

CREATING MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR NEW FACS TEACHERS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

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Kentucky Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Educators collaboratively planned and implemented a model of professional development – New Teacher Workshop for new (one to three years) and returning (coming back to the classroom) teachers from 2000-2003. To enhance the planning of this model, principles of Action Research were applied throughout the process. Results from a recent nationwide study identifying six factors that establish the context for successful professional development were used to guide the planning. The New Teacher Workshop provides a model of professional development for others who are interested in mentoring new teachers.

In light of educational reform movements, professional development needs are no longer being met by the traditional, one-shot, everybody meet in the cafeteria in-service (Corcoran, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1995; Lieberman, 1996; Little, 1993). Teacher needs are better addressed through well-planned, content specific, ongoing professional development. The purpose of this article is to highlight a model of professional development, *New Teacher Workshop*, collaboratively implemented by Kentucky Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Educators between 2000 and 2003. To enhance the collaborative planning of this model, principles of Action Research were applied throughout the process. A secondary purpose of this article is to share insights gained from the ongoing Action Research in relation to the development of the *New Teacher Workshop*.

Development of the New Teacher Workshop

Professional development is defined as an ongoing, planned process for growth. It must be purposeful and result in some recognizable change in teachers' knowledge, attitude, and/or skill, which will ultimately improve student learning. As professional development evolves, it must embrace principles of adult learning, which foster group collaboration and the desire to immediately apply new skills and knowledge (Knowles, 1980). Additionally, effective professional development should foster meaningful teacher reflection.

Armed with this working definition, teacher educators began the Action Research process, which according to Mills (2003) includes four steps: 1) identify an area of focus, 2) collect data, 3) analyze and interpret data, 4) develop an action plan. The area of focus in this case was to enhance the localized professional development experience for new (one to three years) and returning Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teachers. The teacher educators used information collected from informal needs assessments with new teachers and results from a recent nationwide study by Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet (2000) to guide the preparation and planning of the *New Teacher Workshop*.

Birman et al. (2000) identified six factors that establish the context for successful professional development. They are form, duration, participation, content focus, active learning, and coherence. These factors can be posed in question form to guide the planning process.

1. *Form.* Is the activity structured as a “reform” activity (e.g. a study group, mentoring relationship, individual action research project), or is it a traditional format of a workshop or conference? A traditional format is defined as a one time lecture in-service criticized for not giving teachers time, appropriate activities or content necessary for increasing their knowledge enough for meaningful change. Recent literature on professional development emphasizes changing the form to encompass more educational reform approaches (Darling-Hammond, 1995, 1996; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998). Birman et al. (2000) reported that reform based activities better meet the needs of today’s teachers because they are longer, have more content focus, provide for active learning opportunities, and coherence.
2. *Duration.* How many hours did participants spend in the activity, and over what span of time did the activity take place? Birman et al. (2000) found that activities of longer duration (more than one time/day) provide more subject-area content focus, more opportunities for active learning, and more congruity with teachers’ other experiences.
3. *Participation.* Did groups of teachers from the same school, subject area, or department participate collectively, or did teachers from different schools, different subject areas participate individually? Birman et al. (2000) concluded that activities that include collective participation tend to promote more active learning and are more likely to be coherent with other teaching experiences. Collective participation promotes the discussion of concepts and problems specific to those teachers and promotes integration of what they learn with other aspects of instructional content. Teachers with a common background are likely to share curriculum materials, course offerings and assessment requirements.
4. *Content focus.* To what degree did the activity focus on improving and deepening teachers’ content knowledge? Birman et al. (2000) observed that the degree to which professional development focuses on content knowledge is directly related to teachers’ reported increases in knowledge and skills. These results are consistent with other research that documents the importance of content (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Kennedy, 1998). Focusing on content targets the professional development on a specific subject area, such as classroom management.
5. *Active learning.* What opportunities did teachers have to become actively engaged in a meaningful analysis of teaching and learning? Birman et al. (2000) noted that if professional development included opportunities for active learning, teachers reported increased knowledge and skills and changed classroom practice. Examples of active learning activities include opportunities to observe and be observed while teaching, to plan classroom activities reflecting the professional development, to review student work, and to present, lead, and write about experiences.
6. *Coherence.* Did the professional development activity encourage continued professional communication among teachers and incorporate experiences that are consistent with teachers’ goals and aligned with state standards and assessments?

Birman et al. (2000) stated that the coherence of the professional development is directly related to increased teacher learning and improved classroom practice. The more the professional development activity is connected to teacher learning and development the more coherent it is. Activities are also coherent when they support national, state, and district standards and assessments.

In the collaborative development process of the *New Teacher Workshop*, the Kentucky Teacher Educators applied the above six questions to develop an action plan for delivering professional development. The overall goal of the workshop was to continue the development of new teachers in areas where teacher education programs leave off. Secondary goals were to contribute to teacher professionalism and retention in Kentucky, to promote the status of the FACS profession, and promote a commitment to life-long learning by FACS teachers. The following narrative will discuss how each of the six questions was addressed throughout the planning and implementation of the *New Teacher Workshop*.

Planning and Implementing the New Teacher Workshop

Form – Was the *New Teacher Workshop* structured as a “reform” activity (e.g. a study group, mentoring relationship, individual action research project), or was it a traditional format of a workshop or conference? Yes, the workshop was structured as a “reform” activity in numerous ways. First, the workshop was ongoing throughout the academic year, and in most cases, the meetings were held for more than one day. Second, the workshop encouraged the sharing of concerns for group dialogue and the completion of individual growth activities, many of which were completed for graduate credit under the direction of a teacher educator. Each participant anonymously completed evaluation forms after each session.

Many of the teachers chose to participate for two years and some of them took on the role of mentor for first year attendees. On an evaluation, one participant noted, “Sharing ideas was excellent! I greatly enjoyed getting to meet other new teachers! The meetings built a bond that would never have otherwise been formed” (personal communication, 2000).

Duration – How many hours did participants spend in the activity and over what span of time did the activity take place? The workshop was designed to meet five times throughout the year, beginning and ending in July as a pre-conference to the Kentucky Association of Career Technical Education (KACTE) Conference. The participants were identified through teacher education programs, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), and the various professional organizations affiliated with FACS Education. E-mail and paper invitations were sent to these individuals encouraging them to attend the *New Teacher Workshop* and the KACTE Conference. The workshop then continued throughout the academic year, meeting for three more sessions on Friday and Saturday. The selected host sites represented different departmental configurations such as single or multi teacher departments. During the second year of the *New Teacher Workshop* the pre-conference included a joint meeting of those teachers who had just completed the workshop and the group of new teachers for the upcoming workshop.

Participation – Did groups of teachers from the same school, subject area, or department participate collectively, or did teachers from different schools, different subject areas participate individually? Although the participants were from different schools throughout Kentucky, they were all Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teachers with a common bond – they were new to the classroom or returning after several years of absence from the teaching profession. The commonality of the participants promoted collective participation. Participants were eager to

discuss concepts and problems related to new teachers, such as classroom management. One of the most successful activities of each workshop was the sharing session in which the topic was identified in advance and participants were encouraged to bring examples to share. The sharing session included a variety of topics including surviving the first days of school, class management, lesson plans, and Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) activities.

Content focus – To what degree did the activity focus on improving and deepening teachers’ content knowledge? Because the participants were all FACS teachers, multiple opportunities existed for strengthening content knowledge relevant to FACS Education. Topics specific to FACS Education included areas such as management of the FACS department, curriculum ideas, advising and integrating FCCLA into the classroom, implementation of FACS Career Majors, Kentucky Skill Standards Assessment System, professionalism, and integration of academic skills with FACS content. Participant evaluation comments confirmed that a content focus is beneficial. One new teacher said, “It really helps to get information specifically designed for FACS teachers” (personal communication, 2000).

Active learning – What opportunities did teachers have to become actively engaged in a meaningful analysis of teaching and learning? As mentioned earlier, the workshop encouraged the sharing of concerns and ideas for group dialogue. The sharing sessions allowed for more reflection on the part of the teacher than the teacher educators realized would occur. These directed activities allowed participants to give and to receive input and ideas from each other, which often resulted in new strategies for solving classroom problems. One new teacher stated, “I definitely learned new ideas and realize ways to improve” (personal communication, 2001).

Participants were encouraged to complete individual growth activities beyond the workshop for graduate credit under the direction of a teacher educator. Graduate credit (3 hours) required attendance at all of the workshops: a reflective paper on strengths, areas for growth and teaching/professional goals; reflective abstracts of nine outside readings in the areas of current trends, professionalism, and technology; and a project to be presented at the pre-conference. Project choices include a ten-lesson unit utilizing technology; assisting four students in developing PowerPoint presentations for FCCLA, class, or a community organization; or the formulation of a *new* FCCLA chapter. These projects were presented to the group at the final workshop, which served as a wrap-up activity for the current participants and as an introduction for the upcoming workshop participants.

Coherence – Did the professional development activity encourage continued professional communication among teachers and incorporate experiences that are consistent with teachers’ goals and aligned with state standards and assessments? The ongoing nature of the workshop promoted continued dialogue between new teachers, teacher educators, and state staff. Periodic emails between workshop sessions further enhanced communication among the new teachers.

The focus of each meeting addressed the unique needs of new FACS teachers in Kentucky. Promoting a better understanding of the specific components of state standards, such as Career Majors, and the Skill Standards Assessment System was a major goal. The strategy in presenting information was to develop a deeper comprehension without overwhelming the new teachers. Therefore content of the workshop was introduced gradually. Implementation into the FACS classroom was highlighted.

The teacher educators met regularly throughout the year to reflect on the workshop and to discuss future directions. Participants’ evaluations were reviewed often to better meet the needs of the new teachers. These meetings included staff from the Kentucky Department of Education

to ensure that the most recent and necessary content was being addressed. Implementation of content was divided equally between the teacher educators.

Evaluation of the New Teacher Workshop

The following conclusions were drawn from the teacher educator reflection session and evaluations completed by the participants. The *New Teacher Workshop* was so successful that many of the new teachers participated a second year. A participant said, “I loved it all – again! It’s new each time and soaks in a little more hearing it every year...I appreciate having this professional development opportunity” (personal communication, 2002)! All the evaluations were positive. The only request that echoed through the evaluations was for more time to share. Sharing sessions were a highlight – they generated new ideas and a sense of comradery among the new teachers.

The *New Teacher Workshop* increased the level of motivation among the attendees. They realized they were not the only teachers experiencing similar problems and issues. As successes were shared, others were eager to go back to the classroom with new ideas. The *New Teacher Workshop* has allowed for professional involvement of new teachers that may not have gotten involved otherwise. After attending the *New Teacher Workshop* many of the new teachers have taken on leadership positions in regional Kentucky Association Teachers of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Although the participants gained numerous benefits, a few hurdles surfaced during the implementation of the workshop. Attendance at the meetings became increasingly difficult for some participants because of traveling distances and recent state budget cuts. Several participants needed to travel four to six hours to attend a meeting. Administrators were reluctant to release new teachers for travel due to the shortage of funds for substitute teachers. Additionally, some school districts required their own professional development programs that competed with the workshop.

Facing these issues, the teacher educators have established the following goals for future workshops. First, in order to accommodate more new teachers, the group will secure official approval from the KDE to be a professional development service provider, which will eliminate the competition with some school districts in providing professional development. A second goal is to restructure the format as a summer institute. The New Teacher Institute will be created with a special focus to meet the needs of the first year teacher. Second and third year teachers who have attended previously will be grouped together with the focus on using Action Research to enhance student learning. Graduate credit will be available for the second and third year teachers. Finally, to alleviate travel issues experienced by some of the participants, alternative delivery methods such as distance learning are being explored.

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