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The right facilitator can help teachers make meaningful change to their instructional practice

Educators who read our column often ask whether we would be willing to provide diversity professional development in their schools and districts. When we ask what makes someone think we would provide the kind of professional development they need, our authorship of this column comes up as the reason. While we work with teachers and school leaders to help them develop cultural proficiency and we think we do a pretty good job of that, we are not the best choice in every case. Selecting a diversity professional developer requires consideration of several factors.

EXPERIENCE AND CREDENTIALS

Because the need to create culturally responsive schools is so great, there is no shortage of people who offer diversity professional development. Many of these professional developers are outstanding and can help educators develop cultural proficiency to better serve students and families. However, there are also people who are willing to provide services but lack the knowledge and skills to be effective professional developers for educators.

Diversity professional development is a need not only in education, but in other fields as well. While certain elements of diversity learning cut across all fields, there are also distinct differences. To be effective, diversity professional development must address the specific context of the field and

must be delivered by someone who understands the field well enough to help professionals connect learning to practice. For educators, this means selecting a professional developer who has the knowledge and experience to help teachers make meaningful change to their instructional practice. Therefore, the first step in selecting a professional developer is to find someone within the field of education.

However, simply having a background in education does not make someone an effective diversity facilitator. Professional developers for cultural proficiency should have experience as practitioners in diverse educational settings. While educators can learn much from reading about diversity in the classroom or studying its effects, the most effective diversity professional developers are those who have actually done the work. Such experience gives professional developers insight that cannot be gained through other means. It also gives them credibility with educators who sometimes question whether anyone

understands what it is like to be in highly diverse classrooms.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Diversity professional developers use varying approaches, each with particular benefits and limitations. Which approach is best depends on teachers' goals and needs.

Introductory

An introductory approach focuses on increasing awareness about the need for cultural proficiency. This approach often includes presentation of data on shifting demographics and the effects of longstanding educational inequities. Participants may be asked to engage in activities that stimulate surface-level conversation and insights and help participants see the systemic need for cultural proficiency without challenging participants to consider how their own beliefs and practices may be contributing to the inequities. Although a few participants in introductory sessions may feel uncomfortable, most find it informative, perhaps even

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entertaining. These kinds of sessions work well as an initial step in developing cultural proficiency because they can be done with large numbers of participants and do not tend to create tension or conflict. When well done, an introductory session stimulates interest in more in-depth learning about diversity.

Introductory sessions are the most popular approach for diversity professional development because they are easy to implement and allow schools to meet systemwide goals of ensuring all teachers and school leaders have participated in professional development in diversity. These benefits are also the limitations of the introductory approach. Because the introductory approach focuses only on raising awareness, introductory sessions help teachers understand the need for change, but do not push teachers to consider the implications for their own instructional practice. As a result, introductory sessions rarely lead to changes in classroom practice. In this way, introductory sessions may help districts meet the goal of providing systemwide diversity training without having any effect on student learning.

Direct

The direct approach focuses squarely on challenging personal beliefs and exposing biases and prejudices. This approach assumes that whether educators are aware of it or not, they hold problematic beliefs that lead to inequitable practices and that the best way to address such beliefs is by confronting them head-on. Direct sessions are often characterized by very pointed discussions intended to surface underlying tensions, conflicts, and biases. Such conversations tend to be emotionally charged and create discomfort among participants. The feeling of being exposed or vulnerable

is not uncommon. Direct sessions often have a lingering effect in the school as participants process their feelings of discomfort.

Creating discomfort is an intentional tool in the direct approach. The idea is that change only occurs when educators are sufficiently uncomfortable to confront real issues. The direct approach is most effective for educators who already have an established understanding of cultural proficiency and want to push themselves to think deeper about issues of equity and diversity. The direct approach is also effective with educators who have entrenched deficit beliefs and are resistant to other approaches. However, for educators who are open to learning but have little background in cultural proficiency, the direct

approach may be too intensive. In fact, using the direct approach with well-intentioned but uninformed educators can cause educators to resist further efforts to develop cultural proficiency. For this reason, while the direct approach can be powerful, it should be used with caution and only with participants for whom it is appropriate.

Constructivist

A constructivist approach assumes participants have varying levels of cultural proficiency and will develop cultural proficiency at different rates. Constructivist sessions are characterized by engaging activities and discussions that build on the existing knowledge and experience of participants. The constructivist approach relies on development of collegial relationships to bring about self-reflective learning that leads to change in instructional practice. For this reason, the constructivist approach tends to be used in professional development offered as a series of sessions over time and with relatively small groups of participants.

This arrangement allows for a high degree of trust and interaction among participants and facilitators and is what makes the constructivist approach the most likely to impact classroom practice and student learning. However, because the constructivist approach requires a significant commitment of time and engages a relatively small number of participants, it does not lend itself to systemwide goals of providing diversity training to an entire faculty in a short period of time. The constructivist approach is better suited to the goal of steady progress over time, and when done well results in more effective classroom practice and increased student outcomes.

SELECTING AN APPROACH

Knowing which approach to select requires analyzing the needs of the organization and the participants. Questions to consider include:

- Why is the professional development needed? Is this to fulfill a systemwide goal of training for large numbers of people in a short period of time or a more focused approach aimed at systemic change?
- What are expected outcomes for participants?
- Is this a first effort, or have participants engaged in previous professional development? What are participant sentiments about diversity professional development?
- Will there be additional opportunities for professional development?
- In what ways will district staff support participants after professional development?

In our next column, we will discuss these questions in more depth because selecting the right diversity facilitator is key to a successful professional development initiative. The right facilitator can help teachers move forward toward creating more culturally responsive learning environment. ■

