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The Elementary Directors of School Services Study 2007–2008

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Summary

The Elementary Directors of School Services Study examined the professional development (PD) provided to directors at the central level and the subsequent local district PD provided to principals in the District Reading Action Seminars (DRAS). The following are some of the key findings from this study:

- Despite the existence of necessary structures for a high quality PD experience, several factors inhibited its full success.
 - Directors did not have structured opportunities to practice and receive feedback, that is, to have their performance assisted.
 - An increase in lack of engagement over the course of the year may have been the result of a lack of buy-in on the part of some directors.
 - Although facilitators provided opportunities to the directors to provide feedback and give input, at least eight of the directors (32%) perceived having a lack of agency in designing the PD.
 - A lack of community and a perceived unsafe climate inhibited the success of the professional development.

As the district moves forward with local districts as the context in which PD for directors will take place, the findings from this study can be used to plan for and implement PD for local district leaders. In other words, by presenting effective and ineffective PD components and practices, a primary purpose of this report is to inform designers of PD about instructional leadership as they support directors, principals, and other leaders in the local district context.

Overview

For the past several years, the elementary directors of school services have received PD at the central level. The 2007–08 central PD was intended to build directors' leadership capacity by engaging them in a research cycle in order to teach them how to identify a problem related to their work, to collect evidence about that problem, and to experiment with ways to solve it. The PD was intended to also teach directors how to help their principals by "guiding" them to solutions rather than "telling" them what steps to take. As well, central PD facilitators planned the local district DRAS, which were monthly meetings in each local district for principals and assistant principals who applied to be a part of the Reading First grant. The 2007–08 DRAS meetings exposed principals and assistant principals to writing instruction in Open Court Reading as well as teaching them how to be instructional leaders. The DSS PD facilitators used

the DSS meeting context to model for and support the directors who were charged with delivering the leadership portion of DRAS and subsequently supporting their principals in engaging in a research cycle of their own.

The following questions guided our study:

- What is the nature and extent of directors' learning around leadership and writing instruction? Does this learning prepare them to be effective instructional leaders?
- To what degree does the PD provided in the DSS meetings influence the work of the directors with their principals in the DRAS meetings? What are the barriers and/or facilitating factors to transferring knowledge and skills from the directors' meetings to their work with the principals in the DRAS meetings?

Broadly speaking, this report discusses components of professional development (PD) that both facilitate and hinder learning in adult settings. Using the elementary directors of school services PD as an example, we examined both the effective and ineffective practices we observed. The findings from this report can be used by local district superintendents to plan PD in their local context.

Methods

As a study that focused on the nature of PD provided to the elementary directors of school services, this study was qualitative in approach. We used observations, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews as our sources of evidence. The following table summarizes our methods, timeline and sample.

TABLE 1
Data Sources for 2007-08 DSS Study

Types of Data Collected	Data Collection Time Period	N
Observations		
DSS meeting observations	August 2007 – June 2008	17
DRAS meeting observations	October 2007 – May 2008	32
DSS planning meeting observations	October 2007 – June 2008	13
Interviews		
DSS interviews	November 2007 – December 2007	25
LD superintendent interviews	December 2007 – January 2008	8
Deputy superintendent interview	January 2008	1
DSS interviews – follow up	May 2008	28
Principal focus group interview	June 2008	4

Key Findings

In this section, we highlight the key findings from our report. (For a complete list of findings and the evidence for our assertions, please refer to the report.)

In the Director of School Services Study, we found that despite the existence of necessary structures for a high quality professional development experience, several factors inhibited its full success.

Directors did not have structured opportunities to practice and receive feedback, that is, to have their performance assisted.

Although directors were given ample opportunities to share their independent practice of the research cycle, we did not observe much guided practice within the PD setting, nor were there opportunities for the facilitators to give directors feedback about their work. Specifically, we found that two strategies – Socratic questioning and critical thinking checks – were not sufficiently practiced by the directors despite being explicitly stated in the PD learning goals. Out of the 2653 minutes spent on opportunities to practice and/or share, only 115 minutes (or 4%) were dedicated to Socratic questioning and critical thinking checks. As well, instruction on and opportunities to practice these strategies tapered off as the year progressed. The discontinuation of these specific strategies was reflected in the DRAS meetings as well. Out of the 3516 total number of minutes spent on opportunities to practice and/or share during DRAS, only 219 minutes (or 5%) were reserved for the practicing of Socratic questioning and critical thinking checks. In addition to the lack of guided practice, there was also very little opportunity for directors to receive feedback on their work. Because the PD facilitators did not supervise the work of the directors, there was a sense of discomfort around providing feedback to them. Thus, the structures and relationships were not in place to make such feedback possible.

An increase in lack of engagement over the course of the year may have been the result of a lack of buy-in on the part of some directors.

We found an increase in the level of negative engagement throughout the year. We wondered through the course of the year whether levels of engagement were related to buy-in or a perceived lack of agency on the part of the directors. Using the data we collected on directors' willingness to provide feedback or give input, whether solicited by facilitators or not, we found a relationship between the enactment of agency and the level of engagement. Specifically, those who were observed providing feedback or giving input to the PD facilitators tended to have higher positive engagement.

Although facilitators provided opportunities to the directors to provide feedback and give input, at least eight of the directors (32%) perceived having a lack of agency in designing the PD.

The DSS PD facilitators made attempts to elicit and follow through with feedback from directors throughout the year. The purpose was to not only to make mid-course improvements, but to give directors agency in shaping the PD being provided to them. The following is a table highlighting the different kinds of director agency.

Table 2
Director Agency

Kinds of Agency	Number of instances
Opportunities for feedback and/or input	65
LDs given license to change DRAS	31
Feedback referenced	25
Unsolicited feedback was given by directors	15

Despite the opportunities for director agency, it should be noted that 28% of the opportunities given for feedback were characterized by a show of hands or a simple yes/no question. Also, 18% of the time when feedback was elicited, the facilitator moved on after a few directors had participated. In other words, sometimes, they were satisfied with the amount of feedback they received even when the majority of directors had not cast their votes. Additionally, there was variation in the number of times that directors participated in such agency, whether solicited or not. Some directors participated as many as 13 times while other directors did not participate or only participated once. Subsequently, several of the directors felt that they did not have agency in the PD process. For example, some felt frustrated that they were unable to be a pivotal part of the DRAS planning process. There was a sense from some directors that even if they were given the chance to provide feedback or make minor changes in DRAS, they had not been invited to contribute to the very planning of the PD they were being asked to deliver.

A lack of community and a perceived unsafe climate inhibited the success of the professional development.

The importance of the culture and climate in a learning setting cannot be underscored enough. The perception of a negative culture and climate on the part of some directors affected the success of the PD directors received, and in turn, the kind of PD they were able to deliver to their principals in DRAS. Some directors communicated that they did not feel safe sharing their ideas with their colleagues, both within and across local districts. In a follow-up interview, one director suggested that the PD facilitators spend more time in their central meetings *building* a more positive learning environment with the hopes of eventually becoming a learning community. Additionally, our study pointed to tensions between the PD central was providing and the priorities of different local districts. These tensions influenced some directors’ buy-in and receptiveness to the PD they were receiving at central. Despite the facilitators’ efforts to foster a learning community that transcended central-local district divisions, at least a quarter of the directors communicated not feeling safe in the DSS meetings. The central-local district tensions resulting from the existing structures coupled with a perceived negative learning environment made it less likely that some directors would internalize the teachings from central. This finding points to the importance to any district employee who is planning and/or implementing the PD of other district employees of structuring opportunities for building and fostering positive relationships.

Conclusion

Research and Planning has conducted many studies of professional development settings. Although several factors hindered the success of the 2007–08 elementary DSS PD, it provided one of the better examples of PD models we have observed in the district. At the same time, there were several factors that inhibited the full success of this PD and these are issues we encourage local district superintendents to pay attention to and attempt to address in their own contexts.

It is important to note that this study had a few limitations, and the reader should read this research brief and the report with these limitations in mind. Most importantly, the design of the study did not allow us to observe the directors in all of their local settings, such as one-on-one interactions with their principals. As such, we were unable to fully gauge the extent to which directors internalized and were able to implement what was shared with them in the PD meetings. The directors may have used the strategies they were taught in other settings in which we were absent.

Despite the limitations, our findings (many of which were summarized in this research brief) prompted us to make the following recommendations:

- PD facilitators should provide ample opportunities for both independent and guided practice on the specific strategies and skills they hope to teach participants.
- PD facilitators should structure more opportunities for giving participants feedback as they practice and apply the strategies, skills, and knowledge they are learning.
- PD facilitators should articulate both long-term and short term learning goals, adding, where possible, a roadmap for the year. This roadmap should be flexible to change and mid-course corrections as necessary.
- Facilitators should try to include, whenever possible, all stakeholders in the process of planning PD.
- PD facilitators should pay close and continuous attention to issues of culture and climate in the learning setting. For example, effort should be expended to create an emotionally safe environment in which participants can share their ideas without fearing punishment or humiliation.
- If and when tension or conflict arises in the learning setting, PD facilitators should address them by eliciting open dialogue about the issues that gave rise to these tensions.

These are necessary components of professional development. Whether PD is planned and delivered at the central level or in local contexts, PD facilitators should keep the above recommendations in mind in order to maximize participants' buy-in and learning.

For more information regarding this study see the full report:

Samkian, Artineh, Dávila, Brianne, and Valdés, Rosa. The Elementary Directors of School Services. Research and Planning No. 2008–11. Available Online: research.lausd.net