Utilizing Collaborative Teacher Inquiry to Enhance Daily Teaching Practices in K-12 Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This article describes an inquiry-based research study focused on teacher professional development and utilizing evidence-based practices in everyday teaching to enhance learning opportunities for students in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. During a year-long professional development series entitled Embracing All Children: Addressing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Our Schools teachers were provided with an inquiry-based framework to apply evidence-based practices presented during professional development sessions into their daily teaching. Teachers gained knowledge of evidence-based practices during monthly sessions while simultaneously participating in collaborative teacher inquiry research groups. The teachers applied new instructional methods in their daily practices while utilizing an inquiry-based action research model to monitor and self-evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. The findings suggest professional development paired with ongoing opportunities for collaborative teacher inquiry can move evidence-based practices into everyday teaching.

KEYWORDS

Action Research, Collaborative Teacher Inquiry, Evidence-Based Practices, Inquiry-Based Research, Professional Growth Model, Professional Learning Community, Teacher Professional Development

The diverse student demographics of America calls for educators to have the knowledge and skills to teach a culturally and linguistically population. With an increasing English language learner student population of over 9% in K-12 public elementary and secondary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a), teachers must embrace effective teaching methods for educating a cultural and linguistic diverse student population. While apparent, K-12 teachers need effective teaching practices to address student diversity, research indicates only 27% of teachers have professional training in the area of teaching English language learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017b). Moreover, the changing demographics of schools and the demands of meeting common core initiatives make it imperative for teachers to take an active role in pursuing meaningful, relevant professional growth opportunities. Teacher preparation programs and professional growth models for in-service teachers must be designed and sustained by providing classroom teachers with the knowledge and skills to address the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of all learners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature suggests effective professional development for teachers in K-12 schools includes participation in sustained professional learning communities (PLCs) with a focus on collaborative inquiry to be responsive to students' diverse needs (Carpenter, 2017; DuFour & DuFour, 2010). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) emphasized the need for PLCs immersed in teacher inquiry to ask questions, admit uncertainties, and embrace continuous learning among educators. This collaborative model of professional shifts away from the traditional standalone formal in-services, and provides ongoing opportunities for inquiry to collectively identify, analyze and address current issues and problems within a school.

Today, at the forefront of school reform and efforts for continuous improvement, is the need to embrace teaching practices that are responsive to cultural and linguistic diversity. Teachers must be afforded opportunities to actively engage in professional development to acquire new knowledge along with opportunities to connect the newly acquired pedagogical knowledge to improve their daily teaching practices. Cochran-Smith (2010) identified inquiry playing a pivotal role in enhancing both teacher and student performance. Inquiry provides teachers the opportunity to work collaboratively to raise questions and use data to analyze and address specific student needs. Boyle, Lamprianou, and Boyle (2005) found the underlying factor that separated high-quality PD from standalone in-services was how educators within a school responded to students' needs. Standalone models of PD such as short workshops and conferences helped facilitate new skills and knowledge to enable educators to stay attuned with current topics in education; however, the one-time sessions did not change teaching practices and tended to be disconnected from the curriculum and instruction. Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) reported 90% of teachers participated in the standalone form of professional development, with 59% of teachers reporting it was not useful. These findings directed the thinking of the researchers at the onset of the study and guided the development of a teacher inquiry-based action research project.

Further research provided insight to the researchers on how to develop a useful model of professional development, addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom and supporting teachers to use their own class to implement change to improve instruction for English language learners. Levin and Rock (2003) found the approach of PD using collaborative research combined with long-term goals, provided teachers with activities that were reflective and utilized to improve their daily teaching practices. The method of developing PLCs enabled educators to analyze data, identify areas of weakness, and develop strategies to provide intervention for improvement. This systematic approach combined with time and support demonstrated increased student outcomes. Along similar lines, the National Writing Project (2017) has been recognized as a useful model of professional development since 1974 and suggests as its five core professional development principles as the following (1) at all levels, teachers are the agents of change and reform, (2) ongoing opportunities for teachers to work together need to be provided, (3) teachers need ongoing opportunities to increase understanding of theory, research, analysis of practices, and to share experiences of practices, (4) developing a reflective and informed community on best practices supports comprehensive educational programs, 5) teacher-leaders who are competent and effective in their practices should be utilized as teachers-teaching-teachers and recognized as a resource for change and reform. These qualities of effective professional development focus on improving teachers' self-determined areas for professional growth with the support of a reflective and informed professional learning community, were embedded in the teacher inquiry project.

REFLECTIVE AND INFORMED COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Developing a reflective and informed community on best practices supports delivering comprehensive educational programs to students. DuFour (2004) identified the focus in a professional learning

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