



Professional development as product implementation training



Christopher B. Crowley

229 Education Building, College of Education, Wayne State University, 5425 Gullen Mall, Detroit, MI 48202, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Professional development is bundled with the sale of curriculum materials.
- Publishers of curricula are being positioned as expert generators of knowledge.
- Some professional development is similar to forms of product implementation training.

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to maintain tighter control over the curriculum by external stakeholders in the United States are evolving, and one such way this is occurring is through the reshaping of required professional development for practicing educators. To demonstrate how this is happening, this article critically analyses the seemingly common practice of bundling professional development session with the sale of curriculum materials and programs marketed to schools and districts. By approaching inservice teacher education as linked to specific curricula, these types of professional development sessions are constructed in a manner more likely to have greater similarity with forms of product implementation training.

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1. Introduction

The curriculum has long since represented a site of struggle (Kliebard, 2004), not only with regards to its role in the sanctioning of official knowledge (Apple, 2014) but also in terms of the contested means through which it is disseminated in schools—the most prominent form of which occurs through the use of textbooks produced by commercial publishers (Apple, 1988). Attempts to exercise control over the curriculum have taken countless forms, such as the politicized role of appointed education boards responsible for overseeing state-wide textbook adoption policies, efforts to ban the presence of certain books from school libraries, and attempts to mandate the teaching of religious beliefs alongside the teaching of scientific facts, among many others. Much less recognized has been the potential role of inservice teacher education to function as a method of both influencing teachers' instructional practices and externalizing processes of generating stronger

control over the curriculum.

As recognized in the report on “International Perspectives on U.S. Education Policy and Practice” (2010), the status and treatment of teachers can vary rather significantly between nations. For example, the degree of professional agency afforded to teachers in Finland—a national recognized perennially for its high levels of student achievement—offers a worthwhile conceptualization of teaching and teachers' professional identities as mediating factors contributing to students' learning and success (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Such research is instructive in terms of both contextualizing and countering some of the impulses behind the types of trends described in this article as it pertains to professional development for inservice teachers in the United States.

This article argues that one of the ways in which efforts to maintain tighter control over the curriculum by external stakeholders currently occurs through the use of required professional development for inservice teachers. To demonstrate how this is happening, this study discusses the seemingly common practice of bundling professional development sessions with the sale of curriculum materials and programs marketed to schools and school

E-mail address: cbcrowley@wayne.edu.

districts.

The practice of bundling professional development with curriculum materials mirrors forms of commercial product implementation training. Whereas professional development for practicing teachers is widely considered more effective when it is collaborative and inquiry-based, some publishers of commercially produced curriculum materials and programs position teachers as technicians in need of procedural knowledge. The act of situating publishers as the expert generators of knowledge related to both the curriculum and instructional practice deserves critical analysis and investigation.

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

This study both follows and builds upon critical traditions in education research in the fields of teacher education and curriculum studies (Apple, 2014, 1988). Locating the curriculum within schools was in essence part of a political project (Schubert, 1982). It is in this regard that the school curriculum needs to be recognized as inherently ideological and political (Apple, 2006; Pinar & Bowers, 1992) as well as having to a certain degree a foundation that stems from a purpose of social control—something that is part of the school curriculum from the very first moments when children begin formal schooling (Apple, 2004; Apple & King, 1977).

In one regard, the purpose of bundling professional development training for inservice teachers with the sale of curriculum materials and programs can be viewed as a straightforward means to an end. Training teachers exactly how to follow a predesigned curriculum is, in the minds of some (Carroll et al., 2007; Keller-Margulis, 2012), key to ensuring that students receive an intended schooling experience. Some research has approached this topic in terms of discussions about fidelity of implementation (O'Donnell, 2008), particularly as it relates to processes of enacting educational reforms. Indeed, the practice of bundling training sessions for teachers with the sale of curriculum materials is perhaps at best only partially a matter of ensuring implementation fidelity. Much like how analyses of the hidden curriculum have for a long time sought to capture what is taught to students beyond the official knowledge contained in textbooks (Anyon, 1980), this study seeks to explore a potentially more complex factor than implementation fidelity as a way to understand what is occurring—namely that connecting professional development training to specific curricula is rooted in efforts to better ensure control over the curriculum.

Critics of curriculum reform methods that are preoccupied with notions of implementation fidelity charge that these approaches towards addressing pressing education concerns represent little more than a one-size-fits-all way of conceptualizing the curriculum (Lieberman, 1995). Ensuring that something is equal does not mean that it is inherently equitable. Prepackaged “teacher-proofed” curricula could be argued to represent the very opposite of what researchers and educators have in mind when they discuss the importance of culturally responsive approaches to teaching, learning, and the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Moreover, the adoption of a tightly scripted curriculum not only serves as a hindrance to the enactment of what some have discussed with regards to a critical re-envisioning of the curriculum (Au, 2012) but it also impedes ongoing efforts to decolonize the curriculum (Brown & Au, 2014; Desai, 2015).

As Kliebard (2004) suggests, “perhaps the most profound standardizing influence on the curriculum of the nineteenth-century schools was the widespread use of popular textbooks ... teachers had to rely on such textbooks as the standard for what to teach, [and] these books contributed to a growing nationalization of the curriculum” (p. 2). The types of standardization stemming from the

use of textbooks contribute powerfully to the standardization of knowledge within schools. By extension, the prevalence of commercially produced curriculum materials is arguably intensifying this influence. It is further enabled through the practice of bundling training sessions for inservice teachers with the sale of curricula, which not only further standardizes curricular knowledge but also standardizes and narrows pedagogical knowledge.

The knowledge related to effective instructional practices and what counts as “good” teaching—as well as the knowledge related to student learning and successful demonstrations of achievement—become subsumed by the sanctioned norms perpetuated by a discourse preoccupied with the reductive notion of doing “what works.” Luke (2004) argues that this comes to represent “a retrograde recommodification of knowledge, as systems and teachers increasingly turn or return to an industrial model of teaching, with packages, tests, and standardized pedagogic sequences seen as enabling both compliance to new criteria for performativity and, more to the point, simple occupational survival in a work environment of proliferating curricular and administrative bids for time” (p. 1428).

With regards to the research literature on professional development, a wide variety of programs and lifelong learning opportunities can be recognized as forms of professional development—single day workshops/seminars, college courses, collaborative teacher inquiry groups, university-school partnerships/professional development school programs, participation in regional and national conferences, co-teaching/team teaching, etc. And each year over \$1 billion are spent on professional development for teachers at the state, local, and federal levels (Desimone, 2009).

There exists general agreement about features of effective professional development for practicing teachers. These characteristics tend to include the following: that the duration of the professional development program is ongoing, that it involves collaborative and active learning opportunities, that it is focused on pedagogy and student learning, that it takes into consideration a variety of curricular content, and that there is overall coherence (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2006, 1996; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2001, 2008; Sleeter, 2008). However, practices do not always reflect these aspects of professional learning, and an increasing number of stakeholders are becoming involved processes related to inservice teacher education.

At the same time that significant investments in inservice teacher education are being made—both in terms of time and money—the roles and purposes of teacher education writ large are being called into question. Nowhere has this perhaps been more evident than in the, at times, rather outlandish remarks from prominent critics of university-based teacher education. Such criticisms should by no means be assumed inconsequential, given the fact that university-based programs are not only responsible for the preparation of the overwhelming majority of prospective/pre-service teachers for their work in classroom (Zeichner & Hutchinson, 2008) but are also extensively involved in offering graduate coursework and professional development for inservice teachers.

For example, Art Levine, the former president of Teachers College Columbia, claimed that schools of education represent the “Dodge City” of higher education (Levine, 2006). Russ Whitehurst, the former director of the US Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences argued that rather than focusing on the preparation of highly effective teachers, there need to be programs that simply produce “good enough teachers” (Imig & Imig, 2008). Rod Paige, a former US Secretary of Education, claimed that teachers’ formal preparation for teaching does not matter and that effective

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