Centering Equity in Educator Professional Learning

"Professional learning requires a new action plan for systems that are engaged in improving so that all children can learn."

- Lois Brown Easton

Did You Know

Centering Educational Equity in Professional Learning is Crucial in Ensuring Effective Teaching and Learning for All Students?

The discussion of equity within education discourse is often focused on issues of learners' access, participation, and outcomes. However, the centering of equity into educators' professional learning experiences often has been missing, and accordingly, progress toward educational equity, hindered. Moreover, peripheral engagement with equity principles in the design and delivery of professional learning opportunities contributes to incomplete and inaccurate understandings of the complexity of individuals' identities and social and cultural contexts, and the effect of these on educators' professional learning, growth, and development. To illustrate, Battey, Kafai, Nixon, and Kao (2007) examined 170 professional learning efforts related to gender equity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) disciplines and found that the limited attention given to equity mostly dealt with surface issues, such as educator engagement omitting questioning individual identities, understanding historical and social context. Battey and colleagues found that even when addressing equity concerns was stated in the purpose of professional learning projects, equity-oriented practices were not centered or defined loosely in project enactment. In this newsletter, we discuss ways in which professional learning can be designed and carried out to promote educators' deep understanding of educational equity and therefore, better situate educators to provide every learner with access to a high-quality education in an inclusive environment, regardless of educational content area.

[The Every Student Succeeds Act](ESSA) aims to provide all children significant opportunities to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps (Skelton, Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017). Note that we conceptualize achievement gaps more than differences between the historically marginalized students and white students. We must move away from deficit-oriented examinations of student outcomes and provide robust, rigorous, and effective equitable educational opportunities for those who are historically marginalized students to eliminate educational disparities (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017). To achieve this goal, ESSA considers that professional learning is a critical means to providing effective teaching and learning (Learning Forward, 2017) and requires state departments of education to conduct professional learning as "an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and to meet the challenging State academic standard" (ESSA, 2017, p.396). ESSA also highlights that professional learning may include activities that improve and increase teachers' understanding of how students learn and ability to analyze student work and

achievement from multiple sources, including how to adjust instructional strategies, assessments, and materials.

With its foundational theme of equity, ESSA renews educators' opportunities to shift conversations related to the educational outcomes of diverse students from closing achievement gaps to improving educational equity for all students (Skelton, Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017). To do so, however, we need to rethink how professional learning should support educators to understand and address equity practices for all learners. To start, professional learning must facilitate educators' understanding of how social identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, language, gender, dis/ability, social class etc.) intersect and interact to influence learning.

Why It Matters
Well Designed and Implemented Professional Learning Improves Learning and Teaching.

ESSA allows states to use five percent of Title II funds toward design and implementation of professional learning to advance and achieve equity. To specify, we pull from a definition of educational equity we developed as the previous Region V Equity Assistance Center: that is, creating and sustaining educational systems in which all learners are supported to engage in high-quality learning experiences in order to reduce disparities in student educational outcomes, regardless of individual characteristics and cultural identities (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).

Professional learning is critical to develop equity-focused educators who understand and redress systemic inequities that disproportionately impact students across demographic and social memberships (Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2016). Professional learning experiences that focus on equity across content areas increase educators' knowledge about equitable practices and enable educators to better recognize what each learner should receive in order to be successful. One concrete goal of equity-focused professional learning is the cultivation of educators' critical consciousness, which requires their close examination of the marginalizing effects of systemic and personal practices, strategies, and assumptions (Radd & Macey, 2013). Next, equity-focused professional learning positions culture and language as main tools to promote educators' thinking and reasoning (Vygotsky, 1978); efforts challenge educators to understand the complexity of their students' and their own individual identities and cultures, including influences on learning and teaching (Rimmer, 2016). To find out how, please keep reading.

Developers of effective equity-focused professional learning experiences demonstrate the understanding that learning is mediated through social and cultural activity, take into account the environment, personal histories, cultures, artifacts, motivations, and complexities of real life action of participants, involve the use of tools to facilitate meaning making, and use opportunities to create tensions that stimulate new knowledge construction and innovation (Engeström, 2004; Thorius, 2016).

In order to design and implement effective professional learning, ESSA requires that professional learning meets five research- based criteria: sustained, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused (ESSA, 2017, p.396).

Sustained professional learning requires teams of educators to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement (Hirsh, 2009). ESSA emphasizes that professional learning should last more than one-day short-term workshops. Other researchers have emphasized that professional learning should build continuous and sustainable educational communities in which knowledge, lived experiences, and practices are shared to improve educational outcomes for every student and families, particularly historically marginalized students and families (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009).

Collaborative professional learning refers to authentic interaction among educators through discourse, inquiry, and public professional practice (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009). Collaborative professional learning promotes inquiry, which encourages educators to question and explore their own identities, practice, curriculum, and school culture (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009).

Job-embedded professional learning enables educators to discuss and address content-specific needs of their school's student population (Learning Forward, 2017); educators examine and explore content in their own local contexts, with particular emphasis on students who have been historically marginalized in schools. Through this component of professional learning, educators "expand their professional knowledge of the sociocultural dimensions of learning, and its impact assessed through student involvement and performance in academic and social curricula" (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009, p.6).

Data-driven professional learning considers utilizing a variety of quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning, and identify learning needs and set objectives and goals for future efforts (Educators for High Standards, 2017). Data can be used to demonstrate systemic inequities, focus attention on who is being marginalized, and offer solutions to address the educational needs of historically marginalized students.

Classroom-focused professional learning simultaneously accounts for student learning, instruction, and curriculum (ESSA, 2017). Similarly, Schott and Driscoll (1997) state that effective instruction considers (a) learners, (b) learning tasks and outcomes, (c) instructional methods/conditions, and (d) the context in which learning takes place. Each of these elements should be deliberately organized and examined from the equity perspective, which we briefly address in what follows.

- **Learners:** David Ausubel, educational psychologist, reflected "If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows." (1968, p.18) Each learner comes to education settings with their own unique background, cultures, values, and prior knowledge and experience. Consideration of this context positions educators to determine multiple access points for instruction, develop and employ diverse learning goals, activities, methods, and account for various learning preferences, all toward ensuring that every learner succeeds. Equity-focused professional learning views diversity of learners as a strength, and therefore, centers educators' examination and response to such diversity.

- **Learning tasks and outcomes:** Learning is promoted when learners acquire knowledge and skills in the context of real-world problems or tasks (Merrill, 2013, p.26). According to King, Artiles, and Kozleski (2009), the outcomes, content, and activities of any professional learning activity must be grounded in the multicultural context that characterizes most contemporary urban communities. Equity-focused professional learning utilizes cultural identity and values in the design of instruction for all learners (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009).

- **Instructional methods/conditions:** One of the reasons why instruction fails for every student is the assumption that every student is relatively homogeneous and same, which results in utilizing similar instructional methods by negating individual differences (Dolan, 2000). However, instructional methods/conditions should be customized based on individual characteristics, capacities, and abilities. Using the principles of universal design for learning to design instruction accommodates a wide range of inclusive instructional strategies and means of action and expression for diverse learners including students with disabilities (Mcguire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006). Instructional methods being used should enable learners to effectively perceive information, actively engage in learning, meaningfully recognize multiple representations of learning, and successfully express what they know (CAST, 2011). Moreover, educators should be mindful of word choice, gesture, tone of voice, and treatment during content delivery regardless of instructional methods, which may be positive messages (micro-affirmations) or negative messages (micro-inequities) conveyed to learners (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Equity-focused professional learning encourages educators to redesign instructional conditions by considering individual differences.

- **Context:** According to Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, individual learning cannot be understood separate from the social and cultural context within which the individual is embedded (1978). As mentioned above each

learner has their own unique identities. Likewise, each social and cultural context in which learning occurs has also their own unique characteristics. Understanding social and contextual factors improve educators' capacity to better redress systemic inequities and incorporate more effective instructional strategies into their teaching (Watson, 2013). Equity-focused professional learning ensures that educators customize learning strategies and conditions based on social and cultural context in which learning takes place to provide all learners with equitable access to facilities, equipment, and resources.

Meet the Authors

This November 2017 issue of Equity Dispatch was written and edited by: Cesur Dagli, Robin G. Jackson, Seena M. Skelton, and Kathleen King Thorius

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