

In the February 18, 2016 Hechinger Report Opinion *“How Finland broke every rule- and created a top school system”* by William Doyle, he states that control, competition, stress, standardized testing, screen-based schools and loosened teacher qualifications should be replaced with warmth, collaboration, and highly professionalized, teacher-led encouragement and assessment. What a novel thought to personalize teacher professional learning!

Doyle visited the University of Eastern Finland’s Normaalikoulu teacher training school in what he calls, “the school of tomorrow.” A white board and a teacher’s desktop computer were the only kinds of technology he saw. But, he also saw students engaged, comfortable, and encouraged to be learners without fear of mistakes or failing grades. Here, he saw that the teachers were able to learn from each other, try new ways to teach content, and pass on their love of learning by enjoying what they were doing. They were encouraged to step outside of their boxes and be creative, innovative, and practical without the fear of being evaluated. Think about it... imagine working in an environment where you were encouraged to teach either new or familiar content in a totally new, “untested” (literally) way with the only worry about how to make necessary changes so that the students’ capacity for learning constantly and consistently improved.

Doyle visited Jussi Hietava, an experienced teacher who manages his own classroom and works as what we call a *cooperating teacher*. Unlike our system, Hietava works with teachers who have master’s degrees in education with specializations in research and classroom practice. Their teacher training takes place over a longer period of time and is structured by graduate schools of education. They are serious about preparing pre-service teachers. Our system, unfortunately, thinks that after a semester of student teaching, teachers are “made” and they are ready to navigate the school system, manage their classrooms, plan engaging lessons, implement effective instructional practices, identify and then provide appropriate materials, differentiate their instruction, grade their students’ work, perform other “duties” and know everything possible about the students... all this in a day’s work! And, all without support.

One of the things we’ve learned is that our teaching colleagues want and need consistent, persistent, and insistent support. They need the nagging and nurturing from a highly skilled teaching colleague who provides real-time support to change beliefs, thinking, and practices. Teachers need to work collaboratively with colleagues who are caring, trustworthy, inspirational, and good listeners. They want to share their learnings with flexible, competent individuals who are authentic in their belief that everyone is a member in a non-threatening community of learning and practice. They want to know that they can make mistakes in a no-risk environment without fear of a negative evaluation. They want to know that evaluation is not the enemy of

innovation.

Whether a teacher is a novice or veteran, changes in practice are fraught with anxiety. *How do I know I'm changing my instructional practices appropriately? How do I know that what I change is what my students need me to change? How do I know that I'm not missing something more important, relevant, or critical to my students' growth? How can I move my thinking into action?*

These are a few of the questions that coaches and teachers discuss when they work together. They collaborate and explore ways to reflect on their thoughts, beliefs, and values. They think about continuous growth and how they can make that happen so that all of their students succeed, not just some of their students. They make a targeted effort to talk about effective practice and how to strengthen all practices.

So, below is a quick and easy reminder list for any change agent:

- Start small and build on each teacher's successes
- Communicate early and often
- Welcome new ideas with enthusiasm, collaborative spirit, and open mind
- Share thinking, voices, and mindsets
- Think more about the "How" than the "What"
- Begin with the "end" in mind

But, change doesn't happen automatically or without a deliberate and planned approach to school wide improvement. Take your time and make each coaching interaction positive, safe, and inviting!

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