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Reflections on the NCSM Annual Conference in Oakland, California, 2016

Being chosen to attend the NCSM conference in Oakland was a wonderful experience for me. As the only math coach in our district for elementary, my professional development has sometimes felt like an island. The NCSM conference gave me an opportunity to network with other math leaders from around the country! And I realized that so many of these coaches and teacher leaders feel the same as I do, and have the same struggles with their teachers and students.

The theme “Building Bridges between Leadership and Learning Mathematics” was very appropriate for me. I was looking to build bridges with other colleagues, but also to look at what kind of math professional development I could bring back to the teachers in my district. I achieved all that and more. I thank the NCSM board for giving me the opportunity to travel to Oakland through the Iris Carl Grant.

On the first day, starting out by attending Lucy West’s session on “Who Are you and What Do You Want to Create?” was very inspiring. She talked about leadership as a verb, not a job, and that leadership must be intentional influence. I learned that I need to have critical conversations with my teachers, and to teach my teachers to have those same critical conversations with each other!

Another session that gave me a new perspective on working with teachers was Andrew Clark and Genevieve Collura, who presented “Videos of Classroom Discourse and Interviews to Develop Teacher Understanding of Number Sense and Reasoning”. Their session gave very specific suggestions on how to use short teacher videos to change teaching and thinking. Giving teachers a specific goal to look at in the clips will help focus their teaching. I cannot wait to try this out with my teachers.

My favorite session on the first day was Tracy Zager’s “I’m Not Really a Math Person – Coaching Strategies for Elementary Teachers who have been turned off mathematics.” This powerful session described how the presenter coached a building of teachers to take ownership of their teaching and become more reflective through problem solving, teaching each other, and using children’s literature on mathematics. She gave me hope that I can reach some of those elementary teachers who think math is not their thing.

Sherry Parrish and Ann Dominick were wonderful to listen to in “Number Talks: Fractions, Decimals and Percents”. I know that this is specifically for building the bridge on learning mathematics. The presenters shared many great strategies for talking through the math, and particularly on highlighting misconceptions that students have with fractions, decimals and percents. I will be using this information in professional development with my 3-5 teachers.

My favorite presentation was from Greg Tang, who shared that math doesn’t have to be so polarizing. Memorizing and timed tests can coexist with good teaching and strategies. More importantly, it is how we model problems for our students, and help them make sense of the problems they are presented. The progression he presented from the models to the algorithms highlights the bridge we need to take in our instruction.

And finally was a session by Marilyn Burns. As she shared her thoughts on teaching, conferring and listening to students, I was reminded that this is what teaching and coaching is all about. Her quote at the end of the session says it all “Our teaching goal is not to cover standards...but to uncover them.”

Overall, the NCSM conference was an amazing opportunity to network, share and collaborate with math coaches and teachers from around the country. Again, I thank the NCSM committee for allowing me this opportunity to grow as a teacher leader.