Research offers little guidance on professional learning for inclusive education

WHAT THE STUDY SAYS

Federico Waitoller and Alfredo Artiles, in response to the growing urgency and global interest in inclusive education, conducted a review of the research in professional development in this area. The guiding questions for the research were:

1. How is inclusive education defined in professional development literature?
2. How is professional development for inclusive education studied?
3. How is teacher learning examined in professional development research for inclusive education?

They conclude that current research is fragmented and limited primarily because of how inclusive education and teacher learning are conceptualized. They report that there is a need for "a more robust theory of how teachers learn in complex contexts in which various institutional and professional boundaries overlap" (p. 347).

The authors find that professional development for inclusive education integrates "an intersectional approach in which teachers identify and dismantle

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At a glance

Prompted by the urgency to address the learning needs of all students, particularly students who are different (students with disabilities, with various ethnic and racial backgrounds, from different family backgrounds, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, etc.), this study examines the findings of a decade of research on preparing and supporting teachers to create inclusive classrooms. Research is limited and insufficient to guide effective professional learning in inclusive education.

THE STUDY

Waitoller, F. & Artiles, A. (2013). A decade of professional development research for inclusive education: A critical review and notes for a research program. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(3), 319-356.

interesting and multiple barriers to learning and participation for all students" (347) and prepares teachers to work collaboratively with other education professionals, families, and students to increase access, participation, and outcomes for all students.

Study description

After establishing six criteria for selecting and studying research in professional development between 2000 and 2009, researchers chose 42 out of 1,151 articles to examine. From the analysis, they identified trends related to each research question.

They cited four reasons for the study's significance:

1. The imperative to create more inclusive school systems in which teachers have opportunities to develop the "understanding, skills, critical sensibilities, and contextual awareness" (p. 320) to provide quality education for all students;
2. The role of professional development for administrators and teachers in implementing any reform including inclusive education reforms;
3. The importance of comparing previous reviews of research in professional development that did not focus on inclusive education to their current study to understand the current landscape, strengths, and weaknesses from an international perspective; and
4. The need to define the evidence of change in the efforts to move toward more inclusive teachers and schools.

Methodology

After reviewing the literature in inclusive education, researchers synthesized the findings and identified

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Education practitioners work with students who manifest differences every day. To create equitable opportunities for access, participation, and achievement for all students and inclusive cultures within schools and classrooms that nurture student success, educators require deep understanding, skills, dispositions, practices, and willingness to address the intersection of multiple differences simultaneously through cognitive and behavioral changes.

This form of professional learning, as evident in the extensive use of action research in the studies examined, increases teachers' "construction of their knowledge that is situated in their daily practice and struggles" (p. 331) and builds their

"confidence and efficacy to use an inquiry approach to teaching, create schoolwide programs to foment inclusion, introduce to teachers practices such as differentiated instruction, and challenge teachers' deficit views of students who struggle to learn" (p. 331).

To acquire the capacity to create schools and systems that implement inclusive education, educators need to engage in continuous learning through collaborative, co-constructed learning that occurs within their daily practice.

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six criteria for studies to analyze further. To be included in the analysis, studies needed to meet all six criteria:

1. Focused on questions, hypotheses, or purposes focused on preparing teachers for inclusive education, the impact of professional development on inservice teachers who are implementing inclusive education, or the experiences of teachers implementing professional development on inclusive education;
2. Published in peer-reviewed journals;
3. Occurred within the designated time range of 2000-09;
4. Included participants who were K-12 inservice teachers;
5. Employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed designs; and
6. Included data collection at a minimum of two points in time.

Analysis

Researchers used the three research questions to summarize trends in the 42 studies.

How is inclusive education defined?

• Some studies defined inclusive education as ability differences and focused on professional development on technical changes in instruction or on curricular changes to address gender and cultural differences. A second set of studies focused on overcoming barriers to participation and learning through ongoing and systemic changes in school culture to value ability differences and increase representation in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

• Some studies focused exclusively on inclusion as defined as race, class, gender, and culture rather than ability.

• Some studies addressed inclusive education as a process of overcoming barriers to participation and learning for all students.

How is professional development for inclusive education studied?

• There was a spike in studies in inclusive education mid-decade, and a decrease in the last quarter of the decade.

• The majority of articles were published in journals focusing on special education.

• The majority of studies of professional development on inclusive education used primarily qualitative methodology, had no specific subject focus, and included predominantly teachers of primary grades as subjects.

• Data sources for qualitative studies included interviews, observations, student and school documents, focus groups, and teacher journals. Mixed method studies employed many of the qualitative sources listed above and supplemented them with surveys and implementation checklists. Quantitative studies used surveys or questionnaires predominantly. Most qualitative studies applied content analyses; mixed method studies used descriptive and inferential statistical analyses; and logically quantitative studies used inferential statistics.

• Fifty-two percent of studies occurred in the United States. Studies in other countries increased in the latter half of the decade studies.

- The studies applied six forms of professional development: action research; onsite training; university classes; professional development schools; and newsletters. The majority of the studies, 70%, applied action research.
- Most studies, 89%, did not examine the impact of professional development on students.

How is teacher learning examined in professional development for inclusive education?

- Professional development studies focused on teacher outcomes and processes. Outcome studies, accounting for half of the studies examined, explored changes in teachers' cognitive and behavioral perspectives. The unit of analysis in outcome-based studies was the individual teacher. Process-based studies focused on the actions participants take as they apply new strategies and tools and changes in their engagement in communities of practice. The unit of analysis in process-based studies was groups of teachers.

Results

Waitoller and Artiles identify improvements needed in research and professional development on inclusive education. The researchers' redefined construct of inclusive education broadens the concept to acknowledge its complexity. They advocate a three-dimensional construct that includes "an ongoing struggle toward (a) the *redistribution* of access to and participation in quality opportunities to learn (redistribution dimension); (b) the *recognition* and valuing of all student differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools (recognition dimension); and (c) the creation of more opportunities for nondominant groups to advance claims of education exclusion and their respective solutions (representation

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dimension)" (p. 322).

Researchers claim that existing approaches to professional development on inclusive education that emphasize a single form of student difference fail to acknowledge the interaction among differences and fail to "shed light on how teachers learn to address the needs of students that live with complex and intersecting forms of exclusion" (p. 338). Researchers advocate the use of an intersectional approach to differences, considering how multiple differences interact and require different approaches to addressing differences and barriers to education.

Researchers identify flaws in existing research. Many studies failed to examine impact on students, report a specific content area, or sufficiently describe analysis procedures and study participants.

Outcome-based studies that focused on individuals do not adequately consider the complex nature of participant change within the political, ideological, and social context of schools. Researchers call for an approach that examines the complex systems in which teachers work and how they learn within the boundaries of their daily work. Process-based studies can be improved, according to researchers, by deepening attention to how teachers learn within

the boundaries of their communities and practice.

Limitations

The researchers expose a number of limitations within the research on professional development. First, little rigorous research on professional development for inclusive education exists, and most focuses on teachers of students with disabilities. With the growing number of students with differences in classrooms around the globe and the substantial investments by federal agencies to meet the needs of all students, the need for a research-based body of evidence in professional learning for inclusive education is growing rapidly. This requires more research and more studies using quantitative designs.

Another limitation the researchers identify relates to measuring the effects of professional learning. Studies fell into two categories: outcome-based or process-based studies. Outcome-based studies examine the effects at the individual teacher level predominantly. Process-based studies focused on the sequence of actions and events from the participant perspective.

The outcomes examined, however, focus primarily on cognitive (83%) and behavioral (22%) changes in teacher learning. Cognitive changes included teachers' knowledge as well as beliefs about students with disabilities. Only one study examined the impact of professional development in inclusive education on students. While this is disappointing, it is similar to the trend in research in professional development during the last several decades.

While identifying the limitations of current research, Waitoller and Artiles infuse the study with a strong ideological and theoretical orientation toward professional development for inclusive education. ■