

Arts for Learning/Miami Professional Development Program: Does It Measure Up?

Janet Evans

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between student achievement, teacher practice, and professional development programs for teachers. A theoretical program model is then created and used to evaluate the Arts for Learning/Miami program model.

As schools strive to meet federal, state and local standards for student achievement, the role and value of professional development is brought into question. Does continuing professional education have an impact on student performance? Is there direct correlation between teacher practices and student achievement and, if so, does staff development improve teacher practices? What are the defined goals and desired outcomes of teacher development programs when student test scores are the primary measurement for success? What other factors influence student achievement and how do they impact professional development programming? When reform initiatives are expressed through professional development programs, what barriers arise to prevent successful teacher development?

As the fourth largest school system in the nation servicing a widely diverse student population, Miami Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) must ensure that its development initiatives reap results. In 2000, the MDCPS partnered with the Miami-Dade Department of Cultural Affairs and Young Audiences to create Arts for Learning/Miami (A4L/Miami), a non-profit organization that works to advance teaching and learning by providing professional development programming in arts-integrated, team teaching methods. The program was initiated in response to concerns that the arts were being marginalized as testing on core curriculum state standards became emphasized. Similar programs in other states and scholarly research gave evidence that infusing the arts into classroom activities helps to teach core subjects by addressing multiple learning styles (Gardner, 1999; Gardner & Hatch, 1989). The program teaches teachers how to utilize arts-integrated methodology to bring learning to life. A series of government, corporate and private grants now fund the A4L/Miami program. Recent funding through The Children's Trust (which was created through a Miami-Dade county voter referendum in 2002) makes the professional development program available to teachers, early childhood professionals, parents, after-school activity leaders and teaching artists.

In this paper, the A4L/Miami professional development model will be measured against a theoretical model of continuing professional education to assess gaps in performance. Documents from government agencies and professional organizations, research findings, evaluation reports, and scholarly writings are used to comprise the theoretical model by which the A4L model is analyzed.

Theoretical Framework

First, the relationship between student performance, teacher practice, and professional development activities for teachers is explored. Next, a sample model is established through the review and comparison of various theoretical models of best practices for professional

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development programming. Once the sample model is defined, barriers to successful implementation are explored. The A4L/Miami professional development model is then measured against the sample to discern discrepancies and the results are analyzed for feedback on future action.

Linking Professional Development Programs to Student Performance via Teacher Practice

While student performance is ultimately the final determinant of professional development effectiveness, it is nearly impossible to draw clear empirical conclusions that link the two in a direct cause/effect relationship. However, it is possible to obtain good evidence. (Guskey, 1999; Guskey & Sparks, 2002; Haycock, 1998). The Education Trust conducted an exhaustive review of teacher effectiveness data systems (also known as value-added systems) in urban schools across the country over the course of a decade (Carey, 2004). The data from this review traces clear evidence relating quality of teacher practice to student performance. By establishing the impact of teacher practices on student achievement, the importance of effective teacher development is verified through extension. As quoted by the director of the Education Trust, “If education leaders want to close the achievement gap, they must focus, first and foremost, on developing qualified teachers” (Haycock, 1998, p. 12).

Guskey and Sparks (2002) extended current research to develop a theoretical model that illustrates the multidimensional relationship between professional development for teachers and improvements in student learning. The premise of the model is that many factors influence the quality of professional development programs. Furthermore, student performance is influenced not only by the knowledge and practice of teachers, but administrators and parents as well. The model was tested on five in-depth case studies with the conclusion that the relationship between professional development and improved student achievement is complex but not chaotic or random. The results also underscored the importance of utilizing a systemic approach to professional development.

Establishing Best Practices in Professional Development

A comprehensive evaluative report authored by Mullens, Leighton, Laguarda, and O’Brien (1996) and published by the U. S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) outlines optimum professional development goals and practices. The report clarifies the difference between training and educating. Training is defined as transferring technical information or mastering proven procedures. Education (reform development) entails learning to “apply broad concepts of reform to specific classroom contexts” and to solve complex problems in collaboration with others (Mullens et al., 1996, p. 23). Focus is placed on analytical and reflective learning that utilizes teachers’ current skills and prior experience as a resource for future learning. This open-ended, collaborative, problem-based learning model offers teachers “meaningful intellectual, social and emotional engagement with ideas, with materials and with colleagues” (Mullens et al., 1996, p. 24). Moreover, the report emphasizes that the learning goals for teachers must be compatible with the learning goals for students and must be directly linked to broader school improvement goals. This ensures overall coherence, builds support by reinforcing individual goals within the organizational structure, and, thereby, promotes continuous inquiry, reflection and learning as an integral part of the school culture.

Aside from program design, the contents, delivery, context and methods of evaluation are also discussed. Appropriate program content ties-in to practical subject matter and teaching strategies that are rooted in classroom concerns. Group process skills (brainstorming, decision-making, consensus building) are also forms of content that link to more successful reform.

Four aspects of delivery are mentioned in the 1996 NCES report: (a) multiple ways to participate; (b) diverse opportunities for learning (e.g., collaboration, reflection and discussion, experimentation, action research, on line resources); (c) intensity and duration that allows for internalization of new knowledge and the ability to exercise that knowledge with new practical skills; (d) integration with outside resources to encourage ongoing exchange of ideas and information (Mullens et al., 1996).

The NCES report specifies that the context within which a program functions is a huge determinant to its success. Thoroughly committed, top-down, institutional support is most effective. Such commitment might include designating professional development as a line item in the budget or restructuring time to allow for team collaboration and individual research and reflection. The most successful schools work to create learning cultures. Rather than focusing on individualized professional development, they work to develop teaching communities that continually share knowledge. This ensures ongoing learning by allowing opportunities for teachers to mentor each other and to offer formative feedback.

Finally, the NCES provides standards of evaluation by stating that an effective professional development program produces changes on several levels: the organizational culture of the school, teachers' knowledge and beliefs, teachers' skills in the classroom, and student achievements (Mullens et al., 1996).

The Florida State Department of Education Office of School Improvement (n.d.) lists 12 characteristics of effective professional development, most of which coincide with the elements listed in the NCES report. However, one of those characteristics warrants separate mention: "[the program] addresses issues surrounding diverse needs of learners in a non-prescriptive way to help teachers include all students' needs in the planning of their teaching" (Mullens et al., 1996, p. 1).

Several professional organizations list characteristics of effective continuing education programs. The American Federation of Teachers (2002) outlines 11 guidelines for developing effective professional development programs and the National Staff Development Council (2001) lists context, content and process standards, all of which reiterate the national and state guidelines listed above. Facilitation of inter-professional collaboration for practical problem solving and the use of performance-based evaluations are emphasized by Queeney (2000). She also speaks to the importance of catering to varying career-oriented needs and to including a practical component that allows for theory-to-practice experience.

Barriers to Program Effectiveness

Now that the value of quality continuing education for teachers has been established, and the characteristics of a successful model defined, it is important to consider possible obstacles that can hinder a program's impact. Although the most effective program models build on existing teacher experience through a practical component that allows for theory-to-practice experience, practice-oriented continuing education requires time, money, resources, and mentoring. Often, these resources are limited or not available. Because policy-makers ultimately mandate professional development programming, participants sometimes feel coerced to attend. Many professional development programs embody an attitude that sees workforce development as a re-tooling of employees in order to meet the next set of organizational changes. This often leads to embitterment on the part of participants and the belief that their existing knowledge is not enough (Fenwick, 2000). An emphasis on accountability can frighten teachers from taking the risks required to learn new things, especially if they do not believe that the administration and/or school culture is committed to supporting their success (Fenwick, 2000). Problems of group dynamics within collaborative learning situations can dramatically hinder the growth of an

entire team. While increased inter-professional collaboration offers opportunities for new learning, it can also challenge team dynamics. Garmston (2004) offers advice on how to manage group dynamics to keep the group focused, cooperative and productive. Lastly, while teacher development programs sometimes address issues of diversity, inclusion, and ‘the outsider’ perspective as regards teachers’ work with students, few programs address the need for inclusive practices towards the adult participants within professional development programs (van Broekhuizen & Dougherty, 1999).

Arts for Learning Professional Development Model

Few gaps appear when comparing the theoretical model of best practices as listed above, with the A4L/Miami professional development model. Wide support from district and community leadership allows for coordinated, systemic implementation in a supportive context that helps to overcome barriers to success. Content is directly related to MDCPS reform goals as well as to specific teacher interests and needs. Emphasis is placed on collaboration, and the application of broad concepts to specific classroom practice. Services are delivered in ways that coordinate with practical concerns and allow for equitable, ongoing access to multi-media resources and mentoring. Ongoing analytic and reflective practices allow for continuous formative evaluation and specific summative methods are used to measure desired outcomes (Birnie, 2005). A detailed comparison of the models is listed below.

Because it was originally established in partnership with the MDCPS district, the A4L/Miami model works within the school culture and enjoys strong leadership support at many levels. Examples include the cooperative restructuring of school schedules to allow for team planning sessions, funds for substitute teachers and after-hour work, and the provision of resources and adequate rewards for teacher participation.

The goals of A4L/Miami program align with those of the MDCPS, which in turn are aligned with state and federal goals. A4L/Miami is committed to improving student learning in core curriculum subjects, particularly reading, language arts, math, science and social studies, (although ESOL, inclusion, gifted and other specialty class concerns are also addressed.) To that end, the content of the program teaches practical methodology that participants can apply to their classroom practices.

Participating teachers work in collaboration with colleagues to design multi-disciplinary learning units that are rooted in the specified learning objectives of their classes. This collaborative process of developing creative solutions to practical concerns requires participants to understand and apply the broad concepts of arts-integration and multi-disciplinary team teaching. As a result participants increase their knowledge of the learning process, extend their teaching skills and improve their teaching practices. Because they are creating and implementing their own, unique learning units, participants are able to utilize their current skills and experience in authentic ways. The work is simultaneously personal and collaborative, allowing for significant intellectual, social and emotional learning. Workbooks, multi-media research materials, organizational materials, and online resources are given to all participants.

An initial, full-day session is designed to convey the big concepts, offer first-hand experience with the methodology, instruct in the use of multi-media research, and begin team planning. Later, a follow-up half-day planning session with the facilitator occurs in the school. A mentoring program offers ongoing assistance with research, group facilitation, and situating the broad idea into classroom objectives. In the process of collaborating with colleagues and outside professionals, the teachers learn effective group processes and find meaningful ways to participate. Teachers are paid stipends for after-hour sessions and acquire continuing education

credits when the course is completed. Funding for substitute teachers is provided during in-school half-day sessions to ensure that all teachers in the team are present.

The learning units include live-arts experiences with community cultural institutions and professional teaching artists who specialize in customizing their art form to help teach core concepts. Field trips, in-school performances, and artist residencies are used to offer multiple-style learning opportunities. Teaching teams are encouraged to involve administration, parents, and other community members.

The initial session and the team planning processes occur in beginning of the school year. Implementation of team learning units occurs throughout the school year, as per the individual team schedules. Facilitation and mentoring is provided to the participating teachers throughout the duration of the program. A county-wide exhibition is mounted at the end of the school year to celebrate and share the products and processes of the learning units. Finally, a half-day group session is conducted at the end of the school year in order to reflect, evaluate, offer feedback and share best practices. This sustained process of facilitation, mentoring, and support over a nine-month period allows time for teachers to internalize new knowledge, exercise it in practice and reflect on the outcomes.

Because the A4L/Miami program is voluntary and builds on teachers' existing skills and knowledge, most participants are involved and motivated. Those who are reluctant usually become motivated when they are able to contribute personal knowledge, skills, ideas, and experience. Fellow teammates help to mentor those who are less confident. The mentor program helps to monitor group process and assist with individual concerns as needed.

Further research is needed to better determine the appropriateness of the model from a standpoint of diversity. The flexibility of the practitioner-centered Arts for Learning professional development model accommodates the needs and interests of teachers at every level of career experience, any subject matter or special teaching program (e.g., ESOL, LEP, inclusion, and gifted) and any grade level. The model also addresses a variety of personal learning styles. However, the underlying assumptions upon which it is based have not been formally analyzed from the perspective of alternative culture, gender identity or abilities.

Past evaluation reports of the A4L/Miami professional development model do not include qualitative or quantitative means by which to measure change in the organizational cultures of the schools. Changes in teachers' knowledge and beliefs are measured through the use of teacher surveys, interviews and reflection sessions. Changes in teachers' practice are measured through documentation of lesson plans, learning units, student activities and the culminating event. Finally, changes in student achievement are measured by documenting student attendance, assignments, projects, and tests (Bateman, Bransford, & Moore, 2006; Birnie, 2005).

Conclusions and Implications

Results of the analysis show that the A4L model conforms to the optimum characteristics of best practices with little variance. However, a means by which to gauge its impact on school culture must be acquired and applied. Furthermore, the underlying assumptions upon which the model is based (aligned, primarily with nationally published comprehensive research findings) have not been adequately reviewed from the perspective of participant diversity concerns. Further research must be conducted to determine if the model is appropriately inclusive.

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