

**High School Educators' Perceptions of Professional Development: The Cost, Time,
Relevancy and Direction.**

By

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While K-12 educators come from diverse teacher-education programs, they tend to experience and receive varying degrees of professional development once employed within a school district. Much of K-12 professional development for educators is also mandatory and not of the educators choosing. Professional development has almost always been implemented within school-based settings for educators, yet it is rarely evaluated by the very educators who are subjected to it.

Research has not examined high school educator's perceptions of their in-service training, in particular whether or not such professional development methods align with their current experiences with students, and whether or not the relevancy, cost and direction of professional development adds to frustration among employees within the profession. For example, school-wide attempts to reduce school-based violence through anti-bullying programs largely fail to have a lasting presence within schools and among staff members (Richard, Schneider, & Mallet, 2012), yet these programs dominate professional development and they tend to persist at great monetary and personal cost to both schools and school districts. Furthermore, researchers have indicated that educators have varying perceptions regarding student health-related factors that contribute to conflict and violence in school (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2013; Bushman, Newman, Calvert, Downey, Dredze, Gottfredson & Webster, 2016) and whether or not such Professional development training is addressing these issues and others that are related to the everyday life of teachers and administrators within K-12 school-based settings. Therefore, the existing gap in research raises

the question: What are high school educator's perceptions of their professional development training, what is being done, how often is it occurring, and at what cost—both monetarily and personally?

This brief study took place while conducting face-to-face interviews with 10 educators within a major Midwestern high school, who taught each core subject available within (i.e., math, science, history and literature; grades 10-12). The participating high school was demographically the 7th largest within this Midwestern State. The participating high school also received a State Department of Education grade of a "D" within the studied year. Pseudonyms were used for each of the participants, and interviews were individually conducted and recorded. The interviews lasted roughly 45 minutes each.

When asked about the presence of professional development (i.e., in-service training), teachers were very forthcoming about the times, frequency, and type of training. Within this studied environment, *Restorative Practices* and *ALICE* Training were mentioned, along with professional development for classroom technology use (i.e., Google Classroom). These three examples dominated the educator's professional development, and no other examples were provided.

Restorative Practices is a program that originated in Australia, where a federal judge sought to have violent criminals who had been previously convicted of crimes and spent time in prison, readmitted into society successfully. This program, once watered-down and used within an American K-12 school system, seeks to have all staff members arrive at similar word usage in order to have an offending party (i.e., a student breaking the rules) accept responsibility for their role in their wrong-doing, while promising to not re-offend. Within this school district, every employee received 16 hours of mandatory *Restorative Practices* training.

ALICE training, on the other hand, is common state-mandated training for school emergencies. It's simply a procedural program in case of an emergency. This training may take on different names in differing states, however, the objectives and goals are the same. Educators were not opposed to the one-time *ALICE* training that lasted less than 30 minutes.

Regarding the presence of mandatory *Restorative Practices* training for all current staff members and new staff members, teachers believed it to be "ineffective," "corny" and "not relevant to their needs." Damon stated:

It's one more thing to do, and it's always the next, best, latest and greatest idea that you never get the chance to perfect before they come up with the next best and 'greatest idea.'
Everybody has a platform. Everyone wants to stand on their soapbox and tell you what they think is best.

Margret described the differing forms of training they have received by stating:

We do a lot of in-service here. So, we have daily morning meetings where we kind of do like staff meetings, department meetings, writing tests, blah, blah, blah. As far as like full days in in-service, those are usually curriculum based because right now that's a lot what our district is focusing on.

Alice elaborated by stating:

Yes, we have way too much training. We've got 40 minutes in the morning. It depends on the week. We're supposed to have P.D. (professional development) once a week, 40 minutes. Generally, they pull stuff at the last minute to have P.D. on something. It's usually computer-related with Google Classroom, or Google whatever ... everybody had to be trained in Restorative Practice. I do it anyway.

Erin described her training at other schools where she has worked and she expressed her interest in a need for more consistency in a relevant direction. She stated:

I think our school violence trainings focus more on an intruder coming in, or a school shooter. I think that's where most of our school violence focuses on. I've been at three different schools, and at every school I've had to take an online training course that people just breeze through. I think that that's not very helpful. There needs to be more one-on-one, or small-group training on it, and there hasn't really been that kind of stuff at any school I've been at.

Macy described her in-depth perspective of her *Restorative Practices* training:

Restorative Practices was a complete waste of my life and days that I can never get back. If I've got an issue with a student then I'm confronting the student about it. That's just how I am. Now, are there teachers who don't do that? Yes, but Restorative Practices wasn't going to help them to do that. The videos and the trainers that were here, it was all these small little schools and there were elementary kids and there were middle school kids and it was like 'you're coming into this school and you have no idea what we're about and you have no idea about the clientele that is at this school.' The videos that we watched were all upper elementary school. There was no high school stuff at all.

The assistant administrators were far more trusting of the *Restorative Practices* methodology and the required in-service training. Mitch (the first assistant administrator) stated:

In terms of Restorative Practices, we are on a cycle for that training. There's a three-day initial course. Then there are refresher courses. There are many positive things that come from this training.

Janice (another assistant administrator) seemed to blame teachers for not accepting the *Restorative Practices* training:

The common theme among teachers is, 'Well, we do that already!' But it provided common language. It provided common language throughout the building for teachers. The people that balk at it are probably the people that need it the most. People said it had no validity "We do it already. I don't need to go through this stuff," well, they were the people that really needed to learn how to develop those relationship pieces in the classroom. I think Restorative Practices have been successful.

However, while Mitch agreed with *Restorative Practices*, he did believe that training needed to address teachers concerns more:

In terms of looking at what other training do we offer outside that... we don't have a ton of refreshers on those things. That's something that maybe we even need to look into. We always are good with our staff meetings and pass along information. If we start to see a trend of increasing, we re-talk about it with the entirety of the staff. In terms of specific questions or means of addressing those kinds of situations, maybe not as much as we should.

Regarding future recommendations for in-service training opportunities and topics to be discussed, teachers provided many examples. Damon stated:

I think that it's such a reactionary approach. It's so reactionary. If you're going to come in to give me PD, I want you to have your pulse on what goes on here, and know that the techniques, the skills. Not 'Here's your pamphlet. See you later.'

Margret specified the type of professional development that was warranted, by stating:

We need a more basic understanding of teen psychology and how they perceive the world and issues. I think that would be good. I think just even general PD on teen health and awareness, health-type presentations or in-service would be beneficial too. So would educational law. We never hear what we should do legally or what we are allowed to do, legally speaking, in order to protect us.

Sally suggested:

We need professional development to prepare teachers to be able to manage their classrooms in a school setting like ours. When you're a brand-new teacher, if I came here for my first year, I would be really overwhelmed too.

Betty expressed a serious interest in improving communication during professional development training from the administration towards their teaching staff:

It would be nice to have an administrator that leads small groups that discusses with us, maybe not student names, but what they're seeing in and out of the office on a daily basis, so that we can have more of a concept of what's going on in the building. Don't keep the information hidden from us. We're with students every day after all.

Macy described the lack of communication and the repetitive nature of the current professional development:

They just repeat themselves. I've had like three professional development days this year on the same Google Classroom. I'm using Google Classroom; I know how to use Google Classroom! Like put me in something else. Quite frankly, the way things are run up at the district office they're just going to fly by the seat of their pants and they're going to come up with something. It's a waste of time...and certainly money.

In summary, an overwhelming theme that emerged among responses was a strong distrust among teachers regarding the competency levels of district officials and school-based administrators to offer relevant, low cost (if not free) professional development that was relevant to the teachers' everyday needs and experiences. Educators within this environment made it abundantly clear that their professional development was not relevant, not content specific, nor did it accurately or relevantly address the needs of students and teachers. Educators were also aware of the cost of their professional development and how these mandatory sessions are not free. In fact, any technology that was pushed on them to use, was viewed as counterproductive (i.e., Chromebooks) to their current technology use, for which their previous curriculum was already designed around. Teachers also stated that the training for such new technology use—pays teachers by the hour to attend, costing the district tens of thousands of dollars, if not more, not including the purchase of said technology for every educator. The cost of both mandatory and counterproductive technology, combined with the cost of professional development, added to the frustration that teachers felt, and perpetuated relationship distrust between teachers and their administrators, both within the building itself and those within the district offices who are ultimately responsible for making the professional development decisions. Moreover, within this studied school environment, which is not unlike many K-12 environments, professional development for teachers was viewed as overabundant, routinely irrelevant, it failed to include outside options for subject-specific content, and it failed to address the causes of school violence and conflict that so commonly exist within school-based environments. This lack of focus also added an element of distrust among the adults who work within these environments, as this too may lead to further frustration, unhappiness within the workplace, and a lowered interest in teaching and learning. Therefore, it could be argued that professional development for educators

within this common environment, is neither professional nor aligned with positive employee development.

With the turnover rate as high as it is within the business of K-12 education, as 40% of teachers nationwide quit the profession within the first four years; costly and irrelevant professional development for educators may be adding to the larger problem. The K-12 teaching profession is, and has been, one profession where those training to be teachers at the undergraduate level are attending their training programs longer than they are actually engaging in the profession as a paid educator. Therefore, based on the 14th century philosophy of William of Ockham; the answer will always reside in the explanation that requires the least amount of assumptions (Ockham's Razor).

Three months after the conclusion of this study, of the ten educators who participated—three of the participating teachers quit the teaching profession altogether and both assistant administrators quit their positions to take administrative roles in other schools within the same district, only to change positions yet again one year later.

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