

Family-Friendly Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract: This paper examines a professional development model that centers teachers and their families and was intended to deepen teachers' practices and engagement with making. This program was initiated by teachers who wanted to participate in professional development but faced constraints by the need for childcare. This program highlights what is possible when teachers are positioned to learn alongside their family members and are encouraged to draw on multiple roles and identities. A professional development program that invites and honors the multiple roles of teachers can expand existing best practices and offer a creative and meaningful response to the reality of remote learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: play, teacher education, technology-enhanced learning, best practices

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought several new challenges to, and highlighted existing inequities within, the educational landscape. School districts are requiring teachers adopt new models of pedagogy, while also fervently working to ensure that each of their students receive the emotional, cognitive, technological, and social support that they need. In many states, teachers are expected to pursue additional professional development opportunities, while, at times, still being expected to care for themselves, children, and family members that live in their homes. The tilt (technological innovations for inclusive learning and teaching) Fellows Program, which began in 2019, examines the challenges and possibilities for teachers who are caretakers and participants in professional development. At a high-level, the program supports teacher professional development experiences that engage teachers alongside their family members to surface pretty good practices (Erickson, 2014) and highlight ways that family members can be assets to teacher learning.

The tilt Fellows Program is designed to acknowledge the responsibilities and opportunities associated with caring for and learning alongside family members. Cohorts start during the summer and participate in a one-week synchronous experience alongside other teachers from their school district and any available family members. After the one-week session, for at least a year, participants are invited to regularly meet with the program facilitators and receive support as they implement their ideas from the program. A central objective of the first instantiation of the program was to introduce teachers and their family members to some of the tools found in the Maker Movement and support teachers as they designed new activities for their learners. The teachers that participated in the program expressed clear interest in developing their skills and knowledge of technology based making, and how to incorporate it into their teaching. However, when a summer workshop was suggested, teachers assumed that they could not participate because of their responsibilities as primary caretakers for their children. In response to this, the research team designed a program that would incorporate and encourage intergenerational learning and participation. The program features connections to research on teacher professional development best practices. These practices include being content focused, incorporating active learning, supporting teacher collaboration, using models and modeling, providing expert support, including opportunities for feedback and reflection, and being of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). We utilize these practices as a base for developing our model of practices for intergenerational teacher professional development experiences. Details about the program design can be found in Perez, Jones, Lee, and Worsley (2020).

Discussion

Within these different practices, there are a few challenges and opportunities that are important to highlight. Specifically, the power of play, which created a low-stakes environment for teachers and their families to learn alongside each other; bridging formal and informal spaces so that participants could workshop their ideas with family members; and, finding opportunities to work with the competing identities of teacher and parent.

The power of play

Play created a low-stakes environment that benefitted the group as they navigated new tools and tested out their ideas. It contributed to general levity that offered moments of meaning and consequence (Hall and Jurow, 2015). Play was characterized by structured or unstructured moments when participants and researchers engaged with

each other to maintain interest and productively move ideas forward. At the same time, spontaneous moments of play made group discussions challenging. Some parents felt like their children were too distracting for other participants and would have liked clearer delineations to signal when and where play was appropriate. Play has implications for how teachers might think about learning in the context of home, where the rules of school are less dictated, and students have access to materials that are familiar to them. While the home is different for many, it can be the space where students play and have fun with what they are learning in school. In a time of remote learning, moments or postures of play can offer teachers an opportunity to engage their students and expand what they see as possible for making.

Teacher professional development goes home

We often talk about the importance and value of students being able to explore their learning across contexts, but sometimes forget that this holds true for teacher learning, too. In interviews, some teacher participants shared that having family members participate in the program helped them prepare for in-school implementation in part because ideas and practices in the program crossed over seamlessly into conversations at home. This consideration was factored into the design of the program through assignments and materials given to families to take home and complete before returning for the next in-person session. Furthermore, teachers shared ways they sought to incorporate non-participant family members of the program into the experience. Finally, teachers talked about how the experience was meaningful; having the artifacts at home served as a valuable reminder for the children and teachers of their shared making experience.

Complementary and competing identities

The program filled an immediate need that teachers had as primary caretakers and as teachers interested in making. The opportunity for participants to bring in and enact these two identities together proved invaluable. Teachers emphasized that many existing professional development experiences neglect the different roles that they hold—especially as a caretaker. Hence, there is a need for teacher professional development experiences that intentionally make space for teacher participation and their multiple roles or identities (hooks, 1994). Reconciling these roles, however, presents its own unique challenges. One teacher described her process as constantly having to switch between roles. This may point to an important opportunity for future teacher professional development: providing space for teachers to explicitly discuss their different roles or identities, and how they would like for a given professional development experience to incorporate those roles or identities.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the program is an instantiation of what is possible when we reposition something that would traditionally be viewed as a constraint, as an opportunity in teacher learning. We find this a useful paradigm shift in the context of making and the maker movement but suggest that this change might be beneficial across several inquiry- and problem-based learning contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing the world to deal with a new reality where many of our assumptions are no longer met. Instead of running from these different constraints, we can consider how they might advance new forms of expansive and meaningful teacher professional development.

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