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Closing the Gap between Professional Development and Student Achievement

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Abstract

Whenever there is a discussion on closing or bridging the achievement gap in education, one accurately reasons that the “gap” in question is among groups of students from various cultural and/or socioeconomic backgrounds. Stakeholders throughout academia, then, frantically search for solution(s)” to poor student achievement in America’s ailing, public education system. A plethora of studies and federal mandates have been proffered to address the myriad problems that have been revealed through research. Experts have identified some of the problems as poor parenting, teacher shortage, poor school leadership, lack of funding, student apathy, and the like. Although these factors do have an adverse impact on student achievement, the author of this study purports that the “gap” between teacher professional development and student achievement is the debilitating crack in the foundation of America’s public education system.

Closing the Gap between Professional Development and Student Achievement

In an effort to address poor student achievement in the nation's public school system, stakeholders from every level of the academic continuum have successfully effectuated the first step of the scientific method of problem solving: identifying the problem(s). Through research, they have discovered a plethora of mitigating factors and/or circumstances that adversely impact student learning. Experts, both within academia and in other professions, provide research-based solutions, strategies, programs, and the like to improve student performance. Through the vehicle of professional development, teachers are trained and provided resources to effectively and creatively address these hindrances to student learning. However, growth in student achievement is very minimal. This leaves stakeholders pondering, "Where is the proverbial ball being dropped in academia?" If the problems have been identified, if resources have been made available, and if professional development has been provided, then why are students not performing proficiently or higher in the core subject areas? The author of this study submits that the problem lies between teacher professional development and implementation of those skills, concepts, and/or strategies in the classroom. The author theorizes that after professional development, teachers: (1) initially attempt to use the training in their classes and revert back to their ineffective methods; (2) never attempt to implement the training at all; or (3) attempts to implement the training sporadically. In either case, there is a lack of fidelity to the application of professional development. Until this issue is adequately addressed, student achievement in America's public schools will progressively worsen.

One must first understand the goal of professional development before attention can be given to closing this gap. According to Gallagher (2009), professional development is the tool that is used to "strengthen teacher craft" and this is when improvement in student learning will be realized. Zepeda

(2008) purports that this “craft” is enhanced when teachers learn from hands-on, real-world applications in the day-to-day operations that take place in schools. The effectiveness of this training will manifest through continuous, job-embedded learning opportunities that are relevant to the teacher’s content area (Zepeda, 2008). Along with Gallagher and Zepeda, theorists throughout the world contribute to the significance of staff development in the effort to increase student efficacy in the classroom.

Apparently the federal government heeded the consensus from the realm of academia regarding the role that effective training and staff development for educators plays in our efforts to properly impart knowledge to students. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 allocated millions of taxpayer’s dollars for the implementation of professional development in the public school system. Schools systems had to utilize these restricted funds for professional development that: (1) related to the school improvement plan; (2) was researched-based; (3) was connected to student achievement; (4) included activities related to the subject area of individual teachers; and (5) was evaluated (Zepeda, 2008). This system of accountability was put into place in an effort to ensure that teachers receive the training and necessary resources to effectuate their duties.

To date, more federal funding has been allocated for staff development in the public school system than it ever has been in this country’s history. President Obama allocated \$100 billion dollars to education in his economic stimulus plan (Moses, 2009). Within this amount, \$200 million have been allocated for the Teacher Incentive Fund, \$650 million for more innovative programs; and \$39 billion for professional development, school staff, after-school programs, and early-childhood education (Moses, 2009). In essence, the federal government, along with the state and local governments, has recognized this need within the public school system and has provided the resources accordingly.

One, then, can reasonably expect to reap from the fields of student achievement abundantly. According to national assessment reports, this is not the case. Not only is there minimal growth in student achievement, but the achievement gap between White and Black students is still very prevalent and very wide. Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, and Rahman (2009) report in the 2007 Nation's Report Card that white students scored higher than their black counterparts in every subject area; in essence, white students scored approximately 26 points higher than black students in each category. This report is indicative of the performance of students along the racial divide at every grade level. Why is this so? What is going on in the public schools systems that are preventing students of color from performing as proficiently as their white counterparts? What is going on in the nation's public schools that prevent our students from being globally competitive with their international counterparts?

The commonality in every classroom is the teacher. A closer analysis of teacher training and the transference of those skills and knowledge reveal a gap that academic practitioners have grossly overlooked. Professional development is not "development" if the teachers fail to process it, learn it, apply it, and reflect upon it to determine classroom instruction. It is assumed that because teachers attend professional development sessions that they are utilizing what is learned in their classrooms. Such assumptions are the reasons that the nation's achievement gap is not sufficiently decreasing. There is a direct correlation between the gap in teacher professional development and student achievement and the achievement gap among student groups. The width of the former gap dictates the width of the latter, and so forth.

Mayben (n.d.) purports that teacher burnout may be the causative factor for such educational malpractice. He asserts that teachers may experience one or a combination of three types of burnout that adversely affect their performance: physical, psychological, and behavioral burnout. Symptoms of physical burnout are "exhaustion, frequent headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, weight loss, and

sleeplessness” (Mayben, n.d.). Those who suffer from psychological burnout experience “changeable mood, irritability, depression, loss of caring for people, cynical attitude, increased frustration, and feelings of helplessness” (Mayben, n.d.). Behavioral burnout teachers show signs of “deterioration in work performance and absenteeism” (Mayben, n.d.). Teacher burnout is one of many theories to explain the disconnect in teacher performance and student learning. Does this exempt teachers from their contractual duties? The answer is an emphatic, “No.” Educators are still legally and morally bound to do the jobs that they have accepted. In cases like teacher burnout, there are still avenues of assistance to help them overcome such stumbling blocks to student achievement. Thus, the question becomes, “Do teachers want to overcome such stumbling blocks?”

References

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