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**The Devil in the Details: A Study of a Districtwide Job-Embedded Professional Development
Facilitator Initiative in Urban Middle Schools**

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ABSTRACT

Recent legislation and accountability efforts in K-12 schools, has increased the need to support and maintain high-quality teachers through enhanced professional development and teacher training efforts. As districts and schools seek new and innovative ways to provide professional development opportunities that are real-time and effective, investments in job-embedded professional development models can support teaching and learning in a world of accountability and federal mandates. This qualitative study explores the experiences of professional development facilitators (PDFs) implementing job-embedded professional development in middle and K-8 schools. Study results are designed to inform districts and schools on the successes, challenges, and program structures needed to effectively design job-embedded activities that yield increases in teacher quality and ultimately student achievement.

Keywords: job-embedded, professional development, facilitator, accountability, instructional support, coaching, teacher quality, teacher growth, student achievement

This article submission addresses #4: Organizational Support & Processes

The Devil in the Details: A Study of a Districtwide Job-Embedded Professional Development Facilitator Initiative in Urban Middle Schools

In 2013, a large urban school district in the southeastern United States decided to undergo implementation of a new initiative; placing job-embedded professional development facilitators into schools throughout the district. The creation of this new school-based position, the Professional Development Facilitator (PDF), was part of a goal within the district to increase teacher quality and support by providing school-based job-embedded professional development for teachers via facilitators on site. Identified in the district's Strategic Plan, the initiative was a call to include job-embedded professional development on-site to teachers in middle and K-8 schools. The district conceptualized a PDF Talent Pool of qualified educators from which principals were to select and then use PDF's to provide professional development opportunities and models in middle and K-8 schools.

The first step was to develop a process for potential candidates to apply for these new positions. The district established a hiring and selection process that identified qualified candidates to apply for and be selected into the PDF Talent Pool. The initial application process required several documents, one being "a letter from a principal/supervisor supporting application for the Professional Development Facilitator position." While it is not known how many educators initially applied to be considered for the PDF Talent Pool, the application requirements indicate that many principals were aware of the district's new initiative when the call for PDF Talent Pool applications went out. Once in the PDF Talent Pool, qualified candidates could then be interviewed by any of the middle or K-8 principals and hired by these schools to serve in the new role. In an examination of the districts' job posting criteria for the PDFs, two steps were required in order to be hired as a school-based PDF. First, all PDFs hired by each school had to have become members of the district's PDF Talent Pool (which required an initial recommendation from the candidate's principal), and secondly, to be selected into the pool, applicants had to apply and meet all PDF Talent Pool selection criteria (thus having undergone district screening to make it into the pool).

The PDF Talent Pool Selection Criteria was guided by the district's job description for all applicants. While the job posting criteria for the PDF position was evidence of the district's commitment to hiring qualified educators to deliver professional development in schools, some details were either not considered or inadvertently left off the actual document. The job description opened with a summary of who the PDF is:

Summary

The school-based Professional Development Facilitator (PDF) is a teacher leader who helps foster the development and growth of professional learning communities and facilitates job-embedded professional learning with colleagues. This position provides vision and leadership for teacher growth by working in close collaboration with the principal, school leadership, central services, and school-based staff, supports the building of staff capacity to meet the goals outlined in the district's strategic plan and school improvement plans, to inspire 21st-century learning tools and methods.

While the job description goes on to list some categories wherein the PDF can perform in accomplishing this summary, such as serving as a Coach, Consultant, Program Manager, Resource Provider, and Facilitator, after the essential duties are listed, an immediate disclaimer is noted:

Essential Duties: (These duties represent a sample and may vary by position.)

In addition, one of the requirements for the PDF reads:

- Performs related duties as assigned

The job descriptions were completed, the Talent Pool was established, and school principals picked their PDF's. After all selection and hiring had taken place, the new PDFs convened at an initial district meeting (without their school principals), informational handouts were distributed, and additional resource information was provided to support the job-embedded work of each PDF as expected by the district initiative. Having been officially commissioned to go forth and improve instruction, the PDFs set out to their sites. Other than the uniformity of the initial hiring process, the paths of the new PDFs diverged soon afterward.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the roles of professional development facilitators in providing job-embedded PD for teachers. It was also to examine how they perceive their roles as educational leaders responsible for implementing useful, sustainable, and effective school-based professional development opportunities that increase teacher effectiveness and ultimately student achievement. In particular, this study intended to identify and describe the major internal, external, and environmental factors that shape how professional development facilitators work and implement job-embedded PD in their schools.

The literature showed that the use of job-embedded professional development is a growing model for delivering teacher professional development based on current education policy requiring increases in teacher quality tied to accountability and K-12 funding (Russo, 2004; Parise & Spillane, 2012; Sun, Penuel, Frank, Gallagher, & Youngs, 2013). In order to discern the perceptions of professional development facilitators in job-embedded roles and assigned to the primary role of supporting and increasing teacher quality, the study focused on gathering data through use of the three most common techniques of qualitative methodology: interviews, observation, and document analysis (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it supports the examination of the perceptions of one's reality, and it allows the researcher to identify the factors that influence specific outcomes when testing a theory (Creswell, 1998). This is particularly true when the topic being explored is not easily quantifiable, and descriptions and discussions are the most accurate and reliable method for uncovering a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

The school district selected was targeted because of its intentional incorporation of professional development initiatives in the district's 4-year strategic plan for school reform and accountability measures. Included in the district's strategic plan was the creation of professional development facilitators to support increasing middle school student achievement. The creation of these job-embedded positions was directly tied to accountability measures, school reform, and federal funding efforts. As an intentional district initiative, the professional development facilitator role was created and implemented, and a large budget was dedicated to the initiative.

Results

Four years after the PDF initiative was launched, it was dissolved with the changing of the district's Superintendent. At this time, and as part of a doctoral dissertation study, these professional development facilitators were invited to participate in interviews to collect qualitative data. After initial contact with all current and former PDFs in the district, seven job-embedded PDFs responded to the

call for participation in the study and all seven were selected as participants. The interviews revealed that all seven participants were confirmed as being selected to be PDFs by applying to the PDF Talent Pool, completing the application and selection process. Each of the PDFs in the study had been selected and placed into the PDF Talent Pool as advertised by the district. They were then both interviewed, and hired by a school principal for an open PDF position, or they were selected by their current principal to work under the title of PDF in their current school. While all seven participants stated they participated in the PDF Talent Pool process and met the criteria, five participants recalled having to complete additional interviews at schools needing PDFs to secure a position, and two participants describe already being at the school in a position and simply changing titles within their school. The selected participants also further acknowledged participation in the ongoing monthly district support meetings for the PDFs.

The study revealed insights into the experiences and perceptions of the PDFs in their roles. The study also highlighted some of the variations of implementation across schools. In its quest to offer an initiative focused on sustaining job-embedded professional development in schools to increase quality teaching and ultimately student achievement across the district, the small details written in the job posting became a reality for many PDFs. For the PDFs, many of their essential duties became an on-going variation of what was described in the job posting, and primarily activities referred to in the fine print as “may vary by position.” In addition, variety of duties emerged due to the district’s job posting also included in fine print, another portion of the PDFs essential duties listed as “related duties as assigned.”

The participants of the study defined and articulated their experiences and perceptions of their roles as job-embedded coaches. They also revealed that many of their roles and responsibilities included activities that were not directly related to improving teacher quality and student achievement. Interview data revealed that while PDFs spent much of their time performing duties essential to the functioning of the school per directed by the school principals, these duties were not all directly related to providing job-embedded professional development (Mashariki, 2017). The PDF roles and responsibilities as perceived and experienced by participants ultimately fulfilled the position duties as more defined by their principal and the needs of the school, however these duties may have deviated from the comprehensive description and expectation of the PDF role as defined by the district, maximizing the small fine print of the description, “these roles represent a sample and may vary by position.”

PDFs reported a variety of their daily roles and responsibilities as being testing coordinators, parent liaisons, student discipline providers, substitute teachers, project managers, and occasionally program coordinators. PDFs also reported working directly with students by pulling small teaching groups, being hall monitors throughout the day, supervising students as they completed classroom assignments in separate settings, working with the media specialists, writing grants, and designing lesson plans for teachers and substitutes (Mashariki, 2017). While these tasks are essential in the support of school activities and goals, the role of the PDF as envisioned by the district job description was to enact teacher leader responsibilities through job-embedded activities. The actual application of the PDF role in schools left gaps in the time PDFs spent engaging in sustained, on-going, and continuous job-embedded models daily and supporting the needs of schools in ways that do not directly improve teacher quality.

The job description and the essential duties of the PDFs were very well spelled out, the PDF Talent Pool selection criteria was designed to ensure that high-quality professional practitioners were placed in each school. The study reveals, however, that many principals may have chosen the small detail in the description that allowed them to customize the role to fit the school’s needs on any given

day at any given time; “other duties as assigned.” With good intentions, principals do what they feel is necessary to meet the on-going daily needs of the school. This variation from school to school contributes to findings revealed in the study establishing clear inconsistencies in PDF experiences across schools in the district. In a different study of the impact of PDFs on student achievement, Efird (2015) sites these variations as contributing to the findings of her study that the PDF role did not improve student achievement in this same district; thus, impacting the decision of the district to redirect the funds used for this initiative in other ways to support student achievement.

Under current educational accountability standards, the concept of job-embedded professional development is included as one of the most impactful ways to support teachers and increase teacher quality, therefore increasing student learning (Mashariki, 2017). The intentional creation of a job-embedded professional development program by one district contributes to on-going efforts in teacher professional learning opportunities, but we have learned that these types of initiatives must also be implemented with intentional design, expectation, and collaboration of school leaders. District leaders and school-based leaders must act cohesively so that success of any job-embedded school-based program is not lost in the details that allow school level leaders to utilize professional development practitioners and school staff in roles and responsibilities other than those that have been deemed to provide increases in teacher quality and ultimately student achievement. The variance across schools caused by the small details (or lack thereof) in the job description of job-embedded professional development facilitators can cause a devil of a problem in implementing sustainable professional development programs with fidelity and achieving the ultimate goal of improved teacher and student learning.

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