

The Research to Practice Gap: Disconnects Between Research and Professional Development for PK-12 Schools

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Abstract

Budget cuts continue to increase in higher education and throughout PK-12 school systems. These budget cuts have, subsequently, affected the potential for growth in the area of professional development programs. School districts and universities across the United States are faced with the reality that many faculty-driven research initiatives are failing due to this lack of funding. These research initiatives, such as the best practices in education and the use of PK-12 teacher-driven research, are experiencing a mode of disconnect between higher education faculty and PK-12 classroom teachers. These research initiatives, which would normally propel teacher education programs, are becoming defunct. This paper seeks to address the types of disconnect that exists between higher education teachers and PK-12 teachers, budget constraints, and evidence-based practices.

Keywords: PK-12, teacher education programs, professional development programs, faculty-driven research, best practices, disconnect.

1. Introduction

Statewide budget cuts to education have appeared within varying types of media outlets across the United States, and among the causalities listed that these cuts produce, were teaching positions, research on leading practices in education, and the use of the research findings by teachers within the PK-12 classroom. Due to the fact that faculty members in teacher education programs were increasingly required to take on more responsibilities, such as teaching additional courses per semester, and were asked to give up pre-budget cut course releases that normally would have been granted, they had less time to do service to their profession, such as providing professional development for teachers in the PK-12 schools.

Teachers in the PK-12 schools also had less development for time and funds available for professional development days and travel to complete professional development requirements. Despite severe budget cuts to education in many states, the continuing education requirements remain. Without the support which was previously in place, teachers had to take annual leave and often pay out of pocket to attend conferences or workshops.

Even before the budget crisis, there was a sense of disconnect between higher education faculty and the PK-12 classroom. Teachers and administrators had previously viewed, at times, teacher education programs as trying to dictate what classroom teachers should be accomplishing from their positions in the “ivory tower.” In the past, there had been distrust and indifference by the PK-12 classroom teachers toward teacher education faculty and their research findings. Teachers wanted practical applications that they could utilize within their classrooms on a day-to-day basis. They believed that the research conducted in higher education did not apply to their particular settings. Partnerships between PK-12 and higher education would alleviate the mistrust and indifference that exists.

As the education system continues to evolve, the federal government places more of an emphasis on evidence-based practices and student outcomes. Even during these tough economic times, it would be imperative that teachers in the PK-12 schools have access to the latest and most current information; whether it cover best practices, assessment, or technology. This paper examines how four teacher education programs in various states across the country have partnered with PK-12 school systems to provide professional development.

The following research questions were addressed in the research study:

1. How often do teacher education programs provide professional development activities with PK-12 teachers?
2. How have budget constraints impacted professional development activities?
3. How often do teachers attend professional development offered by teacher education faculty or education organizations?
4. What are the reasons teachers may not utilize research-based findings?
5. How have school districts and teacher education programs compensated for budget constraints to provide professional development opportunities for teachers in the PK-12 setting?
6. How can evidence-based practices be made accessible to practicing teachers in ways that can be utilized?

2. Review Of The Literature

Professional development for teachers can be utilized to make programmatic changes, enhance current practices, and maintain successful practices (Schlechty, 1983). In their research, Clarke and Clarke (2005) identified 10 features of a professional development program that have the potential to increase the likelihood of the long-term growth of teachers. These features noted that professional development should be able to do the following: 1) address the concerns of teachers and have the availability of multiple options; 2) involve stakeholders (teachers, parents, school and district administrators); 3) be designed to address issues that prevent teacher growth; 4) use teachers’ classrooms as learning arenas; 5) have teacher buy-in; 6) provide positive results in teachers’ classroom after the implementation of change; 7) allow time for reflection and feedback; 8) create partnerships with teachers so that they maintain ownership during the change process; 9) support teachers, understanding that change is gradual, difficult, and uncomfortable; and 10) encourage teachers to keep moving forward and continuing to grow (Clarke & Clarke, 2005).

As indicated by the 10 features that were needed for a successful professional development, teacher ownership and practical application were found to be common themes. With the increase in responsibilities due to budget constraints, professional development workshops must address issues that are directly tied to the classroom. It was noted that teachers did not want to waste their time implementing changes or attending professional development workshops that were not related to issues in their classroom or school. When requiring significant changes, teachers must blur the boundaries of ownership and partnership in the process. The effects should reflect positive results that would validate the change. Professional activities provided by higher education faculty should be purposeful and directly related to concerns of teachers and their classroom or school (Clarke & Clarke, 2005; Schlechty, 1983).

The gap between research and practice is not a new concept. Indeed, it has been identified in research literature for more than three decades (Carnine, 1997). Teachers are more likely to implement a new practice if the professional development includes presentation of theory behind the practice, demonstration, opportunity for hands-on practice during the training, and on-going prompts and feedback (Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987).

3. Contribution

Teacher education programs have often partnered with PK-12 school districts to provide professional development opportunities to classroom teachers. However, these opportunities have become hampered by the recent budget crisis. It has been discussed and decided that it is of the utmost importance that teachers within the PK-12 school system receive professional development to improve the teacher-learning process. To provide effective professional development opportunities for PK-12 teachers, the information presented at such workshops has to be purposeful, applicable, and delivered in an efficient and accessible format.

4. Methods

The proposed research was offered as an individual paper and was later presented as an interactive discussion which focused on the development process, system structures, and lessons learned. The presentation was organized into three sections. The first section defined the problem. The second section covered system development. The third, and final section, provided an analysis, lessons learned, and the next steps that would be needed for improvement. This section offered an opportunity for participants to explore this topic through interactive presentation and discussion of the issues that were involved.

4.1 Participants

There were a total of 220 participants in this study. The participants were teachers within the PK-12 school system and were located within four states: California, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. Their participation was voluntary and their answers were anonymous.

5. Findings

The participants were given a series of focus questions throughout the study which focused on professional development within their school district. The findings were organized to correspond with the seven research questions that were addressed in this study.

Research Question 1: How often do teacher education programs provide professional development activities with PK-12 teachers?

75.1% of participants noted that professional development was a priority at their school while 24.9% did not. One participant noted that professional development was a priority due to the fact of education constantly changing. Another participant relayed that the school district that they work in felt that it was necessary to improve teaching methods. 48.3% of participants noted within this study that they participated in 4-5 professional development activities within the last calendar school year. 34.9% participated in between 2-3 professional development activities. 9.7% participated in at least one professional development activity. 7.1% noted that they did not participate in any professional development activities.

74.3% of participants reported that there been absolutely no change in their experience with professional development activities within the last calendar school year while 56.4% of participants actually noted an increase. 33.5% of participants reported a decrease in their experience with professional development activities within the last calendar school year.

Research Question 2: How have budget constraints impacted professional development activities?

This was an open-ended question that allowed the participants to expand on the answers. One participant noted that their school district does not provide any funds for professional development activities with PK-12 teachers. Another participant relayed that their school district was not encouraged to participate in any professional development activities, and if they did, they generally had to pay for it themselves. The availability of resources was also impacted by budget constraints.

Research Question 3: How often do teachers attend professional development offered by teacher education faculty or education organizations?

6.5% of participants noted that their university's teacher education programs provided between 4-5 professional development activities for their faculty that were either hosted at a site designated by their school districts or on campus. 15.8% noted that they were provided between 2-3 professional development activities. 17.2% noted that they participated in at least 1 professional development activity. 60.6% noted that there were not any university teacher education programs that provided professional development activities for their faculty. 7.8% of all participants noted that they had the opportunity to attend between 4-5 professional development activities through a teacher education institution within the last year. 19.9% noted that they attended between 2-3 professional development activities. 23.2% attended at least 1 professional development activity through a teacher education institution. 49.0% noted that they did not have the opportunity to attend a professional development activity through a teacher education institution at all within the last year. 8.1% of participants reported that they had the opportunity to attend 4-5 professional development activities through a private vender such as a software company or a book seller. 21.8% noted that they had the opportunity to attend 2-3 professional activities through a private vender. 27.9% reported that that had the opportunity to attend at least 1 professional development activity while 42.2% reported that they did not have any opportunity. Some of the participants noted that teachers were reluctant to attend professional development activities and that these activities were counter-productive (reactive versus proactive) to what they were attempting to accomplish.

Research Question 4: What are the reasons teachers may not utilize research-based findings?

This was an open-ended question that allowed the participants to expand on their answers. 202 participants responded to this question. The participants noted that a lack in funding was a reason as to why teachers did not utilize research-based findings. Also, they reported that it would not help students achieve in the classroom. Other answers by the participants included the following: that it would not benefit their staff, it would not benefit the individual needs of the students, or that it may be in direct conflict with the curriculum. Participants also reported that they did not have the available resources that would normally be provided by school districts in order to conduct research-based findings.

Research Question 5: How have school districts and teacher education programs compensated for budget constraints to provide professional development opportunities for teachers in the PK-12 setting?

Some participants noted that teaching materials, such as professional journals, were provided by their school districts in order to compensate for budget constraints. 14.4% of participants read articles from professional journals 11 or more times per year while 21.4% reported that they read articles 4-10 times per year. 41.1% of participants noted that they read articles from professional journals 1-3 times per year while 23.1% said that they never read any journals.

Research Question 6: How can evidence-based practices be made accessible to practicing teachers in ways that can be utilized?

In order to keep abreast of changes in evidence-based practices, 17.8% of participants reported that they participated in journal reading while 16.5% reported that they participated in informal collegial discussion. 19.1% reported that they participated in in-service workshops with another 13.1% of participants attending conferences. 16.5% of participants noted that they participated in professional learning communities while 12.6% reported that they had enrolled in graduate courses. 4.4% noted "other" as an answer. From their experience, and in order to achieve professional development that they were most likely to gain new information from, 10.6% of the participants reported the use of tactics such as journal reading, 14.8% reported that they used informal collegial discussion, and 22.5% reported that they used in-service workshops. 21.6% of participants reported that they used conferences to gain new knowledge while 14.9% reported that they used professional learning committees. 12.8% reported that they used what they learned during graduate work while 2.8% reported "other" as a means to gain new knowledge. Participants noted that observing fellow teachers, the implementation of multi-media tools, and the development of long-term goals helped to achieve professional development.

It was interesting to note that 68.1% of participants reported that they immediately put what they learn into practice while 23.0% reported that they exercise what they learn in 1-2 months. 6.2% of participants reported that they exercise what they learn only once during the school year, 1.4% reported that they exercise what they learn within several school years, and 1.4% reported that they never use evidence-based practices.

6. Summary

Budget constraints in PK-12 schools and in higher education have continued to affect the potential for growth in the development of professional education programs. This study sought to identify modes of disconnect between PK-12 and higher education teachers, budget constraints, and evidence-based practices. At the end of this study, participants were able to perform the following necessary functions: 1) they were able to identify essential keys to creating research-based professional development activities for PK-12 teachers; 2) they were able to identify creative manners in which teacher education programs and PK-12 school systems work together in order to provide research-based professional development activities during the current economic crisis; and 3) they were better able to understand PK-12 teachers' and administrators' perceptions of research-based professional development activities and identify the changes needed to make these activities more purposeful, useful, and efficient.

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