



# Are you listening to midcareer teachers' needs?

BY JENNIFER REICHEL

**M**idcareer teachers want something new from professional learning. That's one of the takeaways from dissertation research I conducted on the professional learning needs of experienced educators. Nearly all of the midcareer teachers I interviewed described a need for content that

is fresh or invites a meaningful extension of their existing skills and understandings.

Take Jeanine, a second-career educator with 14 years of teaching experience who shared an example of how frustrating it can be when professional learning repeats the same information year after year. "As an English learner teacher, I have seen

the cultural iceberg way too many times," she said, referring to a diagram noting visible and underlying beliefs, attitudes, and values of a culture that is commonly used in workshops. As a result, Jeanine said, if a session starts off with "a handout of the iceberg on my table, I immediately am discouraged."

Like many teachers, Jeanine appreciates professional learning, but

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only when it meets her needs. She said she enjoys learning that is fresh and new and offers a different lens on concepts already in her repertoire of skills, like enhanced strategies or language to use with her students or even a question that invites her to sustain reflection long after the professional learning experience has ended.

Jeanine's request for learning that matches her experience and skill level is not only understandable, it reflects best practice. Midcareer teachers have different professional learning needs than novice teachers. To serve their needs, it is important for professional learning designers to understand teacher career development.

Research clearly articulates differing attitudes, needs, and behaviors of teachers as they progress through their careers (Burke et al., 1987; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1989). It is important to understand that career development is not always a linear process. Lynn (2002) describes how teachers navigate "through stages, not in a lockstep, linear fashion, but in a dynamic manner reflecting responses to personal and organizational environmental factors."

Career development can look different for different teachers and can be conceptualized in multiple ways (Burke et al., 1987; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1989). Yet some experiences and challenges are common among midcareer teachers.

For example, many teachers encounter career frustration or disillusionment with daily teaching experiences, or they reach a plateau where they feel adequate performance is acceptable (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

Professional learning can be a solution to these common challenges, but qualitative evidence suggests that systems do not consistently provide the kind of meaningful learning for midcareer teachers to keep career disillusionment and complacency at bay. A deep desire to ensure that all teachers have professional learning experiences that inspire and engage them led to my dissertation research seeking to answer the question, "What characteristics of professional development do midcareer teachers say they need?" I grounded this investigation in research about adult learning theory, particularly the principles Knowles et al. (2020) described regarding the role of experience and readiness to learn.

### WHAT DO MIDCAREER TEACHERS NEED?

Using a grounded-theory approach to research, I proposed, studied, and refined a theoretical framework and application-focused tool for leaders and facilitators to consult as they plan, support, and implement professional development for midcareer teachers (Reichel, 2023).

After reviewing existing research,

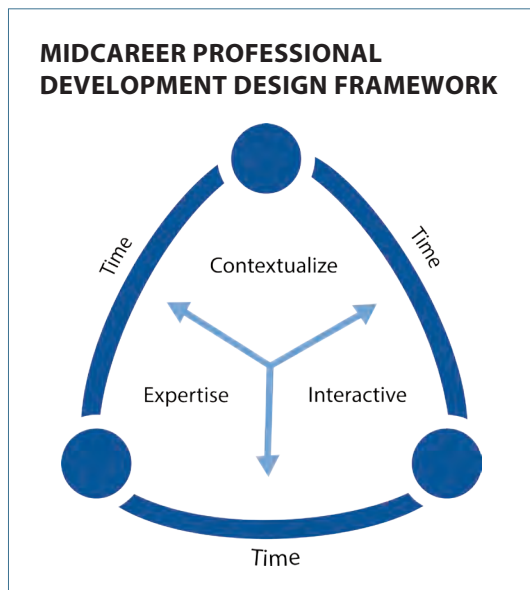
I interviewed midcareer teachers from across the U.S. from March 2022 to February 2023 via a convenience sample and additional participants recruited through social media professional groups. This article includes quotes from some of those teachers, using pseudonyms to comply with Institutional Review Board criteria for protecting research subjects' privacy.

The figure on p. 26 provides a visual of the framework, which represents four themes that emerged from the research that support the planning, preparation, and implementation of professional learning experiences that midcareer teachers need. The three components in the middle specify that professional learning should be contextualized, interactive, and led by expert facilitators.

The fourth component, time, surrounds the other components, and the figure is intentionally designed to be reminiscent of a clock to illustrate the influence of time on the whole process of professional learning. Professional learning for midcareer teachers should be cognizant of the demands on teachers' time, show respect for their time, and make good use of time.

### Contextualized

Professional learning for midcareer teachers must be contextualized — considering not only the day-to-day context of the students they serve and the pedagogical underpinnings of



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their particular content or grade level but also how the learning experience aligns with current school and district initiatives and how it supports what’s happening in the world.

Susan, a high school English teacher in an Eastern state, described a particularly impactful learning experience where she engaged in and learned to use a particular discussion protocol to facilitate student discussion that honored differing viewpoints. She began by sharing her context: She works and lives in a community like many around the country, with polarized wealth, political ideologies, and world experience. In addition, Susan noted that her high school students had not yet learned the skills to participate in meaningful discussions about rich literature because of the social impact of virtual learning during COVID-19.

The professional learning experience was meaningful to her because the learning kept in mind these two essential pieces of her context. After the learning session, she said she felt empowered to engage students in discussion without fear, explaining, “I felt that I that I had the tools now to

actually have those conversations, which I didn’t have before.”

Roxie, a middle school teacher in an affluent suburban charter school in the Midwest, also described how important it is to experience professional learning that is mindful of her context. She said that because of the social isolation of virtual learning due to COVID-19 and the high expectations students at her school perceive, she encounters more anxiety and mental health challenges than she did when she started her career. She appreciates professional learning that helps her be mindful of student mental health.

Knowing that she is not a therapist nor serves in the role of school counselor, her approach to student mental health needs to be grounded in her classroom environment, culture, and learning expectations. Roxie contrasted this experience with another professional learning experience that did not feel meaningful because it was led by new leaders at her school who seemed unaware of the school’s context. She said it felt like the presenters didn’t know the students, community, or the skills and strengths of the teachers and, as a result, felt frustrated by the learning experience.

Leaders planning context-informed professional learning should consider these questions:

- What is happening in current events locally or nationally that may have an impact on students or staff?
- What initiatives or strategic plan pillars are integral to the school or system that are necessary points of intentional integration?
- What is important to know and address about the school’s student body?
- What classroom content, context, or expertise needs attention?

**Interactive**

Midcareer teachers value social experiences with colleagues with whom they have a sense of trust and mutual commitment (Shavit et al., 2022). To honor that, learning experiences should focus on creating deep, sustained interactions rather than surface and incidental engagement.

Bella, a literacy teacher from the Midwest, described an experience where the facilitators of professional learning created job-alike discussion

groups that they used throughout the two-day learning experience. Bella valued the opportunity to “go into breakout rooms with job-alike cohorts where we could synthesize information and share what it looks like in our current jobs.” Because she was able to have ongoing conversations that were meaningful to her role and day-to-day context and learn with educators whose context was similar, the interaction proved meaningful to the ultimate application of the learning.

Midcareer educators benefit from experiences that invite meaningful discourse intended to enhance their craft and generate instructionally transforming ideas. Carrie, an elementary teacher in the Midwest, illustrated another value of interactive professional learning. She said that if professional learning invites “an innovative way of thinking about something, then it really, really helps. I love the (professional learning) that gives me language.”

Teachers like Carrie also need to experience engagement strategies as a learner so that they can incorporate them into their practice. To that end, leaders of professional learning must complement new learning with opportunities for practice and must also make space for significant opportunities for midcareer teachers to discuss with like-minded peers the ways in which professional learning can be assimilated into their instructional practices.

As leaders prepare professional learning experiences, they might consider:

- In what ways will the learning experience invite meaningful opportunities to build community with colleagues?
- In what ways will this professional learning ensure that educators have opportunities to engage in craft-enhancing discourse?
- What strategy or concept must be modeled and debriefed during this learning experience?

### Expertise

By the time teachers arrive at the midcareer stage of development, they have spent years cultivating a strong foundation of pedagogical expertise, so learning opportunities must be mindful of their skill set and build from there to help improve their craft.

Carrie, an elementary language immersion teacher in the Midwest, expressed frustration with facilitators she does not perceive to have authentic experience and expertise. She said that facilitators need to have knowledge that extends beyond the content they are sharing to be perceived as quality facilitators.

Elyse, a high school college and career readiness teacher at a school in the South, values learning from someone close to the source of the original information. When Elyse talked about a college readiness-focused learning experience, she noted her appreciation for the presenters. They were “people in school districts that had specific knowledge about this, and one presenter actually worked at the College Board and was in charge of this entire system that he was talking to us about.”

Midcareer teachers have a readiness to learn at a deeper level and expect facilitators to be able to answer questions beyond the planned presentation and offer anecdotes to bring the content to life.

Leaders, facilitators, and consultants are encouraged to consider these questions as they plan professional learning for midcareer teachers:

- What preparation is necessary to ensure depth of knowledge?
- In what ways will the facilitator illustrate their authentic connection to the content?
- How will the facilitator ensure the content offers extensions to the expertise already internalized by those who attend the learning experience?

### Time

Midcareer teachers, particularly those who perceive the duration of

their career as limited, place a particular value on how they spend their time. Carstensen’s (2006) socioemotional selectivity theory uses time as a lens to understand how values change and shift. When applied to teacher career development, it sheds light on how teachers’ values shift as they progress in their careers: They become more focused on whether their time is well-spent. Because of this, the other components of the framework described above become particularly salient.

In addition, midcareer teachers find value in sharing their expertise (Shavit et al., 2022). Midcareer teachers say their time is meaningfully spent when they are able to serve as mentors or guides to colleagues being inducted into the profession. Donna, a high school special educator in a Midwest charter school, echoed the research when she noted that it is “nice to tap into the talent and the information and the wisdom of some of the other teachers that you work with because we don’t get a lot of time to talk to each other.”

Like other midcareer teachers, Donna appreciates not only benefiting from the expertise of her colleagues, but also sharing her perspectives to benefit her school system.

Two questions that leaders or facilitators of professional learning need to consider as they are planning experiences for midcareer teachers are:

- In what ways will time be allocated to enhance relationships and cultivate expertise in areas of perceived strength?
- How will you intentionally offer time for practitioners to share their expertise?

### CAPITALIZE ON LEARNING TIME

Time for professional learning is precious and often scarce. Capitalizing on the limited or infrequent opportunities to ensure that learning experiences are designed for the teachers in the space is essential. Too often, schools and districts focus their professional development resources in a

*Continued on p. 31*

share after spending the day looking at resources and discussing teacher leadership with their colleagues.

- “I didn’t realize how many options there are for teachers who want to lead but who do not want to be an administrator.”
- “Having a common definition of teacher leadership is a good start to creating positions that will impact student outcomes.”
- “Teacher leadership is an important pipeline for building future leaders.”
- “I need to find a way to include teacher leaders in decision-making.”
- “The power of teacher leadership is so impactful, and finding ways to increase those opportunities is critical for school improvement.”

I also encourage leaders to talk directly with teacher leaders. These teachers’ experiences and insights are powerful. That is obvious in these two responses to our teacher leadership program’s exit survey:

- “This school year, I was asked by my administration to be a part of the teacher leadership team. ... It has given me more of a leadership role in the school. I am helping to peer-observe and coach our new teachers, and I have gotten to help restructure our faculty meetings.”
- “I don’t know what I expected when I started this [teacher leadership] journey, but what I ended up with was confidence. Confidence not only in my teaching abilities, but also in my leadership abilities. I’ve also seen myself get involved in ways I never would have in the past. Because of this journey, my colleagues and administrators see me in a way they did not previously.”

Most administrators I have met are not intentionally undervaluing teacher leadership. Sometimes they just need to be reminded that teacher leaders are change agents who can and will make a tremendous impact on teaching and learning in our schools if we create

an environment that allows them to do so. To those administrators, I say: You know your teachers’ strengths. Capitalizing on those strengths will benefit you, the teachers, and most importantly, the students.

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## Are you listening to midcareer teachers’ needs?

*Continued from p. 27*

one-size-fits-all format that might better support inducting new educators into the system.

This approach is detrimental to meaningfully engaging midcareer teachers in their own continuous improvement. The midcareer professional development design framework is intended to keep midcareer teachers engaged in their continuous improvement and ultimately to support the design of better learning experiences for their students.

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