

Chapter 5

Meeting the Professional Development Needs of Special Educators in 21st Century Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the challenges personnel preparation programs meet when preparing pre-service special educators for service in today's technology rich classrooms. The author used action research methodology to explore the feasibility of developing a virtual Professional Learning Community (PLC) for the purpose of building a collaborative culture of learning in special education and providing pre-service and novice special educators access to networks of support. A wiki and Ning provided the basic infrastructure for the virtual PLC and the data collected from the websites were analyzed using the eight essential characteristics of PLC development. The results showed that the PLC membership participated in community work primarily as observers only, relying almost entirely on the teacher educator to direct and manage all facets of community work. The implications of the research are discussed with respect to how personnel preparation programs prepare teachers for service in in 21st Century classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of in-service and pre-service teacher profession development is to support the development of pedagogical expertise over time. Professional development activities that are likely to have the greatest effect on student achievement are those that occur over an extended period of time, are focused on subject matter content and how students learn that content, and promote active engagement in the learning process involving collaborative teamwork (cf. Bausmith & Barry, 2011, Johnson & Fargo, 2010). The availability of highly interactive, socially engaging technology adds an additional layer of complexity to effective professional development and is also transforming teaching and learning in ways that have not

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been previously imagined (Bender; 2012; Ludlow, 2012; Schrum & Levine). Understanding subject matter and discipline specific methods for teaching subject matter is still necessary but no longer sufficient in the mastery of pedagogical expertise. In technology rich 21st Century classrooms, good teaching requires an understanding of “pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), technological content knowledge (TCK), technological pedagogical knowledge (TPK), and all three taken together as technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK)” (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p. 1026).

Technology has always played an important role in the education of students with disabilities, but until recently was used in isolation as a student specific adaptation to accommodate access to the curriculum. Modern technologies have enabled equity in the form of equal opportunity and access to the general education curriculum that reaches far beyond how technology has been used in the past. For example, the i²Flex model is a technology-rich classroom innovation developed by the K12 Athens Community School International that was conceived to nurture the development of higher order thinking skills such as applying, analyzing, and evaluating subject matter content (Avgerinou, Gialamas, & Tsoukia, 2014; Gialamas & Avgerinou, 2015), not just for some but as a school wide model implemented to meet individual learning needs. Thus, the model not only promotes the blending of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge to meet students’ diverse interests and abilities but also provides the wherewith all for the seamless blending of special and general education into a shared practice that maximizes every student’s learning outcomes.

This chapter describes the challenges personnel preparation programs meet when preparing special teachers for service in today’s technology rich, academically diverse classrooms. The author summarizes the results of an action research project conducted over a four year period to explore the feasibility of developing a virtual professional learning community (PLC) for the purpose of building a collaborative culture of learning and providing pre-service and novice special educators access to networks of support. The implications of the results are also discussed with respect to how personnel preparation programs prepare teachers for service in 21st Century classrooms.

INCLUSION: A STUDENT CENTERED PRACTICE

Inclusion defines the practice of special education and is the term widely used to describe how students with disabilities and at risk peers can achieve full member status in a learning community that values everyone for the unique contribution each can make toward realizing the community’s purposes (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2011). The principle of inclusion is best satisfied when general and special educators engage in a shared practice for the purpose of maximizing every student’s access to the critical content defined by the general education curriculum (Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Neither general nor special educators have the depth of content knowledge or pedagogical expertise required to meet the learning needs of every student in today’s academically diverse classroom but in a shared practice, the general educator provides content expertise while the special educator adapts the delivery of that content using evidence based practices (EBPs) specifically designed to meet the individualized learning needs of students with disabilities and typical peers who may be at risk for academic failure (Lenz & Deshler, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).

EBPs developed for practical settings do not originate in the classroom but are developed under carefully controlled research conditions (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2008). They are then disseminated to practitioners via a hub-and-spoke model of professional development where profes-

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