Developing a K-12 Professional Learning Typology: Social Justice Training Designed for Educators as Adult Learners

Courtney Hoffhines

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/aerc

Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Commons, Adult and Continuing Education and Teaching Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons, and the Secondary Education and Teaching Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.
Developing a K-12 Professional Learning Typology: Social Justice Training Designed for Educators as Adult Learners

Courtney J. Hoffhines

1Olathe School District, Kansas, United States

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine current literature supporting the development of a K-12 professional learning typology based in effective social justice training for educators as adult learners.

Keywords: professional learning typology; social justice; critical pedagogy; K-12

A professional learning typology may be used to provide purposeful learning designed specifically for educators as adult learners regarding the establishment of socially just schools and classrooms. With aims at developing K-12 educators in their awareness, understanding, and professional knowledge, the typology maintains a framework in critical pedagogy. Each extending area of the typology is based in the provision of professional development (PD) opportunities formed through critical reflection, critical dialogue, and critical consciousness, with key content areas found within current literature.

Educators as Adult Learners: Recognizing Educational Needs

Social justice is challenging and emotional work (Bondy, Beck, Curcio & Schroeder, 2017). In spite of its difficulty, it is an important consideration within today’s educational programming, as evidenced by research which shows educators’ beliefs and attitudes can impact equitable practices (Khalil & Brown, 2015). Navigating educators’ needs as adult learners requires a closer look at typical professional deficits in social justice as well as professional learning pitfalls. The gap between K-12 educator and student demographics (Khalil & Brown, 2015) serves to demonstrate the potential for impacted levels of awareness for personal and institutional bias (Samuels, 2018). Recognizing traditional training is not associated with effective outcomes (Webster-Wright, 2009), a review of educator training and development can lead to improved processes and the selection of purposeful, effective adult learning approaches.

If social justice education may be, for the purpose of this paper, understood as educational practices supporting equity and student achievement through a foundation of value and respect for all learners (Lalas & Morgan, 2006), teacher attitudes, awareness, and development may be considered as vital pathways towards this aspect of effective educational practice. There is a range of understanding for social justice education (Burns Thomas, 2007), and research demonstrates practitioners limited knowledge over varying groups, including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (DeMulder, Ndura-Ouedraogo & Stribling, 2009; Samuels, 2018). This can lead to an avoidance of topics (Samuels, 2018) as well as inadequate acknowledgment of diversity (Shields, 2004). This limited awareness is then compounded by teacher attitudes, as demonstrated in Theoharis’ (2007) study which investigated the effect of social justice leadership and areas of resistance, revealing teacher attitudes may result in opposition to social justice efforts. The failing traits of professional learning aids in these concerns, through the lack of effective training for social justice praxis (Bondy et al., 2017).
Critical Pedagogy Supporting Professional Learning

If “social class is a strong predictor of academic achievement in standardized measures” (Lalas & Morgan, 2006, p. 21), a transition away from traditional PD may lead to improved training for K-12 educators to understand and effectively support increasing degrees of social change (DeMulder et al., 2009). To respond to socially based educator needs, professional learning should include the examination of inequity, privilege, and diverse perspectives and experiences (Lalas & Morgan, 2006). A key part of the learning process includes critical reflection as well as the analysis of one’s own beliefs (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). This is enhanced through the development of social consciousness centered on humanizing traits and critical components (Vlach, Taylor, & Wetzel, 2019).

In guiding educators towards social justice through critically focused professional learning, there is improved potential for impacting social change (Lalas & Morgan, 2006). The use of critical pedagogy as a framework for teacher development allows for critical reflection, critical dialogue, and critical consciousness to support meaningful advances among educators and educational systems. Critical pedagogy provides a route of reflection over pedagogical processes through a perspective of equity and power (Vlach, et al., 2019). Critical pedagogy permits educators to be guided by consideration, reflection, and processing of sociocultural issues through establishing greater awareness of equity and power related to race, class, and other areas of social impact (Vlach, et al., 2019).

Moving Beyond Deficits to Development: Discussing a Professional Learning Typology

Acknowledging the needs of today’s K-12 professionals, with special consideration for their roles as adult learners, a professional learning typology may support educators as they build and develop their awareness, attitudes, and practice through areas that directly support social justice in the K-12 setting. Addressing K-12 educators’ professional needs includes PD based in culturally responsive classrooms, developing value for justice and humanizing pedagogy, deficit thinking and implicit bias, social advocacy and activism, as well as social and collaborative learning.

Empowering K-12 educators (Theoharis, 2007) in social justice practice cannot be accomplished through singular trainings, but must be an iterative (Baily & Katradis, 2016), comprehensive (Kose & Lim, 2011) process. Striving to improve teaching and learning, PD for educators is supported by explicit content as well as effective modeling and practice (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014), such as is possible within the professional learning typology. Acknowledging that “preparing social justice leaders is complex and multidimensional” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 249) engaging educators authentically (Baily & Katradis, 2016) towards social justice means moving beyond simply focusing on classroom strategies (Kohli, Picower, Martinez & Ortiz, 2015). Through integration of a comprehensive process which considers various professional learning content (Kose & Lim, 2011), educators build great potential towards the establishment of equity and justice (Kohli et al., 2015).
Figure 1
*Professional Learning Typology: K-12 Social Justice Education*

Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Today’s schools are made up of wide-ranging cultural identities (Khalil & Brown, 2015). Educators’ discomfort with both acknowledging and navigating controversial topics due to limited understanding (Samuels, 2018) is a real concern. With connections to positive student outcomes (Samuels, 2018) and the promotion of engagement among all learners (Khalil & Brown, 2015; Samuels, 2018), cultural competency is considered a key trait of reflective practice (Khalil & Brown, 2015). Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is demonstrated by educators who are diligent in developing their cultural competence within educational contexts (Samuels, Samuels & Cook, 2017) and is recognized as a teaching pedagogy (Hsiao, 2015) which acknowledges and integrates students’ backgrounds and cultural identities within the learning process (Samuels, 2018) through a student-centered framework (Samuels et al., 2017). While CRP and cultural responsiveness in general appear invaluable to the K-12 setting, there exists an unfortunate divide between theory and practice (Samuels et al., 2017). In order to support the development of culturally responsive classrooms, efforts must be taken to address teacher limitations in time and resources (Samuels, 2018) allowing for effective training and implementation of CRP practices. Culturally responsive practice serves as an opportunity within the typology to objectively place student-centered learning and best practices with a raised awareness for cultural competency.

**Developing Value for Justice and Humanizing Pedagogy**

While it may appear an overly simplistic observation, the reality that educators cannot teach what they do not know or understand (Baily & Katradis, 2016) rings especially true for a profession which “normalizes a culture of whiteness” (Vlach et al., 2019, p. 64). In order for educators to recognize the influence of areas like race, class, and gender within the classroom (Vlach et al., 2019), efforts must be taken to develop professional values in regard to humanizing
students and recognizing social justice realities. Considering “human conflict and violence often reflect or result from a tendency to dehumanize the ‘other’” (DeMulder et al., 2009, p. 33), educators must build consciousness of inequity, avoiding implicit participation in the continued production of prejudice (Khalil & Brown, 2015). While deconstructing long accepted beliefs may be complicated (Baily & Katradis, 2016), there must be effort made in developing discernment for foundational inequities (Samuels, 2018) in order to examine realities of social injustice as well as potential alternatives (Bondy et al., 2017). While the use of narratives is a potential method to support greater teacher understanding for critical social issues (Vlach et al., 2019), the priority in this typology of professional learning exists in ensuring educators do not fail to implicate themselves in the structures of oppression (Bondy et al., 2017) that are faced in schools and society at large. Educators are better equipped to operate as border crossers (DeMulder et al., 2009) through the act of building connections and broadening sociocultural knowledge within school and classroom environments when there is a professional urgency towards valuing justice and humanizing educational experiences.

**Deficit Thinking and Implicit Bias**

Considering that each area within this typology of PD for social justice intersects, added value of cultural competency is established through applying asset-driven understanding for community cultures, rather than deficit-driven perspectives (Khalil & Brown, 2015). Deficit paradigms are unfortunately not uncommon among practicing educators (Samuels, 2018). In a study exploring teacher perceptions of students, participants devalued diversity through a promotion of colorblindness and assumed “an automatic intersection of race with SES” (Samuels et al., 2017, p. 55). Pollack (2012) observes “the act of making the in’visible’ visible, and the un‘heard’ heard, is often the first step towards the development of transformative, equity-oriented educators” (p. 885). Provision of professional learning aimed in revealing and understanding deficit thinking as well as the recognition of implicit bias would serve to promote self-efficacy and professional responsibility (Pollack, 2012) among K-12 educators, leading to improved practice and educational experiences.

**Social Advocacy and Activism**

It is important to observe the potential for large-scale change to be facilitated through schools, as they serve as settings to a convergence of diverse cultures and communities (DeMulder et al., 2009). The move towards improved equity and understanding in regard to social justice includes consideration for both a local and large-scale context (Burns Thomas, 2007), resulting in the need for educators to understand their vital role within social advocacy and activism. As education remains a key component in conflict resolution (DeMulder et al., 2009), social justice advocacy influences policies and directs social realities towards increased just and equitable practices (Hoyle, 2018). Consider for a moment that modeling is the most effective method for fostering behavior(s) (DeMulder et al., 2009). If advocacy holds greater impact when conducted collectively (Hoyle, 2018), the value of professional learning dedicated to advocacy and activism becomes clear as educators are empowered to view their societal role, and in so doing, progress in educating and inspiring students (Khalil & Brown, 2015).

**Social and Collaborative Learning**

Moving beyond traditional formats for PD, social and collaborative learning offers a unique support to the social needs of today’s K-12 educators, reinforcing the value for practitioners to learn and improve upon professional practice through the context of educators’ lived experiences and the classroom (Ladson Billings, 1995). Drawing from the knowledge of their peers, as well as daily problem-solving, professionals learn alongside one another (Meijs,
A study observing a biweekly educator-inquiry group observed through the development of a cooperate learning space, a sense of community was built among participants, which supported participants’ ability to both challenge and be open with one another, while learning together (Kohli et al., 2015). Social interactions are key to the process of meaning-making (Bondy et al., 2017) and workplace learning, and social learning within schools demands active engagement among educators (Meijs et al., 2016). Not only do high levels of teacher collaboration demonstrate encouraging results for students (Kose & Lim, 2011), it also provides educators with relevant and meaningful ways to move forward in developing professional practice with increased autonomy (Meijs et al., 2016) and access to colleagues.

Conclusion

Acknowledging educators are adult learners, PD focuses should reflect teacher-learner needs (Gregson & Sturko, 2007) and should also establish value for the content. In careful consideration for teacher attitudes and awareness, as well as professional learning realities, opportunity may lie in utilizing critical pedagogy as the foundation for a professional learning typology based in improved professional practice, including social justice praxis.

References


