

## RESEARCH IN PRACTICE



### Dr. Mernie Maestas

MERNIEMAESTAS@GMAIL.COM

Mernie Maestas, Ph.D., is a practicing elementary school librarian and the lead librarian in the Wentzville School District in Missouri. She additionally works as an adjunct professor in the Library Sciences & Information Services Department at the University of Central Missouri. Maestas has consistently been involved in leadership with the Missouri Association of School Librarians, which has inspired her research interests in professional learning and intellectual freedom.

# The Power of Self-Directed Professional Learning

Professional development is mandated by state and federal laws to ensure that educators remain knowledgeable about current best practices in education. The intent is to apply research to practice to influence learner achievement and retain high-quality educators.

Educators, however, report disparagement of mandated professional development and required professional learning goals (Zerey). This is especially true for those in specialized areas, including school librarians (Akiba; Maestas). Often participants state that mandated professional development is irrelevant and a waste of their time.

One reason mandated professional development may be thought irrelevant is due to the lack of differentiated instruction within district-provided learning. Often, attendance is required by all staff regardless of their previous knowledge, experience, or specialized area of instruction. Minor et al. found "[h]igh-quality PD is not enough; we need to think more about how the PD interacts with teachers' previous knowledge and experiences" (22). This is especially true for school librarians and other specialty area teachers who must attend professional training that does not pertain to their area of expertise.

Another reason for this disparagement may be due to the way professional learning is implemented. Schools often set aside specific days and facilitate the learning that will occur to comply with laws requiring that all certified teachers receive ongoing professional training. In other

words, they instruct the adults much like they do children with assigned learning and assigned times to learn. However, this is not the way adults learn. The work of Knowles indicates that adults not only have the desire to continuously learn, they also have the ability to identify the need for additional learning, be self-directed in finding information, and evaluate the material towards the resolution of the need. Additionally, adults desire an immediate application to help solve the learning need. Waiting for the next assigned professional development day to receive information is not helpful.

Research shows educators want to grow in their professional learning (Zerey). This is especially true for school librarians, who have multiple, evolving roles, causing them to potentially have numerous areas for desired growth (Maestas). However, these professionals want to drive their own professional learning in a manner associated with adult learning. They want to identify an area of need, seek resources to provide the necessary information, employ strategies for improvements, and re-evaluate the need for possible continued learning. Additionally, they want their school district to recognize these learning endeavors as valid professional learning. These professionals want to improve their instructional practice in an ongoing manner.

## Application of Research

Wanting to make professional learning both meaningful and enjoyable for the school librarians in our district, I met with several members of our district's administration team, including an assistant superintendent, in the summer of 2023. I presented the research showing the success of self-directed professional learning (SDPL) by school librarians (Maestas) and the concepts surrounding adult learning (Knowles). After several meetings and jumping through several hoops to verify compliance with the use of professional development funds, I was approved to initiate a cohort of self-directed professional learning school librarians who would be paid an hourly wage for up to 12 hours of professional learning per month conducted outside contracted hours. Additionally, funding would be provided for requested learning materials to support their learning interests. These materials included online workshops, professional books, and collaboration hours with academic librarians.

In exchange for participating, the cohort school librarians would share their learning. This would be initially done by the participants keeping a log that would be accessible to others. This was maintained as a Google site (<https://sites.google.com/wsdr4.org/wsd-librarians-sdpl/home>) where each librarian recorded their goals, resources, and reflections. A second requirement was the participants were to share their learning with other educators and the non-participating school librarians within our district.

## Participation and Outcomes

Invitations to participate were sent to all the school librarians within the district. Seven of 20 school librarians chose to participate in the cohort with representation from high school, middle school, and elementary levels. Initially, Google Meet times were used to communicate expectations and processes for materials and timesheets as well as to answer questions. Once a comfort level was achieved for the SDPL cohort, learning began. Multiple topics of learning were selected, including genrefication, AI, growth mindset, positive psychology, social emotional learning, building a reading culture, and information literacy. While some additional professional learning resources were purchased by the school district, the majority of professional learning resources utilized were free resources such as blogs, podcasts, social media groups, and online resources. Because these school librarians interacted with every student in the building, this learning impacted nearly 6,500 students within these seven schools. Over the course of the school year, nearly 400 hours of additional learning were reported.

Participants expressed a renewed excitement about their job. A high school librarian stated, "Delving into topics that resonate with me and directly apply to the library has been incredibly rewarding." Another said, "Because I'm getting paid, I have really taken the time to look into PD that is interesting and applies to my building. I have read and reread [material]... on misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation." A third participant said, "I do feel like a lot of this has changed my outlook on school. Although I still have bad days, I just find them fewer and fewer."

These librarians not only presented their learning to the other school librarians within the district, but also to other educators across multiple disciplines within the district. These presentations have initiated collaborative teaching between the librarians and the classroom teachers.

Unexpected benefits that emerged from conducting professional learning in this way was that like-minded goals emerged and initiated collaboration with librarians who may not have otherwise shared resources or personal learning. Additionally, this aspect has also encouraged growth in the area of leadership for the cohort participants. These librarians not only presented their learning to the other school librarians within the district, but also to other educators across multiple disciplines within the district. These presentations have initiated collaborative teaching between the librarians and the classroom teachers. To end the year, the cohort participants presented their year of self-directed professional learning at the Missouri Association of School Librarians annual spring conference. This initiative received the 2024 Bright Idea Award from the Missouri Association of School Librarians.

One downfall of the initial project was the online log, which proved more burdensome than helpful. Participating librarians found they were actually documenting more of their goals, resources, and learning through the presentations they were preparing and the authentic collaboration that occurred. This meant that the log was maintained very sporadically and was eventually discontinued.

## Reflections and Revisions

For the current school year, new administration was in place, which meant that another presentation regarding the application of research was necessary. While this new administration saw the value in the success from last year's cohort, they declined the continuation of the hourly stipend for professional learning. They stated the issue of equity of funding this style of learning for participants across other disciplines. Additionally, they wanted to see the inclusion of SDPL for all the librarians across the district. The disappointing compromise was the use of district-required professional learning days that were set aside for special areas to be self-directed by each librarian. This amounts to four contracted half-days for the year. The online log was revised to a

learning hub of resources ([https://docs.google.com/document/d/1\\_Pu9lo4tW8AfsEUMsspgpKD9jZJ2IW sOs5PJ\\_8Hho0/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_Pu9lo4tW8AfsEUMsspgpKD9jZJ2IW sOs5PJ_8Hho0/edit)). This was established following a collection of declared learning goals of all the school librarians. Once the hub was established, the goals were aligned to the district's comprehensive school improvement plan.

This revision has both benefits and downfalls. The benefit of this is that it calls all 20 school librarians to express specific professional learning interests and should form organic collaborative learning communities for those contracted four half-days. This collaboration may carry over into additional learning and communication to better connect the librarians across the district. The downfall is that many of the factors associated with effective adult learning were dismissed. It is not expected that the same level of excitement will be achieved. However, evaluation of this type of learning will prove interesting, and possibly, just possibly, could influence a greater change in the way professional learning is conducted across the district.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Akiba, M. "Professional learning activities in context: A statewide survey of middle school mathematics teachers." *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 20, no. 14, 2012, <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/838>
- Knowles, M. S. *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Cambridge Adult Education, 1980.
- Maestas, M. *Self-directed professional learning of school librarians*. 2023. Emporia State University, PhD dissertation.
- Minor, E. C. et al. "Insights on how to shape teacher learning policy: The role of teacher content knowledge in explaining differential effects of professional development." *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2016, pp. 34.
- Zerey, Ö. "Attitudes and perceptions of EFL instructors regarding self-directed professional development." *International Journal of Language Academy*, vol. 6, 2018, pp. 49-66.

Participating librarians found they were actually documenting more of their goals, resources, and learning through the presentations they were preparing and the authentic collaboration that occurred.