AN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES IMPROVES THE QUALITY OF TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Just as the educational system in the United States is working to figure out the best ways to reach the developmentally diverse student population found in our public and private institutions; we should be looking how to best prepare our teachers. Over the years, the threat of trickle down curriculum has become a reality and there is increasing pressure on in-coming kindergarteners to be knowledgeable of more and more. Teachers express through honest feedback the lack of quality and/or effective professional development opportunities available to them. There needs to be some sort of reform when the positive changes in the education system can been seen in the success of the students, which is directly affected by the quality and effectiveness in teacher instruction. A quality feedback through coaching model is the most effective way to develop educators in order to improve teacher-child interactions that translates into high quality education.

KEYWORDS

Professional Development, Teacher-Child Interactions, Coaching/Mentoring Model

1. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are many reasons for educators to attend professional development activities and opportunities. One being the simple fact of continuing academia. I would be a good example of this fact, being part of a cohort to obtain my Masters in Educational Leadership. Permanent learning has to be carried out continuously in order to improve educator skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Lino, 2014). The field of education is always evolving with more and newer research. Second is the opportunity to brainstorm and connect with like minds. Veteran educators have a lot to offer novice teachers who are "challenged with balancing theory with practice" (Powell-Moman & Brown-Schild, 2011, p. 47). In my first years as an educator, I looked to those who have been in the field for more time than me in order to cultivate their knowledge. At the same time, I was also creating a mentor/mentee relationship that has been most valuable to my development as an educator. A third and the most practical reason for educators to attend professional development activities and opportunities is the point of bringing the new knowledge back to the classroom and use it to improve the physical, emotional, and cognitive environments of the students; as well as the teacher. Why go to professional development opportunities if not for the natural desire to learn more. "Child care provider education and training appeared to be better predictors of child care quality than did provider age, employment experience, or mental health" (Byington & Tannock, 2011, p 2). Maybe because education and training neutralizes the differences in teacher age, employment experience, and mental health. And at what age level of the student is the best place to start educating our educators than in early childhood.

Zueger, Katz, and Popovich (2014), completed a study with an aim to assess outcomes and benefits of a professional development seminar series for alumni of a pharmacology school. Even

though it is not in the field of education, the result did bring up important overall benefits of professional development activities that can be generalized. For example, the surveys given to 207 alumni with 74 returned found that a majority, 95% or higher, agreed that the professional development seminars provided skills applicable to their career with an inadvertent outcome of improved professionalism. The study by Estrela Paulo (2014) looked into developing a practicum course as part of a 2-year master's program for budding educators. Her review pointed out how teacher training is an integral part of all research involving teaching itself, but has not gain much recognition until recently. These are the first steps in helping novice teachers see themselves as agents of change given the appropriate support.

1.1. QUALITY TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS

The "linking of improvement in teacher knowledge to improvement in student learning" pointed out by Eleanor Armour-Thomas (2008) has sparked a push to seek out and analyze the quality of professional development. Armour-Thomas' study tries to answer the question of what design features can be found in an effective professional development program by selecting two elementary level teachers from five different schools in a New York suburb as participants. Over the course of a school year, the teachers attended workshops on a model of teaching called Dynamic Pedagogy. The researchers gathered data of participants and their third grade classrooms. This was done through a teacher questionnaire in the beginning of the school year used as a self-assessment. Then, several classroom observations on the participants to see how they were implementing what they learned from the workshops was completed and scored using a Teacher-Student Interaction Rubric. Last, end-of-the-year student scores using a mathematics test called Terra Nova for the classrooms of each participant were obtained and assessed for changes in performance. The researchers found that the professional development seminars influenced teacher classroom practice. This study was important because it makes the connection between teacher development and student outcomes, and not only the teacher's opinion of how influential a professional development opportunity was to them.

Now that research has found a correlation between teacher development and student outcomes; the next step would be to what content is important or relevant to teachers in regards to the professional development opportunities they choose to attend. Shirley Matteson, Linda Reichwein Zientek, and Serkan Ozel (2013) looked at the importance of professional development topics in relation to the needs of the teachers and the missing crucial element of follow up. They followed 53 middle and high school teachers in Southwestern United States urban school districts with high-poverty, high-minority populations. The teachers received laptops through the Teacher Quality Grant equipped with 160 hours of professional development training and support over a two year period. It is important to point out the important role funding has on professional development. An agency or school district who is struggling to allocate funds fairly among the needs of the schools may neglect teacher trainings. In the case this study, a grant was able to provide wings to this professional development opportunity. The researchers collected data through interviews and an online survey asking questions about the training and found that it gave them the opportunity to network with peers. Sharing sessions were desired as a way to exchange ideas. The most common challenge with sharing session would be finding the time to meet. Brainstorming is a tactic used by most teachers to encourage knowledge exchange and dialogue in their classrooms, so why not for best practices with other teachers?

A good example is can be found in the study by Yamauchi, Im, and Mark (2013) whom, over a three year period, looked at the influence of a professional development series and its impact on preschool teachers. The study followed 20 preschool teachers who attended a series of workshops on how to successfully implement a technique called instructional conversation in their classrooms that was adapted to the developmental level of preschool-aged children in the

area of language. Many techniques lately have been modified to fit the developmental level of the population the teachers serve. This is an important consideration to make to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the training. In this case, data was collected through a scoring instrument that rated the teachers on six video-recorded observations lasting 60-90 minutes in length. At first, the scoring system did not fit what the raters were seeing in the observations because the tool was not developmentally appropriate. So the participants were given the task of modifying the tool to fit the age-group of their students and how it measured their interactions with them. As a result of the participant's collaborative efforts on the tool, the study found that all of the teachers increased their use of instructional conversation because of their participation in the professional development program.

1.2. EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The next question is who is training the teachers that have so much influence on children's development and learning? In this case, it is important to think about the other part of professional development; and that is the trainers themselves. Similar to how education and experience is used as qualifications for teaching positions, trainers of teachers who come with some credentials of their own add to the effectiveness of the training. Teresa A. Byington and Michelle T. Tannock (2011) put out a study that focused their efforts on my field of Early Childhood Education, ages zero to five, with the simple plea that "the skills, abilities and learning approaches essential to delivering effective professional development merit examination." (p. 8). The researchers collected data through online surveys distributed to 277 trainers, not trainees. This 31 question survey asked demographic questions and the participant to identify their professional development needs. The surveys found that a majority of trainers have been in the field for over 10 years and offer their services free of charge multiple times per year. These are two important qualifications of a trainer. In a study by Carole Angell and Bernadette Garfunkel (2002), they looked at a mentoring program for novice teachers. They wanted to know what part of the mentoring process was most appreciated by a novice teachers. The mentoring program lasted one school year and followed 5 novice teachers and their 2 veteran mentor teachers. Additionally, they wanted to also know which coaching/mentoring strategies and techniques were most beneficial. As if they were answering Angell and Garfunkel's questions, Byington and Tannock (2011) discovered teaching techniques like handouts, lecture, group activities, and hands-on opportunities were commonly used by trainers; and relevant or current topics in education were desirable workshop content. The mentoring program participants in Angell and Garfunkel's (2002) study took full advantage of hands-on activities like classroom observations, discussion meetings about teaching techniques, and opportunities to role model best practices. This not only helped to educate the novice teachers, but refined the skills of the veteran teachers.

This puts into perspective how this current action research will be carried out. There are several published studies that incorporated the same Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) used in this study. Along the same lines as this current action research, the first study looked into the best approach for "introducing teachers to desired classroom interaction and results in relatively immediate improvement in their interactions with children" (Casbergue, Bedford, & Burstein, 2014, p. 430). The authors observed the spring semester of 7 preschool classrooms using the CLASS tool without first explaining the details the tool to the teachers. Afterwards, the classroom teachers participated in a weeklong professional development institute introducing them to the tool, as well as a summer professional development institute that went into more detail about the tool. A second observation of the classrooms was made in the fall semester of the following school year and the scores were compared to those from the spring semester. The results showed at all the teachers made significant improvement in their scores on the domains of emotional support and classroom organization. And five out of seven classrooms showed significant gains in the last domain of instructional support. The second study had a larger

sample size, observing 30 early childhood classrooms selected at random consisting of 72-month old children; but with a more specific goal of finding the answer to "is there a significant difference between children's self-regulation scores according to the quality of teacher-child interactions" (Yildiz, Kara, Tanribuyurdu, & Gonen, 2014, p. 330). To answer this question, the authors also used a Preschool Self-Regulation Assessment (PSRA) tool for the children. The results were mixed, finding that some self-regulation skills were correlated to the quality of teacher-child interactions, while some had no correlation. Since some of the skills showed significant effect on teacher-child interactions, it would be useful to provide professional development in this area for educators. Both studies have fueled the importance of this current research even more.

2. ANALYSIS

All of the articles seemed to have one thing in common: professional development has a positive effect on educators. The research follows a natural progression of influence. Byington and Tannock (2011) discussed the importance of knowledgeable trainers whose success and effectiveness was a product of attending conferences and workshops themselves. This is important in the case they brought up about directors acting as the trainers, and how the results of this study can push the importance of training the trainer. Matteson, Reichwein Zientek, and Ozel (2013) found in their study that teachers in a certain subject expertise had a desire to look at student populations and how to cater their instruction to them. With the diversity teachers are faced with in many U.S. states, it is important to consider the flexibility and versatility of teacher instruction. Both of these findings are important in that according to Armour-Thomas' (2008) study, there is a relationship between student academic performance and effective professional development. Ignoring this correlation takes away for the students the opportunity for the best education possible by taking away from the teachers the best education possible.

Validity and reliability were tested on the scoring system used in the study conducted by Yamauchi, Im, and Mark (2013). At the end of the professional development workshops, the teachers had in put in altering the pre-existing assessment to fit preschool age expectations and developmental level. They watched preschool level observations with the old tool, and found that it did not give credit to earlier language development milestones since it was geared toward elementary level students. They developed a new tool, tested in on the same videos and found that it was impractical. The final modification lead to the assessment used for this study. During the actually assessment, two coders viewed and scored the video observations independently and later on joined to discuss their findings before coming to a consensus on the final rating. This shows instrument validity because the inferences were made appropriate and meaningful for the study. This shows instrument reliability because scores were decided on by two people who conferred with one another to ensure consistency of scores for similar observations. As a result, "all the teachers in this study increased their use of instructional conversation throughout their participation in the professional development program" (Yamauchi, Im, & Mark, 2013, p. 148). And the results are useful because of their solid validity and reliability.

Different from the above mentioned studies were the ones that focused on or incorporated qualitative data collection. Ramona Henter and Elena-Simonia Indreica (2014) looked at how metacognitive training can shape and possible sharpen how they use previous knowledge to new situation. This skill is used constantly by an educators working with the varying personalities of their students in a single day or as many as seven groups that rotate in the higher grades. In their study, the students we asked to keep a journal to write down reflections on how the techniques presented to them in class to help improve their metacognition. The journal itself was the catalyst for the participants to think about the learning activity and what they can take away from it. This

study points out the human element of the educator's background and opinions that shape a standardized curriculum and instruction.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Despite some limitations such as small sample sizes, using an impersonal online questionnaire, and participant drop outs; the studies show much support for the importance of effective professional development. It was learned that professional development is more effective when the materials meet the needs of the teachers and their classrooms. The value of peer collaboration and opportunity for analysis and reflection on one's own teaching instruction is important for growth and creating best practices. A study by Ramona Henter and Elena-Simona Indreica (2014) look at the place of reflective practice in novice teachers through metacognitive training. As a result, the students had a better understanding of their own cognition and how to regulate it. This is an important tool for new teachers; to be able to reflect on actions and improve decision making skills in similar situations in the future.

Another limitation that was brought up in the study by Casbergue, Bedford, and Burstein (2014) was actually an opportunity for future research. Even though there were positive gains all around in the study results, the varying strengths of the teachers' scores were aided by the differences in the needs of their own classrooms. If one skill was not practiced as much as the others, gains may not have been detected. But it does not necessarily mean that gains needed to be made. Maybe the lack of gains is due to the fact that the observed teacher and classroom has satisfactorily met the higher scores of that CLASS domain. So, this is another reason for professional development opportunities to reflect the needs of the participants.

It is important to reflect on the importance of professional development or *permanent learning*, as described by Dalila Lino (2014) in her article titled Early Childhood Teacher Education: How to Enhance Professional Development. Our educational system, as well as everything else in society, is working to keep up with the changing world. In order to support these changes, we need to support our educators through appropriate professional development. This can be done at the administrative level by making reasonable accommodations for teachers to attend course, workshops, or other professional development opportunities. Professional development programs in-house can be developed through planned funding or grants. Or partnerships with outside agencies can show teachers that their company or district cares about their growth and development as educators. Teachers are students also, and a student cannot advance and succeed without learning. "It is therefore necessary to acquire a number of skills, to learn a set of abilities and relearn others, to meet the new social and knowledge demands" (Lino, 2014, p. 200). The research in this literature review can make the case for effective professional development when it is presented in a series and the participants have the opportunity to practice and reflect on their practices with peers. Instead, adopt a norm of training series that follow natural development and progress of a specific topic or material in order for the learner, the teachers in this case, to develop a full understanding of it in order to properly implement the method or re-teach the knowledge in the classroom.

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