

51st NCSM Annual Conference Reflections

Making Waves with Effective Mathematics Leadership

San Diego, CA

April 1-3

Transformative! It is a few weeks after my first NCSM Annual Conference and I can safely say that the conference started a transformation within me. I went to the conference thinking that I was attending just another national conference. I have been to many large conferences in Michigan and around the country, but this was the first national conference that felt tailor made for me as a math leader, consultant, and coach. The conference provided so many amazing presentations, so many opportunities to network, so many great ideas to ponder. Most importantly, all of those opportunities directly connected to the role I play as a mathematics leader in my region. I found myself asking the question, "Where do I begin to try to share my experience?"

The conference provided the flexibility for personal choice and the structure to support the choices. My only problem was that there was always more than one session that I wanted to attend. Oh, and once I was in session I wanted to linger and ponder the ideas for hours, but I didn't want to risk missing the next session. The best way that I can think of to capture my experience is to share a few of the ideas I am still contemplating from a few of my favorite sessions. Some of my thinking inspired by these sessions is still raw and incomplete. I am grappling with how to partner with the teachers that I work with to improve our math instruction. I hope that a glimpse into this raw thinking will inspire you to think deeply about some of these challenging topics and to attend next year's 52nd NCSM Annual Conference.

Dr. Julie Dixon's session *Five (Un)Productive Practices* challenged my thinking about how our current evaluation systems and practices might be discouraging high quality math instruction. One example of this is posting specific learning objectives. The purpose of the lesson matters. Once we know our purpose we can select the best way to share the learning objective with students. When the purpose of a lesson is to have students make sense and develop understanding posting the learning objective steals the ah-ha moment. Dr. Dixon suggested zooming out with a broad general learning target at the beginning of the lesson, giving kids the time and space to make sense of the mathematics, and then zooming back in at the end of the lesson with a specific learning target to make sure that every student knew exactly what mathematical outcome was expected. Dr. Dixon went on to help participants explore and rethink the roles of gradual release, academic vocabulary, teaching algorithms and procedures, and small group instruction. She encouraged participants think deeply about the purpose of the tools that we use to instruct mathematics and to push our instruction. Dr. Dixon stated, "We all have disastrous lessons every once in a while. If we don't, we aren't pushing our practice." So true!

Dr. Connie Schrock transformed my thoughts on leadership in her session *Strength Based Leadership*. She defined strength based leadership as helping educators discover their own talents for teaching and applying those strengths to help students do the same. This definition caused me to immediately think of the challenging work of creating an equitable mathematics education system that strives to build on kids strengths instead of trying to fix their inadequacies. This connection stunned me for a moment. We as math leaders and professional developers often fall into the trap of trying to fix teachers. Like with students, there is a tendency to focus on what teachers can't do or what they do wrong. When we focus on what our teachers can do we build them up and provide the foundation for launching learning opportunities for teachers and math leaders to learn together in a partnership with a laser like focus on improving our mathematics instruction to positively impact student learning in mathematics. Dr. Schrock summarized my thoughts well, "We need to focus on what our teachers can do, not what they can't!"

Dr. Luis Cruz inspired conference attendees, myself included, with his passionate opening keynote. I found myself on the edge of my seat as he shared his story and experiences about many things in education that we need to change now in order to ensure that we have equitable schools. Dr. Cruz's call to not allow malpractice in our schools resonated with me. We must send the message that we don't have a choice; we must eliminate practices that create inequity and we must incorporate practices that help all kids learn. In short, we must send the message that if you are using these inequitable practices you must change! The challenge is inspiring change. Inspiring change often seems to devolve into trying to fix teachers. When we try to fix teachers it seems that we cement their beliefs and ensure that change will continue to be elusive. Yet we know that we must not allow malpractice. Contemplating this tension challenges me to improve as a mathematical leader every day and inspires me to learn more. It is definitely time for more learning on my part!

I can't wait for the next conference! Attending the NCSM Annual Conference has been a highlight of my professional learning in the area of math leadership. I am grateful for the opportunity to attend the conference as a recipient of the Iris Carl Travel Grant. I look forward to attending next year in Chicago. See you there!