Professional Development: Challenges and Opportunities

Melinda Durrant and John Hughes

ELP 6450: Administration of Educational Resources

Dr. Mohomodu Boncanca

University of Utah

**Professional Development: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Introduction:**

The topic that we have chosen to do our final presentation and paper on is one that we feel has great relevance in the topic of the Administration of Educational Resources, and to education in general. Professional development is a vital necessity for any educator, regardless of job title. Everyone can benefit from high quality professional development – maintenance workers, cafeteria workers, paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators. We chose this topic because it was something we both felt strongly about and something that was applicable to our current situation.

When we started researching the history of professional development we found that there was little information before the 1990’s when electronic technology - computers, etc. - was just making an appearance on the scene. Before that time not much which was written about professional development as a separate, specific topic. In the mid 1990’s, Thomas Guskey (1995) stated, “Never before in the history of education has there been greater recognition of the importance of professional development. Every modern proposal to reform, restructure, or transform schools emphasizes professional development as a primary vehicle in efforts to bring about needed change” (p. 1). Guskey noted that there appeared to be a greater interest in professional development in the educational research of that time.

Between 1990 and 2000, teachers were traditionally receiving professional development in one-shot experiences that were generally designed in the same fashion. The district or school would hire an outside consultant to come on site and present to a group of educators. A 2004 article in *Education Week* cited research by Little (1994) and Miles (1995) on this topic:

Professional development has traditionally been provided to teachers through school in-service workshops. In the classic conception of that model, the district or school brings in an outside consultant or curriculum expert on a staff-development day to give teachers a one-time training seminar on a garden-variety pedagogic or subject-area topic. Such an approach has been routinely lamented in the professional literature. Experts variously say that it lacks continuity and coherence, that it misconceives of the way adults learn best, and that it fails to appreciate the complexity of teachers' work ("Professional development," 2004).

Indeed, in much of the research we found teachers almost universally denounced such professional development tactics. In many cases teachers felt that these types of trainings were patronizing and demeaning, treating them less as professionals, and more as mere laborers.

Beginning around the year 2000, technology itself changed the way that teachers could receive professional development. Teachers were able to receive more courses online through webinars – web-based seminars. Learning has become more self-directed and local level selected. In fact, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2010) lists the following skills as a requirement for Professional Development:

• Ensure educators understand the importance of 21st century skills and how to integrate them into daily instruction

• Enable collaboration among all participants

• Allow teachers and principals to construct their own learning communities

• Tap the expertise within a school or school district through coaching, mentoring and team teaching

• Support educators in their role of facilitators of learning

• Use 21st century tools

The use of Web 2.0 tools – blogs, wikis, social networks, etc., - and other online resources appears poised to define professional development entering the second decade of the 21st century.

The next section of our document will address the four questions we sought to speak to in our paper. 1) In general, what does effective and lasting professional development look like and how does that differ with traditional methods of disseminating professional development? 2) What examples and research can we find to support the answers to our first question? 3) What professional development resources are we currently aware of in our area? 4) How can these resources be adjusted to be more effective in small rural schools and districts?

**In general, what does effective and lasting professional development look like and how does that differ with traditional methods of disseminating professional development?**

To begin this section of our paper, we wanted to share four researchers’ definitions of effective professional development.

Judith Warren Little defines professional development as “a focus on and responsibility for student learning and the formation of professional community inside and outside the school” (1996, p.1).

Secondly, Linda Darling-Hammond and Milbrey W. McLaughlin state that professional development is “deepening teachers’ understanding about the teaching/ learning process and the students they teach, [which] must begin with pre-service education and continue throughout a teacher’s career.” They continue by saying that “effective professional development involves teachers both as learners and teachers, and allows them to struggle with the uncertainties that accompany each role” (1996, p. 203).

A third perspective is from Alexander Russo (2004) who stated that professional development needs to be “ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers’ classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based approaches. It also must help to open classroom doors and create more collaboration and sense of community among teachers in a school” (paragraph 8).

Finally, Willis D. Hawley and Linda Valli of the University of Maryland express the idea that effective professional development for educators is continual and “...calls for providing collegial opportunities to learn that are linked directly to solving authentic problems that are defined by the gaps between goals for student achievement and actual student performance” (1996, p.1).

These four descriptions of professional development were very much in line with our own feelings on the topic. We have both had incidents in which professional development was not effective. Unfortunately, our experiences are not isolated examples. When teachers feel that professional development is ineffective, they are less likely to attend unless required to, and when they do attend there is little buy-in or retention of concepts that are shared in these sessions. We have found this to be true in our own attempts at providing professional development for the teachers in our school. It is important that educational leaders and educators in general have access to quality, research based, ongoing professional development resources.

**What examples and research can we find to support the answers to what professional development actually looks like especially in rural schools such as ours?**

While many educators like the experience of living in less urban areas and working in rural schools, there are as many drawbacks as there are positives. In several rural districts, professional development has been seen as something that is endeavored when there is “extra” time to spend because it is not considered to be imperative to good teaching. That is not to say that teachers and administrators in such situations do not welcome professional development, it simply means that it is not considered at the top of their priority list when things such as finding enough teachers to cover classes, or dealing with transporting students from outlying areas take precedence. In the past, some rural educators have opted out of professional development opportunities offered, due to issues with distance and cost.

In our own district we have found this to be the case. Because of the ninety mile distance to our district office, anytime a meeting was scheduled teachers or administrators who needed to attend had to add a three hour round trip on top of the time in training. This meant that if the meeting lasted an hour, participants were on the road three times longer than in the training. In some cases the trainings or meetings lasted far less than an hour, thereby making the disparity even more glaring. As this happened more frequently, many teachers from the schools in our town simply stopped attending. Leonard Annetta and Daniel Dickerson (2006) declare:

“Distance learning programs are increasingly being explored in many areas of education. In particular, schools in rural settings, which have traditionally been underserved and dislocated from their urban counterparts, are now seeing the benefit of distance learning technologies. It would seem, then, that there should be a natural marriage of rural teacher training, professional development, and distance education. (p. 400).

The reason that such technologies are becoming increasingly common is that they ameliorate time and travel issues to a certain degree. A disadvantage of this type of technology is that offsite participants often do not have immediate access to resources such as handouts, manipulatives, the ability to view movies or video clips that are shared as part of a presentation, and even the seemingly insignificant ability to partake in refreshments that may be provided to onsite participants. This can create a feeling of isolation within distance participants even though they are able to access much of the content and are often grateful for the opportunity to participate. It is a dichotomy that may become increasingly more prevalent as this type of training becomes more widespread.

We sent a questionnaire to administrators in a rural district asking the following questions:

1) What is your perception of what constitutes effective professional development?

2) (a)What challenges do you face in creating and/or implementing professional development? (b)Which, if any, of these challenges are intensified by the size of your school or faculty?

3) Do you provide professional development for others on your staff besides certified teachers?

4) What are the results of your professional development efforts on your faculty/staff morale?

5) What, if any, effect do you feel your professional development has had on student achievement?

Though there is not space to discuss answers to all the questions we posed, we chose a sample that we felt was significant from the responses we received. The responses came from both a district and school level. In answer to question 2(a) we felt it was telling that at both levels – time, buy-in, and funding were considered to be challenges. If we were to add our own responses they would be in line with those we received in this area. For complete replies, see Appendix A.

**What professional development resources are we currently aware of in our area?**

While the opportunities for professional development in rural areas such as ours can be limited, when we began listing resources we knew of, we were pleasantly surprised at the number that were available.

A local and fairly low cost option is to have “homegrown” or “in-house” professional development using “experts” in certain curricular areas that are already on staff. An example of this would be a “book club” of sorts where the entire faculty reads and discusses a book about a specific educational topic. Another example would be having a teacher who is familiar or skilled in a certain area give training, such as someone who is experienced at using an interactive whiteboard giving a training to members of the staff that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with using one.

For professional development that is not done in-house, an opportunity that has been available for the past several years in our area - first through Utah State University and more recently through the Utah State Office of Education - is Core Academy. This three-day training held during the summer was created to address topics in Math and Science in grades Kindergarten through Sixth. Teachers all over the state had the chance to attend sessions in areas near them to gain new insights, as well as to collaborate with other teachers on their grade level. In our district we have been fortunate to have our registration fees for this training paid for at the district level, which allowed all educators who wanted to participate that chance. In fact, the opportunity to attend has also been extended to paraprofessionals. This was significant because it is one of the few professional development opportunities they have the chance to attend. Because of the adoption of the Common Core Curriculum Standards the Utah State Office of Education has revised how they will be offering training in Core Academies in the future. It remains to be seen if the changes will positively or negatively impact our district or other districts.

Another professional development resource is the Rural Schools Conference held yearly in Cedar City, Utah at Southern Utah University during the month of July. This three-day training focuses on a variety of topics for educators and administrators at both the elementary and secondary levels. At this conference, educators, administrators, State Office personnel, and other guest presenters teach sessions. As with Core Academy, our district has paid the registration fee for all interested participants. The quality of sessions varies based on each presenter and their topic, preparation, and experience. Informal feedback has been generally positive.

The Utah Coalition for Educational Technology (UCET) sponsors a yearly conference in early spring focusing on current and new technology that can be used in education. This conference is generally held during the school year at varying larger high schools on the Wasatch Front. The quality of the sessions in this conference has been variable based on the presenters, their format, and the topic chosen. While, on the whole a good resource for professional development, a disadvantage of this conference lies in the fact that is held during the school year, requiring anyone attending to miss school in order to participate. Because finding an adequate number of substitute teachers is an on-going problem in many rural school districts, this limits the number of educators who can attend.

The Utah Council of Teachers of Mathematics (UCTM) sponsors a yearly conference in the fall, again in a large high school on the Wasatch Front. This conference focuses on research-based teaching practice for mathematics. As with the UCET conference a disadvantage of this conference is the fact that it takes place during the school year, requiring participants to leave their classrooms to participate.

The Utah Association of Elementary School Principals (UAESP) sponsors several conferences for elementary school administrators, school secretaries, and school student councils. These are often based in the northern part of the state, although the winter conference for administrators is held in St. George.

While this is likely not a comprehensive list of professional development conferences, they are the ones we are most familiar with. While it seems to be a fairly extensive list, there are a variety of mitigating factors that make them limited in the number of participants that can attend. These include timing, distance, and cost. When dealing with budgeting issues if given the choice between attending a $300 conference (not including travel expenses such as fuel and housing) and spending the same amount on supplies for their classrooms, teachers will invariably choose outfitting their classrooms because of its more immediate effect on their students. In other words, crayons win out over conferences. There are a few alternative methods of professional development that we are aware of in our district, which include, but are not limited to: the Utah Education Network (UEN) and PD360.

The Utah Education Network (UEN) provides online tutorials for educators at no cost, and onsite training if there is enough interest expressed to justify the time, travel, and materials of the presenters. Their purpose, according to their acceptable use policy is “to advance and promote a world- class public education in Utah. UEN is intended to assist in the collaboration and exchange of information between and among schools, school offices, the Utah Education Network, and other State and educational entities as well as provide access to the 'world of information' via networking facilities like the Internet.” Many of their training topics deal with the use of technology in education, but there are other topics as well (UEN).

PD360 is a paid subscription based professional development website run by the School Improvement Network. Subscribers have access to 1,400 videos, 120 educational experts, and 97 professional development topics. Topics cover a wide range of issues on a variety of levels both elementary and secondary. Additionally, for another fee, educators can participated in online courses provided by the site and taught by renowned educational practitioners. In our district, each administrator and a few lead teachers have access to PD360, because the cost would be prohibitive to the district otherwise. The idea is that administrator or teacher leaders would show segments to the faculty or assign individual teachers or groups of teachers to watch under their subscriptions.

As can be seen, there are resources available for professional development that can be taken advantage of by educators and those who lead them. The challenge comes in finding the funding to take advantage of many of the resources whether they are one-on-one training sessions, conference attendance, contracting with outside vendors to visit on-site, or online. Most training comes with a fee that the district, school, or individual may not be able or willing to pay when there seem to be so many other budget issues that are pressing.

**How can these resources be adjusted to be more effective in small rural schools and districts?**

In larger school districts there are often curriculum directors who provide professional development on an ongoing basis to schools. Part of the job of such a curriculum director is to find and fund these professional development activities. Rural districts often do not have the ability in either finance or human resource capital to have a curriculum director on staff. This requires thinking outside of the box to other ways of bringing professional development opportunities to their staffs. Diane Wood (2007) asserts, “To reconceptualize teachers' work…requires a professional development agenda that doesn't simply equip teachers with techniques, but widens their professional responsibility and hones their professional judgment” (p. 709).

One such option is video conferencing. A study by Annetta and Dickerson (2006) explored the effectiveness of using point-to-point videoconferencing for a professional development workshop aimed at elementary level teachers in rural Missouri that would span three days. “Results suggest that teachers perceived the use of point-to-point videoconferencing to be as effective as their previous experience in traditional workshops. However, teacher participants overwhelmingly preferred to have the workshop leaders onsite” (p. 399). In many ways, this may be the wave of the future for interactive professional development. Our own district uses a version of this for some of the grade level and other district meetings it holds. Indeed, videoconferencing is the way that a significant portion of our Educational Leadership cohort (including the two of us) has been able to receive instruction for our Master’s Degree. While there are disadvantages – lag time, no personal one on one interaction with teachers or all classmates, being subject to network failures – these are minor and will probably improve as the technology becomes more sophisticated and instructors and students become more comfortable with this way of conducting and receiving training.

Another option is more widespread use of already available online subscription services, such as PD360, which was mentioned earlier. While in the short term it may cost more to implement, it might serve rural districts better in the long term as educators and administrators can pick and choose topics that fit their needs and circumstances.

**Recommendations**

We agree with Annetta and Dickerson (2006) who state, “It is critical that teachers are exposed to and feel a sense of comfort with emerging technologies. Teachers need constant professional development with technologies to keep up with the technologically literate students in their classrooms” (p. 400). Therefore, we would recommend that rural districts more thoroughly investigate online and videoconferencing professional development opportunities and invest in the hardware and software necessary to make such alternatives available to more administrators and educators. Because this type of professional development is on-demand it is more flexible with teacher schedules, interests, and needs. It also allows multiple topics to be studied simultaneously by a faculty. Done in a traditional way, the costs for the same trainings would be prohibitive both in cost and scheduling.

Another recommendation is that rural schools and districts join together to create a co-op of sorts to schedule on-site as well as virtual professional developments. Developing a clearinghouse of resources both virtual and real world will create a valuable asset for districts that might not otherwise have such options.

What makes this topic even more relevant is the adoption of the Common Core Standards the Utah State Board of Education. It is likely that more educators than ever will be interested in receiving professional development. Access to both traditional and non-traditional methods of training will be necessary to fulfill the needs of educators.

**Conclusion**

This topic is one that the two of us felt strongly about before starting this project and that feeling has not decreased as we have done our research. In fact, we probably have a greater desire to see an increase in high quality, flexible, and affordable professional development. We discovered several resources that we were unaware of which will be a great asset to us as we continue to implement professional development in our own school.

As professional development continues to advance and change only time will tell what it will look like in the future. With education funding dwindling, administrators and districts - urban, suburban, and rural - will have to find more creative ways to use their in-house experts and learn to use more on-line resources to provide the needed training for teachers and staff.

**Appendix A:**

**Professional Development Questions and Responses**

**Responses from local District Superintendent**

1)*What is your perception of what constitutes effective professional development?* Professional development is an on-going developmental process of personal and professional growth designed to promote professional self-renewal and effective learning for students. It requires and fosters a norm of continuous improvement and a positive attitude and commitment to activities designed to promote growth. Professional development focuses on developing the skills and processes necessary for achieving expected individual and school/district outcomes.

Professional development requires strong leadership in order to obtain continuing support and to motivate all staff members to be advocates for continuous improvement. It should be aligned with the school/district strategic plan and provide for the accomplishment of the school/district mission and goals. Professional development activities should also be based on the specific needs of individual teachers as evidenced by teacher evaluation, and should also be targeted at data received on student assessment instruments.

2)(a) *What challenges do you face in creating and/or implementing professional development?* The biggest challenges to professional development are three- fold – 1) Time – current schedules (student, buses, etc.) are not conducive to allowing for continuous long-term professional development activities; 2) Funding Resources – most of the funding for professional development was eliminated by the Legislature as a result of a depressed economy and decisions on where to find funding for presenters and to compensate participants require the elimination of other important services to students; 3) The lack of desire on the part of some teachers to want to consider professional collaboration and/or change in status quo.

*(b)Which, if any, of these challenges are intensified by the size of your school or faculty?* The size of a school district impacts the amount of funding received, which limits the ability to effectively compensate for professional development, the availability and affordability of high level professional development presenters, affordable software, supplemental materials, as well as the ability to arrange schedules due to the transportation issues.

3)*Do you provide professional development for others on your staff besides certified teachers?* While our efforts are not as broad with other employee groups, we do look for and provide training for our support staff as well as our teachers.

4)*What are the results of your professional development efforts on your faculty/staff morale?* Most staff members appreciate the opportunity for personal and professional growth. Most of them see these opportunities as evidence that they are valued and that the District wants to see them succeed.

5)*What, if any, effect do you feel your professional development has had on student achievement?* We continue to see improvement and growth through student assessment, and, although it is hard to measure, classroom observation suggests that many teachers are more effective in teaching strategies, classroom management, classroom climate, working with parents, and in overall satisfaction with their teaching abilities – which all impact student success.

**Responses from local Elementary school Administrator**

1) *What is your perception of what constitutes effective professional development?* Answers are not in a rank order (professional development = PD) 1- sustainability- one-shot-wonders are poor programs for PD. The PD needs some type of ongoing accountability or in-service in order to be effective. Do you, or a faculty member, have the expertise to help continue the training by providing training or support?

2- affordability- There are many programs that are great but the cost prevents then from being implemented at a school level. 3- applicability/usefulness- Is the information being taught something that the teachers will use and lead to improvement in instruction? How much of a burden will be added to the teacher or administrator when this program is implemented?

4- research based- Is it fluffy crap, a trendy program? Attention to the research behind the program would help indicate the quality of the program and its value. 5- schools identified needs- a school needs analysis can help you select PD the meets the identified needs.

6- leaders vision and goals- where do you see a need? What direction do you want or need your faculty and staff to go? What tool can help you get there? Is there a staff development program that can help you meet that vision.

2) *What challenges do you face in creating and/or implementing professional development?* Which, if any, of these challenges are intensified by the size of your school or faculty? 1- Time- after school is tough because teachers are tired. Before school, teachers are mentally planning the day. During school requires subs and is expensive and difficult to do on a full faculty basis. Weekends, requires a budget where you can compensate the teachers for their time.

2- Teacher buy-in- if you consider answers #’s 1,3 & 5 of question chances of achieving teacher buy in is increased. 3- budget- see answers #1 & 2 from question #1. I don’t think that school size intensifies these 3 aspects of PD. A larger faculty translates to a bigger budget. The more people involved complicate the buy-in or create the shared vision. But time, support/buy-in and budget are administrative concerns independent of class size.

3) *Do you provide professional development for others on your staff besides certified teachers?* Our paraprofessional receive ongoing in-service through our Title I coordinator and Resource teacher. This year our paraprofessionals were able to attend the state parapro conference. Custodians attend asbestos and safety training each August. Secretary- District offers training in the spring. I encourage my secretary to attend the secretaries training offered by UAESP in the fall. Librarian- there is a ULEMA (Utah librarian association) conference held in the spring. I offer this to our school librarian.

4) *What are the results of your professional development efforts on your faculty/staff morale?* Over the years we have studied books and topics together. The last few we have conducted in-service on topics of interest together. I think spending time in professional discussion and study has brought our faculty and staff together. As we worked to develop a school vision & mission statement, faculty and staff were involved, and it helped increase the unity at Ferron Elementary.

5) *What, if any, effect do you feel your professional development has had on student achievement? It* has helped bring some new skills to the classrooms. We have become better at using data to measure student achievement. We have seen our test scores increase and PD is a component that plays a role in that increase.

**References**

Annetta, L., & Dickerson, D. (2006). Integrating point-to-point videoconferencing into

professional development of rural elementary school science teachers. C*ontemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 6*(4), 399-413 .

Darling-Hammond, L. & McLaughlin M.W. (1996) Policies that support professional

development in an era of reform. In M.W. McLaughlin and I. Oberman (Eds.), Teacher Learning: New Policies, New Practices. 202-218 New York:Teachers College Press, Columbia University.

Guskey, T.R. (1995). *Results-oriented professional development: in search of an*

*optional mix of effective practices*. Retrieved from <http://classicweb.archive.org/web/20060405093712/http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/rpl_esys/pdlitrev.htm>

Hawley,W. D. & Valli, L. , The essentials of effective professional development: A

new consensus. Unpublished paper for the Department of Education at the University of Maryland.

Little, J.W. (1996) Organizing schools for teacher learning. Unpublished paper for the

Department of Education at the University of California, Berkeley.

Professional development. (2004, September 21). *Education Week*, Retrieved from

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/professional-development/>

*Professional development for the 21st century*. (2011, April 16). Retrieved from

<http://www.p21.org/documents/ProfDev.pdf>

Russo, A. (2004). School-based coaching. *Harvard Education Letter Research Online.*

Retrieved December 16, 2005, from h[ttp://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2004-](ttp://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2004-%20) ja/coaching.shtml

Utah Education Network, (n.d.). *Network acceptable use policy*. Retrieved from

<http://www.uen.org/policy/downloads/UEN_Network_AUP.pdf>

Wood, D. (2007). Teachers' learning communities: Catalyst for change or a new

infrastructure for the status quo? *Teachers College Record, 109*(3), 699-739.