WALKING THE TALK:

SUPPORTING TEACHERS' GROWTH WITH DIFFERENTIATED

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper details how a 7-month reading-focused professional development initiative, centered on the assessment-to-instruction cycle, supported teachers' growth by combining small group sessions with related individualized literacy coaching. Analysis of participants' experiences revealed the importance of differentiated professional learning in supporting teachers' abilities to first modify their reading assessment practices, and then modify their reading instructional practices in response to their students' identified needs. Importantly, requisite to supporting teachers' diverse needs and interests was differentiating the content, process, and expected outcomes of this professional learning initiative. Implications include the use of students' reading assessment results as a catalyst for teacher change and use of proximal goal setting following collaborative small group sessions to delineate the differentiated foci of concurrent classroom-based coaching.

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DIFFERENTIATED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The literature abounds with assertions about the need to enhance teachers' abilities to provide responsive differentiated instruction, especially in the area of reading where students' early success is vital for later success (Chard, 2004; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005; Taylor & Pearson, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005). Requisite to providing such instruction is differentiating the content, process, and expected outcomes of student learning (Tomlinson, 2005). In attempts to ascertain how to support teachers' abilities to provide such programming, assessment-focused professional learning initiatives have been investigated, with the finding that increasing teachers' reading assessment competencies holds the potential to enhance their abilities to provide differentiated instruction for students (Snow et al., 2005; Taylor & Pearson, 2005; Triplett, 2007; Walpole, Justice, & Invernizzi, 2004). However, little previous research has explored how to differentiate teachers' professional learning opportunities through integrating assessment-focused small group sessions, with concurrent individualized literacy coaching.

This paper documents how a reading-focused professional development initiative centered on the assessment-to-instruction cycle, supported teachers' growth by combining small group sessions designed to meet teachers' collective needs, with related classroom-based literacy coaching focused on participants' unique individual needs. An overview of the theoretical framework of this study and teacher professional development literature is provided first to contextualize this inquiry. The methodology follows and includes descriptions of the context, participants, data collection, and data analysis methods. Next, the findings detail how differentiating the content, process, and expected outcomes of professional learning, supported teachers' abilities to modify their practices in response to their students' needs. Implications include the use of students' assessment results as a catalyst

for teacher change and proximal goal setting after small group sessions to delineate the differentiated form and foci of concurrent classroom-based coaching.

Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted within the theoretical framework of social constructivism, characterized by the existence of multiple truths, rather than a single universal truth (Schwandt, 2000). Social constructivism emphasizes the role of language, social interaction, context, and culture, in the processes through which individuals adapt and grow, as they make connections between new information and existing networks of prior knowledge, and construct representations through which they make sense of experiences (Vygotsky, 1986; Wink & Putney, 2002). Accordingly, teachers' diverse professional knowledge was valued and respected throughout this study that sought to understand how their participation in this inquiry affected their professional knowledge and classroom practices.

Two social constructivist models of teacher change were used to guide this inquiry (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Gregoire, 2003). The key tenets of Gregoire's (2003) Cognitive-Affective Model of Conceptual Change (CAMCC) and Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) Interconnected Model of Teacher Professional Growth (IMTPG) were used throughout the development and implementation of all small-group and individual professional learning opportunities throughout this study. The CAMCC is a framework that can be used to guide the development of professional development initiatives that seek to acknowledge teachers' perspectives and provide them with the support required to facilitate changes in their subject-matter beliefs. The dual process model of cognition presented in the CAMCC addresses factors including teachers' motivation, efficacy, and knowledge that may affect their abilities to systematically process curricular reform persuasive messages. The IMTPG (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) focuses on factors not addressed explicitly by the CAMCC, most notably the role of professional experimentation and student-learning gains that teachers

attribute to their use of new practices. As such, the IMTPG was used in conjunction with the CAMCC to guide this investigation.

Developed within the theoretical framework of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Vygotsky, 1986) the professional learning opportunities throughout this initiative sought to provide scaffolding through opportunities for participants to be provided with the support and assistance of one another and the researcher. The individualized coaching throughout this study also drew on Bandura's (1986) theory of observational learning. Specifically, coaching sought to enhance participants' self-perceptions of teaching competence by providing vicarious experiences watching targeted teaching practices modeled. The saliency of vicarious experiences is related directly to how closely the observer identifies with the skills and context of the individual observed (Bandura, 1997). Consequently, observing a coach teach their students in their classroom, held the potential to positively impact participants' teaching efficacy. This study documented how participants socially constructed professional knowledge during collaborative small group sessions and concurrent individualized coaching.

Teachers' Professional Learning

There is little doubt that supporting teachers' abilities to construct professional knowledge is critically important to fostering educational improvement (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). To this end, researchers have recommended collaborative professional development that builds school capacity for sustainable change (Coburn, 2005; Fullan et al., 2006; Guskey, 2002; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000; Youngs, 2001). School capacity can be defined as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individual teachers, the strength of the school's professional community, program coherence, administrative leadership, and the quality of resources (Newmann et al., 2000). While all five components are important, teachers' knowledge, professional community, and program coherence have been shown to exert the greatest effects on promoting sustainable change (Youngs, 2001).

Teacher's responsiveness to engaging in collaborative inquiry focused on enhancing professional knowledge and working towards program coherence, is related to their needs and competencies at particular career stages (Fullan et al., 2006; Leithwood, 1990; Snow et al., 2005). Leithwood (1990) identified a spectrum of the development of expertise across teachers' careers. This is presented as beginning with novice teachers who focus on developing survival skills (e.g., classroom management), progressing next to instructional competence following practices used widely in their school setting, then later to expanding instructional flexibility, prior to acquiring instructional expertise, and finally adopting a critical reflective stance about their teaching methods. Leithwood (1990) claimed that teachers move through these stages at varying rates dependent upon their unique needs, interests, and abilities. Allington and Cunningham (2002) maintained that literacy school improvement efforts would benefit from faculty comprised of teachers across this spectrum, as they would be able to extend one another's knowledge through professional collaboration.

The focus on school capacity building acknowledges the importance of teachers' collaboration in effecting school improvement, with enhancing teachers' collective knowledge regarded as critical in this process (Fullan et al., 2006; Youngs, 2001). In recognition of the need to establish collaborative cultures of teacher inquiry, it has been recommended widely that schools work towards forming professional learning communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan et al., 2006; Kelleher, 2003). These communities are exemplified by collaborative reflective exploration of common issues or problems with the intent of generating and implementing strategies that will promote positive change for students and teachers (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan et al., 2006).

A hallmark of teacher professional learning communities has been the adoption of an inquiry stance (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan et al., 2006). Promoting teachers' engagement in this form of critical inquiry, while simultaneously building community and fostering

program cohesion can be very challenging, as this process may reveal the need for teachers to alter their own teaching beliefs and undergo conceptual change, which can be personally threatening and diminish teachers' efficacy (Gregoire, 2003; Guskey, 2002).

Sinatra and Pintrich (2003) described conceptual change as intentional goal-directed behavior. That is, altering one's teaching beliefs does not occur without first recognizing that new information is inconsistent with existing understandings; next, believing in the credibility and usefulness of new information; and then, explicitly working towards changing one's beliefs (Gregoire, 2003; Hynd, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001; Sinatra & Pintrich, 2003). Of particular importance to creating a catalyst for change during group sessions is engagement in robust collaborative reflection, without which teachers may be unaware of their teaching beliefs (Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 2005).

Hensen (2001) claimed that in providing participants with opportunities to assume control of their decision-making, research groups were a form of professional learning community that had the potential to enhance teachers' self-efficacy–beliefs that have been shown to influence teachers' willingness to embrace new methods (Alderman, 2004; Ross, 1995). Importantly, who were teachers engaged in critical inquiry through research-based professional learning communities have been described as feeling empowered, less isolated, more effective, and more confident when implementing new strategies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan et al. 2006; Taylor & Pearson, 2005).

In order to monitor the ongoing effectiveness of teacher learning communities, Kelleher (2003) advocated that participants establish specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound goals to focus their efforts and determine their effectiveness in achieving their established targets. Lyons and Pinnell (2001) suggested small-group teacher learning communities meet every 2 to 3 weeks to maintain momentum for change, while affording participants sufficient time to work towards their proximal goals.

Professional learning communities have provided the support required to transform teachers' reading assessment practices (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2006; Hoffman, Roser, & Worthy, 1998; Taylor & Pearson, 2005; Walpole et al., 2004). Hoffman and Pearson (2000) highlighted the value of assessment-focused teacher learning communities, noting how "discussions of assessment tools lead almost inevitably to discussions of curriculum and teaching" (p. 38).

Grierson and Woloshyn (2006) investigated teachers' participation in an action research professional learning community focused on the development and use of literacy assessment profiles. Although this project did not include the individualized coaching that has been identified as important in effecting change (Kise, 2006; Taylor & Pearson, 2005), participants believed their classroom-based assessment and related instructional practices were enhanced as a function of participation in the group. Consistent with Hoffman and Pearson's (2000) assertion, discussions relative to the analyses of assessment data within the context of this group led naturally to the exploration of related instructional implications.

Hoffman and colleagues (1998) worked with first grade teachers to develop a performance-based assessment plan that simultaneously provided data to teachers to inform instructional decision-making and to administrators to satisfy accountability requirements. Consistent with the findings of Grierson and Woloshyn (2006), Hoffman and colleagues (1998) documented the positive effects of discussing the instructional implications of these data on teachers' abilities to provide instruction targeting their students' identified needs.

The 6-year study undertaken by Walpole, Justice, and Invernizzi (2004) that included small-group professional learning community sessions focused on data-driven decision-making and individualized teacher coaching in use of the recommended instructional methods, also supported assessment-focused curricular reform. Walpole and colleagues documented increased student achievement attributable to teachers' modifications of their

reading instructional practices implemented as a function of analysis of their students' assessments. Curricular co-ordination, assessment-based decision-making, small-group student instruction, efficient school management, knowledgeable leadership, and persistence were identified as the factors that contributed to increased student learning.

Taylor and Pearson (2005) also conducted a longitudinal study of assessment-focused reform, the CIERA School Change Project, which included elementary teacher participants from 13 schools across the United States. Teachers in each site followed an iterative process of: collecting and analyzing their students' reading assessment data, selecting a shared focus of professional learning on the basis of these data, using study groups as a vehicle for collaborative reflection and targeted professional development, and revisiting student data after implementation of new practices to determine their effectiveness in promoting achievement. The school change efforts were supported over a 2-year period by external facilitators, who assisted individual teachers through coaching and supported the teacher study groups. In describing the experiences of participants in one site, Taylor and Pearson outlined that while a comprehension instruction focus was initiated by teachers' analyses of their students' initial informal reading inventory results, participants highlighted the importance of ongoing evidence of student learning gathered through classroom observations and work sampling as pivotal to sustaining their commitment to this instructional focus. While the CIERA change project was effective in many sites, one third of the schools showed limited success, which was attributed to lack of administrative support and/or lack of the emergence of teacher leader within the staff who was able to engender collegial support for sustaining the initiative. Summarizing their findings, Taylor and Pearson stressed that reading reform is a long-term endeavor represented by small changes over time, rather than any "quick fix".

Although these studies all demonstrated the positive effects of assessment-focused

professional learning communities, they did not investigate the processes through which participants' beliefs and associated classroom practices changed. In order to understand the effects of teacher professional learning and facilitate long-term teacher growth, the processes through which such growth occurs must be examined (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Guskey, 2002; Sinatra, 2005). Simply stated, "optimization of the outcomes of a process, is facilitated by the understanding of that process" (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 947).

Researchers have documented the importance of professional collaboration in enhancing teachers' understandings of how to use assessment findings to develop instructional programming priorities and recommended inquiry-based small group sessions as a vehicle to do so (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan et al., 2006; Taylor & Pearson, 2005). Nonetheless, some have cautioned that collaborative small-group learning alone may be insufficient, and recommended that to enhance teachers' abilities to provide differentiated instruction for their students, their own needs must be met through differentiated professional learning (Kise, 2006; Tomlinson, 2005). To this end, individualized support through coaching has been recommended (Kise, 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). However, little research has explored the processes through which teachers' professional knowledge is constructed during reading-focused initiatives that endeavored to support teachers' growth through combining small group sessions with concurrent coaching focused on the assessment-to-instruction cycle.

Methodology

As this 7-month investigation sought to explore the interaction between factors that affected participants' change processes over time, qualitative case-study methods were adopted (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003). Case studies are frequently undertaken when researchers seek to understand complex phenomena (Merriam, 2001). Creswell (1998) described the impetus for case studies as the lack of in-depth understandings of phenomena that are unique

or unusual, together with the desire to see unexplored details that will provide a picture to inform practice. Descriptions of the context, participants, and an overview of the professional development initiative are provided next, followed by the data collection and analysis methods.

Context and Participants

The three participants, Emma (pseudonym), Judy (pseudonym), and Violet (pseudonym), taught grade 1, grade 2/3, and grade 3 respectively, in an Ontario independent school serving over 200 students with diverse needs. Whereas Emma had over ten years of classroom teaching experience, Judy and Violet were relatively novice to the profession, with four and three years of classroom teaching experience respectively. Participants' interest in reading-focused professional learning was the catalyst for them to take part in this study.

This three-phase study combined inquiry-based semi-monthly small-group professional learning community (PLC) sessions (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) and weekly individualized literacy coaching. An emergent research design was employed with participants' needs and interests as expressed in one session used to determine the foci of subsequent sessions (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Semi-monthly small group sessions were intended to promote collaborative knowledge building and reflection (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Risko et al., 2005); while coaching was intended to meet teachers' unique individual needs and provide classroom-based assistance to support their abilities to modify their practices in response to their students' needs (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Walpole & McKenna, 2004).

At the conclusion of each semi-monthly small group PLC session, participants completed goal-setting templates designed to promote critical reflection as described by Risko and colleagues (2005). More specifically, these templates asked participants to identify their goals for the ensuing two-week period, with attention to which practices they intended to work towards modifying in response to their students' needs. Participants also outlined the

support they believed was required to meet their proximal goals (e.g., resources, the specific form and focus of individualized coaching). The researcher facilitated all 14 semi-monthly small-group PLC sessions throughout this inquiry and provided weekly individualized classroom-based coaching to each participant. As a former school board literacy support teacher, the researcher brought to this inquiry extensive experience facilitating teachers' small-group professional learning and providing individualized literacy coaching.

The first phase of this study (three months) focused initially on developing shared understandings of the reading process, and next, on collecting, analyzing, and interpreting students' reading assessment data, gathered through the use of informal reading inventories. Supporting teachers in the implementation of instructional modifications denoted through analysis of their students' assessment data was the primary focus of the second phase (three months). The third phase (one month) centered on developing site-based support to promote sustainability of teachers' programming modifications, as the researcher gradually withdrew as a professional learning facilitator at the research site.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Throughout the duration of this study multiple forms of data were collected to triangulate evidence (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 2001). These included: artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, goal-getting sheets completed by each participant following each semi-monthly group session); field notes gathered during weekly individualized coaching interactions; scheduled lesson observations gathered semi-monthly in each classroom; unscheduled lesson observations gathered weekly to control for observer effects (Gay & Airasian, 2003); transcriptions of 14 small group sessions and three individual interviews with each participant; and, final summative reflections written by each participant documenting their perceptions of their changes and the factors affecting change throughout this initiative. All data were member-checked for verification of accuracy.

The data collected from each participant were first analyzed through coding and categorizing of patterns, trends and recurring themes (Creswell, 2002). These interpretations were then summarized in descriptive narratives and shared with each participant who verified the accuracy thereof (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003). In order to understand the relation between participants' change processes, single-case analysis was followed by cross-case analysis during which the experiences of each participant were entered into a matrix and compared and contrasted with the experiences of the other two participants (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003).

Findings

The findings of this study provide strong support for reading assessment-focused professional learning initiatives that combine inquiry-based PLCs with individualized classroom-based coaching. Indeed, all three participants recursively modified their reading assessment and related instructional practices throughout this initiative and perceived their enacted modifications to enhance their students' learning and their teaching self-efficacy.

> *I always felt that I was a decent reading teacher, but now I am better able to teach all students regardless of their abilities. I had attended workshops on how to do running records before, but I never knew what to do with these records. Now I have learned what to do and more importantly, how to do it.* (Emma, Written Reflections, June 28)

> *I was given the encouragement by you to embrace and introduce small changes a few at a time. Once I implemented a change, I was able to see the benefits of it for my students and as a result my self-confidence has grown in my ability to program for my individual students.* (Judy, Written Reflections, June 27)

> *My greatest accomplishment was that my self-esteem and confidence as a teacher grew. I felt encouraged, supported, challenged, and affirmed in what I was doing in my individual classroom.* (Violet, Interview 3, June 27)

As detailed next, all three teachers' professional growth was supported by differentiating the content, process, and expected learning outcomes in response to their unique professional needs, interests, and abilities.

Differentiated Content

Teachers first developed skill using informal reading inventories to assess their

students needs and delineate instructional priorities. All three participants discovered in the analysis of these assessments, that their students' decoding abilities exceeded their reading comprehension. While teachers identified a common need to focus on comprehension instruction, their students' results revealed different aspects of this that required instruction. For instance, Violet's students required narrative story schema instruction, while Judy's students required support understanding non-fiction text.

> *I've got a couple of really strong [readers] with the exception of using story elements, so [working on] characters and problems and such are my goals.* (Violet, Group Session, February 8)

> *I found it [the area of need] is more comprehension. I'd say they are average to strong readers with decoding but not comprehension. The nonfiction was more difficult [than narrative text] with the comprehension too, so working on nonfiction [text] and working on comprehension, I think would be goals for my class.* (Judy, Group Session, February 8)

As we next explored comprehension strategy instruction during the ensuing group session, teachers' diverse professional knowledge, and diverse beliefs about the importance of providing instruction targeting this focus were revealed. For example, while Violet made strong connections between the information presented and her existing classroom practices, Judy appeared inundated with information she found difficult to relate to her existing reading instructional practices and overwhelmed by the suggestions for change.

> *One form [worksheet] that they get one day a week [during literature circles] is predicting and the other one is about a character, and the other one is, you know, summarizing. So it's got those key things [strategies] in there, a lot of them. [I'll] make sure to cover those since I'm going to do that [unit] after March break.* (Violet, Group Session, February 20)

> *I'm now just trying to get my head around not just one thing but the big picture, so now my head is [spinning] ahh, what do I do and how am I going to do this all?* (Judy, Group Session, February 20).

Whereas Judy wondered how she would provide such instruction, Emma questioned whether she should do so. Emma's comments revealed her belief that decoding, rather than comprehension should be the focus of first grade reading instruction.

I don't tend to do [teach] all of those comprehension strategies. Like the ones [strategy visual prompts] that I have hanging up [in the classroom] are the ones [reading strategies] that I focus on, like "looking for little words inside the big words" or those kinds of [decoding] strategies, but these ones [comprehension strategies], I don't, I must admit I don't. I've kind of thought that is above them. (Emma, Professional Learning Community Session, February 20)

Consequently, while an overarching focus of the phase two group sessions became reading comprehension, individualized coaching targeted the aspect thereof that each participant requested support modifying. Specific attention was devoted to the instructional practice teachers sought to modify during the two weeks following each PLC, as recorded on their goal setting sheet. Coaching support focused on conferencing with each teacher, as well as modeling lessons addressing the aspect of practice they identified in their self-selected goals. As a function of success with small proximal changes that enabled them to meet each semi-monthly goal, teachers were able to maintain their motivation to continually refine their reading comprehension instructional practices, rather than become overwhelmed the changes they envisioned.

I don't know if I would have been willing to make this big of a change if I didn't have your coaching guidance throughout. Every time I tried something new my confidence would be okay because I tried it and it worked. The steps were little and yet, when I look back I can see that I have made a big step. But it was all the little steps that got me to that point. (Emma, Interview 3, June 28)

It [goal setting] gave you a focus, because otherwise it was overwhelming. I wanted to change ten things, but it forced me to choose something that was practical that we could do. (Violet, Interview 3, June 27)

These teachers' diverse individual foci reflected both their students' needs as revealed through assessment results and these teachers' beliefs about how to support student learning. For example, Emma whose classroom was rich in oral language, initially focused more extensively during coaching on using comprehension strategy language than did either of her colleagues. Interestingly, Violet later emulated Emma's focus on strategy language.

[Teachers] using the same "lingo" [strategy language] from year to year [is important], because that way [when they change grades] the students really think "oh I know that, oh I can do this, I understand what she is saying," and that helps them to

have better learning. (Emma, Interview 2, March 7)

I've tried to add things [comprehension strategies] into the story schema lessons, but I haven't been intentionally referring to them [using strategy language] like you [Emma] are trying to do. (Violet, PLC, May 22)

Differentiated Process

In addition to varying the content, differentiating the process used to support growth during coaching was essential to meeting these teachers' unique needs. Classroom-based modeling of new practices most supported Violet's growth. During these demonstration lessons she noted both the targeted instructional strategy modeled and other aspects of teaching, such as the use of language to reinforce expectations and foster motivation for student learning.

It's the language and the way you encouraged them and you know [say] 'this is what good readers do' and those sorts of things that I picked up from you. You were really good with the kids. (Violet, Interview 3, June 27)

On the other hand, Judy's confidence in planning for instructional changes and ongoing professional decision-making was fostered through one-on-one coaching discussions centered on how she could use the information presented during group sessions. These coaching conversations enabled her to ask questions and clarify her understanding of the plethora of new information she was presented with during small-group PLC sessions.

There is sort of a big picture, but everybody has their own picture of how this needs to work in their room…. You get all this information, but you need to go through it with support and figure out [how to use it]. (Judy, Interview 3, June 27)

Judy also benefitted from collaborative planning for instructional changes. For example, after analyzing her students' assessment results she intended to focus on non-fiction text comprehension. However, she had little experience in this area and found it difficult to devote time to planning this unit, which provoked her to consider abandoning this focus. "It is just a matter of time and I don't think it will happen this year" (Judy, Group Session, April 17). Consequently, we devoted time during one-on-one coaching to planning this unit of

study. This supported Judy's motivation for and ability to implement this unit, in response to

the needs identified through her students' assessments. She perceived her ability to provide

such responsive programming as her most significant accomplishment during this initiative.

> *I'm pretty excited to do the nonfiction [unit] because I can do it with both my kids*
> *[classes]. Especially because it ties into the animal [science] unit, along with*
> *research, and so it will make it easier for me for the next couple of weeks.* (Judy,
> Group Session, May 10)

> *Just getting a really good feel on where they are as readers and being able to use*
> *those assessments to help me program for them, to be able to evaluate them on their*
> *reading and feel really confident that I really know where they are, that was a big*
> *thing [accomplishment] for me.* (Judy, Interview 3, June 27)

Creating a learning community of teachers focused on shared goals of reading

program cohesion also created opportunities for participants to support one another outside of

the planned learning opportunities provided during this initiative. For instance, participants

supported one another through engaging in informal dialogue about the complexities of the

recommended instructional changes.

> *To plug this [comprehension instruction] in then is time-consuming. You know, as a*
> *group [primary teachers] we're sitting around in the staff room and then we talk too,*
> *we are [deciding] we're not necessarily going to ditch the whole theme that we had*
> *[with the basal reader], but we are going to substitute. Instead of spending 5 days on*
> *a certain story, what we're going to do is we'll do it [the basal story] maybe for 3.*
> *And then, like I did the other day, we'll just take a book [authentic text] and we'll do*
> *something to show how "good readers ask questions" and then do that* (Emma,
> Interview 2, March 7)

At the end of this initiative participants acknowledged the synergistic effect of

differentiating the learning process through combining individualized professional learning

through coaching with small-group collaborative sessions. These teachers' diverse individual

foci enhanced one another's growth, with changes implemented by one teacher often

subsequently implemented by the others, after successful implementation experiences were

shared during small group PLC sessions.

> *If Violet said she was trying this [in a group session], it made me think 'oh yeah, I can*
> *try that too'.* (Emma, Interview 2, March 7)

Their successes made you excited to try something similar with your class. [They were] being encouraged to try this because it worked for me, just seeing a new idea can spur on different things. I did the nonfiction stuff after Judy. (Violet, Interview 3, June 27).

With my colleagues as well, that's been wonderful, getting ideas from them and seeing what they've done and, you know, talking about "oh I tried this" and "how did that go," and so that's been very helpful for sure. [It] kind of gave you the energy and enthusiasm to try it [strategies] yourself or try something similar. (Judy, Interview 3, June 27)

Differentiated Outcomes

These three teachers' needs, interests, and abilities were diverse. Consequently, differentiating their expected learning outcomes during this professional learning initiative was essential to supporting their professional growth and enhancing their teaching efficacy. For instance, their outcomes with respect to reading comprehension instruction were diverse.

Violet and Emma became adept at providing comprehension strategy instruction during and as a result of this inquiry. At the end of this study, Violet perceived one of her greatest achievements to be the ease with which she and her students, used story schema and strategy language across the curriculum.

Probably [I feel best about] the fact that my language has changed, that I use comprehension and story schema language really naturally. I can integrate it across any field. The fact that they were really good with the language and that they understood no matter where [what achievement level] the students were at [made me] confident that this is working. (Violet, Interview 3, June 27)

Similarly, as Emma reflected on the effects of her comprehension lessons at the end of this initiative, she marveled at her own professional growth and the growth of her students.

They [comprehension strategies] are key strategies, and when you start pulling it [comprehension instruction] all together, they pick it all up [comprehension of text]. I would never have even thought about talking about the problem or the setting. At the beginning [teaching story elements through read-alouds] it [the lesson] is longer, but then it is faster and they get it [understand]. They would listen to me, and it is amazing how I have changed just being able to put out good questions when I read. My questioning strategies bore more fruit. I think that the questioning strategies that I use [now], they have to think. It is harder to teach a child to think critically instead of just being spoon-fed. (Emma, Interview 3, June 28)

On the other hand, Judy did not become as confident with or competent in

implementing reading comprehension instruction. "I think that [comprehension instruction] is not something I'm totally comfortable with yet; that's something I need to work on for next year, the "text-to-text" [connections] and "text-to-self" [connections] and all of that [comprehension strategy instruction]" (Judy, Interview 3, June 27).

Nonetheless, Judy experienced considerable professional growth in her understandings of the need for and importance of comprehension instruction. Discovering that students could decode without comprehending text was novel to Judy, and she appreciated participating in professional learning focused on her own and her students' identified needs. "That was new to me, to really see that they [students] could read and they could decode wonderfully, but the comprehension was lacking. So that was really neat, to take our concern and kind of go with that" (Judy, Interview 3, June 27). Judy also altered her practices significantly to place increased emphasis on constructivist-oriented pedagogical practices, such as peer scaffolding that she observed the researcher coach model with her students, in her own classroom setting.

> *Using some of the partner work or the "think, pair, share" [discussion strategy], [I have been] incorporating more of that. So a lot of the [basal] lessons probably have stayed, the framework has been the same. But, by inserting more of these sorts of things, in that way it has changed quite a bit too especially being able to support a weaker student [by orally] sharing their ideas and [organizing lessons] so that everybody has to think and respond instead of always listening to one or two [students], so more partner discussion, small-group work, that kind of thing.* (Judy, Interview 3, June 27)

Judy's professional growth was significant during this study, and it may have been counterproductive to expect her outcomes to be similar to those of the other two participants.

Focusing on the same content, process, and/or expecting the same learning outcomes of each teacher participant in this study may have constrained, rather than promoted their individual and collective professional growth. The findings of this study document how differentiating the content, process, and expected learning outcomes, throughout this study supported the professional growth of each and every teacher participant.

Discussion

In this era where differentiated instruction for students is advocated widely (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Chard, 2004; Fullan et al., 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Snow et al., 2005; Tomlinson, 2005), this study documented that differentiated learning opportunities were critical to supporting these teachers' growth (Chard, 2004; Tomlinson, 2005; Triplett, 2007). The beneficial effects of providing concurrent small-group professional learning community and individualized coaching sessions (Taylor & Pearson, 2005; Walpole & McKenna, 2004) were reinforced throughout this investigation. Teachers' understandings and practices were extended positively by engaging in these two mutually reinforcing professional learning formats.

The professional learning community sessions were integral to building capacity for sustainable change through promoting shared understandings of the reading process and the factors that affect it, required for program coherence and cohesion (Coburn, 2005; Fullan et al. 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Newmann et al., 2000; Youngs, 2001). Consistent with researchers' assertions, the inclusion of participants at various career stages appeared to support participants' collective knowledge building (Allington & Cunningham, 2002; Leithwood, 1990). Collaborative reflection during the professional learning community sessions was of particular importance in providing opportunities for participants to explore their beliefs through social dialogue, entertain diverse perspectives, and delineate new directions (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Pajares, 1992; Risko et al., 2005). Participation in these sessions enhanced the potential for conceptual change by promoting teachers' metaconceptual awareness of their beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Patrick & Pintrich, 2001). Moreover, participants' perceptions of discrepant information as credible and useful (Hynd, 2003) were often enhanced as a function of these collegial discussions. This study extended existing understandings by documenting how a professional learning community can support teachers'

change processes by fostering reflective practice, creating motivation for change, and providing a supportive social context for the collaborative exploration of personally relevant issues (Gregoire, 2003; Sinatra & Pintrich, 2003; Sinatra, 2005).

Yet, this study also documented how participation in these group sessions alone may have been insufficient to support change and highlighted the necessity of concurrent differentiated learning opportunities through individualized teacher coaching (Kise, 2006; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). Whereas the group sessions provided the catalyst for participants to consider alternative perspectives and establish plans to modify their practices, coaching was critical to their execution of these plans. Participants' positive implementation experiences then provided the salient outcomes associated with increased student learning that enhanced the potential for conceptual change (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Guskey, 2002).

Throughout this study, the synergistic effects of combining professional learning community sessions and associated goal setting with individualized coaching were documented. Proximal goal setting was integral to all participants' change processes, enhancing their abilities to delineate short-term program modifications that collectively promoted long-term growth (Kelleher, 2003). These procedures enabled participants to monitor their progress and celebrate their accomplishments, which fostered their motivation for continued change. When teachers' motivation for change appeared to decrease, individualized coaching was especially critical. For instance, Judy's incomplete understandings of reading comprehension caused her to contemplate abandoning or postponing her objective of teaching a non-fiction comprehension unit. However after being provided with individual assistance, she was able to achieve this goal and subsequently perceived it as one of her greatest accomplishments during this project. Proximal goal-setting procedures may enable professional development facilitators to enhance teachers' abilities to identify their needs, monitor progress, and document their growth over time (Kelleher, 2003).

Sinatra and Pintrich (2003) described conceptual change as intentional goal-directed behavior. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) delineated teachers' modifications to their practices and attribution of increased student learning to these modifications as precursors to sustainable change. Participants' experiences in this investigation documented how first establishing goals to modify their practices may later create the conditions required for teachers to engage in intentional conceptual change, particularly when they are provided with the individualized support required to achieve their goals. Participants each brought unique strengths to this initiative, with their collective change enhanced by focusing on individuals' assets rather than their deficits.

While differentiated learning appeared to affect all participants' growth positively, their experiences support Chard's (2004) position that analogous to students, some required professional learning opportunities that were more explicit and intensive. The complexities of adopting an inquiry stance when participants possess limited professional knowledge were revealed throughout this study. Specifically, the information discussed during the professional learning community sessions, at times, seemed to exceed Judy's zone of proximal development (Vytotsky, 1986). Although coaching was intended to provide additional support, the participant with the greatest needs also possessed limited time. This study reinforced the importance of teachers' acquisition of foundational understandings during teacher preparation programs (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Snow et al., 2005). Just as students' early reading success is vital for their later success (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), teachers' development of foundational understandings during the early stages of their careers may be vital to their later abilities to support students' growth.

The experiences of the participants in this study provide strong support for professional learning through concurrent individualized coaching and small group professional learning opportunities (Kise, 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Consistent with

researchers' assertions, the semi-monthly small group sessions promoted collaborative knowledge building and reflection (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan et al., 2006; Risko et al., 2005; Taylor & Pearson, 2005), while coaching provided the differentiated support these teachers' required to modify their reading instructional practices (Kise, 2006; Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). Importantly, this study also documented the pivotal role of students' reading assessment results in directing instructional changes (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Earl, 2003; Snow et al., 2005) and extended existing understandings by documenting the importance of proximal goal-setting following each group session, in delineating the differentiated foci for individualized coaching.

Of primary importance, this study exemplified how teachers' growth may be fostered by "walking the talk" through differentiating the content, process, and expected learning outcomes during professional learning opportunities. Importantly, these are the same practices recommended for teachers' use in meeting their students' differentiated needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005).

Concluding Thoughts and Educational Significance

This study will inform educators and researchers about how to support teachers' abilities to modify their reading assessment and related instructional practices through differentiated professional initiatives that combine small group collaborative learning with coaching. These understandings hold the potential to enhance teacher-educators' abilities to foster teachers' growth. These changes in turn, may increase students' learning.

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