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Teaching for Equity and Deeper Learning: How Does Professional Learning Transfer to Teachers' Practice and Influence Students' Experiences?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how two urban schools help teachers create equitable spaces for students. We describe the structures and experiences supporting teacher learning and transfer of learning to practice as well as what happens when what is designed for and what is enacted do not align. Findings include that teacher professional learning for equity must (1) include centering it on content related to equity and critical pedagogy; (2) model instructional practices that promote equity; (3) create a culture of inquiry and ownership to promote a school ecosystem where equity and deeper learning thrive; and (4) invite students' voices into the conversation to understand the impact of teachers' professional learning.

"The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it— at no matter what risk." —James Baldwin

James Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers" suggests that the purpose of education is "to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions ... [to] ask questions" (1963, p. 42). Yet Baldwin also cautions us that society is wary of such deep learners, thinkers, and doers; he reminds us that the structures of our society have been "hammered into place" and rely on compliance for sustainability.

That last statement bears repeating: *the structures of our society have been hammered into place and rely on compliance for sustainability*. In schools across the United States, our most struggling students of color, those from poverty, English Language learners, immigrants, and students with disabilities experience instruction that reflects such compliance. This "pedagogy of poverty," described by Haberman (1991), is teacher-driven, rewards passivity and silence, and values worksheet completion over question asking, meaning making, problem solving, and engagement (Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlaender, 2015).

Such experiences are too commonly sustained in our current educational system, where teacher preparation programs often fail to support educators in developing the skills and mindsets needed to close the opportunity and achievement gaps of struggling students. Also, teachers' own professional learning experiences may inadequately support them as engaged, curious, and autonomous learners, serving to reinforce a vision of weak facilitation and lackluster content. At a moment in our nation where we suffer severe gaps in high school graduation rates for students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and English Language learners (Civic Enterprises Data Brief, 2016), we see an increasing need to disrupt a system of complicity. As Paulo Freire asserts, "Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence" (1970, p. 73).

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Those same students most in need of compelling learning are often denied deeper learning¹ opportunities, defined as those that provide support in not only mastery of rich skills and content, but also the ability to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, self-direct learning, and believe in oneself. At this critical juncture in our global society when college and deeper learning skills are essential for participation in the world, too many underserved students struggle in classrooms that reinforce low-expectations and inequity. We see deeper learning goals as inextricably connected to equity and critical pedagogy skills as such skills are urgent for participating in, making sense of, and re-shaping the world. We wondered, What can educators do to combat inequity and the “pedagogy of poverty” in classrooms and schools, helping to actualize the possibilities of education?

We studied two urban schools in a Northeastern city actively working to address the challenge of helping teachers build equitable spaces for deeper learning for all students. We sought to understand what professional development looks like that centered on equity issues and issues of critical pedagogy. We define equitable spaces as those where all learners have multiple access points to rich content and tools to promote success in developing the deeper learning skills defined above. Equitable spaces also incorporate critical pedagogy that Freire (2000, p. 72) refers to as, “problem posing pedagogy,” that attempts to liberate and transform. It is through critical pedagogy that teachers engage students in questioning existing ideologies and practices considered oppressive and encourage response through actions that impact the conditions of their own lives.

We knew from literature that strong professional learning is extended over time, provides teachers with collaborative opportunities for active learning, and is relevant to classroom practice (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). We wondered how a focus on supporting students’ deeper learning and equity influences the design and features of professional development, particularly since recent empirical studies demonstrate uneven impact on student learning even when professional development design included the above core features (Garet et al., 2001; TNTP, 2015; Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). We also brought student voices into our research to understand what sense learners made of the experiences their teachers engaged in during the course of the year, having noticed that although researchers have looked at students’ assessment scores in evaluating professional development quality, student voices are often absent from professional learning research.

We asked:

- (1) How was professional learning designed to support teachers in promoting students’ deeper learning and equity?
- (2) What gaps existed between design and implementation as assessed by classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups?
- (3) What did our findings tell us about how policymakers and practitioners might narrow the gap between design and implementation?

From culturally responsive teaching to equity centered professional development

Our study sought to make sense of what professional learning for equity and deeper learning might look like, and we contextualize this investigation within the broader critical pedagogy literature addressing students’ cultures in teaching as well as in teachers’ professional learning experiences. This context includes what the literature on culturally responsive teaching offers us regarding necessary features for practice. With a relatively small body of work centered on professional development for equity and deeper learning, we turned to culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy and teaching, which have been well explored in the literature and are overlapping and connected areas of research. In preparing culturally responsive teachers, understanding the relationship between the students and the

learning is essential for framing the work about professional development for equity and deeper learning. Using this as a broad frame, we move to the literature about critical pedagogy as both fields speak to a shared concern for equity. Finally, we end with discussing the literature focused on professional development for equity and deeper learning to address inequities in schools.

A defining feature of culturally responsive teaching is teachers knowing their students deeply and being able to emphasize the ways in which students learn in the classroom (Gay, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching is understood to mean responding to the students' culture as a means of addressing knowledge, learning, and teaching. It often shares characteristics with multicultural teaching, equity pedagogy, ethnic studies, sociocultural teaching, and social justice teaching (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Banks, 2014; Sleeter, 2011). The common thread across these frameworks is the importance of affirming the students' cultural lives to enhance learning while creating a more equitable school experience. Significantly, each of these paradigms encourage high quality teaching practices and address larger issues of (in)equity in schools. Connected to culturally responsive pedagogy, but focused on its own goals, is the field of ethnic studies. Specifically, in ethnic studies there is an aim to build academic success and cultivate student agency through the implementation of ethnically relevant curricula (Sleeter, 2011). Ethnic studies focus more on particular content and links to the lived experiences of students. There is an important balance between maintaining ethnic identity and challenging societal inequities which is fostered in ethnic studies (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008). Teacher understanding of, and appreciation for, the diverse backgrounds of the students in their classrooms creates an opportunity for more meaningful experiences for students, allowing teachers to leverage students' strengths and respond to students' needs. In addition to knowing and responding to the students, both culturally responsive pedagogy and ethnic studies include a call to action, which we see as highly connected to teaching for equity and deeper learning and creating more equitable schools, since deeper learning promotes student agency. Challenging the oppression of white middle-class norms can be addressed through culturally responsive teaching as a vehicle to develop social justice (Gay, 2002, p. 108) and, in ethnic studies, justice includes providing students' curricular resources that reflect student identities outside the Eurocentric resources (Bean, Valerio, Senior, & White, 1999) and thereby placing value on all students to create opportunities to disrupt systemic inequalities. Additionally, Dover's (2015) framework teaching for social justice combines a number of these practices:

teaching for social justice includes curriculum that (a) reflects students' personal and cultural identities, (b) includes explicit instruction about oppression, prejudice, and inequity, and (c) makes connections between curricular standards and social justice topics. Second, teaching for social justice employs pedagogy that (a) creates a supportive classroom climate that embraces multiple perspectives, (b) emphasizes critical thinking and inquiry, and (c) promotes students' academic, civic, and personal growth. Third, teaching for social justice makes connections between education and social action through (a) teachers sense of themselves as social activists, (b) teachers' intent to raise students' awareness of inequity and injustice, and (c) teachers' intent to promote students' social action. (p. 363)

Culturally responsive teaching at the classroom practice level involves high quality instruction that demonstrates care and builds learning communities (Gay, 2002). It depends upon teachers embracing high expectations for all learners and encouraging students to think critically (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1995) calls this teaching that encourages academic success, which reflects the principles of deeper learning: mastery of rich skills and content, and the ability to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, self-direct learning, and believe in oneself. In addition, Gay (2002) asserts that culturally responsive teaching should include use of culturally diverse materials. She promotes integrating diverse cultural content in the curriculum, specifically, curriculum that addresses "controversial issues like racism, historical atrocities, powerlessness, and hegemony" (p. 108). Further, curriculum should critically analyze societal issues like the "knowledge, ideas, and impressions about ethnic groups that are portrayed in the media" (p. 109). The notion that curriculum should challenge students to question issues is shared in ethnic studies and the deeper learning principles, which merges inquiry and critical thinking with rich, controversial content.

Deeply intertwined with the foundations of culturally responsive pedagogy is culturally sustaining pedagogy, which specifically seeks to build upon the notion of responsiveness; it does “not imply that the original was deficient,” but rather speaks “to the changing and evolving needs of dynamic systems” (p. 76), working to help educators think about how “to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). The voices students bring empowers them to explore, understand, and value their ethnic identities. Paris and Alim (2017), in their work on culturally sustaining pedagogies, make explicit reference centering curriculum on student agency and input, as well as the importance of de-centering curriculum from the white gaze (Ferlazzo, 2017). Here, curriculum and teaching become an activist tool for disrupting racism. Irizarry (2017) further highlighted the role of the student in culturally sustaining pedagogy, identifying the necessity of dynamic student voice in classrooms and schools as ethnicities are explored and affirmed.

Because teaching is deeply connected to learning, we also rely on the literature on critical pedagogy, which encourages students to learn through questioning the dominant culture. As Shor (1992) explains, critical pedagogy involves “habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beyond surface meaning [and] dominant myths” (p. 129). It is teaching and learning that encourages students to respond to text as politically aware members of a community. Freire (2000) further asserts that critical pedagogy creates a classroom of mutual learning, in which teachers and students learn together and students can speak with authority as they draw from existing knowledge and experiences. Teachers and students create a dialogue where they explore issues they mutually face and, at the same time, teachers support students in finding their voices and their own capacity for action.

The unique needs of schools and classrooms suggest the importance of teacher-directed professional development for teaching for equity and deeper learning. As we understand student learning to be grounded in the needs of students, teachers also must have the opportunity to experience professional learning that honors their needs in a meaningful way (Skerrett, Warrington, & Williamson, 2018). Skerrett et al. (2018) identified six features to support the professional development as equity educators: teacher identified and driven, presented by experts who value the teachers’ expertise, context where the teachers can be the teacher and the learner, sustained over time with continued further learning, fosters meaningful collaborative relationships with others in the community, and includes support from those with the capital to enact change. Providing professional development with these features allows teachers to experience more equitable educational practices in their own learning.

Contextual factors further support teachers’ learning to teach for equity. Burns Thomas’ (2007) work responded to teachers’ need for support when developing curriculum and pedagogy for equity and social justice, a term closely linked to culturally responsive teaching and critical pedagogy that “analyz[es] multiple forms of oppression” and promotes “pedagogical principles to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression, both in social systems and in their personal lives” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997, p. ix). Burns Thomas’ research included building a network for teachers, inspiring other teachers with practical examples of the ability to work for social justice. The key elements involve creating a network of educators engaged in a common goal and providing tangible examples of what that might look like. Work with others who share a common goal was visible in other studies about professional learning for equity and social justice teaching. Picower (2015) described the importance of collaboration with others who share similar goals. Her research emphasized the significance of teacher-initiated professional development focused on the specific context of the school setting in response to authentic challenges in the classroom. Engaging in equity and social justice professional development allows teachers to understand the sociopolitical nature of teaching (Martin & Ngcobo, 2015), which responds to the call to address the injustices in classrooms and schools. Based on the literature, professional development for teaching for equity and critical pedagogy authentically addresses teachers’ needs to drive their learning, consider the specific context, develop understanding of sociopolitical injustices, and promote collaboration.

The structures of our school settings are such that students and teachers face practices that reinforce existing social stratification. Anyon (2017) addressed the hidden curriculum where students and teachers reproduce these stratifications through the experiences provided in different school settings determined largely by social location. The students with the least social capital—including students of color, English Language Learners (ELLs) and immigrants, and students from poverty—attend schools where learning experiences often maintain these social capital differences. hooks (2009) described how fear can reinforce these structures. Conversely, meaningful work around teaching for equity and deeper learning provides opportunities to disrupt and dismantle these social strata. Because deeper learning creates opportunities for students to interrogate issues, develop critical thinking skills, and build a sense of agency and belief, we view it as a distinctly equitable way for teachers to engage learners, in particular students who have been historically underserved.

Based on the above literature, we see a framework for teaching for equity and deeper learning as one that includes: (1) Teaching that engages students in thinking about and exploring questions related to their immediate lived experiences; (2) Teaching with content that explicitly explores issues of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality; (3) Teaching that additionally helps to reveal injustices and power dynamics within society; and (4) Teaching that helps students apply particular skills to redress inequalities.

Conceptual framework: understanding professional development for centering equity

Our framework emerges from literature on professional development and teacher change and seeks to make sense of what happens when schools try to center their professional development around issues of equity and the critical pedagogy of deeper learning. As mentioned previously, the features of effective professional development reveal core components explored in research studies for over a decade: It is content focused, engages teachers collaboratively in active participation (Borko, 2004; Cohen & Hill, 2001; Klein & Riordan, 2009), is coherent and supported within schools, and is extended in duration (Desimone et al., 2002, 2013; Garet et al., 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999). We examined how teachers engaged in teaching students with a focus on equity (in content, mindsets, and instructional practices) and deeper learning (defined as not only mastering skills and content, but also the ability to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, self-direct learning, and believe in oneself). Teaching with this focus required re-thinking assumptions about teaching and learning.

To explore the gap between design and implementation, we turned to the work of both Argyris and Schon (1978), and Schön and McDonald (1998), whose frameworks explore what organizations may “espouse” or mean to do (as illustrated in organizational documents and verbally), what they *design* for (as illustrated by structures of professional development), and what they *actually* do (as illustrated by practice). We used this framework to illustrate where we identified gaps between organizational belief, design, and practice to help us explore what might cause those disparities. We knew that the translation of espoused theory to practice is often opaque.

Lastly, we are informed by literature on the need for student voices to inform the school reform conversation and promising research suggesting that student engagement can increase motivation, participation, and achievement (Mitre, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2013; Qualgia & Corso, 2016; Shediak, Hoteit, Jamjoom, & Insight, 2013). We also see the element of student agency and voice playing key roles in our conceptual framework. Ryan and Deci (2000) describe a continuum in which heteronomy (subordination, subjection, coercion) lies at one end and autonomy (independence, self-sufficiency, self-rule) at the other. Because the various experiences that bring students to school can strongly influence students’ sense of agency, those learners who endure social hierarchies of subordination based on race, ethnicity, immigration status, linguistic heritage, and socioeconomic class confront messages from educators about expectations and abilities (Smith & Hung, 2008; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). We sought out students to give voice to and unpack their classroom experiences of equity and deeper learning to provide a “distant mirror” into how teachers’ practices

reflect—or not—structures of compliance and low expectations. Additionally, we wanted to engage in research about professional learning that reflected our beliefs in the importance of student agency. While there is some research linking professional development to student outcomes (Desimone et al., 2013), that research is quantitative and largely drawn from standardized test scores. Few, if any, studies look at qualitative data from students or invite students to describe their experiences in classrooms where teachers are formally engaged in professional development. An exception to these studies is the rich and extensive work on participatory action research (PAR) where scholars and practitioners have invited students' voices to shape classroom practice research for years (Fine, 2009; Fine & Torre, 2006; Torre, 2005). We position this work as different from PAR, in that this research did not engage students in action research, but rather as participants in making sense of these studies. As the students served as “distant mirrors” to help us make sense of the impact of teachers' professional learning for equity and deeper learning, we wondered how the deliberate practices of a school (i.e., towards equity) were reflected through student understanding. What sense did they make of how teacher learning translated into their experience of the classroom? In Figure 1 we present a visualization of how we conceptualized our understandings of the literature and conceptual frameworks as informed by our data sources. It includes the data sources that helped us understand how each school made sense of equity-centered professional learning, and how that sense-making varies in terms of espoused theory, design for professional learning, and theory in use.

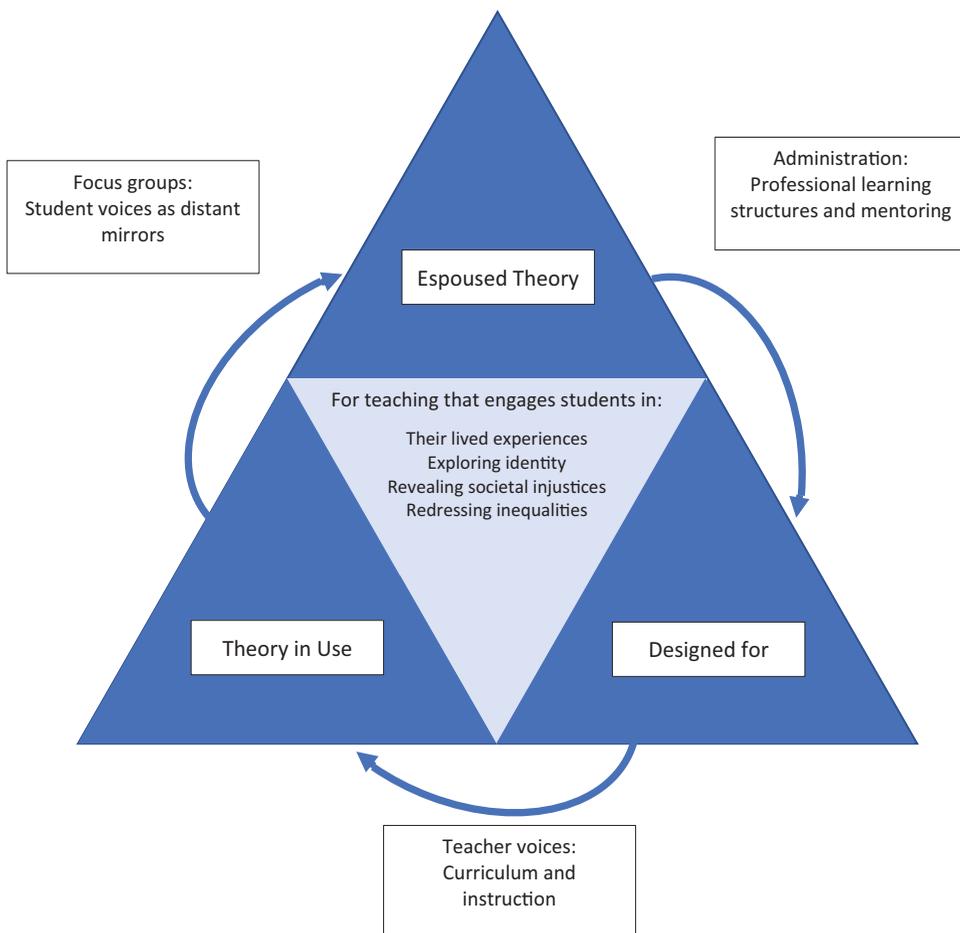


Figure 1. Understanding equity-centered professional development.

Methods and data sources

This study uses qualitative case study methods. Case study methods are ideal for illustrating the complex dynamics of organizations and when “A how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 1994, p. 9). While the typical case in this type of research is highly bounded, we heeded the warning by Bartlett and Vavrus (2018) about how this approach of “identifying a case relies on a static, confined, and deterministic sense of place” (para 7). Instead we sought to think flexibly about the boundaries of our cases. In this study, while the school marked a particular “boundary” we also looked at the school networks in which those schools were situated, to understand the ideas, materials, and, in some case, outside actors who shifted the case. We understood, as Bartlett and Vavrus note, that traditional case study boundaries are “invented and imposed by us, and they should be subject to continual modification as participants make reference to (and thus make relevant) policies, actors, or artifacts beyond the bounds of the study” (para. 5). Additionally, most literature on professional development views the case of professional learning from the interaction of the teachers and the learning. Here we wanted to include students as part of how we made sense of the case.

While traditional case studies often focus on a single site, we explored two separate sites for cases in order to look “at linkages across place, space, and time” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2018, para. 15). According to Bartlett and Vavrus, this provides greater theoretical generalizability. Since we saw this study as a means to help us conceive of what a framework for professional learning for teaching for equity and deeper learning might look like, it was particularly relevant for us to seek these linkages.

Setting

When identifying schools to participate in the study, we turned to respected colleagues and educators in the field and who were familiar with the Northeastern urban center where we were conducting research. They collectively identified five potential sites that were grappling with designing teacher and student learning experiences for equity and deeper learning. We then approached all of the schools on that list and the first two to express interest became the cases for the study. Shortly after beginning the study, one of the sites dropped out and we returned to the list to choose a second site.

Site one or case one, Midway School², was a member of the EL Education schools network (“EL Education”). EL Education has 25 years of experience in designing professional learning for teachers and is a member of the Deeper Learning network of schools. Deeper Learning identifies itself as designing professional learning for teachers with attention to developing teachers’ deeper instruction and equity practices/mindsets. Recent publications (Berger, Woodfin, & Vilen, 2016) and research (Klein, Jaffe-Walter, & Riordan, 2015; Klein & Riordan, 2011) suggest that EL’s professional learning promotes teachers’ deeper instruction and equity practices/mindset.

The second site or case we chose, Highland Academy, was outside of the Deeper Learning network of schools. This site had recently adopted the EL Education model as an important learning principle for guiding their school development. The school itself was only a few years old at the time of this study. They contracted with EL Education for targeted teacher support to develop project-based learning curriculum, steeped in opportunities for student inquiry, authentic products, and other elements reflective of deeper learning.

Table 1 includes school demographic data about each school.

Both of these schools have relatively high levels of students who receive free or reduced lunches, students of color, and above average numbers of students with disabilities relative to the national average. As schools launched in the last ten years, they have had some degree of autonomy in terms of hiring and structures. Thus, issues of equity along a variety of lines (class, race, ability) were urgent and central issues to the lives of students and their teachers, which may have provided motivation for faculty, staff, and administration to delve into these as central curricular and pedagogical themes.

Table 1. School demographic data.

	Schools	
	Midway School	Highland Academy
Grades	6–12	6–8
Year opened	2010	2013
Graduation rate	98%	–
Tracking	none	math
Enrollment	841	421
Free or reduced lunch	71%	51%
Students with disabilities	19%	24%
ELL	2%	4%
Asian	20%	14%
Black	17%	10%
Hispanic	40%	49%
White	17%	24%
Other	7%	4%

Note: The demographics represent the 2017–2018 school year

Data sources

We spent the fall and winter of 2017 trying to understand their professional learning, the kinds of curriculum and instruction teachers were constructing and enacting, as well as the experiences of students. We observed classes, interviewed teachers and leaders, observed the range of professional learning experiences, and engaged in focus groups with students about how they saw issues of equity and deeper learning in their classrooms.

We triangulated our data in multiple ways. For each school, we included interviews at various levels: leader, teacher, school coach, and student, and we conducted multiple interviews with each type of participant.

Interviews

We interviewed both schools' principals, school designers (coaches), and at least one other school leader (for a total of six interviews); we interviewed three to four teachers at each school (for a total of seven interviews), and we interviewed a focus group of three to four students in each school. We conducted approximately 20 interviews total.

Observations

We observed approximately three to four days of professional development in each school. These professional development days were not necessarily focused on teaching for equity and deeper learning. We observed two to three days of regular school activities and team/department meetings. We used a modified protocol for observations that helped focus us on issues of equity and deeper learning. Protocol items included questions like, “Is the content centered on controversial issues that invite students to challenge dominant structures?” “Did the students collaborate during the period?” and “To what degree did the students engage in activities that support development of communication skills (e.g., discussion, inquiry-based conversation, writing tasks, presentation)?”

Documents

We collected school-based documents to help us understand the professional learning systems, structures, content, and pedagogy of the schools. These included: school work plans, professional development schedules and focus areas, team meeting calendars and content, professional learning agendas with detailed content and facilitation notes, classroom-based documents (e.g., daily teaching agendas, protocols, and activities), and student work artifacts.

Analysis

The data analysis used the constant comparative method and was ongoing and recursive. As we amassed transcripts and field notes we entered them into our field log using Dropbox to store documents and the log. Early on, we began to make sense of our data by re-reading our field and interview notes, making notes in the margins, and writing analytic memos where we looked for emerging themes, which “give the data shape and form” (Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 185). This early writing and analysis helped us to begin thinking about meaningful categories for our data. Margot Ely (1991) says of this process, “Creating categories triggers the construction of a conceptual scheme that suits the data. This scheme helps a researcher to ask questions, to compare across data, to change or drop categories, and to make a hierarchical order of them” (p. 87).

Soon after, we spent a few days creating preliminary codes, categorizing the phenomena we were observing, making connections between categories, and testing hypotheses against the data. We read through the data together this time to come to consensus about what a code meant. Often upon finding new codes we returned to early data in the field log to re-code. Further, we often found that what we originally coded under one title was part of a larger category. We triangulated our data in order to find “convergence of information” (Creswell, 1998, p. 213). Finally, once all our data was collected we solidified our categories for analysis with detailed definitions of each category (Creswell, 1998; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, & Garner, 1991). For example, one large category looked at “socially just content” (which we later re-named to include “teaching for equity and critical pedagogy”), which served as a means for us to notice how often the content of either the professional development or a class we were observing used resources and content that we would consider culturally responsive and equitable. We defined teaching for equity and critical pedagogy as content that sought to provide “opportunities to learn that not only provide access to mainstream knowledge and practices but also provide opportunities to question, challenge, and reconstruct knowledge” (Moje, 2007, p. 4). We differentiated between *content* that provided such opportunities to investigate and reconstruct knowledge, and *pedagogy* that encouraged students to develop the skills of questioning and reconstructing the world. In many instances data was coded for both critical pedagogy and content, but not always. For example, a teacher might use a particular strategy that encouraged equitable access for knowledge (such as teaching students how to ask questions of text), without using a text that was particularly focused on equity and critical pedagogy (i.e., a text about how trains are built).

What matters in designing professional development for equity and deeper learning

Our data reveal several significant findings about both the design and content of teachers’ professional learning, as well as insights from students into how teachers’ practices play out in the classroom context. Across both sites we identify four keys to support implementation of deeper learning and equity that have the power to disrupt teachers’ and students’ learning experiences: (1) Teacher professional learning for equity must include centering it on content related to equity and critical pedagogy; (2) Teacher professional learning should model instructional practices that promote equity; (3) Create a culture of inquiry and ownership to promote a school ecosystem where equity and deeper learning thrive; and (4) Invite students’ voices into the conversation to understand the impact of teachers’ professional learning.

Centering equity content in professional development

Our data suggest that when teachers are steeped in professional learning that explores *both* content centered on issues of equity *and* pedagogy that models equitable practices, students are more likely to experience those practices in the classroom. Additionally, we found that there was more coherence between professional learning experiences and classroom experiences if teachers had opportunities to practice new pedagogical skills within the professional development experience. When professional development asks teachers to explore compelling questions of race, class, gender, civil rights,

environmental justice, or other relevant equity issues, teachers enter into learning that requires a heavy cognitive and emotional lift, promotes productive struggle, and offers the opportunity to grapple with complex concepts—all reflective of deeper learning. As related to our framework, the features of professional development that seemed to influence the alignment of espoused, design, and theory in use were particularly those related to (1) The focus on the content (specifically the focus on equity focused content), and (2) The opportunities for active learning and engagement. Teachers identified these two features as particularly salient in being able to enact the espoused theory of the organization.

In the case of Midway, we saw alignment across professional development experiences, coaching, and implementation by teachers. What was designed for and what was implemented was closely matched. For instance, teachers at Midway engaged in professional learning steeped in content informed by local issues, both current and historical: The 1863 New York City Draft Riots, conservation efforts to preserve horseshoe crabs in New York Harbor, and food deserts in New York City. In each professional learning experience (known as a “slice of an expedition”), teachers posed questions to explore the content: “What’s worth fighting for?” “How do horseshoe crabs impact our ecosystem?” and “How does our neighborhood impact our health?” Based on our framework for equity centered teaching, we understood this to be content centered on equity and critical pedagogy as it engaged teachers in thinking about and exploring questions related to their world that reveal injustices and power dynamics within society. It helped them peel back the curtain and understand how traditional power structures of race and class intersected to create dramatically different equitable living conditions in communities. Additionally, equity centered content should explore means of impacting the world and making it better, rather than leaving students without hope for how to engender change. Interestingly, a school coach at one of our sites noted:

Inquiry questions aren’t designed specifically in an equity lens, but teachers are thinking about the undercurrent of what we do though not explicitly naming the subgroups—race, language, learning, and disability. We also have specific case studies that focus on issues of equity—water in Flint, Michigan; Colin Kaepernick’s support of Black Lives Matter—but our staff is not yet at a point where we as a school talk about race, class, language, and immigration status.

Thus, professional learning was designed to examine content with an equity-centered lens, even as the school was not quite ready to explicitly discuss issues of race and class. We see this through the metaphor of a window and mirror; teachers at Midway realize the need for students to look out their windows and engage in critical analysis of culturally relevant issues. At the same time, this school staff was just beginning to look at their own mirror into their identity to explicitly unpack and dialogue about implicit biases and systemic issues of equity. This alignment between espoused and designed for equity-focused professional development was important in how it was later enacted. It also reminds us how rare it is for teachers to have equity centered professional development that includes all of the features we identify in our framework and how, even when they do, delving deeply into the construct of race and other issues of equity can remain elusive.

At Highland Academy, we saw less alignment and coherence amidst the multiple learning experiences teachers had, however, there was a focus on using case studies to illustrate bigger questions and issues of equity. The use of case studies seemed most powerful at helping the teachers at this school align what they espoused for, designed for, and how this work was implemented in classrooms. Professional development experiences were often designed to model these case studies using content that illustrated issues and questions of equity. One coach at Highland Academy said of them, “the case study is like a window into a specific person, place or historical event that is like a snapshot of a big idea. We’re spending a lot of time in something that seems really simple but then uncovering the underlying themes that are present within that one specific person or event.” The coach described how, in working with a teacher on a case study related to immigration, the teacher struggled with how to use the case study to illustrate larger issues. Finally, she was able to make a personal connection,

Her grandmother or her great grandmother came through Ellis Island, and so her family had all these primary documents and so she shares that immigrant experience with students as a case study like, “just look at this woman. She is connected to me, and I would not be here if it was not for this one woman, and let’s look at like all the experiences she went through and what the immigrant experience was like and—And then living in the tenements.” And then that opened a window for students, and they have a personal connection to a person.

The teacher’s own experience making a personal connection to the history of immigration enabled her to see how she might structure the curriculum to allow this kind of window for students, and additionally might have provided a model for the importance of building cultural relevance from students’ lives. The school coach noted that they emphasized “the non-traditional case studies that you wouldn’t see in a typical history text. And so with women’s rights, we talked about Kathrine Switzer as the first woman running the Boston Marathon as an example of what women were courageously doing for women’s rights back in 1967. We connected it to women’s suffrage.” The professional development that teachers in these schools experienced explored content that provided insight into history from an often untold perspective. Using content that challenged dominant culture both signaled the values of the school organization, but also illustrated how these kinds of provocative and engaging case studies could be used to show big ideas about traditional content and curriculum. As Johnson, Sieben, and Buxton (2017) note, “one of the primary goals of professional development for social justice should be to support school-based educators as they provide opportunities for their students to define and examine themselves and their worlds” (p. 176). As our framework for equity-centered professional development highlights, we believe, like Ladson-Billings (1995), that it is important that students not only be able to name injustices and oppression, but be afforded visions of a better world. Content should increase their critical imaginations in visualizing how the world might be. Particularly for equity-centered professional development, the *content* of professional development was key to how well teachers were able to transfer new understandings to their practice. This aligns with Hammond’s (2015) work on culturally responsive teaching and the brain, which suggests that “the brain is wired for stories” and that processing new content is easier when it is in the form of stories or case studies (pp. 134–135).

Equity centered/critical pedagogy in professional development

We defined equity centered/critical pedagogy as pedagogies that (1) help students of a variety of abilities and backgrounds to understand high level content and express their knowledge in a variety of ways, and (2) allow them to both make sense of the world and then take action to have impact. Moje (2007) writes that:

It is important to note, however, that teaching the skill of critique without providing access to information and/or skills for accessing information (e.g., conventional literacy practices) is no more an example of teaching for social justice than is the act of teaching discrete bits of information to be memorized as taken-for-granted truths. (p. 4)

Moje’s description of social justice teaching also includes a warning that there is no single set of equity centered teaching practices—rather “those practices must be generated in response to actual learners” and are contextually based on the needs of particular students at particular moments (p. 5). Teaching skills that help students critique the world must be done through the authentic experience of critiquing their actual context. Knowing this, we looked to see how our two schools sought to build students’ toolbox of deeper learning skills to help them make sense of the world as well as develop equity-aware skills for achieving change.

At Midway, there was a consistent focus across all kinds of learning opportunities for teachers to experience equity and deeper learning pedagogy in their professional development. The espoused theory was present in what the school designed for in their teachers’ learning experiences. Embedded within provocative and meaningful content, the teachers experienced pedagogy that modeled equitable practices. In our observations we witnessed dozens of examples of this: the facilitators of professional learning modeled reading aloud challenging text to define words and offer access to all

learners; teachers discussed ideas using protocols where they assumed specific roles, timed their responses, and all voices were heard; teachers engaged with content area experts in order to pose questions and work towards a culminating product to demonstrate their learning; the participants also experienced pre-writing, drafting, peer critique and feedback, and revision using a rubric as they crafted their product for an authentic audience. Such experiential professional development serves to build teachers' understanding of what deeper learning is and how to design for it in their own practice. One teacher noted the importance of learning *how* to do these practices:

For me, a powerful experience was a PD with EL Education on Reading and Differentiation. I was immersed in the learning and really doing was so important. The EL PDs are about “doing” and it’s a mindset about what we want kids to do—have the experience and debrief. It’s the pedagogy that we believe in and have the chance to experience ... we’re explicitly saying “growth mindset” and “all students can do this,” and the same long-term learning target for all kids. It’s a philosophy that’s a part of the school and the PD. We have the same product for all students—not different. It’s foundational.

Teachers at Midway identified the importance of engaging in the kinds of professional learning experiences that they were trying to transfer to their classrooms, something we have explored in prior research (Klein & Riordan, 2011). Throughout our day-long observations of teaching practice, we noticed multiple conversations across all classrooms that invited talking to learn: Socratic Seminars, World Cafe, turn and talk protocols, and discussion protocols for reading and writing. These created a variety of ways for students to interact, have their individual voices heard, and collaborate with the deeper learning skills that will then help them to critique their world and offer skills for re-imagining that world. Teachers consistently used the practices they were exposed to in professional learning, practices that they saw as explicitly connected to helping them provide rigorous content to all students. Thus, there was an implicit notion that teaching for equity and deeper learning was not merely about the content, but about how students were mentored to engage with the content.

At Highland Academy, there were a broader range of pedagogical strategies in place due in part to the multiple partnerships and initiatives Highland was involved with. For example, through their connection to the EL Education schools intermediary partner, they had coaching from an EL trained coach who worked with the school four to five times per month; they also were involved with a separate literacy initiative, plus another environmental program initiative. The EL coach noted that they had “a lot of different goals from a lot of different organizations, and I think that’s where some of the muddling and the lack of coherence can come from.” In some cases, the initiatives were well aligned. For example, in the year prior to this study, a team from the school had attended a summer institute geared towards re-thinking discipline and suspension for eradicating inequity in school punishments. In describing this initiative, a teacher identified it as key in setting a tone for teaching for equity in the school. He and others who attended the institute turn-keyed their learning during school culture meetings. He indicated,

We’re following through—it’s a mindset shift ... to look at where kids are at and the situation when something happens and become conscious of students who are part of groups that have been treated differently historically. This PD was “real,” and it infiltrated the school. That was the bulk of the training and inspiration behind the equity lens in our work.

This culture shift was well aligned with curricular work done with EL schools that emphasized specific strategies for building curriculum that was student centered, experiential, explored controversial issues, and was inquiry based. As Hammond’s (2015) work underscores, beginning students’ learning with a “provocation”—a powerful image, quote, or video that invites inquiry—and designing learning that connects to real life community promotes culturally responsive teaching. Although Highland teachers experienced disconnect among the different initiatives and sought to make sense of these on their own, they also experienced seeds of strong practice through various partnerships. The resulting occasional incoherence was reflected in how students made sense of the equity focus, something discussed in the following section.

Creating a culture of inquiry and ownership

As our framework suggests, we recognized that it would be important for teachers to engage actively in making meaning of their learning experiences. The gap between design and implementation narrowed when there were opportunities to build a culture of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that engaged teachers as autonomous leaders of their practice. Research on professional development rarely speaks to the degree of ownership teachers had in their professional learning experiences and how that influenced implementation, but our data suggest teachers valued professional learning experiences where they had both ownership and leadership. Similar to the notion of a Freirian classroom where students pose problems that they then investigate and answer, teachers need opportunities not only to run professional development, but also to pose and solve problems that are deeply connected to their work and lives. Again, the more aligned and coherent the espoused theory of the organization and what they designed for, the more likely teachers were able to offer these kinds of experiences to students.

For instance, in Midway, both new and veteran teachers experience professional supports and autonomy within several structures: grade team leader meetings that center on building community, equity of voice, and understanding adult and student learning; new teachers engage in a professional inquiry group; all teachers have one-on-one coaching; and, the leaders of professional inquiry groups and department facilitators receive coaching and supports. One teacher explained, “There’s a lot of thoughtfulness that goes into structuring our meetings. We’re involved in identifying the focus for our inquiry and learning, and we ask the question: how do we develop as learners in every space that we’re in?” Teachers need experiences themselves of driving their own learning in order to be able to model that for students. If we want to create more equitable classrooms for kids, that equity should be reflected in the learning opportunities for teachers.

Our research indicated that teachers need the opportunities to identify gaps in their learning and students’ learning and determine what they need to learn and explore; and, they need to own the means of exploration (even if this is sometimes frustrating for leaders). For instance, one teacher shared,

All of the structures we’re in align to the type of teachers we want to be ... Every structure—off-site institutes, grade team meetings, and coaching, include opportunities for probing questions, accountable talk, turn-and-talk, notecatchers to capture information, and supportive listening—it’s infused in every adult space. And team leaders live that and model it for the teachers.

This highly coherent learning community for both teachers and students helped to significantly increase the degree to which teachers were modeling deeper learning practices for students that they themselves had experienced. Over the course of our observation days we did not observe a single class that did not use one or more of the practices from the professional learning experiences.

Not only are teachers and teacher leaders guiding professional development in alignment with how students can experience deeper learning, but teachers also engage in productive struggle that mirrors what students are challenged to do in classrooms, too. For instance, the teachers we studied preferred to find and read relevant articles with issues that arose from their practice (i.e., “just in time” learning). They turned to trusted colleagues in their school community who understand the context of their classrooms. While this process is messier and less linear than administrator/expert-driven professional development, it seemed to support teachers in internalizing strategies and content for equity and deeper learning. As Margaret Wheatley (2006) states, “people always reach out to those who will give them information, be their allies, [and] offer support” (p. 1).

In Highland Academy, again, we saw less coherence among the various initiatives driving teacher learning, but we also saw a consistent and clear focus on engaging teachers as leaders in their own learning. The principal relayed how the first few years of the school’s externally driven professional development—that focused on administrative concerns—meant that teachers were largely dissatisfied with the professional development experiences. As they surveyed teachers about how they were experiencing learning opportunities, they realized the need to more intentionally engage the teachers themselves as drivers of their learning. While the school continued to involve outside experts in

supporting teachers in their work, the teachers began to pose the problems under investigation, using the outside experts to support their own inquiries. One teacher noted that this shift has been relatively recent: “We’re doing inquiry cycles and I have a voice in what my cycle is. I’ve learned a ton from sitting and talking with the other eighth grade teachers. We’re asking now, “How do we support kids that are lower performing?” This ownership over the inquiry cycle has been something teachers identified as their most important professional learning:

The best learning I’ve had is informal conversations about mindset. In terms of equity, my cycle is about helping students to collaborate with peers. I had kids engage in process to identify “what does good collaboration look and sound like?” ... In one of my classes, 8 of 9 students in bottom third were all boys of color. I wanted to consider how can I change—what are teacher moves in the classroom to change that? I shared the rubric with kids and am more transparent about when I’m grading what I’m writing down. I show them. I notice that investment from those boys increased dramatically. I figured it out because I have a background in accounting and I made pivot tables—I figured it out. I didn’t learn that until recently. One of my mentor teachers did this and so I modeled what she did. I’ve been talking with other eighth grade teachers informally and saying maybe we should make this really clear like we do with content.

This excerpt speaks to the power of teachers posing problems themselves, especially when being asked to engage in questions of equity. Helping teachers have experiences where they ask questions about justice, fairness, and power in relation to questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality provides a model for them as they try to support students in doing this as well. Too often professional learning does not develop from the informal question-asking teachers do in their own practice and even less often do teachers have experiences doing so in ways that situate issues of equity, power, institutional racism, and class at the center of professional learning.

Invite students’ voices to understand teachers’ professional learning

Although our observations suggest that students’ classroom experiences provide structures and opportunities for deeper learning and equity, our student focus groups reveal that students have a murky lens on what deeper learning and equity mean in their daily schooling. There seemed to be a relationship between how explicitly schools worked to support teachers on an issue (i.e., equity) and how well students were able to articulate those ideas. In using a framework that helps to shine light on how espoused, designed for, and enacted theory play out in schools, we have realized that students’ voices are often left out and that those voices are key in understanding the impact of professional learning.

For example, in Highland Academy where equity was not a central focus of their professional learning for teachers (but identified as an important overarching goal, embedded tacitly in PD), students struggled to explain what equity means in terms of their own learning experiences. They did identify particular groups who might not have as much access to knowledge as others. One student said, “I think the Special Ed kids that are upstairs—their voices may not be heard. They need to get represented to this school loudly so we know what they need help with so then if we wanna help them we can help them.” Throughout the focus groups and in classes, there was an uneven focus on issues of equity and critical pedagogy. Students could not identify any content in their classes that was focused on issues of fairness, justice, or power (i.e., when asked about what they studied in Social Studies they said “mostly the presidents”). However, in our observations we did come across examples of content that focused on issues of equity and social justice. For example, in an eighth grade Language Arts class we observed students in the following learning target: “We can analyze the impact racism has on justice as seen within *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” In meeting this target, the teacher handed out a reading entitled “Alabama pardons 3 Scottsboro boys after 80 years,” connecting actual legal cases to the issues raised in the novel. Using a protocol to support students’ reading of the text, the teacher invited them to read through the article twice—once for “clarifications” and the second time for “gist.” During the second reading, students recorded the “gist” in the margin and a “gist statement” at the end of each page.

Thus, we wondered why the students did not make connections between these kinds of experiences and the ideas of equity in school. We wondered (1) if the inconsistency in how this was addressed meant that students were not as clear about how to “name” these kinds of experiences or (2) if we had asked the wrong questions. We recognize this as an important area for further research, understanding that students’ perspectives in learning should be valued and inform the improvement of teaching and learning practices, rather than viewing students as passive recipients (Ferguson, Hanreddy & Draxton, 2011; Mitra et al., 2013).

Implications for professional learning for equity and deeper learning

Pay attention to systemic issues in professional development practice

We see a number of important implications in this study for teacher education, teacher professional learning, and educational research. First, we are reminded that without explicit attention during professional learning to systemic issues of power, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other areas of equity and injustice, teachers are unlikely to find coherent and consistent ways to support students in addressing those issues in classrooms and in their own lives. This is similar to the recommendations for preservice teachers made by Taylor and Sobel (2003). While some schools and teachers may create spaces in their curriculum to include one element of our framework for equity centered teaching (i.e., perhaps content that addresses issues of equity), it is unlikely that they will be able to address all elements of that framework, connecting to students’ lived experiences; engaging in explicit exploration of issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity; revealing injustices and power dynamics within society; and helping students apply particular skills to redress inequalities. For all of these elements of ethnic studies to be considered central to the curriculum, the school must prioritize them as an integral and central focus of equity driven professional learning where teachers examine their own implicit biases and experiences with power, privilege, and disrupting inequity. When that does not happen, there are significant gaps in how this work gets translated in classrooms for students.

Prioritize teacher ownership of professional learning in practice as well as policy

Second, professional learning must provide regular and consistent opportunities for teachers to take ownership of planning and enacting their own deeper learning around issues of equity and critical pedagogy. Equity belongs in professional development (Crockett & Buckley, 2009); if teachers struggle to find meaning in how institutional racism and gender relate to their own lives, they will find it infinitely harder to do this effectively for students. Leaders and policy makers would do well to remember how important it is for teachers to have autonomy in addressing the issues and concerns that directly relate to their classrooms. This can be done within a framework of equity centered schools, where teachers have opportunities to ask questions about their lives, teaching practices, and classrooms.

Researchers and policy makers should engage students in the process of professional learning for equity

Finally, we suggest researchers and policy makers consider the voices of students as a means of understanding how well teachers and schools are centering their work on equity and deeper learning. Participant action research remains one powerful form of doing this, but there are others as well. Including focus groups that simply asked students to talk about the kinds of issues teachers were bringing to classrooms from professional learning experiences revealed a wealth of understandings and misunderstandings that can provide the school and researchers with valuable information for re-aligning their work.

Conclusion

We are at a critical moment in time to actualize education as more than a means of promoting compliance, but as an engine for equity. We know that schools in poorer neighborhoods have difficulty recruiting and keeping skilled teachers, and even in racially diverse districts, schools provide a better education to white students than students of color (Berfield, 2016; Rich, Cox, & Bloch, 2016). Though the current disparity in students' learning opportunities is vast, and not all children have access to the kinds of rigorous, deep learning needed to allow them to critically engage with and re-imagine their communities and world, we see teacher learning as a pivotal lever for transformation.

It is essential that we envision and design schools and districts to support equity and deeper learning for all students, especially the most underserved. We believe teachers are at the fulcrum to impact change and our research explores the principles for designing professional learning that engages teachers as learners and helps to model the kinds of learning they want to design for their students. Our research suggests that we need to expand the voices engaged in creating and understanding teacher professional development; teachers need to be involved at all levels, not merely implementation, and students can provide rich data about the alignment of design and practice.

Notes

1. Deeper learning as defined by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation: <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning/what-deeper-learning>
2. We used pseudonyms for both sites.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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