classrooms so we can use those same strategies.”

Professional development training competed with other activities such as scope and sequence charts and AYP accountability. For teachers, AYP Accountability often translated into their having to develop planning documents to demonstrate how they would meet AYP. A trainer commented, “Will we make it or will we ever make it (AYP)? Because of the district and AYP, every department is supposed to come up with a plan.”

Building administrators were caught between teacher time demands, state-driven

demands, and national demands on school districts related to student achievement. As such, building administrators tried to balance district level initiatives for professional development related to instruction with teacher needs at the building level. Building administrators viewed themselves as negotiators between the district administration and teachers. They worked to provide time, resources, and built in schedule flexibility to meet teacher needs.

Building administrators hired a technology/data staff member to free up teachers' time. The technology employee analyzed data and provided reports and feedback for the teachers to use in lesson planning. An administrator stated, "Twice every nine weeks, he'll [technology/data staff member] sit down with teachers and go through the data [to focus on] student analysis as opposed to the student grading." In addition, a building administrator indicated that MMS created a trainer of trainers' model. The trainers' model prepared MMS Teachers to train other MMS teachers. This administrator felt the model was an effective way for trainers to show MMS teachers how to use cutting-edge pedagogical strategies. Teachers, however, were frustrated that they did not have enough time to practice new pedagogical strategies, discuss training, or receive coaching.

#### *Teacher Empowerment in Professional Development*

Some teachers believed that the district administration did not sufficiently involve them in the professional development decision-making process. "We feel like we should maybe have more of a voice ... because we don't have one." Another remarked, "... our voices are silent."

Some teachers stated that the level of teacher input was sufficient. A teacher said, "We wrote everything down that we wanted to learn." In addition, other teachers stated

that their input on professional development was occasionally sought through needs assessment surveys.

Other teachers believed they had a voice in professional development planning; yet, they perceived it was not a strong voice. A teacher shared, “We pestered, and pestered, and pestered, and finally got the time to sit down together and make some common assessments.” Teachers maintained that their input was rarely encouraged and when they made recommendations, their suggestions were not valued. One teacher summarized the feelings of many teachers, “I think we feel like that we should have more of a voice in ... development.”

#### *Lack of Cultural Responsiveness*

Teachers alleged that the subject matter addressed in professional development was often not relevant to the cultural needs of the MMS population. When asked how professional development addressed these needs, a teacher responded, “I don’t know that we go there very often,” and “I don’t think we do anything that targets any ethnicity group. Not this year.”

Students at MMS displayed unique cultural challenges that required teachers’ attention. Many students needed clothes, food, eyeglasses, health care, and assistance with psychological needs. Teachers felt frustrated when the district ignored these needs and focused on state and federal mandates on academic achievement. In the view of many teachers, the district goal for MMS to make AYP overshadowed the physiological and psychological needs of the students.

One teacher stated, “We have a large population of Hispanics, and a lot of them are second language learners and if they’re not in an ESOL (English for Speakers of

Other Languages) classroom, they still have needs in a regular classroom.” Another teacher stated, “There were problems with fights.”

The demanding physiological and psychological needs of students often prevented teachers from learning new pedagogical strategies. “Our kids have a lot of needs,” one teacher stated. When asked to define student needs, a teacher shared, “They need shoes, or they need glasses, they need immunizations, or they don’t have a coat, or they have to turn in homework folders, or they’re picking on someone on the playground, or they’re depressed, or whatever.”

Teachers wanted the focus of professional development to address the basic physiological and psychological needs of students. “We can be the best teachers in the world, but if we don’t know how to reach our kids, then we’re not going to be effective.” Their primary overriding concern was to address the needs of their unique population of students.

### Discussion

Many teachers viewed professional development in this urban district as a buffet with too many options and not enough time. Teachers were incongruent when reporting professional development. On the one hand, teachers valued the professional development training. On the other hand, they suggested that they seldom used the professional development training. The teachers had an efficacious experience while receiving professional development; however, they did not know how to implement what they learned because of information overload and time issues.

Teachers felt they had little control over time outside of the classroom. Time issues were related to collaborative planning, the need for coaching on new professional

development skills, and maintaining the normal operations of the school. Building administrators attempted to address the time issue through scheduling and hiring a technology/data staff member. These efforts, however, did not lessen the growing resentment felt by teachers.

Many teachers directed their frustration toward “downtown.” “Downtown,” symbolically represented the district’s central administration; it took the brunt of the teachers’ frustration whether justified or unjustified. The divide between “downtown” and the teachers may be related to systemic issues. Moreover, the physical distance between central office and the school site(s) created an illusionary barrier that gave the impression that central office and teachers are on opposite sides. In reality, that is not the case.

Teacher complaints may be a symptom of teacher resistance to the rapid change that is occurring in the education profession related to state and federal mandated testing and teacher accountability. Conversations between central office and teachers were perceived by MMS teachers as top-down and obfuscating attempts at collaboration for change. Change may not be welcome, especially when it occurs rapidly, but when the reasons for change are understood and the strategy for pursuing change have grassroots participation, it is then more likely that central office will have increased teacher support.

Teachers believed that professional development training should address the unique cultural needs of the MMS students. Teachers saw these needs as both physiological and psychological and felt that if they were not addressed, student achievement would suffer. The teachers also felt that professional development training did not address the primary needs of students. The cause of this disconnect may indicate



that professional development's primary focus should be on the needs of the population being served by the school.

The MMS student population brings a culture unfamiliar to the majority of teachers. Many teachers are English speaking and require Spanish translators to communicate with Spanish-speaking parents. It may be that the teachers, by expressing concern that professional development meet the unique needs of their students, express a tacit call for help, and want professional development designed to assist in understanding and communicating with students and parents.

#### *Recommendations*

Throughout the study, teachers and building administrators shared beliefs about professional development at MMS as well as a vision for professional development in this highly Hispanic urban middle school. When the district addresses the teachers' need for greater voice in professional development, they attend to the major findings in this study. We contend that through maximizing the involvement of teachers in the design, development, implementation, and accountability for professional development, the issues of information overload, lack of time, and the needs of the student population will be met. Moreover, through greater voice, teachers may express a deeper commitment to the professional development goals of district administrators.

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