

Empowering tomorrow's Leaders

Problem

Teachers are expected to perform as leaders in and outside their classroom. However, time and structural constraints leave teachers feeling isolated and unappreciated. These obstacles prevent collegial collaboration that could provide teachers with opportunities to make inquiry and to discuss and resolve issues pertaining to student performance. These factors have left teachers frustrated and disillusioned. As a result, they often leave the teaching profession. Muslim schools are especially affected by these circumstances because they are small and lack the resources available to a larger system. To sustain progress, Muslim schools must look for ways to support teachers as leaders.

Purpose

This paper will address the aspect of effective professional development strategies as a means by which to cultivate stewardship. Teachers are leaders in and outside of the classroom. We propose that schools examine various methods of creating an environment of sustained continuous learning to better prepare teachers for the tasks and challenges facing them. This paper will examine how learning communities, mentoring and professionalism cultivates and foster professional development. Creating an environment that encourages growth for teachers and administrators that benefit school constituents, especially students.

Literature Review

The operational definition of professional development in this paper is the act of seeking knowledge for the purpose of serving or teaching others. When one commits to the role of teacher he/she has also taken on the role of leader. The teacher is one who educates, and education comes from the Latin word "*educare*," which means, "lead out"-e- out and *ducere* "to lead", educators are leaders. To become a productive, progressive leader one has to develop skills through learning and acquiring knowledge. In Assad Nimer Busool's *Forty Hadith*, a collection of *ahadith* focusing on knowledge learning and teaching, Jundub reported, "The example of the scholar who teaches people the good, but forgets himself, is the example of the lantern which gives light to people while it burns itself out," (p. 66). If teachers do not replenish themselves, they will have nothing else to give. Their lights will be extinguished and so will their role as effective leaders. Professional development is the way in which educators may replenish.

To sustain progress and cultivate stewardship, educators must focus on effective professional development. The U.S Department of Education's Professional Development Team

identified 10 principles of high-quality professional development (i.e., best practice for professional development), (Web Site, NWREL). Those 10 principles are:

- Focuses on teachers as central to student learning, yet includes all other members of the school community
- Focuses on individual, collegial, and organizational improvement
- Respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the school community
- Reflects best available research and practice in teaching, learning, and leadership
- Enables teachers to develop further experience in subject content, teaching strategies, uses of technologies, and other essential elements in teaching to high standards
- Promotes continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools
- Is planned collaboratively by those who will participate in and facilitate that development
- Requires substantial time and other resources
- Is driven by a coherent long-term plan
- Is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning; and this assessment guides subsequent professional development efforts (NWREL)

Professional development is a continuous learning process; a process of seeking knowledge that will enhance growth and development. Professional development is a vital part of a Muslim teacher's existence. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: "Seeking '*Ilm*' (knowledge) is incumbent on every Muslim" (Busool, 1997). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Muslim teacher to seek knowledge. In another *hadith* Abu Hurairah (RA) narrated that the Prophet (SAW) said: "Indeed! Acquiring knowledge is done through learning. Indeed! Acquiring knowledge is done through learning. And anyone who cares about good, it will be given to him, and anyone who protects himself from evil, he will be saved from it" (ibid). Islam encourages human beings to seek knowledge; therefore, for Muslim educators, because of the responsibility of teaching young children, seeking knowledge is definitely a must.

Recommendations of practical implementation

Creating professional learning communities, establishing mentoring programs and striving for professionalism are not the only means by which to cultivate leadership among teachers, there are many others. However, these three methods will incorporate

the aspects of the 10 principles delineated by the U.S.'s Department of Education Professional Development Team.

Create Professional Learning Communities

As defined by Astuto and colleagues (1993) “[learning communities are communities] in which the teachers in a school and its administrators [and parents] continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit”(www.sedl.org). To improve student learning is the ultimate goal of this collaboration. Learning communities are created environments where everyone takes ownership in what happens in the school. Students, parents, teachers and principal are all partners in designing curriculum, and monitoring students’ progress. In a true learning community teachers are empowered; principals are not “all knowing.” Because learning communities create environments that support teachers working in collaborative groups, teachers do not feel isolated and unsupported. Teachers are given common planning time or leave time to plan. In some cases they spend time analyzing data to determine what methods or strategies worked. The questions that drive the work of teachers in learning communities are:

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experience difficulty in learning?(Dufour,2004)

Time and physical structure of a school can be obstacles to collaborative efforts. Teachers need time together to talk and discuss ideas and to make inquiry. According to Louis and Kruse:

[The] “physical factors that support learning communities are: time to meet and talk, small school size and physical proximity of the staff to one another, interdependent teaching roles, well-developed communication structures, school autonomy, and teacher empowerment. An additional factor is the staff’s input in selecting teachers and administrators for the school, and even encouraging staff who are not in tune with the program to find work elsewhere” (www.sedl.org).

When teachers decide to participate in learning communities, they must be willing to trust the members of their communities and accept feedback and constructive critique given by colleagues. It is understood that all feedback and critiques are done for the benefit of student progress; thus, members of the community should develop warm relationships that is built on trust and mutual respect (www.sedl.org). Being a member of a learning community afford teachers the opportunity to continue to learn about themselves as well as the about the students they serve.

Establish Mentors

Teachers helping teachers is the idea behind mentoring. Cultivate leadership in teachers by giving the experienced teachers an opportunity to lead by sharing their experience with the novice teacher and by placing the novice teacher in the position to become a leader; thus, progress is sustained. “We have found that mentoring offers veteran teachers professional replenishment, contributes to the retention of the regions best teachers, and produces teacher leaders” (Moir & Bloom, 2003). Under these conditions everyone wins, especially the students. The findings from a study on mentoring stated that the “reflective nature of mentoring contributed to the teachers’ self-understanding [causing them] to be more mindful of their responsibilities to their students and to their teaching practices, and in the process, enhanced the teachers’ personal and professional growth”(Jewell, M. 2007). Schools with strong mentoring programs experience higher teacher retention than schools without mentoring programs. New teachers who are supported with coaching are more likely to remain in the field, improve instructional skills and to feel more efficient (Hammond, 2003). A new teacher grows from the watering and nourishment given by veteran teachers and as the veteran teacher gives, he/she is also receiving and both benefit from each other’s existence. This is the principle of *ta’alim*- learning through teaching.

Strive for Professionalism

The College Dictionary defines “professional” as: One with assured competence in a field; behaving in such a way as to appear professional. It also defines “professionalism” as: Professional status, character or standards. Teaching is not a job it is a profession. Represented by people with assured competence in the field. This assured competence is verified with a certificate, which acknowledges that the teacher has met the required standards of the profession. Leaders in the field of education should strive to meet those standards by becoming certified in the desired field or subject area. Students are better served when teachers are certified. Mentors can assist teachers who are having difficulty obtaining the required certificates.

Another level of achievement in teacher professionalism is to become National Board Certified. Becoming National Board Certified requires teachers to endure a rigorous process in demonstration of their competence, skill and experience in their field of study. “Teachers undergo an extensive performance based evaluation, which includes written examinations, lesson portfolios and classroom videos. The process also focuses on classroom practices, content and pedagogical knowledge and community and professional involvement” (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004). While engaged in this process, teachers learn the required standards in the field and are given the venue to demonstrate their ability to meet those standards. Additionally, a research study conducted by the Urban Institute and the University of Washington showed that

elementary students of National Board Certified Teachers earned higher test scores in math and reading (www.nea.org).

Leadership is cultivated and fostered when teachers become members of professional organizations and associations. These professional entities address the needs of the membership by keeping them abreast of the latest information in the field through publications and conferences. Teachers should have membership in at least one organization related to their subject area or the field of education. And teachers should periodically attend local or national conferences. The information gained from reading professional journals and attending conference will sharpen skills and definitely broaden a teacher's perspective. Teachers who are not members of a professional organization in their subject area and have never attended a professional conference are denying themselves an opportunity to grow; thus, denying growth to the students that they teach.

Conclusion

Muslim teachers are in the position to make a great impact in the field of education. However, the progress we make will depend on how we perceive ourselves. Are we teachers doing a job or are we leaders in the field of education striving to improve student learning? If the answer is the latter then there are things we must do to cultivate leadership among ourselves. There are many avenues leading to accomplished competent leadership but this paper is limited to addressing only a few: creating learning communities, establishing mentoring programs, and striving for professionalism.

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