Professional Development for Language Teachers

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Defining Professional Development

Professional development is an elusive term in education. To many, the term conjures up images of in-service days and workshops. To others, it refers to a process in which teachers work under supervision to gain tenure or to enhance their professional practice. In this paper, professional development is defined as an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students. Professional development is not a one-shot, one-size-fits-all event, but rather an evolving process of professional self-disclosure, reflection, and growth that yields the best results when sustained over time in communities of practice and when focused on job-embedded responsibilities.

The Need for Quality Professional Development

School reform and accountability initiatives call for a new role for professional development in the career paths of teachers. Current research shows a strong correlation between teachers' teaching and students' school success (Darling Hammond, 1998; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Sparks, 2002). Professional development has become increasingly important as a way to ensure that teachers succeed in matching their teaching goals with their students' learning needs. In the case of second language teachers, professional development is needed to enable them to help their students develop proficiency in the target language and an understanding of the cultures associated with that language.

Professional development differs from other professional endeavors, such as teacher supervision and evaluation, both in purpose and procedures. Supervision recognizes four basic categories of teachers: pre-service, novice, tenured, and veteran (Nolan & Hoover, 2003). Supervisory activities are aimed at certification in the case of pre-service teachers; induction in the case of novices; and maintenance, improvement, or remediation in the case of tenured and veteran teachers. Evaluation, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on judging teachers' competence or teaching quality and does not necessarily focus on their growth as teachers. Professional development focuses specifically on how teachers construct their professional identities in ongoing interaction with learners, by reflecting on their actions in the classroom and adapting them to meet the learners' expressed or implicit learning needs. The ultimate purpose of professional development is to promote effective teaching that results in learning gains for all students.

Effective Professional Development

In order for professional development to be successful, it must be in line with research on teachers' career development and patterns of adult learning. According to Huberman (1989), teachers' careers are characterized by cycles of conflict/resolution that lead to growth and development. His research describes at least five stages in the professional lives of teachers: exploration and stabilization, commitment, diversif-

ication and crisis, serenity and distancing, and conservatism and regret. Teachers have different needs as they progress through these stages, and professional development needs to target their specific needs at each stage. For example, there is a high attrition rate among certified language teachers, many of whom leave the profession after only a few years. According to Huberman's conceptualization, this is most likely to happen at the diversification and crisis stage. Appropriately timed participation in professional development activities such as peer coaching, mentoring, or study groups (described below) may help retain these professionals.

An important consideration in professional development is the educational context in which it is carried out. Pontz (2003) highlights minimum conditions that education for adults (including education for teachers) should meet in order to be effective: clarity of goals, adequate levels of challenge, capitalization on previous knowledge, sustainability over time, organizational support, and alignment of achievement with the goals set.

Professional development models are differentiated by the degree of involvement of the teachers themselves in planning, delivering, and evaluating the activities in which they are involved. Sparks (2002) argues that professional development should be embedded in the daily lives of teachers, with strong administrative support and use of strategies that are tailored to their specific needs. These needs may incorporate issues of language, culture, or pedagogy.

Professional Development Strategies

Given the diversity of teachers' needs, a differentiated approach to professional development is needed. A number of school districts are engaging teachers in the professional development strategies described below as a way to address diverse teacher needs, skills, and knowledge.

Peer Coaching

Peer coaching is based on the three-phase model of Planning ‡ Observation ‡ Feedback known as clinical supervision (Cogan, 1973). Pairs of teachers, who have been trained to do so, visit each other's classes and provide each other with insights and advice on their teaching. Teachers themselves decide on the focus for observation and the observation instrument, and reflect on the results of the observation based on their development needs. Standardized instruments can be used to guide observation. Typically, these instruments help teachers look at their use of the second language, their planning, their instructional delivery, the methods they use for assessment, and their involvement in other professional responsibilities, such as communicating with parents and keeping records of students' progress. Peer coaching is particularly suitable for teachers who need to learn new ways to use the target language or to implement new language and cultural practices in the classroom.

Study Groups

Study groups involve teachers in reviewing professional literature or analyzing samples of student work. Groups structure their

interactions around scripts or agendas called protocols (Birchak et. al., 1998) and use lesson plans or samples of students' work as input for discussion. In the case of foreign language teachers, these meetings provide opportunities for them to interact in the language they are teaching. Leadership in meetings is shared, with leadership roles rotating among members. Study groups are suitable for teachers who need a better understanding of research and knowledge in the field or of ways to analyze their students' work and for those who need to develop a more reflective stance toward their teaching or their students' learning.

Dialogue Journals

According to Peyton (1993), dialogue journals are conversations in writing. Although they have been widely used in language and literacy classrooms since their first documented use (Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1998), they have only recently found a place in the professional development field. Teachers who cannot meet with colleagues for reasons of time or distance may choose to keep a written conversation with a mentor or peer in order to share expertise and reflections on their instruction. Dialogue journal writing helps extend interaction time between colleagues and is particularly suitable with teachers who have different levels of expertise or different needs. For foreign language teachers, dialogue journals can also provide an opportunity to practice and hone their writing skills in the target language.

Professional Development Portfolios

Although portfolios were originally developed for use in student assessment, professional development portfolios provide a way for professionals to focus on and document their own development in specific areas. A portfolio is a systematic collection of teaching artifacts and reflections. A portfolio can have four main components: a statement of the teacher's educational platform or philosophy, a goal statement, samples of teacher or student work with reflective captions that describe why they were included, and concluding reflective statements. Portfolios can showcase a teacher's development (showcase portfolios) or document a teacher's progress toward a goal (product portfolios). Most portfolios also include a rubric, developed by the teacher or others, that can be used by peers to assess congruence between a teacher's goals and the pieces included.

Mentoring

Mentoring brings together a more knowledgeable professional with a less experienced colleague for collaboration and feedback on teaching and learning. Mentors provide advice, support, encouragement, and modeling for their mentees, who, in turn, provide mentors with opportunities to use and reflect on their expertise. Mentoring relationships work best when structured and developed over time. They are particularly suited to beginning teachers, who need to understand issues such as school culture and climate and their impact on student learning. Mentors can be instrumental in helping novice teachers enhance their proficiency in the language as well as their cultural knowledge and pedagogical competence. Mentors also help novices reflect on the efficacy of their language use and the pedagogical strategies they use in class by modeling the thinking processes and communication processes required of professionals in the field.

Participatory Practitioner Research

Generally known as action research, participatory practitioner research involves groups of colleagues in diagnosing a situation, reflecting on that diagnosis, and planning and carrying out an intervention in order to improve current conditions. The focus for this inquiry can range from students' learning, to school culture and climate, to teachers' own individual issues (language proficiency and use, handling of classroom procedures, etc.). The intrinsic value of this strategy lies in the opportunity for teachers to examine their teaching situations in order to better understand and improve them.

Conclusion

Traditional professional development strategies such as one-shot workshops can be useful for delivering information, but the opportunities they provide for teachers to translate theoretical knowledge into effective classroom practices are limited. Effective professional development calls for adequate support structures and opportunities for teachers to select, plan, carry out, and evaluate the professional development activities in which they are involved. When teachers have the chance to participate collegially and collaboratively in the creation and implementation of professional development activities, they develop ownership over the learning process, and their learning is more likely to promote student success.

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