

# **Professional Development in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools: What if We Have PD Upside Down and Backwards?**

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## **Abstract**

Too often teacher professional development (PD) is focused on mainstream K–12 learners, even as US schools become more culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). This theoretical paper provides guidance for centering professional development on the margins. The three conclusions are distilled from robust experiences with middle and high school K–12 educators. They include making PD relational, providing ample time and patience for teachers to change underlying beliefs, and grounding PD in authentic inquiry, rather than indulging a strategy fetish.

***Keywords:* professional development; culturally and linguistically diverse students; equity**

## **Adams, Brooks, and Kandel-Cisco**

As a cursory review of the history of American schooling reveals (Kaestle, 1983), public schooling in the United States was first developed for affluent White males. Indeed, most of what we do in schools is still grounded in those historical understandings of curriculum, pedagogy and assessments as originally designed, first just for White males, later for White females, and much later, for everyone else. As census data predictions make clear (Fry, 2006) very soon, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students will no longer be the minority at the margins, but they may well still be marginalized curricularly and pedagogically. What if, instead of continuing to design schools and schooling for the perceived “center” of our current population, we instead reconceptualize teaching and learning for students at the margins of our education population: CLD students? In this article we offer a vision for transformational teacher professional development (PD) that positions CLD students at its core. While firmly maintaining CLD students at the heart of our commitments, the PD we have created for CLDs has proven effective for teachers of all learners.

### **Transformative Professional Development**

Nowhere is the need for transformative professional development (PD) more important than in the increasingly diverse U.S. schools. Between 1997 and 2011, for example, the total public school enrollment increased by only 5% (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). However, by contrast, during the same time period, the population of linguistically diverse students grew by over 55%. This recent increase in the population of CLD students, however, has not been accompanied by ethnic and linguistic diversification of the corps of teachers and school administrators. The teacher corps is still composed primarily of White, female, middle class English-monolinguals (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). This disparate percentage of White school principals and teachers relative to the student population is important because students of color tend to receive more negative and exclusionary disciplinary consequences, higher levels of referrals to special education, and lower levels of referrals to programs for gifted and talented students than do White

## **PD in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools**

students (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). While a host of factors may contribute to these disproportionate outcomes, it is likely that a lack of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic synchrony between school staff and students of diverse backgrounds creates conditions in which educators can continue to be unaware of their assumptions, misperceptions, and biases related to CLD students' abilities, intentions, and behaviors (Townsend, 2000).

When PD offerings and school improvement efforts ignore issues of language, race, and culture, they fail to acknowledge and address the needs of the students in their school. For example, reading initiatives in CLD schools that do not integrate oral language development, native language literacy development, and bilingual reading strategies ignore research-based predictors of English language literacy development for English learners (Genessee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). Addressing the needs of CLD students cannot just be tacked on as an after-thought or added as a superficial response to fears of legal repercussions or loss of funding. Rather than simply providing random, single-shot, or silver bullet strategy sessions from a checklist of actions on a school improvement plan, school leaders should set sights much higher: purposeful attention to the needs of CLDs, including transformative PD and rich instructional design, that emerges from a shared consciousness, a shared ethic, and a shared commitment to the long-term achievement of CLD students.

### **Project Alianza**

From 2008-2012, Adams and Brooks developed and delivered year-long, weekly professional development courses to practicing middle and high school teachers from four local school districts funded by a U.S. Department of Education Title III National Professional Development Grant through the College of Education at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana. These courses, known as Project Alianza, represent a year-long commitment by volunteer educators who completed graduate courses that focused on inclusive schools, basic second language acquisition, second

## Adams, Brooks, and Kandel-Cisco

language literacy development for adolescents, and content-based instruction for CLD students. Participants engaged in inquiry projects that result in locally designed and implemented school change projects culminating from research conducted by participants with CLD students from the partnership schools. Approximately 255 secondary educators from four partnership school districts completed the two courses associated with Project Alianza.

### Powerful Lessons

Through our Project Alianza experiences and other professional development work with teachers of CLD students, we have learned some powerful lessons:

1. There simply are no fads, no quick fixes and no silver bullets that will do the job: To be effective and sustainable, PD must be relational.
2. Changing underlying beliefs is necessary and requires time and patience.
3. For teachers to make significant, substantive changes, PD must be grounded in authentic teacher inquiry, rather than driven by a strategy fetish.

These lessons represent wisdom distilled from intensive collaboration with approximately 300 mostly White, urban secondary educators, made possible through funding from a U.S. Department of Education Title III National Professional Development grant from 2007-2012. We will next unpack each lesson, providing guidance for how each contributes to meaningful changes in teaching and learning.

**No fads, no quick fixes: Professional development must be relational.** As organizational leadership researcher, Margaret Wheatley, has poignantly noted,

We put more and more effort into planning and leadership approaches that seem only to lead us ever farther away from our goals and aspirations. We have suffered from the unending fads that, like great tidal waves, crash down upon our schools, creating more destruction than growth.

## PD in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools

As the most recent wave recedes, we look over our schools and see debris scattered everywhere—relationships torn apart, survivors struggling to come up for air, ideas and plans tossed askew (2007, pp. 100-101).

It is destructive and counterproductive to simply demand growth and transformation from educators; genuine change requires time, patience, risk-taking, and reflection from within a supportive community of learners (Fullan, 2007). Effective PD fosters the development of authentic and meaningful relationships between educators. Merely adopting the term *professional learning community* does not result in real community if existing hierarchies are left intact and unquestioned, stifling honest communication. If we want teachers to meet CLD students where they are in their development, we must do the same for educators by providing professional learning settings that acknowledge the challenges inherent in teaching in today's diverse classrooms.

Relational community is difficult to establish where competition pits educators against one another through the posting of assessment data, for example, or where the members are fearful of one another. Relational community is also a challenge to develop in classrooms, of course. Many of the teachers with whom we worked were reluctant or even afraid to interact directly with their CLD students due to perceived language barriers and cultural difference. As Jenna (a pseudonym), a high school educator, confessed in a reflection,

For years I have been afraid to talk with ELL [English-language learner] students and have ducked into rooms to avoid meeting them in the hallways. Now I am proud to say that I have changed. I sit with ELL students at lunch in anticipation that they will let me in on a small part of their conversation. I walk to the buses every day with two Hispanic boys and ask them to tell me one thing they learned. I have been tutoring a student since February on general things that I thought would help him be successful in school. In fact, he has taught me a great deal more.

Jenna changed her beliefs about herself and her students because her PD cohort interviewed CLD students to learn what would make the school more supportive of them. Like many of the participants in our PD initiative, one positive interaction with a CLD student boosted Jenna's confidence to get to know other CLD students. Jenna went from being afraid to becoming an advocate for CLD students, but this transformation was only possible because she trusted she was safe to be honest and vulnerable with her colleagues.

**Changing underlying beliefs: Seeing yourself and the world differently takes time.** Wade Davis (2008, 17:58), an anthropologist and ethnobiologist notes, "The myriad voices of humanity are not failed attempts at being us. They are unique answers to that fundamental question: what does it mean to be human and alive?" If, as we observed earlier, the majority of the U.S. teaching force is composed primarily of White females raised and educated in mostly White schools with mostly middle-class values as the norm, how can teachers prepare to teach K–12 students whose experience of the world is quite different? Substantive changes in schools require transformative PD for teachers and administrators. Sustained change in educational practices occurs only when educators first name, and then change their beliefs about CLD students. Excavating these beliefs can then lead to choosing new instructional materials and new approaches to teaching (Fullan, 2007). When educators engage in PD that is rooted in relationships with colleagues and students, we create the conditions for educators to have learning experiences that impact belief systems, assumptions, and ultimately, their interactions with students. For example, instead of spending PD time creating an elaborate new discipline plan to deal with behavior problems, why not engage in a dialogue that taps into our underlying beliefs about our CLD students and ask why students are disengaging, disrupting, or misbehaving in the first place? As Hernandez-Sheets (2009) states,

[Our] personal K–12 classroom experiences are more influential and powerful than the information gained

## PD in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools

through teacher preparation courses and field experiences. The knowledge that you internalize during your process of schooling often influences what you believe about teaching and learning. This knowledge shapes what you think the subject matter should be like, how students are supposed to behave, and how they are supposed to function in schools (p. 16).

PD that is relational and encourages transformation in teachers' beliefs also serves to empower teachers to develop their identity as an advocate for CLD students and an agent for change in diverse schools.

In the schools in which we have taught as teachers and professional developers, English as a second language (ESL) teachers and bilingual paraprofessionals are typically seen as the experts for supporting the education of CLD students, whereas content area teachers and administrators often view themselves as novices (Brooks, Adams, & Morita Mullaney, 2010). Educators in CLD schools must change this false expert-novice dichotomy if deep, transformative change is to occur within in the schools. PD initiatives that help educators to delve deeply into underlying beliefs, linguistic and cultural complexities, as well as instructional approaches, facilitate this type of transformation in teacher perspectives. Inviting teachers to bring dilemmas from their work with students is one way to create the space for these conversations about underlying beliefs, and focuses on the issues that are the most meaningful and relevant to teachers' work. Teachers learn to engage in collaborative problem solving and professional support.

**Professional development should be grounded in authentic inquiry, not strategies.** Professional development in schools often involves an outside expert visiting a school for an afternoon or maybe even a full day to provide trainings focused on a particular strategy or intervention. While we recognize teachers appreciate fresh strategies and may even be invigorated by the expert consultant's presence, positive, long-term instructional change rarely occurs as a result of a one-time PD session (Hawley & Valli, 1999;

## Adams, Brooks, and Kandel-Cisco

Knight & Wiseman, 2006). Handing out strategies like candy robs teachers of the opportunity to analyze the needs of students and to respond systematically to the needs of specific students (whether high ability kids, students with interrupted formal schooling, or students who are struggling readers). No cookie-cutter approach will work for every group of students. We must do the deep analysis work to help identify what students need. When teachers do this analysis work, they build ownership, investment, and the agency to share what they are learning with others. In their own classrooms, they will be able to develop local strategies for CLD students which are effective under local circumstances.

In our work with teachers, this inquiry-focused PD took on many forms, including scholarly text-based discussions, interviews with CLD students who were struggling academically, discussions around professional dilemmas, and school change projects. However, the one aspect that seemed to drive the other forms of inquiry was the interview with CLD students who were struggling academically. As part of the school change project, educators were required to interview a CLD student who struggled academically in order to get the student's perspective of what changes to school systems or to classroom instruction would be most likely to support them. We were startled to learn that for many educators, this was the first time they had spoken individually and directly with a linguistically diverse student; teachers were amazed by what they heard from students, much of which contradicted the teachers' *a priori* assumptions.

Next, educators from the same school met to share and to collaboratively analyze the student interview data to look for emerging themes that would inform the development of a school change project. The most effective school changes were born directly out of the CLD students' stated needs. The end results were projects that required the teachers to examine school and classroom policies, practices, and traditions through fresh eyes and with a clearer understanding of what CLD students experience on a daily basis. An added bonus was the confidence and emerging new relationships these teachers experienced through deliberately getting to



## **PD in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools**

know a CLD student—someone most admitted they might have otherwise completely overlooked.

We are frequently approached by school leaders with requests for lists of sure-fire strategies that will show immediate achievement results. While we understand the reasons for this request, we are quick to discourage any notion of quick fixes, whether for teachers or for students. Disseminating lists of strategies suggests that all the teacher needs is the “right” teaching steps, the “perfect” organizer, or a “guaranteed” script, and if one follows the directions with fidelity, then all the students will achieve at high levels. What we know is that skillful, artful teaching requires a sophisticated understanding and nimble juggling of cognition, prior knowledge, assessment, varied approaches, behavior, learning preferences, motivation, and values, just to name a few components. PD initiatives that settle for handing teachers a clever collection of strategies end up inadvertently disempowering teachers because strategies do not create opportunities for teachers to understand who their students are and what each student needs. Staying curious about student learning, delving into the mysteries of authentic student engagement, being willing to examine our own practice with a critical eye, and making thoughtful changes in design and delivery of instruction result in substantive, sustainable transformation in the classroom and in the school as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

Schools face tremendous pressure to meet the needs of students and raise test scores—all with scant funding. Nowhere is this pressure more intense than in schools with large numbers of CLD students. It is tempting to respond to this pressure with quick fix, top-down reforms in which an outside expert trains teachers to use a collection of champion strategies, a scripted curriculum, or a standardized intervention.

We suggest educators look within their own school communities to engage in meaningful PD that emerges from relationships, excavates deeply held beliefs about CLD students, and empowers educators to transform their classrooms into rich learning

communities. This will require time and patience for practices to take root and bear fruit. We have found teachers respond positively to university partners who join teachers for the long haul, not just the afternoon, and who collaborate in the inquiry, rather than ride in with solutions. If we want educators to create vibrant, engaging, and meaningful learning conditions for all students, but especially for CLD students, we must first create those same conditions by nurturing authentic learning focused on building relationships, transforming our assumptions, and embracing teacher inquiry.

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## PD in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools

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## Adams, Brooks, and Kandel-Cisco

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