A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR DESIGNING TEACHER-CENTERED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Educators often experience significant levels of stress in the workplace that impact their enthusiasm about the profession and longevity in the field of education. Some personal impacts of stress on educators may include emotional numbing, feeling shut down, loss of energy, and increased illness or fatigue. Recently, some schools and districts have begun investing in programming to support educator well-being; however, these initiatives are rarely developed and co-led by educators themselves, and they do not address systemic issues within schools that may serve as barriers to teachers' well-being. In this paper we draw upon existing theories and research, Critical Professional Engagement, Healing-Centered Engagement, and Critical Love Praxis, to explore the development and use of a conceptual framework to support the design of teacher-centered and justice-oriented professional development.

Keywords:
Critical Professional Development, K-12 Education, Teacher, Well-Being Wellness

1. Introduction

Teacher attrition rates are high in PreK-12 educational settings resulting in frequent teacher turnover. At least 40% of new teachers leave the profession in less than 5 years and high turnover rates are associated with costly consequences. For example, high teacher turnover has incurred costs related to training for instructional programming, as well as mentoring and support for new teachers (Acton et al., 2015). Attrition is only one part of the issue; as teachers who decide to stay in the field of education often report experiencing high rates of burnout, as well as mental and emotional fatigue (Turner et al., 2019). Personal impacts of stress on educators may include emotional numbing, feeling shut down, loss of energy, and increased illness or fatigue. The COVID-19 pandemic that dramatically shifted teaching methods, pedagogies, and professional requirements has only exacerbated longstanding issues for teachers in public educational settings. Issues of attrition, burnout, and mental and emotional fatigue alongside alarming rates of nationwide teacher shortages and barriers to teacher retention have turned the attention of educators, their administrators, and researchers toward identifying solutions that may help sustain and grow a motivated and effective teaching force.

One important area of inquiry for researchers and practitioners is teacher wellbeing. Teacher well-being is essential for retaining currently practicing teachers and has been associated with sustaining practicing teachers in the workforce. We draw upon two sources to define well-being, Seligman (2011) whose approach is based on the individual experiences of positive emotion, positive relationships, sense of purpose, and accomplishment, and Acton and Glasgow (2015) who highlight the significance of well-being as a collaborative process that is co-constructed in a community of others (colleagues and students). Teacher attrition rates are high in PreK-12 educational settings resulting in frequent teacher turnover. At least 40% of new teachers leave the profession in less than 5 years and high turnover rates are associated with costly consequences. For example, high teacher turnover has incurred costs related to training for instructional programming, as well as mentoring and support for new teachers (Acton et al., 2015). Attrition is only one part of the issue; as teachers who decide to stay in the field of education often report experiencing high rates of burnout, as well as mental and emotional fatigue (Turner et al., 2019). Personal impacts of stress on educators may include emotional numbing, feeling shut down, loss of energy, and increased illness or fatigue. The COVID-19 pandemic that dramatically shifted

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Teachers who are negatively impacted by work-related stress are more likely to be affected by mental and emotional stressors, to disengage from their work, and to leave their profession. Therefore, it is in the best interest of those seeking to retain and recruit teachers to reduce the impacts of teachers' work-related stressors. Some districts and administrators have responded; many implementing wellness interventions designed through a top-down approach that does not center teacher-identified needs for wellness and well-being. In addition to intervention designs that do not always meet the needs of the target audience (teachers); at times, efforts to support teacher wellness have been subverted and undermined by educational system policies that work against the goals of important aspects of wellness. Therefore, there is a need for interventions that are both teacher-centered and equipped to support educators in addressing systemic barriers that may impede their wellness practices. We sought to address this issue by designing a conceptual framework that could guide the development of teacher-centered programs focused on supporting well-being and social justice. We sought to answer the following questions:

Q1. How can we combine salient attributes of critical professional development (CPD), healing-centered engagement (HCE), and critical love praxis (CLP) to create a conceptual model for teacher-focused wellbeing?

Q2. What planning documents can we produce using our conceptual framework to develop a professional development program?

As a team, we collected data for and analyzed 3 theoretical frameworks to create a conceptual model for professional development focused on teacher wellbeing. We found six shared

characteristics among the three theories and used those to organize our model. We then used the model to design planning documents, including a guide to direct facilitators and participants who wish to design their programs.

2. Review of Literature

Much effort has been put toward improving teachers' instructional strategies through professional development, but less has focused on increasing teachers' job satisfaction and supporting their well-being. This is problematic because of the continuously increasing demands that are placed on educators who are often left under resourced and unsupported. Teachers are also faced with managing the impacts of sociopolitical issues, such as book bans and curriculum regulations that represent the insidious nature of oppression and inequitable power structures. As teachers are called upon to do the work of social justice education as part of their pedagogical practices, it is now more important than ever to support their well-being (Smith et al., 2024). Homogenous approaches to professional development are too often taken up in response to the need for teacher support. Unfortunately, teachers are often dissatisfied with professional development that is not individualized and attentive to their specific needs (Liu & Du, 2022). Similarly, top-down approaches that assign and require professional development absent of meaningful teacher input are not teacher-centered and often fail to meet teachers' needs.

Critical professional development is a framework for social justice-oriented professional development that is teacher-centered and uniquely designed to support marginalized educators by creating a sense of community around pedagogical practice and personal well-being (Lisle-Johnson, 2020). Healing-centered engagement has been identified as a valuable practice for trauma-informed practice with K-12 students and its principles are also useful for supporting educators who have experienced traumas (Kokka, 2023; Nguyen, K.E., 2023; Polleck, J., 2022). Critical love praxis helps educators promote inclusivity and equity in their practice by engaging in reflexivity (Perry et al., 2022). We hypothesized that the theoretical frameworks, Critical love praxis, Healing-centered engagement, and Critical Professional Development would be useful in addressing existing issues with teachers' professional development.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1. Critical Professional Development

Critical Professional Development (CPD) is an approach to professional development that focuses on social justice in education and recognizes teachers as political agents with the

power to transform their local and extended communities. CPD programs differ from more traditional professional development models in two ways: 1) they are politicized and critical because they address topics related to issues of power within society as well as social justice in education and 2) they are dialogical among participants and facilitators. The CPD framework contrasts with other frameworks that view education as apolitical and that take an authoritative approach to the design and engagement of their programs. CPD prioritizes teachers' needs through a process of shared power and decision-making throughout the design and facilitation process of professional development opportunities.

Kohli and colleagues (2015) designed CPD to counter top-down approaches to professional development that do not foreground what teachers identify as important and necessary for their professional growth. The researchers describe top-down approaches to professional development as "anti-dialogical" (p. 7; Freire, 1970) and emphasize the lack of mutual decision-making and participation among professional development organizers, facilitators, and participants. CPD counters top-down approaches to professional development by positioning teachers as experts on their experiential and intellectual knowledge (especially that related to social justice). Because it is a framework for design, CPD can be applied in different ways to professional development programs; however, all approaches should be grounded in dialogical action and used as a method for social and political engagement (Freire, 1970). Kohli and colleagues (2015) found among several models using the CPD framework that they each– shared power among participants and facilitators/organizers, centered students' and teachers' needs through a process of cultural synthesis, and developed unity among participants.

We used CPD to inform the design of our conceptual framework for the S.E.L.F. professional development sessions because 1) we wanted participants to take an active role in their learning, 2) we wanted to address topics and issues that reflected teacher-identified concerns, and 3) we sought to address issues of power related to social justice in education and the broader society. The CPD framework guides creating humanizing spaces for teachers to explore the possibilities for social transformation.

3.2. Healing Centered Engagement

Healing-centered engagement (HCE) is an approach to addressing trauma that is designed to support individuals in addressing undesirable behaviors by working collectively to identify and address deeply rooted harms. HCE takes an asset-based and culturally informed

approach to well-being where the goal of engagement is both to address trauma and to consider possibilities for healing. Individuals who participate in HCE are encouraged to take agentic action toward cultivating their sense of well-being by using tools such as critical reflection and empathy. Participants are encouraged to engage with others through a collective approach to well-being that is interdependent and action-oriented.

HCE consists of four key elements that guide its implementation; HCE is political, culturally grounded, asset-driven, and supports both participants and facilitators as they engage in healing practices. We considered how each element was present in our conceptual framework, paying close attention to how we could ensure support for both facilitators and participants in the wellness community, which is the element that is unique to HCE; the other three elements are shared either explicitly or implicitly with CPD.

We used HCE principles to inform our conceptual model because of the well-documented trauma experienced by teachers in all levels of K-12 and post-secondary education. As we collaborate with teachers to discuss and practice wellbeing we acknowledge the possibilities of raising both trauma and the need for healing as part of our work. HCE principles helped us anticipate how participants may present their traumas during our collective conversations and they guided us to leverage participants' individual and collective cultural assets as part of their healing practices. Therefore, we did not commiserate or identify solely as traumatized individuals, but as agents of change that drew upon our ancestral traditions, histories, and identities to heal ourselves.

We also recognize the limitations of our agentic action in pursuit of well-being, especially when oppression is implicated in our trauma. Thus, we needed to focus on power distributions within interpersonal relationships and society more broadly as part of our collective work. HCE strategies guided participants to view traumas through a lens that highlighted their systemic nature, and placed them in context with related social issues and policies; for example, within schools and broader systems of education. It is these components– critical reflection, politically focused, and action-oriented that represent our reasons for referencing this framework in our conceptual design. The components of HCE are well-aligned with CPD, and offer strategies for addressing trauma and building empathy for others which are both important and timely considerations for public educators. Programs grounded in HCE are culturally sustaining and asset-driven; they are designed to guide participants through a process of acknowledging their traumas within a sociopolitical context and to draw upon their strengths and cultures to collectively pursue

well-being. This led us to design our program in a way that leveraged participants' strengths and encouraged them to focus on the well-being that they wanted for themselves.

3.3. Critical Love Praxis

Critical love praxis (CLP) is rooted in a critical theory of love that requires love to (a) work in favor of social justice, (b) be grounded in the experiences of Black and Brown people, and (3) be measured by how well pedagogies and practices foster and support community and healing (Brooks, 2017). CLP draws from the work of bell hooks (2000) which requires a "love ethic", or care and deep concern for one's community, as necessary for liberation through learning, and Martin Luther King, Jr. who suggests that love demands both tender care and social justice (p. 94). Similarly, a critical love praxis works in pursuit of social justice in education and deep care for students who are in our case the professional development participants.

Critical love Praxis includes the pedagogical practices that emanate from a "love ethic" or critical theory of love. CLP is executed in many different ways by educators with their students. Starks and colleagues (2022) found that a consistent theme across practices of critical love was the development of homeplace– a term and idea credited to hooks that is used to describe a place of safety, collectivism, resistance, joy, and healing specifically for Black students. We focused on the politically focused development of homeplace for our professional development program which supports participants with positioning themselves as change agents and leveraging their authority and privilege as educators for their agency (Starks et al., 2021).

Critical Professional Development, Healing Centered Engagement, and Critical Love Praxis are knitted together by their learner-centered approaches and attention to issues of oppression through socio-political concern and advocacy for social justice. Each one of the frameworks independently addresses unique aspects related to our goals for the professional development program, and by combining them we were able to create a conceptual framework with a strong foundation in professional development (CPD), specific guidance for addressing and healing from trauma (HCE), and support for developing caring concern and political agency for social justice. In the next section, we provide details of how we combined CPD, HCE, and CLP, and share the resulting conceptual framework along with artifacts that describe the process.

4. Methodology

To create the conceptual model that would guide the teacher-centered program to support well-being, we mined texts from three theoretical frameworks that had the potential to inform our design. First, Critical professional development (CPD) supported us with using best practices for professional development programs in our design, while ensuring that we also attended to the systemic nature of issues teachers may face in and outside of school environments. Next, Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is a set of practices specifically designed to address trauma, and it was instrumental in guiding us to consider how to appropriately address traumatic experiences that may be discussed and unearthed during vulnerable moments in the wellness program sessions. Last, Critical Love Praxis (CLP) is a pedagogical orientation that helps guide our teaching practice; ensuring that we prioritize care and concern for the communities that we serve and advocate for social justice for ourselves and others. Our key research questions were:

Q1. How can we combine salient attributes of critical professional development (CPD), healing-centered engagement (HCE), and critical love praxis (CLP) to create a conceptual model for teacher-focused wellbeing?

Q2. What planning documents can we produce using our conceptual framework to develop a professional development program?

Our data collection consisted of a team of 3 researchers working collectively to identify research literature about each theoretical framework. We read widely and discussed the goals of our professional development program. We identified CPD, HCE, and CLP as well-positioned theories to build our conceptual model. We used search terms limiting the search to the exact names of the theoretical framework (ex; "critical love praxis") and combined those terms with teacher, professional development, wellbeing, and other related terms (ex; "healing centered engagement" + teacher wellbeing). We found 27 related articles and each researcher read all documents to identify salient themes from the literature. Next, all researchers compared salient themes, discussed discrepancies, and came to a consensus. Finally, researchers agreed on the salient characteristics of each theoretical framework.

To analyze the data we conducted a theoretical analysis by reading across all three frameworks to identify shared characteristics. If a characteristic was present in two or more theoretical frameworks then we included it as part of the conceptual framework. We identified 6 shared characteristics and then used them to inform the drafting of our planning documents.

5. Results

We present the results in this section based on our findings for each research question.

5.1. Research Question 1

How can we combine salient attributes of critical professional development (CPD), healing-centered engagement (HCE), and critical love praxis (CLP) to create a conceptual model for teacher-focused wellbeing?

Table 1 represents how we combined salient attributes of CPD, HCE, and CLP to identify shared characteristics that would inform our conceptual model. We found that there were 6 shared characteristics among critical professional development, healing-centered engagement, and critical love praxis. The shared characteristics are named across the top row of this table and their intended use is to guide the design of professional development sessions focused on wellness and wellbeing. Professional development that draws upon our conceptual model must be dialogical (between facilitators and participants), critical and political in its content, culturally aware, and fluid in its power structures, it should teachers to have agency, and support participants in resisting oppressive forces. The six shared characteristics are present in at least 2 of the 3 theoretical frameworks we referenced and we used them to develop the conceptual model.

Table 1: *Professional Development Framework*

Professional Development Framework

Evidence of Shared Characteristics	Dialogical	Critical and Political Nature	Cultural Awareness	Fluid Power	Teachers positioned as experts	Attention to resisting oppressive forces
Theoretical Frameworks *Critical Professional Development (Kohli, 2015)*	Dialogical Process Cooperation	Political Agency Political Organizing	Cultural Synthesis	Shared Power	Teachers as Experts	Unity
Healing Centered Engagement (Ginwright, 2018)		Explicitly political, not clinical Critical Reflection	Culturally Grounded Culture		Agency	
Critical Love Praxis (Starks & Terry, 2023)	Dialogic Creative opportunities for visibility	Critical, civic engagement spirit of activism	Collectivism	Bidirectional Leadership	Teachers as change agents	Resistance

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

5.2. Research Question 2

What planning documents can we use the conceptual framework to produce that would support the development of a teacher-centered professional development program?

We developed several documents representing our conceptual model that could be used to plan professional development opportunities, including a scope and sequence, a template for designing a professional development experience, and one of the most important documents that we developed was a list of critical questions to consider for each of the six shared characteristics. We developed a set of reference questions to help ensure that each characteristic is purposefully addressed when planning professional development sessions. Table 2 provides examples of the questions that were developed to provide guidance on designing professional development with

three of the six shared characteristics (dialogical engagement, fluid/bi-directional power, and cultural awareness).

Table 2. *Session Design Guidance*

Session Design Guidance

Characteristic	Related Questions
Dialogical Engagement	1. How do participants share in the development of the session (topic selection, organizational structures, etc.)? 2. How are participants' ideas and experiences included in the session to ensure the visibility of all? 3. Does the design include opportunities for cooperative and authentic dialogue? Is there built-in time and space for participants and facilitators to be heard (ex; through storytelling)? 4. Are there explicit opportunities for participants to serve as leaders? 5. How do activities draw upon participants' thoughts about topics and readings?
Fluid/Bi-directional Power	1. What is the evidence of shared power between participants and organizers in the session? 2. What organizational measures allow participants to make adjustments to subsequent PD sessions?
Cultural Awareness	1. How are participants' needs and perspectives centered in the session design? 2. Does the session include intentional opportunities for community-building? 3. Is there evidence of restorative conversations about identity? 4. What facilitators, etc. are sourced from the participants' network and community?

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

6. Conclusion

What we learned is that we can combine existing theories to create a conceptual framework that supports the design of a teacher-centered wellness program. We also know that using these particular theories, Critical professional development, healing-centered engagement, and critical love praxis will support us in planning sessions that can address teachers' trauma and also encourage them to resist systemic barriers that impede their well-being. While the conceptual model is useful for planning the wellness professional development program, we anticipate there will be barriers to recruitment and implementation. Hence, our next steps are to investigate the process of using this model with teachers currently in K-12 educational settings.

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