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Understanding the Teacher Professional Development Facilitators and Barriers to Serve a Diverse Student Population

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in serving the needs of diverse learners. Many school districts in response to this growing interest have launched special in-service programs to educate and train teachers on culturally sensitive teaching approaches for serving diverse learners. Many of these professional development programs have implemented one-shot workshops that attempt to transform the school-environment and teacher practices. Although, such efforts have consistently yielded little to no impact on transformation of the school environment and teacher practices they continue to be the preferred teacher professional development model. Nothing has been so frustrating and wasteful as the thousand of conducted one-shot workshops that have led to no significant change in teacher practices (Fullan, 1991). Consequently, on the Southside of Chicago 10 Catholic elementary school principals formed the Council 10-A consortium. The council was established to address and share ideas that would add to the quality of Catholic school education in the 21st century. The council identified diversity as one major issue confronting the delivery of high quality catholic education. The council reported that the one-shot teacher in-service workshops were not enough to create long-term change in the school-environment and/or teacher practices. Therefore, the Catholic Schools 10-A Council enlisted the assistance of a partnership with the School of Education at Saint Xavier University to develop a diversity project that would address systems and teacher change over a three-year period. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the teacher professional development facilitators and barriers effecting ten private schools with respect to serving a diverse student population.

Diversity in Private Institutions

Diversity wasn't even on the radar of most private school communities until the 1990's. In 1996, the Board of Directors of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) approved guidelines entitled "Principles of Good Practice for Equity and Justice in Schools." The guidelines addressed the importance of understanding and respecting the diversity of the school community and the need for establishing a "bias-free environment by addressing issues of equity and justice" (NAIS, 1996). Nationally, shifting demographics has challenged school districts to prepare teachers, counselors, and administrators to serve a rapidly expanding diverse student body (Klauke, 1989). Further embedded in this challenge, is the understanding of how to better address the needs of the diverse experiences children bring daily to the classroom (Klauke, 1989). Therefore, the consistent shifts in racial and ethnic demographics have profound implications for schools. Consequently, schools must ensure teachers possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to understand and teach an ethically and culturally diverse student population.

Nationally to address the concerns independent schools have assigned a staff member to serve formally or informally as a "diversity coordinator." In most schools, the role of diversity coordinator is conceptualized as, at most, a half-time role (Hall & Stevenson, 2007). Many diversity coordinators are not clear on how to proceed with their new roles, and responsibilities (Hall & Stevenson, 2007) This

vagueness is also evident in thelack of professional preparation in culturally responsive pedagogy. Thus, many schools are unable to adequately address their changing diverse student population (White-Clark, 2005).

Teacher Professional Development

A diversity professional development model must ensure that all participants have a vested interest in the process and outcomes (Fullan, 2000). In essence, participants should engage in activities that build on their strengths but also identify areas needing improvement. Often professional development experiences are not based on expressed need but remediation and quick fix approaches (Fiszer, 2004). However, ongoing professional development experiences that involve teachers in diagnosing their learning needs, designing and implementing the change effort, ultimately yield better outcomes for students with diverse backgrounds (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003).

Danielson and McGreal suggested that the sharing of teacher expertise through dialoguing should be embedded in a professional development model. Teachers need to be provided with regular "opportunities to explore, question, and debate in order to integrate new ideas into their repertoires and classroom practices" (as cited in Fiszer, 2004, p.16). Fiszer (2004) found that the lack of time for reflection and dialogue could negatively impact on-going teacher professional development. Further professional development efforts are more likely to produce a non-threatening climate when reflective dialogue and feedback are offered in a non-judgmental way.

The First Year Experience

In September 2005 we launched a three-year action research project on diversity professional development with 10 Catholic elementary schools on the Southside of Chicago. The purpose of the program was to document the impact of professional development activities aimed at changing the school environment and teacher practices towards diversity and inclusiveness.

The 10-A Catholic school principals were primarily concerned that within the past 10 years each school had witnessed a major shift in student racial and ethnic characteristics. In addition they were concerned that diversity teacher training efforts implemented in the past were unsuccessful. The 250 teachers who made up the ten private schools had previously participated in a one-day cultural diversity workshop. Principals were concerned that after the one-day workshop experience, teachers did not demonstrate observable changes in knowledge, teaching practices, or attitudes related to issues of diversity. Also, principals felt that the training approach did not account for the rich experiences and wealth of resources that teachers brought to the training environment.

Taking the principals' dissatisfaction into account, we designed an action research "strengths-based" approach for client services, as described in the social work literature. A strengths-based approach to client services in social work assumes that all people bring experiences and resources that should be respected and considered in developing personal change plans (Saleebey, 2001). Also, after reviewing literature written by Fullan (1991) on school-wide change, it became obvious that at least three years would be needed to achieve the sustainable change. Principals were hoping to see changes in the school environment, teaching practices, and levels of school involvement in the community. Therefore, a three-year professional development project documenting the impact of activities (interventions) on the changing school environment and teacher practices was developed.

The action research literature suggest that in any educational change initiative teachers are more likely to be naturally resistant to the change effort when they perceive their participation as external to the diagnosis and planning of the change strategies (Mills, 2007). Therefore, each building principal was asked to identify two teachers from their school who would serve as teacher leaders for the diversity change project. In this action research program teacher leaders were trained to serve as diagnosticians, planners, and motivators of other teachers to embrace the diversity professional development experience. Later that fall a diversity awareness-training day was held for all 250 teachers representing the 10 participating schools. At this training event the issue of diversity was explored concerning the school environment in which teachers worked. Teachers completed a survey documenting perceptions about their school's environment and culture. Teachers reported that their school had no formal system or structure to address diversity issues. As a result of that finding we recommended that schools design an action plan inclusive of strategies for implementing a system or structure that would address school-wide issues related to diversity. All ten schools agreed to accept our recommendation. Each school created an action plan with strategies to develop a diversity committee.

In early spring of 2006 we conducted on-site technical assistance and monitoring visits to each school. We found the schools implementing a variety of action related approaches to create structures for diversity. For example, one school decided that the diversity committee should not be an internal but an external school committee. They felt that the majority of the committee members should represent the parents of the enrolled children and community stakeholders. Another school developed and implemented a committee that was inclusive of only teachers working in the school. However, that school chose not to include parents or outside community members.

We found that because these were newly formed committees, participants were not always clear about the direction of the committee's work. Many had not established short or long-term goals. Another insight gained was that teachers and administrators in general agreed about the importance of such a committee. However, many had not begun to think of strategies that would ensure the long-term survival of such committees. During our technical assistance and monitoring visits, teacher leaders and principals were asked how they intended to sustain the committees and integrate them into the ongoing practices of the school. Many were not clear about how they would institutionalize the diversity committee. We encouraged teachers and principals to reflect on their diversity committee's successful practices and create future plans for full adoption of such a structure. Most importantly such committees must be institutionalized within the current school's system in order to ensure that diversity is continuously addressed. The lack of such institutionalization of committees can result in short-term results that yield little to no long-term sustainable change in the school environment.

Understanding the Facilitators

In retrospect, to reduce teacher resistance to change we found the following facilitators must be present: 1) The experience must support teachers in the identification of the diversity needs within their school. Because each school is unique with diverse issues and concerns, assessing the school environment are critical so each teacher can begin to understand the facilitators and barriers to supporting a diverse student population; 2) The experience should be non-threatening and non – judgmental. It is imperative that any diversity professional development experience should value participants' contribution to the initiative. The participants have specific knowledge and skills that serve

as valuable resources to be built upon as they engage in intellectual conversations regarding diversity transformation within their school community; 3) The experience must ensure administrators buy-in and support the diversity change initiative. Without the buy-in of administrators the diversity initiative will not move beyond surface change. In essence, transformation of teacher personal perceptions and beliefs about diversity will not happen if administrators do not understand or value their role in the change process; 4) The experience must support teachers in redefining their world view of diversity. Teachers need to engage in activities that allow them to challenge personal beliefs and attitudes about diversity. Through this exploration there should be a conscious effort to redefine diversity that will allow teachers to go beyond race as the sole indicator of student diversity.

Understanding the Barriers

However, teachers and administrators cannot successfully embrace diversity until they arrive at an agreed upon definition of diversity. We found that teachers often misinterpreted cultural diversity as belonging to a specific racial group. Investigation of the literature suggested that cultural diversity encompasses an array of elements such as religion, social class, ethnicity, gender, learning styles, etc (Tileston, 2004,). Identifying ourselves by race limits our understanding of how collectively these descriptors guide our behaviors and beliefs. In schools in which race is predominantly homogenous it is critical that attention be paid to the heterogeneous characteristics of the student body such as learning styles, gender, etc which encompasses diversity. Therefore, changing teacher belief systems and definitions regarding cultural diversity appeared to be a major barrier.

We found the primary barrier to any diversity professional development experience is teacher disposition regarding diversity. That is teachers who struggled with the complexities of race, power, gender, learning styles, and social class etc found it difficult to understand how these issues impacted student learning. Also, they experienced difficulty in understanding how their dispositions toward diversity negatively or positively impacted their ability to serve a diverse student population. These teachers often perceived that no diversity issue existed at their school and exhibited oppositional dispositions i.e. lack of attention, creating excuses and not meaningfully engaging in professional development workshops, activities, and meetings.

In summary, the first year reflections of this three-year action research study revealed there are specific teacher professional development facilitators and barriers associated with preparing teachers to serve a diverse student population. Teacher professional development experiences must support teachers in the identification of the diversity needs within their school. It is critical that the diversity experience be delivered in a non- threatening and non- judgmental environment, so that teachers see their contributions as valuable to the outcome of the professional development program. Also, barriers such as teacher's personal definitions, beliefs, and attitudes toward diversity should be confronted early in the professional development program. Exploring these barriers early open up opportunities for teacher understanding and dispositional change that leads to the empowerment of teachers being able to positively and negatively impact their ability to serve a diverse student population.

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