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We developed this special issue on professional development for equity and social justice in the hopes of disrupting commonly held notions of what it means to engage in professional development for and with teachers. Over the past five years, we have individually and collectively designed and facilitated several long-term professional development projects for inservice English teachers. In our conversations with each other, we often felt as though we were creating these experiences from scratch. We pored over literature reviews and incorporated the features of high-quality professional development they suggested, but most of our learning came as we worked alongside teachers to improve educational opportunities for their students. Our hope in this issue is to provide a roadmap of the various ways that intentional and powerful professional learning can occur. It may also offer some lessons of “what not to do.”

Synergistically, Michie’s (2017) talk at the CEE Summer Conference, titled “Same as It Never Was: On My (Re)Turn to Teaching,” came at an opportune time in our writing of this editorial. Michie framed his professional learning experiences as a former professor who had returned to the classroom as an eighth-grade English teacher in Chicago Public Schools. His opening slide explaining “A few reasons I shouldn’t be speaking to you today” resonated with us, as it laid bare his sense of inadequacy as a teacher-scholar with a vulnerability we found laudable. In the same spirit, we acknowledge that we may seem an unexpected choice to edit this special issue; as early-career scholars, we are just beginning our journey to understanding the complex issue of designing professional development with a focus on equity and social justice. We approach this work with the caveat that we know we...
still have much to learn about professional development practices, and this special issue has been one way for us to engage as critically reflexive scholars.

As Michie’s keynote emphasized, teacher professional development should (a) focus on building relevancy into school curricula for students and (b) teach toward justice in communities. In his classroom example, Michie shared that he gave his students video cameras to record footage of their lives outside of school in Chicago. Michie found that having students record and (re)present their neighborhoods gave him many insights into his students’ lives. However, when he suggested that practice be shared during a professional development day at his school, administrators shot him down in favor of a focus on the literacy issue du jour, close reading. Michie’s example shows the ways in which teacher autonomy and agency, as well as the centrality of students’ lived experiences, are frequently missing from the design and implementation of professional development.

Bringing the Issue into Focus: (Re)Framing Professional Development in Learning Communities

As English educators, we situate the English teacher’s experience with professional development in the question, *How can professional development be designed with equity and social justice goals in mind?* Far too many professional development initiatives are a top-down affair where teachers’ voices and goals are decidedly absent, as was true of Michie’s example. We believe it is critical to consider teacher agency when designing professional development experiences for English teachers. Thus, in this special issue we consider the types of professional development experiences that teachers find most valuable in their efforts to promote social justice in their classrooms, arguing that the best people to solve the problem of professional learning for English teachers are teachers themselves.

According to te Riele’s (2010) work on worthwhile goal-setting, it is not motivating for teachers to pursue arbitrary goals set for them by administrators, university researchers, or other lead teachers in a top-down approach to professional development. What makes people approach goal pursuit with a genuine hope about systems changing is having a voice in the goals set and in the pathways taken to achieving those goals (Freire, 2004; Sieben, 2016; Sieben & Hultberg, 2015; te Riele, 2010). Using collaborative pathways and goals (Snyder, 2000), inservice teachers are more likely to accomplish the professional learning goals they set. As Kinloch and San Pedro’s (2014) work demonstrates, when professional development opportunities are motivated by a shared desire for change (e.g., social, political, and educational), these
motivations fuel professional learning experiences had with people. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) “demonstrated the power of teacher voices to unite teacher experience and curriculum” (Ayers, Quinn, Stovall, & Scheierm, 2008, p. 507); likewise, each of the articles in this special issue demonstrates the power of teacher voices in creating an agentic teacher experience in professional development.

Intentionally, this special issue positions professional development as professional learning communities that include teachers as co-constructors of knowledge, curricula, and approaches alongside university researchers. Further, while professional development is often presented as a way to help teachers (e.g., providing assistance to teachers in need of growth in teaching methods and content knowledge), each of the articles in this themed issue demonstrates how professional development also provides an abundance of critical understandings to the university researchers who provide the professional development. As such, they demonstrate the reciprocal value of professional learning communities when equity of agency and voice is foregrounded. As is evidenced by the coauthorship of researchers and teachers for some of this issue’s articles, teacher voice was emphasized in the professional learning communities described as models for the field.

As a means of (re)framing professional learning, our guiding question posed above serves as a counterargument against the current deficit discourse surrounding professional development in K–12 education. Specifically, critics have argued that the way professional development is typically implemented in schools is a waste of time for teachers and has no positive effect on their students (Layton, 2015). This issue counters these deficit discourses by highlighting studies that emphasize humanizing pedagogies that put researchers, students, and teachers in conversation with one another as co-constructors of knowledge with respect to teaching and learning within the field of English education. The professional development models that emerged from the universities, schools, and communities featured in each of the articles provide perspectives into the kinds of knowledge, skills, and mindsets researchers and teachers might possess to provide culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies for all students.

Notably, the first article in this special issue by Skerrett, Warrington, and Williamson distinguishes between professional development and professional learning, not to set them apart as binaries, but to consider them alongside one another with teacher learning aims in mind. We feel it necessary to note this distinction in the introduction to this themed issue as both terms are often used alongside one another, though not necessarily interchangeably, in research articles. As Skerrett et al. assert, the practice of
professional development has historical undertones of top-down approaches. We agree that while the terminology professional learning may have stronger connotations of collegiality and collaborative practices in teacher learning and development, the practice of professional development is not necessarily devoid of professional learning communities. Thus, professional learning will serve as a means to describe the type of professional growth occurring in some professional development spaces, but will not be established as the preferred mode of professional development in this issue.

Social Justice Frameworks

In this issue, we position social justice as the fulcrum that orients this work in teacher development with teacher agency as a priority. Through uniquely articulated social justice frameworks, each of the research articles provides a model for how professional learning communities can be created to empower the teachers they are designed to help. Skerrett et al. build social justice into their framework by examining three early-career teachers’ educational practices that aim at teaching literacy for social justice purposes in urban schools. While one teacher focuses on building critical conversations on race into classroom spaces with students, another works with middle school students to develop social action plans, and the other critically examines high-stakes testing standards with students.

Next, Kinloch and Dixon position social justice as a pedagogy of humanization. Together with their district partners in urban schools, university researchers in this study explore ways to connect learning and praxis with action research and social justice projects that emerged from student-teacher-and-community collaborations. This collaborative component speaks to another element of the social justice nature of their professional development initiative as publicly engaged scholarship for and with district partners. Further, this study problematizes the notion of university researcher as “expert” and instead establishes all engaged in the work as co-experts in an equity-oriented professional development model.

Finally, Johnson, Sieben, and Buxton articulate their social justice approach to professional development with a model they call collaborative design as mediated praxis. In this model, teachers and university researchers work together to solve problems (Freire, 1970) that are context-specific and teacher-driven. Although this model extends and refines five features of high-quality professional development and takes into account a focus on social justice and equity, university and school-based educators also experienced several tensions as they engaged in the collaborative design process.
These tensions included developing shared understandings of approaches to writing instruction and analyzing and interpreting student work. Ultimately, each of these research studies exemplifies the integration of social justice professional development practices that seek to improve teaching conditions for teachers and their students. Each piece echoes Johnson’s (2010) claim that social justice education research includes the articulated purpose of “improv[ing] the human condition” through perhaps a “variety of epistemologies and methodologies . . . to inform and conduct a project” (p. 59). These projects include a variety of research goals and approaches; however, the unifying threads across all studies are the equitable and socially just research practices intentionally employed during the professional development initiatives.

**Today’s Educational Climate for Professional Learning in English Education**

In accordance with current CAEP standards and past NCATE standards, English teacher candidates are required to participate in their professional communities; participation in conferences, teacher-training workshops, and grant-funded research projects are a few ways that professional development can play a meaningful role in the growth of new English teachers. Further, the NCTE/CAEP Social Justice Standard VI calls for the consideration of social justice goals in teacher preparation programs (Alsup & Miller, 2014). Through practical knowledge and theoretical understandings, this themed issue merges both engagement in professional communities and social justice.

Through the Provocateur Piece, Berchini presents a script that provides a political satire/commentary of the challenging contexts within which professional learning communities are attempting to develop. While professional development models that are more inclusive of teacher agency and input present as more desirable given the findings in each of the articles, the Provocateur Piece illuminates real challenges we face as English teachers and teacher educators operating within and against systems that do not always support such models. The creative structure of this piece gives voice to each article in the issue as participants in the studies resurface as characters in the play.

As a caveat, we find it important to note that while each of these articles demonstrates a willingness by teacher-participants to engage in authentic meaning-making processes with researchers, we are aware that not all teachers in a variety of contexts are afforded the same opportunities for doing so. Some of these studies were supported by university programs/
initiatives (e.g., grant funding), which provided incentivized involvement for teachers and their districts in some cases. For other teachers the incentive to participate had little to do with monetary support—though that may be what afforded some districts the opportunity to participate—but rather, a desire to carve out time to be heard and consulted in curricular decisions.

Finally, as English educators we see our responsibility in this pursuit for socially just professional development practices as two-fold: (a) to create professional learning communities in which meaning-making processes are authentically collaborative and equity-oriented and (b) to include social justice content knowledge into learning community goals for preservice and inservice English teachers. While the professional preparation of preservice English teachers has long been a focus in the field of English education, an emerging body of work on social justice practices in professional development of inservice English teachers can be used to inform the professional preparation processes for English education students too. As Skerrett, Williamson, and Warrington (2015) argue, we cannot really talk about preservice teacher education without talking about developing equity-oriented English teachers in general because we need to support inservice English teachers as they mentor preservice teachers. The development of professional learning communities that include early-career English teachers and mentor professors provides perhaps one model of support; other models of professional development explored in this issue provide social justice perspectives and approaches to teacher development as well.

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Editorial

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