

Reimagining Professional Development by

LISTENING TO TEACHERS

BY JENNIFER L.M. GUNN



The job of an educator has never been more challenging, with ever-mounting responsibilities and a turbulent societal landscape. It seems everyone, from politicians to parents to community members, believe that they know what's best for education. But who should be consulted in policy decisions made about schools? Educators.

It's time to lift the voices of the people who can build something better, more innovative, and more student-centered.

Parents and politicians commonly argue that teachers must “follow their direction” because they “pay their salaries,” but it’s this kind of thinking that erodes the public perception of the professionalism and competence of our teachers, and somehow never seems to extend to firefighters, park rangers, or librarians. It’s time to build education from the bottom up, and it all starts with empowering teachers.

UN-PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Growing and improving throughout one’s career is important. Things change, practices evolve, and it’s imperative that any professional remains open to lifelong learning. A significant amount of time is given to teacher’s professional development. In some states, teachers have to pay out of pocket for ongoing education courses, exams, and seminar hours to continuously maintain their licenses. Most schools have mandatory professional development hours every week that typically offer procedural content where everyone, regardless of experience, collectively learns from an administrator or outside consultant. These sessions are often uninspiring and directive, rather than collaborative and interactive.

If teachers were regarded as experts, they could teach in collaborative professional learning spaces, choosing their own development pathways, working in partnership, utilizing each other’s experiences, learning from their peers, and profoundly growing their skills. Highly

respected educators would be seen as sources of knowledge and ideas, rather than receptors of direction and cogs in the wheel.

Our current system of accountability and professional development is designed to conform every teacher to a lifeless, boring mold, rather than help them flourish as experts in their unique ways. But if teachers were seen as experts, they could help develop their practice in partnership with their peers. Every teacher would bring their expertise, knowledge, ideas and value to the table to help the community grow. Peer-to-peer intervisitations and reviews would be far more effective and align with how some other professions grow their practice. Teaching teams would help educators develop their lessons and units together and connect their disciplines authentically. Effective pedagogy would become less about ticking boxes and compliance, and more about truly engaging students in deeper learning through community-driven practice.

LET’S SAY IT: TEACHERS ARE EXPERTS IN THEIR FIELD

It’s time that people listened to educators. Teachers are experts in their field, but are rarely seen as such — even by themselves. In countries like Finland, teachers are highly regarded professionals who are trusted to make decisions, design content, and shape policy. It’s time that teachers in the U.S. were given a seat at the table — and while we’re at it, students too. As we face a national teacher shortage, it’s time to shift the paradigm.

The impact of 3.2 million empowered, expert educators? Extraordinary.

Teacher and education expert Jose Vilson says teachers need to see themselves as experts first. They need to recognize their knowledge as worthwhile and significant. Like any professionals, teachers need to believe they have value. Most importantly, teachers need to bring that expertise into their classrooms, so students can aspire to do the same one day.

Teachers are scholastic experts who work in the field every day. “We need to see teachers as experts of their craft, and afforded the same cred as professionals in other fields,” Vilson says. “A teacher who is confident in their expertise and comfortable in their role should be embraced.”

The impact of 3.2 million empowered, expert educators? Extraordinary.

Think about it like this: If a change was needed in medical practice, they wouldn’t bring in real estate agents to consult just because they’ve been to the doctor. That’s because it’s critically important to have actual medical expertise to shape clinical decisions. The same is true for education. Those with experience and training in this field should be the ones shaping it.

It’s time for us to innovate, to think outside of the antiquated vision of school, and to bring our unique value to the market. We studied for years to do this work. We’ve spent countless years, weeks, days, and hours with our students. This country has had 104 years of compulsory public education, and we’re still underperforming on most education metrics worldwide. Maybe, just maybe, it’s time we started listening to teachers. Perhaps their vision for education can create better results.

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teacher, teaching coach, and educator in New York City. She created Right to Read, a literacy acceleration program for teens, steeped in social justice. She also created the progressive learning models, The Big Idea Project and We the Change. Gunn is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation. She is a regular presenter at conferences and frequently writes about education, adolescent literacy and innovation. Connect with Jennifer on Twitter: @jenniferlmgunn.



THE VISION ISSUE

For more inspiration, check out the Empowered Hub.

 **EmpoweredHub.org**