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Dyane Smokorowski: Expanding Teachers' Professional Learning Networks Means Greater Options for Students

Lori Goodson and Shannon Ralph

For this issue of *Educational Considerations*, we examine the theme of What Works in the Classroom. As part of our efforts to address this vital topic, we were fortunate to visit with Dyane Smokorowski, who is a 2019 National Teacher Hall of Fame Inductee, 2013 Kansas Teacher of the Year, and is currently serving as an Innovation and Technology Lead Teacher in the Andover Public Schools. Mrs. Smoke, as she's known to her students, believes in a project-based, student-centered classroom that helps students build skills in communication, planning, research, and project implementation. Additionally, Dyane thrives on the mission to create active and engaging teacher professional learning opportunities. She wants her students and teachers to develop a love for innovation, communication, and technology, but also to understand how to use that love and passion to advance their own futures, as well as that of the global community.

The theme for the issue centers around what works in the classroom—for teachers and, ultimately, students. You've been especially active in connecting with teachers around the world. First, explain how you connect with them virtually. What do you see as some of their biggest concerns? And their strengths? What is truly working for them that other educators can apply to their own classrooms?

My professional learning network comprises teachers from all over the globe who share one thing in common, the desire to create learning experiences that elevate student voice

and agency so the children can become leaders in their own communities. This shared vision opens doors for both professional and student collaboration, so often I co-design opportunities for students to contribute to a global discussion via collaborative projects. One of my favorites is our annual Virtual Valentines Project where we invite classrooms to create digital Valentine's Day messages for a partner class outside of their own geographic region. Once the classrooms partner up, they create their digital valentines, conduct mini-research investigations on each other's communities, and develop a series of questions to better understand another perspective. As a culminating event, the two classes will video conference to meet their new Virtual Valentine friends and host their inquiry discussion.

Through these collaborative projects, I'm expanding my network and establishing more educator relationships, which have opened doors to educator roundtable discussions on current issues. Most often, I hear the same challenges that educators face here in Kansas: How do we inspire students to have an intrinsic motivation for learning? How do we help them understand multiple perspectives and build empathy? How do we help students see themselves as learners and not consumers? How do we fight poverty? What is interesting, however, are the answers and ideas I've gathered through these conversations. For example, the Sands School in the United Kingdom is a high school completely based on democratic principles. There, students determine the school rules collectively, no adult has a power of veto, and everyone takes part in running the school and doing chores. The teaching approach is a concept called 'aesthetic learning' which is based on relationships, confidence, and trust. The goal is to get students to think so they can understand themselves and be creative, empathetic, and critical thinking global citizens.

Another concept is the Nature Based Classrooms for early childhood that started in the Scandinavian countries but is quickly spreading across the globe. In these schools, children spend 80% of their day outside. They do math lessons, reading activities, science investigations, social-emotional learning lessons all in the great outdoors. Talking with these teachers is fascinating because they have discovered that their students do not experience the anxieties and pressures that many American children do. Nature based classrooms have children who are thriving with excellent social skills and better preparation for learning.

Now, both school concepts might sound a bit out of the box or maverick, but they work well for their students and educators and they have three things in common that we know are important in any learning environment rigor, relationships and relevance. It's important to investigate and learn from these and other models around the world so we can better serve our own students in Kansas.

Share with us a little about your summer teacher field trips. What do those involve and why are they significant for classroom teachers?

In the traditional understanding of student field trips, students are able to access tools and environments that are not available at school. Their community resources are rich learning laboratories where students can conduct field research, engage in hands-on experiences to better understand concepts, or learn from experts in industry. Each experience solidifies learning and supports important academic concepts. In a teacher field trip, the same concepts apply for experiential teacher professional learning opportunities. Imagine teacher cohorts visiting museums, exploring underwater ecosystems at an aquarium, investigating ancient artifacts at a historical museum, working alongside research scientists in a cancer laboratory, or touring schools of

innovation. These contextual experiences allow teachers to engage with content and teaching strategies in a variety of ways. Concepts are presented through all different media and different modalities so teachers can gain confidence in designing personalized and experiential learning for their own students.

I started organizing teacher field trips in my own community several years ago. I started small by reaching out to informal educators (museum docents, national park interpreters, zoo education teams) to investigate collaboration opportunities for student project-based learning units. Would there be a way for these experts to coteach with me? Might there be a chance for my students to solve real world problems alongside these organizations? It turned out that these connections were simple to make and opportunities opened naturally.

In 2018, I had the wild idea to prototype how this community partnership idea might expand by leaving Kansas and taking teachers along for the ride. I was inspired by group of primary teacher friends in Paola USD 368 who take a teacher field trip annually out of state to investigate cultures and biomes in order create a family engagement night for the city of Paola. Over the years, this small but mighty band of teachers has traveled to Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and even Juneau to bring a bit of the world to their small-town community. I wanted to create something similar with the added challenge of bringing the entire state of Kansas with me. What would happen if 40 teachers captured the most innovative ideas from around the country and used those to move Kansas forward in Redesign?

The first trip was to Walt Disney World in Orlando where teachers were challenged to investigate leadership strategies, cultural connections, STEAM, and personalized learning in the world's most exciting global classroom. That was an incredible hit and all 40 teachers returned to their classrooms with new focus for teacher leadership and creativity in the classroom.

Our second teacher field trip took us to San Diego where we unpacked the four pillars of the Kansas Redesign (personalized learning, family and community partnerships, real world applications, and student success skills) while touring schools of innovation such as High Tech High and Design 39 Campus. Both of these schools are reimaging what school could be and what better opportunity to learn from these teacher leaders than to collaborate with them? Along with the school tours, we spent time working with the education team at the San Diego Zoo and spent a day touring Balboa Park to discover real world connections to our content. Without a doubt, this short experience shifted how all of us approached school innovation for our districts.

My hope is to continue these opportunities in the future because these are the paths where teachers are breaking beyond the traditional definition of education. They are taking more academic risks, establishing partnerships for student collaboration, and becoming incredible teacher leaders.

You're also involved with the National Network of State Teachers of the Year and the Milken Center for Unsung Heroes. Why is that work so significant for educators?

The most important asset any teacher has is a professional learning network. Being a part of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) and the Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes groups connect me with some of the most creative and innovative educators around the globe. These are the teacher leaders who are removing

barriers for all children, engaging in challenging conversations that help shift traditional and at times harmful learning environments to more diverse and inclusive classrooms, and advocating for positive change in education reform.

One of my favorite benefits of being involved with PLNs are the conversations and opportunities that can be made for my own students and colleagues. For example, as our district moves forward with the Kansas Redesign, I needed to research how other schools are approaching personalized learning. Through my PLNs, I was able to find teachers quickly who are leading in personalized and competency-based learning. I invited them to participate in roundtable discussions with teacher leaders in my district so we could investigate strategies and vetted resources to help our schools move forward. It's almost like being able to tap into the expertise and wisdom of dozens of teacher Jedi's so you can be a better teacher warrior if that makes sense. And the real magic happens when you realize being a part of a PLN family, you have the perseverance, guidance, and energy you need to stay passionate about education.

With so many connections to teachers, what do you see that they need to be successful in the classroom? What can schools and communities do to help?

Teachers need to keep in mind three important elements to be successful.

- 1) Remember that everything begins with positive relationships and that Maslow always comes before Blooms. Whether you are working with a child, lesson planning with a colleague, or collaborating with a community organization, positive relationships are the threads that foster positive growth. Yes, they are hard to sustain and come with ups and downs, but with work, commitment, and willingness to adapt you will see positive outcomes.
- 2) Teaching is meant to be a collaborative profession and growing to be more collaborative in the future. It takes a village to lead, instruct, or mentor students, and as we move to a more blended teaching environment, collaboration with student support teammates in ELL, SPED, and the fine arts is going to be crucial. For the first time, we are going to see cross curricular connections becoming the norm.
- 3) All learners – both children and adults – need to find relevance in the learning process. They will internally debate questions such as, “Is this interesting and worth knowing? What’s this have to do with me? or Why should I care about it?”, so it’s critical to seek relevance as we design learning experiences for our students. And PS – relevance is never found in a worksheet packet. Kids don’t hug worksheets. They hug the people who create emotional and relevant connections to learning for them.

How can teachers take what they’ve learned through these professional development activities to make learning relevant for their students? How does that show up in their individual classrooms?

Unsurprisingly, relevance actually begins with relationships. When I design a teacher field trip or a professional learning workshop it always begins with knowing my participants well. I see out why they took the class, what their passions are, what do they love about teaching, what hobbies and interests they enjoy away from teaching. I use those connections so I can personalize the learning for the audience. For example, on the San Diego Teacher field trip, I had two high school Spanish teachers join us. Knowing that culture studies are a significant component of their curriculum, I sought out connections for their content area. As a result, we added an excursion to Chicano Park, a National Historic Site comprised of 80 murals that act as a way to transmit the history

and culture of Mexican-Americans and Chicanos. The Spanish teachers did extensive research, took countless photographs, and captured the Chicano Park story for their students. This one experience became inspiration for future projects on cultural studies. In other words, the adult learners found relevance in what was being presented to them. The same goes for the classroom.

It's also important to mention that teachers have both an opportunity and a responsibility to design their own professional learning if their needs are not being met at the local level. Start by making a list of units where real-world connections are difficult to make, then match those with museums, national parks, or businesses that have content experts on those topics. Visit those organizations' websites and see if they have any community outreach or distance learning opportunities. Establish relationships and before long you will have new opportunities for both you and your students.

As we work to make our classrooms engaging learning environments, what needs to be done to best serve our students?

We need to remember that engagement translates to relevance + energy and enthusiasm, not merely putting tech devices in the hands of students. Teacher enthusiasm sparks the curiosity of students and jumpstarts their motivation to learn. If we want to best serve our students, we need to seek out new and exciting opportunities for ourselves to learn and grow and then transfer those to our students through experiential learning.

When I design any learning experience, I ask myself five questions to guarantee engagement.

- 1) Who are my students and what are their passions and interests?
- 2) What do I need to assess or what competencies do students need to demonstrate through this process?
- 3) What dispositions do I want to see students gain from this experience?
- 4) Who do they need to talk to in order to gain richer understandings?
- 5) How might the elements surprise and delight be incorporated?

Surprise and delight are those moments where you can bring that extra little touch with emotional connections to learning. It might be a Skype call with an author or scientist, a postcard sent in the mail with a teaser of an upcoming classroom experience, or a chalk message on a driveway. Those little bits of magic designed with students in mind helps to solidify the positive learning culture in the classroom.

In a perfect world, what does professional development look like?

The perfect professional development would be experiential, active, collaborative, and reflective. It would involve a shared learning experience that directly connected to content areas and personal growth. Thought provoking conversations that bring deeper understandings with multiple perspectives would be strategically embedded.

Opportunities for reoccurring reflection so teachers could identify where personal growth occurred would be a priority. And most of all, it would be sprinkled with a bit of fun and adventure for good measure. It turns out that fun and enjoyment are not taboo concepts for professional learning. Why couldn't a teacher explore concepts of math and physics while learning to indoor skydive or wrestle with human impacts on natural environments while doing field research with sea turtles or open their hearts to culturally sensitive

topics at a National Historic Site? These are experiences that we crave for our students, so they should be the kinds of learning experiences that we crave ourselves.