

Chapter 17

Innovations in Teacher Professional Development: Integrating Social and Cultural Competencies for Inclusive Excellence

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ABSTRACT

The professional development needs of teachers have changed dramatically over the last 25 years. When constructed to reflect best practices evidenced in the research literature, micro-credentials and other 21st century innovations provide accessible, meaningful, professional learning experiences for educators. This chapter discusses two cases that affected personal transformation and pedagogical change for in-service teachers by an institution of higher education (IHE). A preliminary analysis of these alternative experiences established that when teacher professional development is founded on the context-sensitive integration of social and cultural competencies, meaningful, empowering, and enduring learning can take place.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, the dynamic intersection of economic, technological, and demographic shifts has redefined the nature of teaching, learning, and schooling in American society. At the heart of this nexus, the need for “relevant, continuous, and restorative professional development is evident at all levels of teacher education” (Connery, 2015, p. 47). The rise of micro-credentials reflects the need to provide ample, accessible, and alternative forms of professional development for 21st century teachers (Berry et al., 2016).

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Toward this end, this chapter discusses the implementation of two alternative professional learning experiences offered to in-service teachers by an institution of higher education (IHE), both of which resulted in personal and pedagogical change. The first case or C1 outlines the design, content, and processes of an organic, fluid approach to promoting culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2002). The second case or C2 describes the ontology and outcomes of a highly structured, micro-credential model centered on the development and teaching of social-emotional learning competencies (CASEL, 2002). A preliminary analysis of these distinct yet connected case studies calls for the design of professional development experiences to be founded on the context-sensitive integration of social and cultural competencies as dimensions for effective professional learning.

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

Teacher professional development (TPD) has long been scrutinized for its salience and effectiveness. As a multi-billion dollar enterprise, the average American teacher engages in approximately 70 hours of professional development each year required by local district and state educational authorities (Berry et al., 2016). While professional development experiences are necessary to cultivate educators' pedagogical knowledge, skills, strategies, and dispositions, the traditional, day-long venue of direct instruction delivered en masse by an outside expert has been characterized as a form of "death by PowerPoint" by teachers and researchers alike (Bartz & Kritonis, 2019, p. 57).

Berry, Airhart, and Byrd (2016) emphasize the need for an ongoing, developmental approach to professional development in which "teachers must continuously increase the knowledge and skills they have to teach more rigorous content and engage students in learning" (p. 34). This assertion holds especially true for 21st century "sophisticated forms of teaching...needed to develop student competencies such as deep mastery of challenging content, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. v). Subsequently, the research literature evidences a paradigmatic shift away from top-down, deficit-based, and banking notions of "teacher training" to the re-definition of teacher development as "professional learning" using active, agentic, and transformative terms (Stewart, 2014).

Darling-Hammond (2017) and her colleagues at the Learning Policy Institute further expand this definition of TPD as an "essential component of a comprehensive system of teaching and learning that supports students to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to thrive in the 21st century" (p. vii). By linking individual or micro-level experiences in isolated teacher education programs and/or school systems to a collective or macro-level network, professional learning experiences locate the discipline of education within a multidimensional, career-long structure. This framework is sustained by ongoing ethical, legal, and scientific activity "to ensure a comprehensive system focused on the growth and development of teachers" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. vii).

Researchers at the Learning Policy Institute conducted an analysis of 35 methodologically rigorous studies of TPD resulting in the definition of effective teacher professional development "as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. v). Their review identified effective TPD to be characterized by a majority or all of the seven elements including professional learning experiences that are content focused; incorporate active learning; support collaboration; use models of effective practice;

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