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Standards for Professional Development: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Much research and theory has focused on improving the academic success of students at-risk for failure due to poverty, limited English proficiency, and/or background knowledge and experiences which do not map easily onto school expectations. Several studies have led to significant advances in understanding basic learning processes, including the social and cultural foundations of cognitive development. Rather than focusing on presumed student deficits, researchers have focused on ways that schools can scaffold learning, build on student characteristics as resources, and mitigate risk factors. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) has synthesized this work with five standards for effective teaching: joint productive activity, language and literacy development, contextualizing teaching and learning, complex thinking, and instructional conversation (Dalton, 1998).

These standards can also be applied to professional development activities. Of course, adults and children learn differently. For example, adults have more extensive and more organized background knowledge than young children. They may be more strategic in how they learn, may have different motivations for learning, and may be more aware of their learning so that they monitor and self-regulate their learning better. However, the principles that describe effective teaching and learning for students in classrooms should not differ from those for adults in general and teachers in particular.

Some of the research studies on improving educational outcomes for students and improving schooling have concluded that effective instructional environments depend upon well-trained, reflective teachers who are adequately supported in terms of professional development. Rather than trying to develop teacher-proof curriculum and teaching practices, recent work has focused on fostering professional communities of learners and lifelong support programs. The current emphasis is to embed knowledge and skill acquisition within a framework of teacher growth and development, collaborative programs, and interactive research within a community of learners (see Sprinthall, Remain, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996 for a recent review).

This Research Brief discusses the five standards in terms of sociocultural theory and explains how each standard can support the learning process underlying professional development efforts.

1. Facilitate learning and development through joint productive activity among leaders and participants

One distinguishing feature of sociocultural theory is the view that teaching and learning are social, not individual activities. Learning takes place when novices and experts work together to solve a common problem or produce a common product (Rogoff, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). A sociocultural model for professional development therefore involves assisted performance by a more competent other. In this model the roles of student and teacher are more permeable and flexible than in models of professional development practice which rely on outside experts. Thus a one-shot workshop provided by an expert will not be as effective as a collaborative effort to solve a common problem.

When thinking about professional development in terms of joint productive activity, *joint* refers to who is allowed to participate and how, while *productive* refers to what counts as a legitimate collaboration. It may help to make the rules for participation explicit. For example, should paraeducators, who are normally accorded low status in the school hierarchy, have equal status as collaborators in tackling instructional issues? Should controversial issues such as using Ebonics in teaching standard English or whole language pedagogy count as legitimate topics for collaborative development efforts? It is important to consider the differential power relationships in schools and communities when defining what is legitimate.

2. Promote learners' expertise in professionally relevant discourse

Language and discourse are a critical part of the professional development process. A fundamental premise of sociocultural theory is that language is an important tool which helps mediate interaction with the world. In this view, thinking takes place through the medium of language, and language helps frame problems in new and important ways. Special discourse can be a central part of the professional development process, as long as it helps to frame a problem, capture a phenomenon with more precision, or reconceptualize it in a more useful or accessible way. Professional development should not involve jargon if it does not contribute to meaningful problem-solving, or if it has no connection to practice. Rather, professional development should work to create a com-

mon community of discourse. The leader needs to understand participants' discourse and vice versa.

3. Contextualize teaching, learning, and joint productive activity in the experiences and skills of participants

Another premise of sociocultural theory is that teaching and learning must be contextualized, or situated in meaningful activities connected to everyday life (Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993). This means that teaching and learning activities and joint problem-solving tasks should focus on authentic issues and problems encountered in participants' daily practice. Both the problems addressed as well as the teaching and learning processes in these contexts are certain to be "messier" than those typically encountered in more controlled or artificial situations, but more meaningful to participants.

Professional development should be flexible–to allow for local differences and diversity–and concrete–to avoid the syndrome of "that sounds good, but it won't work here." Innovations and school reform initiatives which rely upon rigid replication of a model or set of practices fail to account for the individual circumstances found in specific schools. They should be addressed through collaborative work.

4. Challenge participants toward more complex solutions in addressing problems

There are many examples of teachers collaboratively addressing complex problems in innovative and successful ways (e.g., Clark, Hong, & Schoeppach, 1996). However, some school reform mandates have become more restrictive, constraining the ability of educational practitioners to develop locally meaningful solutions. Yet, the same high standards and meaningful feedback on efforts that are critical to students' success should be accorded to teachers. Professional development activities are better conceptualized as sustained problem-solving opportunities rather than short-term exercises designed to address simple issues. These are opportunities for members of professional development teams to seek responsive assistance as needed, either internally or from more competent others.

5. Engage participants through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation

Instructional conversations are useful for creating responsive learning environments and should be utilized in professional development activities. The instructional conversation (IC) is a blend of deliberate, planned teaching with more interactive, responsive conversation. The instructional aspects of the IC are related to the opportunities for responsive assistance in the ongoing interactions among participants. The conversational aspects of the IC provide the hook that facilitates the connection of formal schooled knowledge to practical knowledge, including that which comes from teaching and being immersed in a community of teachers. In an important sense, this is at the heart of professional development: connecting the streams of classroom culture and knowledge with more formal knowledge and theory around collaborative problem-solving, that is, joint productive activity.

Conclusion

True teaching and learning take place only when these principles are in place, and professional development is a special case of teaching and learning. There may be a wide range of implementation options that may be faithful to these principles in ways that look very different from each other but may still be effective in the local ecology in which they develop. This should be seen as a natural outgrowth of the sociocultural emphasis on context as a major determinant of behavior.

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