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One Principal's Influence on Sustained, Systemic, and Differentiated Professional Development for Social Justice

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*_This We Believe_ Characteristics

- Courageous, collaborative leadership
- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, _This We Believe_, for this article.

Brad W. Kose

Purpose defines success.—_David Allen_

I hate the phrase, "All kids can learn." To me, that's an insult to educators and to kids because of course all kids can learn. The question is, "What are they learning?"
—_Audrey Union, Principal of Integration Middle School_

In this article, I explore the promising practices of Audrey Union (all names in this article are pseudonyms), a white principal of Integration Middle School (IMS), which served nearly 400 students in sixth through ninth grades. Approximately 40% of the students were of color and a similar percentage qualified for free and reduced lunch. In particular, I examine her influence in creating systemic, sustained, and differentiated professional development for social justice in her school. This is a critical case study (Yin, 2003) in that her practices offer in-depth insights for addressing at least two crucial challenges faced by middle level principals.

The first challenge concerns providing quality professional development opportunities for _all_ teachers to enhance their practice for _all_ students, a core component of school improvement (Elmore, 2002). Several authors have provided models of or demonstrated the crucial role

principals play in creating these opportunities (Bredeson, 2003; Lindstrom & Speck, 2004; Tallerico, 2005; Youngs & King, 2002). However, documented principal practice is needed for creating a more comprehensive understanding of how they differentiate professional learning for individual teaching needs, especially considering the next challenge. A second, related challenge, despite its importance, has received much less attention. It is also the challenge that set Principal Union apart from most principals: providing professional development that encourages teachers to prepare students as citizens who understand and address community, national, and global social issues. In other words, Principal Union's practices not only demonstrated commitment to professional development for equity and academic excellence (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003), but also commitment to professional development driven by student learning for diversity and social action.

Certainly, students face a number of complex and inescapable 21st century social challenges, some of which are longstanding, while others are just emerging. As Banks and Banks (2005) suggested, "The world's greatest problems … result from people in the world—from different cultures, races, religions, and nations—being unable to get along and work together to solve world problems" (p. 5). Some of these realities include a "flattening" and more competitive global economy (Friedman, 2005), multiple threats to the realization of a democratic society (West, 2004), global warming (Oreskes, 2004), other pressing environmental issues (Worldwatch Institute, 2005, 2006), and social injustices such as poverty, discrimination, and violence that extends from hate crimes to terrorism to genocide. Preparing students to understand and engage these challenges in developmentally appropriate ways positions the unusual development of justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) as a central purpose of education. Thus, the purpose, goals, and enactment of professional development aim higher than the ubiquitous and important goal of improved and equitable standardized test scores.

Recent scholarship has advanced theories of leadership for social justice (see Grogan, 2002a, 2002b) and frameworks devoted to a comprehensive understanding of leadership for learning (see Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), but there has been relatively little discussion of school leadership that seeks to evoke student learning to understand and address social issues (for exceptions, see Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Theoharis, 2004). Marshall and Ward (2004) have further suggested the need for constructive or real-life models of leaders for social justice.

Although principals cannot assume total responsibility for addressing social issues within or outside of school, the practices delineated in this article provide evidence that principals can play an important role in this endeavor. Without principal leadership, systemic school change for equitable and critical student learning is unlikely. Just as educators likely vary greatly in the extent to which they have considered what 21st century realities mean for their practice, principals who embrace these realities must assess their teachers' relevant levels of practice and ways to meet their individual and collective learning needs.

Methods

This article stems from a larger study that provides a more detailed account of the rationale, conceptual framework, and data collection and analysis methods (Kose, 2005). In essence, after principals were nominated by peers, they were asked to participate in a voluntary pre-screening interview, used to identify principals for social justice. Principal Union was one of three principals selected for an in-depth, five-month qualitative study, which entailed more than 20 half- to full-day observations, formal and informal interviews with her and her staff, and document collection.

The nomination process and screening criteria assessed principals' beliefs and commitment to what I termed "socially just learning" and "socially just classrooms." Socially just learning entailed equitable student learning in high subject matter achievement (often, academic); personal development (e.g., intrapersonal and interpersonal development); diversity development—growth in affirming one's own and others' diversity (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, ability); and sociopolitical development—increasing understanding and ability to address local, national, and global social issues. Socially just classrooms involve five components: (a) rigorous subject matter content; (b) differentiated pedagogy—teachers design classrooms and teaching to meet all student needs; (c) an ethic of care—positive relationships as a central part of the classroom environment; (d) equitable inclusion—all students are treated fairly (not necessarily the same), and students with special needs are included and served in the classroom rather than pulled out for various programs (with rare exceptions); and (e) social reconstructionist pedagogy, teaching that encourages the development of democratic citizens who understand and engage social issues.

Sustained, systemic, and differentiated professional learning

These high expectations for teaching and learning create a strong need to support teachers with high-quality sustained and individualized professional development. After I spent significant time at IMS, Principal Union turned to me one day and said she hoped I had learned the importance of differentiating professional learning. She explained that she thought about professional development much like she thought about her extensive history of teaching—it needed to be differentiated according to three levels. In short, professional development was designed for the whole staff (the core of what everyone should know), certain groups of teachers, and individual teachers. These three organizers help reveal her influence on meeting collective and individual teaching needs. As will become clear, differentiated professional learning was inextricably tied to sustained and systemic professional learning.

Whole-staff learning

At least three areas established the core of what all staff should know: (a) vision, (b) school-wide program coherence, and (c) complementary professional development. After I describe these

areas and Principal Union's influence on them, I gradually reveal how this collective learning was vital to reinforcing and differentiating teacher learning needs, particularly in group and individual professional development contexts.

Vision

Professional learning efforts were grounded, often implicitly, in IMS's vision. Principal Union, in her fifth year as principal, communicated the extensive and collective community and staff participation in creating and enacting their vision, which centered on bringing suburban and urban students together, cultivating individual talents and needs, and developing students as global citizens and environmental stewards in an interdisciplinary school. Stated differently, Principal Union and other school leaders not only provided opportunities for everyone to understand the vision of Integration Middle School, but they also used this vision to mobilize a collective agreement for school and professional learning efforts. The vision was substantiated, in part, through three collaboratively developed school goals that were tracked with a new and sophisticated data system: (a) improving standardized test scores in each student sub-group, (b) lowering disaggregated disruptive behavior, and (c) increasing disaggregated attendance rates.

School-wide program coherence

Two broad school-wide programs provided the curricular framework from which teachers planned, taught, and, therefore, had reason to learn from one another: the Responsive Classroom (RC) and the Middle Years International Baccalaureate Program (IB). After describing each program, I will discuss how Principal Union helped influence relevant whole-staff learning opportunities.

The Responsive Classroom and International Baccalaureate Program. The school model that guides classroom relationships and expectations was the Responsive Classroom, which Principal Union explained is based on "the idea of building a community with a very diverse group of kids. ... It's basically a model to help to teach kids social skills, and to set up learning so that everyone can be successful." Principal Union described the Middle Years International Baccalaureate Program as a global, worldwide curriculum based on high expectations that fits well with the interdisciplinary mission and vision of Integration. She further explained:

> I see IB as a way to justify spending time helping teachers learn how to do social justice teaching. IB absolutely promotes that idea ... to have kids involved in making the world a better place, to promote global awareness, and community service learning being integrated in every subject area. ... It gave us a very specific thing to guide what we are doing. It's a credibility, it allows our staff development committee to look at these IB schools and say, "Yes, it is important for our teachers to be at that fourth level of James Banks' hierarchy" ... our wonderful ideas ... need credibility and a backbone so we aren't constantly defending ourselves. Having that IB model gives us that foundation from having to be contested about what we are doing.

The curricular and assessment structure of IB prompted teachers to shift from focusing on

activities to focusing on in-depth student learning, in part, because, as one teacher put it, "IB scoring is based on what students know and are able to do. ... It is not based on 10 points for this assignment, or turning in homework."

Building enthusiasm and providing training. Principal Union's role in this professional development at the whole-staff level was largely two-fold. One aspect of her role concerned influencing gradual collective motivation and agreement for these school-wide adoptions. She brought her successful experiences with Responsive Classroom to IMS and with the encouragement of a few other teachers, convinced an initial wave of teachers to take the RC training several years ago. Principal Union said what "really sold" RC to the staff was one teacher's longtime success with RC, which "dramatically changed" her teaching.

Although Principal Union knew about the International Baccalaureate for many years, it was a teacher from Integration Middle School who initiated the conversation. This teacher, whose previous school was rejected by IB, told Principal Union that IMS already was doing many of the most difficult things about IB. For example, Principal Union had used the work of Wiggins and McTighe (1998) as one guide for helping teachers develop "backward design" units that began with rigorous student learning expectations. Principal Union encouraged this teacher to take further responsibility in researching and discussing IB. Principal Union and others first had to remove one decisive barrier: the perception held by many that IB was for middle to upper class white students. They eventually convinced a critical mass of faculty and stakeholders that IB was compatible with the vision and student demographics of IMS. Momentum for the program snowballed, and after a task force gave its approval, the school board accepted it. One of the teachers trained in IB implied the importance of its legitimacy:

> I mean it's a little weird that it came up initially, but now that I know a lot more about it, I feel very strongly that it's about creating a quality consistent program without limits that we don't want.

The general manner in which Principal Union and teacher leaders approached RC and IB implementation with other staff members also was important. In short, they stated: "We expect you to implement IB, but do so at your own professional discretion, and we are here to support your needs."

Principal Union's second relevant task was to provide resources for training. Principal Union allocated funds to train teachers and educational assistants in Responsive Classroom and provided stipends to support their work. Here is one teacher's experience with RC training:

> I took Responsive Classroom this August, and the only reason I took it was because they offered to pay me to go. So not only was my tuition paid, but they paid my time to be there. It was the most fantastic experience of my life. I learned more about classroom

management during that time than I probably did in the four years I was in college and then the two years that I was, you know, floundering in teaching. I really learned [what] language [to] use when you talk to kids … what is effective and what's not.

Principal Union allocated funds for IB, but because the training was expensive, Principal Union and the IB committee decided to use a "train-the-trainer" model of professional development. The IB committee was composed of several strategically located members who were encouraged or who volunteered to take different levels of the training and then provide training to various groups of teachers. Principal Union often structured staff meetings to provide time for the International Baccalaureate training. IB topics at staff meetings included general information, student assessment guidelines, assessment of teacher implementation stages, and distribution of IB materials.

Complementary staff development
The International Baccalaureate program, in particular, provided a broad framework in which to situate other types of professional development. At the whole-staff level, professional development remained comprehensive and sufficiently general to provide multiple points of entry for all teachers, regardless of their teaching assignments. Three examples help demonstrate complementary staff development.

Differentiating instruction. Principal Union facilitated a discussion in one staff meeting that focused on brainstorming ways in which to accomplish school goals by meeting different student needs. During this meeting, Principal Union provided models of differentiating instruction for student needs, one of which included a matrix of high/low skill and high/low will. She explained students with low skill need more intensive learning support, whereas students with low will need to develop stronger relationships with their teachers and peers.

Diversity discussions. One parent volunteered to provide diversity consultation professional development services, because she was "immediately impressed" the first time she met Principal Union. Principal Union had already begun using her services to encourage extensive diversity conversations with students, parents, and teachers. During the current study, this parent, along with a district curriculum specialist, guided the staff through an intense presentation and discussion of a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2004).

Staff members were helped to interpret the results of their Intercultural Developmental Inventories (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). One of the crucial discussion points was the strengths and limitations of a worldview that minimized differences or masked diversity by remaining "color-blind." By minimizing students' (or others') diversity, teachers risked overlooking or misinterpreting important cultural differences that could be interpreted as behavioral problems. Both Principal Union and this parent mentioned that diversity professional development was relevant for all staff members, but particularly for a predominantly white teaching staff and especially for teachers with little previous experience teaching students from

diverse backgrounds.

Teaching for social justice. Principal Union also devoted one staff meeting to social justice teaching, frameworks, and literature. Prior to the meeting, she provided staff members with copies of an article that distinguished levels of multicultural education in schools, the exemplary school being one that called students to affirm diversity, critique social injustices, and take action (Nieto, 2002). The media specialist began the meeting by sharing children's literature relevant to social justice. The majority of the staff meeting was facilitated by a district diversity specialist invited by Principal Union. This facilitator provided an engaging overview of James Banks' four levels of multicultural education (Banks, 1988), which was closely aligned with the assigned readings (the fourth level is "social action"). Teachers and other staff members had opportunities to critique curricula through this multicultural lens and reflect upon how their practices aligned with these frameworks.

Principal Union brought the meeting to a close by highlighting a number of relevant curricular resource books available in the school and in her office (e.g., Christensen, 2000). As with the Responsive Classroom and International Baccalaureate professional development, teachers reported that allowing them to integrate teaching for social justice into their practice at their own pace and discretion was important in their willingness to take risks and try these new ideas. Principal Union considered teaching for social justice to be an advanced and sophisticated level of teaching. She said about one-quarter of her staff taught for social justice, half understood it and were working toward it, and the remainder were so new they were just working on classroom management and implementing basic curriculum:

> I think you've got to be really comfortable in your own skin and in other people's skins, you know, just to be able to go out there and do that. … I would say that community service learning is a part of our school and it's a part of the IB model, and so everyone is expected to do that. But a lot of it is still at a very superficial level; … some teachers get this faster than others.

Group learning

Although Principal Union helped create multiple group learning opportunities, such as book clubs and task forces, I highlight three of the most important structured group contexts that provided teachers with further chances to learn according to their own needs and areas of specialty: core teams, specialist groups, and a mentor group.

Core teams
Principal Union had the opportunity to help design IMS's new facility several years prior to this study. Part of the structural design incorporated large offices to provide a shared space for interdisciplinary teams of four core teachers (language arts, math, science, and social studies), a

special education teacher, and special education assistants who shared the same team of students.

In addition to providing training for newly formed teams, Principal Union scheduled daily common planning and preparation time for these teams to plan integrated units, discuss strategies for meeting students' needs, and share teaching methods. Collaboration was an implicit non-negotiable expectation for the team. The IB program provided common curricular and assessment guidelines, language, and tools for teachers to learn from one another in job-embedded and "just-in-time" professional development (i.e., professional learning embedded in the daily practice of teaching and learning). Therefore, teachers had sustained formal and informal learning opportunities for their common and idiosyncratic needs, which included classroom management, developing IB assessments, and learning how to connect with a particular student or parent. In short, this team context created a rich differentiated learning environment.

As Principal Union inferred in an above quote, several "social action" units had been developed by teams and were being adapted within the IB framework. For example, Principal Union told me about one student who collected community member signatures and contacted legislators to successfully lower noise in her neighborhood (thereby allowing her to sleep at night) as her class project. One teacher described a "huge diversity unit" Principal Union helped create a few years prior to this study (and prior to the IB adoption):

> I have never had eighth graders, and still to this day haven't had eighth graders that
> talked about racism and cultural diversity on the level that they did, and it stemmed from
> the question of "What is normal?" And that was a question that Principal Union and [the
> assistant principal], I think, came up with from our whole year-long theme of diversity. We
> spent a quarter understanding who we are and where we come from.

Not only did teachers learn through collaborative, sustained, job-embedded, and differentiated curriculum development, but they also simultaneously developed and deepened their abilities to nurture justice-oriented citizens.

Additionally, the rich daily learning opportunities between general education and special education teachers afforded by sharing students with special needs and planning together should not be overlooked. The entire core team benefited from sustained formal and informal opportunities to explicitly and tacitly understand and meet individual student needs as well as student group similarities and differences, such as working with students with disabilities, students of color, and students from upper class backgrounds.

Subject area and specialist teams
At least weekly, subject area teams (e.g., social studies) and the specialist team (art, music, special education) held meetings in which teachers had opportunities to deepen their content

expertise. Again, the IB framework provided the substance of many of these learning opportunities. For example, many subject area teams spent considerable effort developing, backward mapping, and aligning IB grade-level assessments with state standards.

Mentor group

Besides IB discussions, during this study the mentor/mentee group, consisting of 28 people, decided to learn about multiple intelligences, which according to several teachers helped both veteran and novice teachers gain different levels of insight into differentiating their teaching to meet a greater range of student learning styles. Everyone I spoke to about the mentor program said it greatly improved since Principal Union hired a part-time mentor facilitator to create a formal structure for scaffolding activities to various teachers' learning curves. Teachers told me the mentor program two to three years prior to the study was "not helpful" to "nonexistent" because they rarely met as a large group and seldom saw their mentors.

Implicitly, this section reveals another indirect influence of Principal Union: designing different groups and deciding appropriate ways of determining team members. Many of these decisions were made democratically.

Individual learning

Principal Union helped to create three contexts that provided individualized professional learning opportunities. These contexts included formal and informal one-on-one conversations, a self-selected professional development day, and strategically placed specialists.

One-on-one conversations

Principal Union, who considered herself to be a teacher of teachers, created individualized learning opportunities by encouraging teachers to see her and by actively meeting with teachers. During my observations, many teachers stopped in her open door for brief or extended conversations about students, teaching, curricula, parents, or personal matters. One teacher told me that Principal Union gradually and continuously nurtured, but never forced her to teach students about social issues by providing articles in her mailbox and holding informal conversations. She noted that it took her a few years to feel truly comfortable teaching in that way.

Whenever possible, Principal Union made it part of her daily routine to visit teachers' classrooms to understand their teaching, understand their students, provide feedback, and establish comfort and trust in being observed. She used the evaluation process to provide extensive feedback on areas of strength and encouraged teachers to identify areas in which they had questions or would like to grow. Principal Union also used this time to encourage greater responsibility for teacher leadership, particularly for intermediate and veteran teachers. Besides providing specific feedback and ideas, Principal Union also used these formal and informal opportunities to highlight and

encourage external professional development activities that may be of interest. Based on teacher feedback and interest levels, Principal Union sometimes recommended colleagues to observe or speak with for a particular expertise area.

A good example of this indirect influence occurred when she encouraged two language arts teachers to attend an intensive state writing conference. Since that time, they have planned together, observed each other teach, attended other conferences, backward mapped language arts curriculum and assessments to IB criteria on one of their breaks, and have sometimes even carpooled to school. As one of these teachers explained:

> I learn stuff from her, and I get her advice and sometimes vice versa, but not as much. I watch her class during prep too because we had different schedules. The equivalent knowledge and time of that would be, you know, $20,000 in staff development money [laughs].

Self-selected professional development day

Another opportunity Principal Union and the professional development committee helped create was an on-site professional development day led by teachers. They realized they had enough expertise in the building to allow teachers to provide workshops on various topic areas that other teachers could choose. Teachers self-selected into workshops that met their individual learning needs.

Strategic placement of specialists

Principal Union was also instrumental in hiring, training, or placing at least three learning specialists in the building: an IB/mentor leader; a creative writing teacher who also served as a valued resource for planning with and observing teachers, teaching students about diversity and social action, and implementing International Baccalaureate; and a lead teacher trained as a trainer in the Responsive Classroom. I expand on the latter example.

Principal Union negotiated with the person in charge of Responsive Classroom training to allow Deb Bell, a part-time lead teacher, to become a trainer under the conditions she could coach students, parents, and teachers at IMS. "That was the only way I was willing to pay for this one teacher to get all this extended training." Here is one example of the return on Deb's professional development, which created sustained, just-in-time, individualized learning opportunities:

> Deb: [Teachers] just come into my room whenever, and say, "Can I just stop in?" [to see RC in action.] People stop in all the time. Sometimes I'll [sense] teachers just hanging outside the door where I can't even see them [laughs]. They just come in to listen to what's going on in the classrooms, hear the language, feel the flow of the class. … I would say probably a couple of teachers from each team throughout the course of a year, and, you know, we're talking about a staff of probably 50 people, so probably 10 to 15.

Discussion

Principals face challenges in creating quality, differentiated professional development for different teacher needs regarding equitable learning and preparing students to be 21st century social change agents. Although this article is limited to focusing on one principal's practice and further studies are needed to fully understand how these practices affect student learning, several insights seem noteworthy.

The first is that to provide quality differentiated professional development, the entire school as a learning system needs to be considered (i.e., systemic professional development). When principals assess the expansive array of teacher learning needs (especially with expectations to teach for social justice), they should help ensure that professional development content and processes appropriately address the different and sustained professional development needs in whole-staff, group, and individual contexts.

The second point of curricular coherence should be clear by now. The adoption and implementation of the Responsive Classroom and the International Baccalaureate program provided school-wide frameworks that connected whole-staff, group, and individual learning opportunities. One can easily imagine that without this coherence, there would be substantially less reason for teachers to learn from each other. Additionally, integrating the IB framework with diversity and social action curriculum and assessments was critical for organizational learning.

An associated implication is that principals should articulate the importance of curricular coherence and provide the encouragement, opportunities, and available resources for their schools to develop this coherence. Although Principal Union helped to successfully mesh the adoption of RC and IB with her school, other frameworks or programs may better fit the needs and interests of different schools. Flexibility for innovation (e.g., to develop social action projects) appears to be a critical consideration in this adoption. Principals should avoid overly prescriptive programs that may constrain teachers' creativity and abilities to adapt to student needs. Additionally, principals and schools may wish to take more of an organic approach to program coherence for philosophical, expertise, or fiscal reasons and develop their own programs. However, even in these scenarios, principals likely want to consult content-free frameworks such as *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Finally, a number of Principal Union's practices provide subtle clues that are important for guiding professional development related to preparing students to affirm diversity and understand and address social issues. Her involvement in developing, articulating, and communicating the school's vision (for professional development) suggests that principals should cultivate the development of a school mission that creates a fertile context in which discussions such as teaching for social justice can grow. Principal Union's influence on the diversity discussions further implies that principals should assess and address their own and teachers' identity needs (e.g., racial identity) before expecting teachers to teach students about diversity. Additionally, Principal

Union's selection of and influence on providing frameworks of diversity and social justice indicates that principals should offer similar frameworks for staff members to visualize and interpret what these big ideas look like in practice. Finally, and consistent with other approaches to professional learning in this article, Principal Union's practice of allowing teachers time and discretion to develop this more critical pedagogy seems paramount for teachers' willingness and ability to transform new ideas into teaching and learning.

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