



Study links professional learning to impact on students' civic literacy

WHAT THE STUDY SAYS

Civic literacy is not only core to success in college and careers, but also to responsible participation in civic life in adulthood. This study contributes empirical evidence that professional development has positive and significant impact on teacher knowledge, practices, and dispositions, and student learning of complex concepts and critical thinking skills.

Professional development interventions provided by Facing History and Ourselves, a nonprofit organization, is planned, nonprescriptive, and sustained over time. It includes seminars, workshops, coaching/mentoring, access to print and electronic resources for classroom use, modeling classroom lessons, guest speakers, communities of support, and opportunities to address implementation challenges.

This mix of professional development practices coupled with rich curricular resources affects not only teachers' practice, but also their sense of competence, degree of satisfaction, and level of burnout. When teachers

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At a glance

A randomized control study of professional development for humanities teachers provides empirical evidence that teachers who experienced the planned intervention showed positive, significant impact on variables related to self-efficacy; satisfaction with professional support, engagement, and growth; and positive, significant impact on their 9th- and 10th-grade students' historical understanding and four variables related to civic literacy.

THE STUDY

Barr, D., Boulay, B., Selman, R., McCormick, R., Lowenstein, E., Gamse, B., Fine, M., & Brielle, M. (in press). A randomized controlled trial of professional development for interdisciplinary civic education: Impacts on humanities teachers and their students. *Teachers College Record*, 117(4).

experience these changes, students' opportunities and engagement in civics learning and classroom environment change.

When students' learning environment and experiences change, they gain deeper understanding of history, increased civic responsibility, efficacy, tolerance, and engagement as well as social and ethical awareness.

Study description

Schools with sufficient numbers of 9th- and 10th-grade teachers and with limited or no previous exposure to Facing History and Ourselves were recruited to participate in a planned professional development intervention.

Schools, including public, public charter, and private schools, that met eligibility requirements were randomly assigned to an intervention group that would participate in the professional development in Year 1 or control group

whose participation was delayed until Year 2. Most intervention schools met federal criteria for underperformance and high poverty. Participating teachers received a stipend.

In Year 1, 80 schools within a geographical area surrounding Facing History and Ourselves regional offices participated in the study, with 40 in each of the intervention and control groups. Seventy-eight teachers participated in the intervention, and 102 were in the control group.

Attrition during Year 1 accounted for eight schools in the intervention group and 10 in the control group. About 1,400 students from the randomly selected classes of teachers participated in the study.

Ninth- and 10th-grade humanities teachers in the intervention schools participated in a summer program, Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The professional development intervention, despite the impact on teachers and more limitedly for students, fails to meet all the Standards for Professional Learning at a high level. Had all standards been met at high levels, the results, particularly for students, might be more significant.

Standards the professional development intervention meets well: Resources, Learning Designs, and Outcomes.

Intervention teachers had access to regional staff, print and digital curricular and instructional resources, and a stipend for participation in the summer program and for implementing the program.

The intervention program incorporated formal and informal learning designs and available ongoing support. Outcomes focused on teacher and student cognitive and affective changes associated with full engagement in civic life.

Standards the intervention meets weakly: Learning Communities, Leadership, Data, and Implementation. While teachers had access to online communities, they did not have the benefit of engaging in ongoing sustained communities of

educators with collective responsibility for student success nor apply a cycle of continuous improvement to refine their practice and student learning.

Researchers engaged school leaders during the selection phase, yet not in the implementation of the program, nor did they address the systems and supports within schools for effective professional learning. Data were used to measure defined outcomes to answer the research questions, yet no student or teacher data were used to craft the specific professional development intervention.

Previous evaluation studies may have used data to identify specific areas of need, but there is no mention of how the intervention or researchers used data for needs analysis or ongoing implementation monitoring and adjustments.

Implementation support and expectations for accessing support were limited, and the actual implementation support provided was limited. This might account for the overall level of high-fidelity implementation at the teacher and classroom level.

The results of this research study might be even greater had the professional development intervention more intentionally incorporated and adhered to all Standards for Professional Learning.

They implemented the program in the subsequent school year in one randomly selected class they taught and received follow-up support from regional office staff as they designed their lesson plans and implemented the units.

Intervention teachers also received classroom materials and access to print and digital instructional and content resources.

Questions

Researchers posed two research questions and several hypotheses related to teacher and student changes as a result of the professional development.

1. What is the impact of this approach to professional development and follow-up coaching on high school teachers' sense of self-efficacy, burnout, and perceptions of professional engagement and satisfaction compared to a group of control teachers who were not assigned to participate in the professional development?

The authors hypothesized that teachers without experience with the

intervention and randomly assigned to the intervention would develop greater self-efficacy and professional engagement and satisfaction and lower levels of burnout than control teachers.

2. What is the impact of assigning teachers to professional development aimed at supporting classroom implementation of the Facing History and Ourselves program on 9th- and 10th-grade students':

- Perceptions of the classroom climate and civic learning opportunities;
- Civic skills, dispositions, and behaviors;
- Historical thinking skills; and,
- Social and ethical awareness, compared to a group of control students taught by teachers who were not assigned to such professional development?

The authors' hypothesized that the intervention students would:

- Perceive their Facing History class as having a more open climate and providing more opportunities to

- learn about civic matters;
- Develop greater civic skills, dispositions, and behaviors; and
- Demonstrate the capacity to reflect more deeply on social relationships and ethical decisions and be more likely to value active, prosocial solutions to social conflict (e.g. collaboration) and ethical dilemmas (e.g. standing up for others).

The authors also hypothesized that, given the lack of research on how this educational approach impacts adolescents' historical thinking skills, program students would perform at least as well as control students in their academic subject area (Barr et al., in press).

Methodology

High-fidelity implementation of the program included attending a four- or five-day Facing History and Ourselves professional development session, accessing staff support, using print and digital resources, and teaching a minimum six-week unit with at least two hours devoted to each part of the course

of study. About half of the teachers met high-fidelity criteria, with the remaining half at medium and low fidelity.

Researchers measured outcomes using existing and newly developed survey instruments, administered as baseline and follow-up to the implementation, in two teacher domains including 12 outcomes and seven student domains including 15 outcomes.

The teacher domains included teacher self-efficacy and teacher perception of professional engagement and satisfaction. The efficacy outcomes included teacher beliefs and efficacy in instructional practices relevant to the program such as promoting deliberation, tolerance, student civic literacy, and historical understanding.

Student domains included civic responsibility, civic self-efficacy, civic participation, tolerance, classroom climate and civic learning opportunities, historical understanding, and social and ethical components.

Analysis

Researchers used a two-level hierarchical linear model to address random assignment at the teacher and classroom

levels. The model included other factors relevant to the characteristics of students, such as gender and race; to the school, such as type of school; and to the teacher, such as level of education and subject taught. There were no significant differences between teacher groups or between student groups on baseline measures.

Results

The professional development intervention impacted both teachers and students. Teachers experienced greater effects, demonstrating the causal effects of professional development. Statistically significant differences were found on 10 of the 12 teacher outcomes and for five student outcomes, including historical understanding and four aspects of civic literacy at the end of the intervention.

Limitations

The study measures teachers' first implementation of the program. As teachers become more familiar with the resources, content, and pedagogy over time, student impacts might increase. ■



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