

## **TRIBES, An Effective Professional Development Approach: A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

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*Teachers play an important role in school-aged children’s lives to support their need to learn 21st century skills, like critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, media literacy, personal and social skills, etc. A classroom teacher is significant in establishing a learning environment in which all students are accepted, valued, and respected and have opportunities for academic success (American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015). The practice of 21st century skills prepares students for college, career, and citizenship. Teachers need professional preparation to support their effort to implement teaching strategies that enable students to learn and demonstrate 21st century skills. This paper examines the TRIBES Tribe Learning Community (TRIBES TLC) process as an effective professional development approach that supports 21st century learning using a single case study. The TRIBES process and use of strategies are based on researched principles that support children’s academic learning and social-emotional development. Results of this study confirms that the praxis of the TRIBES TLC process inherently creates a learning environment that is student-centered and provides experiential learning strategies to promote student achievement of 21st century skills.*

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**Keywords:** 21st century skills, professional development, TRIBES Tribe Learning Community, classroom management, learning environment, social-emotional learning.

### **Introduction**

Schools face pressure to reach educational goals outlined by federal and state policies measured by standardized tests that determine their success (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2015). Curricular and instructional decisions have been primarily based in teaching students the “3 Rs,” reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as science and social studies. The traditional approach to teaching was often focused on rote learning and memorization of content information (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). However, this type of educational approach and traditional curriculum alone has left students unprepared for today’s world. According to Battelle for Kids (2019), students are required to learn and acquire complex skills and competencies to prepare them for college, career, and citizenship (ASCD, 2012; Morse & Allensworth, 2015)

Teachers are vital in helping students develop 21st century skills. They can apply methods that increase students’ abilities and use innovative strategies that integrate cognitive and social skills with content knowledge (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). The promotion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills is facilitated by teachers establishing learning environments

that support increased student participation (Alismail & McGuire, 2015) to provide opportunities for academic success and positive social relationships (American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015). Teacher professional learning in essence supports the complex skills students need to learn in preparation for further education and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017). Therefore, it is important that teacher professional development (PD) addresses not only academic content, but incorporates classroom management strategies that establish safe and supportive learning environments that promote the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration.

This paper examines the importance of a teacher's role to establish positive learning environments that support student abilities, the characteristics of effective teacher professional learning and PD approaches that enable educators to support complex student learning and student practice of 21st century Skills (Darling-Hammond et. al, 2017), and the use of TRIBES TRIBES Learning Community (TRIBES TLC) process as an effective teacher professional development approach. This case study examines the observations and personal reflections of a veteran certified TRIBES trainer's use of the TRIBES TLC process with elementary teachers to conduct a follow-up TRIBES TLC Outreach Refresher Course. Observations and reflections indicate training effects on increasing teacher knowledge and practice of the TRIBES process, teacher self-efficacy and social-emotional. Research questions asked were: Does the application of the use of TRIBES TLC process for PD demonstrate characteristics of design for effective PD? Does the use of the TRIBES TLC process for PD increase teacher engagement, self-efficacy, and the praxis of skills in their classrooms?

### ***Teachers Impact on Creating Supportive Learning Environments***

Students deserve to be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged but most students do not receive the support they need to achieve these outcomes (America's Promise Alliance, 2006). Teachers are key in employing Effective classroom management is based on (a) setting and communicating high expectations, (b) consistently nurturing positive relationships, and (c) providing a high level of student support. (American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015) Students profit from a predictable structure and high expectations for both academic achievement and classroom behavior.

The teacher is also significant in establishing a climate in which all students are accepted, valued, and respected; have opportunities for academic success and relevant support; and have opportunities for positive social relationships with adults and peers. Emotional well-being influences educational performance, learning, and development. (American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015, p.23). When students feel connected to school, they are more likely to succeed academically and make healthy choices. Teachers can facilitate students' feelings of connection by providing: students with the academic, emotional, and social skills they need to engage in school; opportunities for students to improve their interpersonal, stress management, and decision-making skills; Foster critical and reflective thinking, problem solving, and working effectively with others; Allow and encourage students to identify, label, express, and assess their feelings. (CDC Teacher School Connectedness) Therefore, it is imperative that Professional Development provide teachers the knowledge and skills necessary to create and establish learning environments and opportunities that support students and their learning.

### ***Effective Professional Development***

Professional Development (PD) that is intended and implemented should be considered as a necessary element of a comprehensive system of teaching and learning that supports students to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Darling-Hammond et. al, 2017). Battelle for Kids (2019), prescribes that 21st century professional development should: 1) Enable teachers to identify activities and integrate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, tools, and teaching strategies into their classroom practice; 2) Use project-oriented teaching methods balanced with direct instruction; 3) Illustrate how a deeper understanding of subject matter can actually enhance problem-solving, critical thinking, and other 21st century skills; 4) Promote 21st century professional learning communities for teachers that practice classroom learning that promotes 21st century skills for students; 5) Prepare teacher to identify students' learning styles, intelligences, strengths, and weaknesses (p. 8).

Professional development is a strategy to equip educators to support deep and complex student learning in their classrooms. There are seven common design elements of these effective PD approaches:

1. Content focused.
2. Incorporate active learning strategies.
3. Engage teachers in collaboration.
4. Models and/or modeling.
5. Provide coaching and expert support.
6. Include time for feedback and reflection.
7. Of sustained duration ((Darling-Hammond et. al, 2017, pg.23).

PD should be well designed, incorporating elements of effective PD, as we have described. It should also be linked to identified teacher needs, should ensure that teachers have a say in the type of learning they require to best support their students, and should be regularly evaluated so that quality can be continually improved. PD well also requires responsiveness to the needs of educators and learners and to the contexts in which teaching and learning will take place. Professional learning should link to their experiences in preparation and induction, as well as to teaching standards and evaluation. It should also bridge to leadership opportunities to ensure a comprehensive system focused on the growth and development of teachers. Policymakers can provide flexible funding and continuing education units for learning opportunities that include sustained engagement in collaboration, mentoring, and coaching, as well as institutes, workshops, and seminars (Darling-Hammond et. at., 2017). Barriers to PD may include inadequate resources, including needed curriculum materials; lack of shared vision about what high-quality instruction entails; lack of time for planning and implementing new instructional approaches; conflicting requirements, such as scripted curriculum or pacing guides; and lack of adequate foundational knowledge on the part of teachers (Darling-Hammond et. at., 2017).

### ***The TRIBES Tribes Learning Community (TLC) Process***

The TRIBES Tribes Learning Community (TLC) process was developed and authored by Jeanne Gibbs. It is a goal-oriented process based on researched principles that support children's academic learning and social emotional development (Gibbs, 2014). The word TRIBES is used to describe versions of the works, TRIBES TLC designates the proprietary process developed by Jeanne Gibbs and CenterSource Systems, LLC. Only CenterSource Systems, LLC certified trainers are permitted to use the TRIBES TLC mark to identify their training. (Gibbs, 2014). Jeanne Gibbs uses these titles interchangeably throughout her documents. Therefore, these terms will also be used interchangeably for the remainder of this paper.

The TRIBES mission is to assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, competency and resilience to be successful in today's rapidly changing world. Its goal is to engage all teachers, administrators, students and families in working together as a learning community that is dedicated to caring and support, active participation and positive expectations for all students (Gibbs, 2014, pg. 31). Gibb (2014) states that TRIBES is a community building process – a culture and active learning pedagogy best learned by experiencing it. The community is built using three stages of group development: Inclusion – a sense of belonging, Influence - valuing differences and Community - working together creatively (Gibbs, 2014, pg. 71). Community building is supported by using four working agreements among those in the group: Attentive Listening, Appreciation/No Put Downs, The Right to Pass or Participate, Mutual Respect (Gibb, 2014, pg. 9).

Unlike traditional classroom environments that are teacher-centered, the TRIBES TLC process establishes a classroom environment that is student-centered. The teacher becomes a facilitator of learning by using multiple active learning strategies to teach diverse learners. In a TRIBES classroom individual and group accountability is assessed jointly by teacher and students. The process promotes caring, sharing, active participation, and positive expectations, which are protective factors that foster resilience (Gibbs, 2014).

The Developmental Process of TRIBES is underpinned by a research-based framework for the school renewal process that include four strategies:

- 1) Student Development and Learning - Whole child Stages of development Resiliency
- 2) A Caring Culture Protective Factors Stages of community development Community agreements Multicultural and gender equity
- 3) The Community of Learners Small group structures Collaborative skills Reflective practice (Gibb, pg.11)

4) Responsive Education – Student Centered Active Learning Group development process Cognitive theory Multiple intelligences Cooperative learning Constructivism Reflective practice Authentic assessment Technology (Gibb 2014, p.32)

American Psychological Association Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education (2015) identified that planned instruction and opportunities for practice and feedback are fundamental when teaching effective social skills. These social skills include cooperation/collaboration, perspective taking and seeking, respect for others' views, constructive feedback, interpersonal problem solving, and conflict resolution (American Psychological Association, Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015,2015, p.26). The TRIBES TLC process also supports a school's need to teach 21st century skills that address social and emotional competencies. Student outcomes the schools can achieve overtime using the TRIBES process Social and emotional competency, improved academic performance, communicate and work well with others, value diversity, assume responsibility for their own behavior, develop critical thinking and collaborative skills, and improve their sense of self-worth and mastery of academics (Gibbs, 2014, pg.31)

The learning process of TRIBES TLC sets the stage throughout school systems to create and sustain caring values, individual self-esteem and motivation among all. The underlying theory to the TRIBES TLC process is the Systems theory (Bernard, 2005). Bernard (2005) states that The TRIBES TLC understands that schools are systemic, the focus on development and learning for students requires the creation of comparable processes for teachers and school staff. Therefore, it is also important for teachers to engage in professional communities of learning. Sergiovanni (1996 as stated by Bernard, 2005 lists the practices of professional learning communities as doing the following:

- 1) Encourage teachers to reflect on their own practice;
- 2) Acknowledge that teachers develop at different rates, and that at any given time are more ready to learn some things than others;
- 3) Acknowledge that teachers have different talents and interests;
- 4) Give high priority to conversation and dialogue among teachers.
- 5) Provide for collaborative learning among teachers;
- 6) Emphasize caring relationships and felt interdependencies;
- 7) Call upon teachers to respond morally to their work; 8) View teachers as supervisors of learning communities (1996 as stated by Bernard, 2005, p. 142),.

### ***Research Design***

Case studies have a naturalistic approach and are sensitive to contextual interactions (Stake, 1995). A single case study examines the use of the TRIBES TCL process as an effective PD approach (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N., 2018). The content for the PD was a series of supplemental refresher workshops called TRIBES TLC Outreach Refresher Course that consisted of four two-hour sessions. These sessions were conducted to reinforce teachers' skills to apply the TRIBES TLC process and strategies to classroom instruction. The TRIBES Outreach was a follow-up PD to a preceding four-day 24-hour basic training TRIBES PD named Building Community for Learning. The basic PD prepared teachers to develop a caring school and classroom environment, and teach students through active learning that promotes student development, motivation and academic achievement (CenterSource Systems, LLC, pg.4). The supplemental TLC Outreach Refresher Course was conducted to further support teachers' knowledge, skill, and application of the TRIBES process in their classroom.

This case study focused on the TRIBES TLC trainer's perceptions of her use of the TRIBES TLC process with inservice teachers and its impact on promoting effective and successful PD and the achievement of the projected teacher learning outcomes. The TRIBES TLC certified trainer represented a purposeful sample (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N., 2018). The TRIBES certified trainer had more than 20 years of experience using the TRIBES TLC process in her own classroom and as a certified trainer to train teachers on how to use the TRIBES process in their classrooms and/or schools. This case study also involved two teachers who were the learner-participants of the TRIBES TLC Outreach Refresher Course. The teachers had previously participated in the TRIBES TLC process basic training and learned to use the TRIBES TLC process in their classrooms.

### **Procedure and Data Collection**

The TRIBES Outreach Refresher Course was a series of four two-hour sessions conducted once a month as a follow-up to the TRIBES basic training course that consisted of 24 hours of training over a four-day period. The learning outcomes of the TRIBES Outreach Refresher Course were the following:

1. Teachers would become experts at using the TRIBES strategies:
2. Teachers would become familiar with the TRIBES process by participating in hands-on learning experiences, discussions about each Tribe strategy and reflecting on each of the strategies:
3. Teachers will become more comfortable with and will use the TRIBES strategies and TRIBES process in their classroom.

The TRIBES Trail process that was used to facilitate learning for each two-hour course session. The process used to build learning communities.

1. Inclusion: (Building a sense of belonging) 1<sup>st</sup> step of the TRIBES process;
2. Influence: (Valuing differences) 2<sup>nd</sup> Step of the TRIBES Process;
3. Community (Working together Creatively) (Gibbs, 2014, pg. 71). Throughout each session the TRIBES Agreements were always in place. These are Attentive Listening, Appreciation/No Put Downs, The Right to Pass or Participate, Mutual Respect (Gibb, 2014, pg. 9).

Strategies to help reinforce steps in the TRIBES process were scaffolded from session to session. The TRIBES trainer selected meaningful topics that were relevant to the TRIBES process and to the teachers. Topics were used as discussion prompts to facilitate the teachers' constructive thinking. It was important in a TRIBES classroom to promote content that was relevant and real. The topics determined for the four sessions were:

1. Session1: TRIBES Reflections
2. Session 2: CoVid19: Using the Double T chart Strategy
3. Session #3: Multiple Intelligence:
4. Session #4: Resilience and Motivation Matters.

The trainer also selected experiential TRIBES learning strategies that reinforced or enhanced her instruction and discussion of the selected topics for each session. The data collected consisted of recorded observations of teacher professional learning and personal reflections completed by the certified TRIBES trainer. Data were sorted and analyzed according to themes that align with the tenets of TRIBES TLC, such as student outcomes, the steps of the TRIBES process, and TRIBES strategies. Themes found in personal reflections and documented observations of leaning and participant interactions were identified and compared. Data were also evaluated using the seven design elements of effective PD to confirm or dispute if the TRIBES TLC process is an effective PD approach (Darling-Hammond et. at. ,2107). Themes were also analyzed and compared to the recommendations for PD for 21<sup>st</sup> century Skills learning communities to either confirm or dispute that the TRIBES TLC process is an effective approach (The Network of the Battelle for Kid, 2019).

## **Results**

The TRIBES trainer's observations and reflections confirmed that the TRIBES TLC process and strategies supports a learning environment that is inclusive of everyone involved. The use of Community Circle (Gibb, 2014) as a tool for Inclusion (creating a sense of belonging) (Gibb, 2014) and instruction allowed for teachers to express their "voice," opinions, ideas, which promoted many discussions and dialogs during all two-hour sessions. The inclusion strategies (Gibb, 2014) also helped to promote strong and positive relations among both teachers and the trainer. The trainer also reflected on the consistent use of the Tribes

Strategies (Gibb, 2014) and that strategies used throughout the PD were interactive, relevant, and meaningful for self and the classroom. The teachers felt comfortable in implementing, which exhibited self-efficacious behavior.

The trainer also used the TRIBES Reflection Process with every discussion topic as well as after each of the applications of TRIBES strategies. Reflection questions supported each of the strategies facilitate the "aha" moment of wonderment for every participant. During the reflection process in each session the teachers felt comfortable and safe enough to express themselves. From session one to the last session, the trainer observed and documented that teachers were more familiar with the process and tended to share more openly. Therefore, the TRIBES process did not only facilitate the skill to be reflective but promoted trust among the participants.

The TRIBES process inherently focused on relationship building, being consistent and connected, and using the COVID pandemic (real and relevant) with the Tribes Strategies supported teaching and learning). The process helped to facilitate use of strategies and discussions of selected topics that help build collaborative skills. As the trainer and teachers developed an appreciation of each other and their differences, discussions became deeper and problem solving seemed to become more relevant. Using COVID 19 as the relevant source of discussion and also asking questions that would support student learning helped the teachers and the facilitator develop a common language and support system. The discussion about Multiple Intelligences in session #3 addressed the collaborative skills of valuing differences. The trainer noticed the transformation of teachers by the second session. She observed that teachers were more comfortable with each other and herself. A community was developed by everyone working together creatively. Laughter was really important in the teaching and learning during these sessions and the energy was very positive. Celebrating achievements like implementing interactive strategies on line and using a white board to instruct another participant, is vital to building a classroom community.

Having discussions on pre-selected topics jointly decided upon by trainer and teachers, and using these topics to find TRIBES strategies that supported it, made the learning meaningful and relevant. The trainer as well as the two teachers were able to build synergy and a community by practicing each of the strategies. Respect among the participants came because they constantly shared about ourselves. Secondary consequences resulted in teachers starting to recruit for other teachers to either join the Tribes training, because they had a positive experience. Each of the teachers and facilitator also volunteered their time to continue to participate in another Tribes Outreach II.

### ***Discussion and Limitation***

The results of the case study, based on observations and reflections by the TRIBES certified trainer, provided evidence that the TRIBES TLC process is an effective PD approach for any content area. The process was utilized in the TRIBES Outreach Refresher Course to teach in-depth content and applications of the TRIBES process that incorporated active learning strategies, engaged teachers in collaboration, and allowed the trainer to model the process and strategies. TRIBES Outreach Refresher Course provided coaching and expert support by the trainer that included time for feedback and reflection and was over a sustained duration of four days (Darling-Hammond et. al, 2017).

The tenets of the TRIBES TLC process also aligned with suggested recommendations for 21st century professional development that should:

1. Use active and experiential learning of the TRIBES process to facilitate the learning of cognitive and social skills, enable teachers to identify activities and integrate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, tools, and teaching strategies into their classroom practice.
2. Use project-oriented teaching methods balanced with direct instruction.
3. TRIBES facilitate the learning necessary to problem-solving, think critically, etc. Illustrate how a deeper understanding of subject matter can actually enhance problem-solving, critical t
4. Promote 21st century professional learning communities for teachers that practice classroom learning that promotes 21st century skills for students.
5. Prepare teachers to identify students' learning styles, intelligences, strengths, and weaknesses. TRIBES process values diversity, emphasizes multiple intelligences, and incorporates learning strategies that accommodate diverse learning (p. 8).

It is evident that the TRIBES TLC process is a highly effective and beneficial approach that has characteristics that aligned well to effective design elements for PD. However, this study was limited in that it was a case study that only examined the application of the TRIBES TLC process to conduct professional development for its own process. Therefore, the next study that should be conducted to examine the use of the TRIBES TLC for PD for other content areas.

### ***Conclusion***

The research reviewed in this paper addressed the need for schools to make an education shift in order to facilitate student learning to focus on 21st century learning and skills (Battelle For Kids, 2019). This need indicates that teachers play a vital role to create safe and nurturing classrooms. Teachers should set clear and high expectations that create environments to maximize student engagement and motivation for optimal learning. Teachers need to master classroom management skills to be able to model and facilitate 21st century learning strategies and the



development of skills for their students. The TRIBES TLC process was studied and proven effective for the TRIBES trainer and teacher participants in the case study that was examined in this paper. The TRIBES process helped participants build a community that supported active engagement and the development of social competencies. The practice of using the TRIBES TLC process also increased the teachers' self-efficacy to apply their learning in the classroom. In conclusion, the components and activities of the TRIBES TLC process matched all the tenets for an effective design for PD approach. Schools and districts need to continue to offer the TRIBES process training to more teachers so that they can equip themselves with the necessary tools and skills to facilitate 21st century learning in their classrooms. In the end, students will benefit.

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