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Practitioner Research: A “Refreshing Change” for Professional Learning

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my co-researchers, who so graciously gave of their time to explore this relevant and important issue with me.

Practitioner Research

A “Refreshing Change” for Professional Learning

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Introduction

I am ashamed to admit that during my 10 years as an elementary teacher, I never thought much about the absent faces of color in my gifted cluster groups or resource classrooms. It did not occur to me that culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD¹) learners in my school with untapped gifts and talents were being overlooked. No one questioned their absence, so neither did I. Instead, I put my faith in what I now know to be a broken, antiquated, and biased gifted referral and identification process.

It wasn't until I enrolled in the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement courses as part of my PhD program that I found myself thinking about what had been missing from my gifted classes all those years. I reflected on the many faces of color that were absent not only in my gifted classes and cluster groups but in the gifted referrals as well. Realizing that students who were English language learners (ELLs) were predominantly forgotten when it came to gifted education programming was the reality check I needed. The respectable teacher I thought I was allowed students to be overlooked and slip through the cracks. And while I knew that I couldn't undo what had happened in the past, I determined that I could move forward in a way that honored my new understandings. From that moment, it became clear that I wanted to be an advocate for English learners and concentrate my work in a way that would increase their opportunities to access gifted education programs.

I spent a lot of time reading, studying, and reflecting, and decided that working alongside elementary teachers would be a perfect starting point for my advocacy work. Because of the significant role teachers play in the gifted referral and identification processes, I believed that concentrating my efforts on working with teachers would ultimately positively impact students. So, I launched into interviewing teachers to first learn about how their beliefs and perceptions of English learners and gifted learners impacted the gifted referral process. From there, I began thinking about designing a practitioner research study with teachers who wanted to delve deeper into the topic with me. Over the past few years, I have learned much about the challenges that plague classroom teachers and English learners and influence their underrepresentation in gifted

¹ Although labels carry potential biases with them, they are sometimes necessary to promote collective understanding. In my research, I use the term *culturally and linguistically diverse learners* to represent students commonly referred to as English language learners (ELLs; Lee & Anderson, 2009).

Taking a participatory action research approach to professional learning can transform teachers in powerful ways because it allows teachers to investigate issues that matter to them.

education programs. I have also learned the value of inviting teachers to engage with a topic that stirs them personally and is relevant to their daily work. I now feel that I am armed with research-based understandings that will allow me to continue to move forward in my work with educators to open doors for CLD learners.

In the decade I spent as a classroom teacher, I participated in countless hours of professional learning. I took part in these formal seminars and informal meetings with other educators, often feeling as though I was being “held captive to another’s priority” (Sagor, 2000, p. 8). I imagine my experiences were much like many other educators, since professional learning often follows a very traditional format: disconnected and ineffective workshops that assume all learners have the same needs; isolated sessions; and controlled by outsiders, leaving educators with little to feel empowered about (Rogers et al., 2005). In order for teachers to become more invested in their learning and feel more committed to making adjustments to their teaching practices, we must rethink and modify the format of professional learning. Taking a participatory action research approach to professional learning can transform teachers in powerful ways because it allows teachers to investigate issues that matter to them, resulting in more meaningful and persuasive knowledge, and thus, change (Borgia & Schuler, 1996; Hendricks, 2006).

This article illuminates my experience engaging with teachers in a practitioner research study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) where our shared interest in a common educational issue—the underrepresentation of CLD learners in gifted education programming—led us to collaboratively investigate ways we may unintentionally contribute to the problem as well as seek promising solutions for reversing the trend and improving the educational experiences of ELLs. Despite efforts to address the recognized need for supporting underserved diverse student populations in American schools, little improvement has been made in the area of access to gifted programming for CLD students as they remain underrepresented in gifted education programs by greater than 40% nationwide (Ford, 2012; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). The goal for this study was to use practitioner research involving student-created digital stories combined with an original protocol to facilitate discussions to help teachers recognize and reflect on deficit thinking, shift their thought processes from deficit thinking to attribute or dynamic thinking (Lee & Anderson, 2009; Shaklee & Hamilton, 2003), and recognize their own sense of agency.

Broadly speaking, I wanted to understand how educators can help improve access to gifted education, advanced programs, and/or more challenging curricula for CLD students. The following specific research questions guided my study:

1. How do focused, critical conversations cued by Latin@ students’ collective photographs and digital stories help teachers become more aware of their social constructions of labels such as “gifted” and “English language learner” and their potential biases associated with them?

2. Subsequently, how do teachers understand the ways in which these labels encourage and/or hinder an equitable gifted referral process for ELLs?
3. Furthermore, how do these critical conversations contribute to teachers’ awareness of their role as gatekeepers in the gifted referral process?

I will begin this article by sharing the relevant literature related to the study, which centers on the underrepresentation of CLD learners in gifted programming and the role professional learning plays in improving this issue. The literature discussion will illuminate the current state of professional learning and elaborate on the need for shifting into a more holistic, participatory, and collaborative approach to make professional learning more effective. Next, I will move into a discussion of the study and how the use of visual media to drive small-group, cross-specialty, collective practitioner research resulted in an effective form of professional learning that promoted new understandings and shifted teaching practices among those involved in the study. Finally, I will share recommendations for facilitating this type of work in schools.

Connections to the Literature

At least one half million CLD students are attending schools across America where their potential gifts and talents are being neglected (Ford, 2010), putting them at a disadvantage because they lack access to gifted programming and its generally challenging and engaging teaching methods (Ford, 2013). Research provides insight into the sources driving the differential representation of CLD learners in gifted education, with scholars citing the inconsistent definitions of giftedness (Maker, 2005; Pierce et al., 2006) and the overemphasis on biased standardized testing as plausible causes (Ford et al., 2008; Ford & Grantham, 2003; González, 2002; Harris, Rapp, Martinez, & Plucker, 2007; Pierce et al., 2006).

Much of the research, however, attributes the underrepresentation of CLD learners in gifted programming to deficit mindsets that ultimately impact gifted referrals (Baldwin, 2003; Cahnmann, 2006; Ford, 2013; Ford et al., 2008; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995; Harris, Plucker, Rapp, & Martinez; 2009; Milner & Ford, 2007; Olhouse, 2013). This is largely due to practices and policies in educational settings that are often grounded in labels that ascribe who learners are or should be based on socially constructed assumptions (Lee & Anderson, 2009). Therefore, instead of being considered for gifted referrals, teachers often place CLD students in low tracks because of the perception that they are less able or less intelligent than their peers (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], 1998). In other words, CLD students are often presumed to underachieve and are placed in classes with other students whose achievement is believed to be similar. This deficit thinking leads to discriminatory referral and identification practices and procedures for gifted education, whether intentional or not, and makes teachers significant “gatekeepers” for programs when they are asked to refer students who have not surfaced through standardized testing screeners (Peterson, 2003).

Professional Learning is Key

Some of the literature related to the underrepresentation of CLD students in gifted programming suggests that professional learning can serve as a promising catalyst for transforming teachers' negative beliefs, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors toward CLD learners and encourage them

to look twice at these students to make doubly sure that they are not overlooking them during the gifted referral and identification process (Peterson, 2003; Williams & Newcombe, 1994). Even as far back as 1995, Frasier et al. argued that future research on the topic of underrepresentation of diverse learners in gifted and advanced programs should revolve around changing teacher attitudes and understandings about talent potential and its diverse manifestations (Frasier et al., 1995). Defined as the “routine work of a highly engaged group of educators who come together to better their practice and in the process, improve outcomes for students,” high-quality, effective professional learning can engage educators in such a way that they become committed to continuous improvement of teaching practices and student outcomes (New York City Department of Education [NYCDOE], 2014, p. 3).

The current culture of professional learning. While professional learning is one of the most effective avenues for improving student learning, it is often a missing or misguided component in the effort to enhance teaching and learning (National Center on Education and the Economy [NCEE], 2015). The most common type of professional learning, traditionally referred to as professional development, has been criticized for being disconnected and ineffective in increasing knowledge and encouraging meaningful change (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; NYCDOE, 2014). Traditional professional development usually comes in the form of a structured workshop, which occurs outside the classroom and involves an “expert” leader who talks at teachers to impart “knowledge” focused on a district or state initiative (Garet et al., 2001; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998; NYDOE, 2014). Moreover, many professional learning endeavors, operating within the prevailing accountability agenda, emphasize test scores and function under flawed assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning—namely, that training, transmission of knowledge, and testing, as opposed to the dynamic and social processes of teaching and learning, are the driving forces behind the educational process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This approach to professional learning may result in disengaged educators who feel disempowered because they lack a sense of ownership over their work.

However, a growing interest in “reform” types of professional learning, which are often more responsive to teachers needs and goals, has led to a subtle shift in the nature of professional learning (Garet et al., 2001, p. 920), and schools and districts are claiming to move toward more “holistic” and “participatory” approaches to professional learning (NYCDOE, 2014, p. 3). Yet, although a shift in professional learning is occurring, few of today’s school reform efforts emphasize a practitioner research approach to professional learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dinkins, 2009). This absence of a practitioner research approach is puzzling, as features often found to be characteristic of practitioner research have also been found to be key components of effective professional learning.

Making professional learning effective. High-quality, effective professional learning is a complex, dynamic process that should be sustained over time, consistent, coherent, focused on student outcomes, and embedded into the daily practice of teaching (Forte & Flores, 2014; Garet et al., 2001; NCEE, 2015; NYCDOE, 2014; Stewart, 2014; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). Professional learning has also been found to be more impactful when teachers and school leaders take charge of their professional learning and determine what they and/or their students most need, allowing them to feel a sense of ownership over their learning (NCEE,

2015). Furthermore, individual teachers appear to be more likely to make cognitive and behavioral shifts when they see colleagues they admire modifying their approach. This “ripple effect” is more likely to occur when professional learning comes from within than when initiatives are mandated from the top-down (NCEE, 2015, p. 5).

Successful professional learning should be highly collaborative in order to result in teachers’ collective sense of responsibility (NYCDOE, 2014). Because teachers in the same school setting often share students and experience common challenges, professional learning involving collaborative discussions to reach promising solutions to meet student needs across grade levels may sustain changes in practice over time (Garet et al., 2001). Practitioner research, a form of professional learning, engages teachers, or practitioners, in collaborative efforts in the quest to improve education because it encourages them to collectively reflect on and analyze their own teaching practices, successes, and challenges (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Practitioner research provides “a way of knowing, an attempt to peel back layers of knowledge and understandings in order to stimulate growth and generate new knowledge for use” (Dinkins, 2009, p. 271). And because the teachers are invested in their own learning, their new understandings are more convincing and more readily applied to enhance instructional practices as well as learning opportunities and outcomes for students. My study capitalized on practitioner research as a form of professional learning that engaged teachers to collaboratively learn more about the reasons teachers overlook CLD learners—emergent bilinguals, commonly referred to in schools as English language learners or English learners, of Latin@ heritage specifically—for gifted programming, and examine their own roles in improving the issue of underrepresentation.

Contexts of Research

I utilized practitioner research for this study and involved educators as coresearchers, stimulated them to think about the inequities in schools, and nudged them to interrupt the status quo, challenge dominant viewpoints, and strive to make educational resources and outcomes more just and equitable (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). I chose to focus on teachers for several reasons. I initially became interested in the issue of the underrepresentation of CLD learners in gifted programming because of my previous experience as an elementary teacher during which I regretfully and unintentionally remained blind to the absence of ELLs in my own gifted education classrooms. Additionally, I was inspired by a previous qualitative interview study I facilitated with teachers, during which these teachers indicated a need for raising awareness about the issue of underrepresentation of ELLs in gifted programming as well as a need for shifting deficit thinking and helping teachers to see past “the language barrier” (Allen, in press). Furthermore, I understand that teachers have the closest proximity to students and also have the ability to influence educational practices, especially at the classroom and school levels (Dinkins, 2009).

I agree with the idea that teachers can learn ways to transform most any aspect of the human condition, as long as the condition is accessible and they have an open awareness of it (Heron & Reason, 2001). In essence, I hoped that my work with teachers would help us all learn to recognize, honor, and cultivate the strengths, interests, and talents students bring into the classroom and translate those capabilities into challenging and engaging educational experiences (Gay, 2010).

Guided broadly by critical theory and more specifically by Latin@ critical theory (LatCrit), I approached this study believing that dominating structures, created by human choice and practice, could be undone through human agency and that I was an active and empowered agent of change (Bronner, 2011; Comstock, 1982; Hanks, 2011; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; Prasad, 2005). Particularly, I wanted to work with teachers to address social injustices in the field of education, specifically how the marginalization of people is constructed through schooling (Popkewitz, 1999), due to the often unquestioned structures, procedures, and discourses schools have in place as well as the deficit notions that continue to affect the classroom experiences of emergent bilinguals (Darder & Torres, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Lee & Anderson, 2009). I hoped that we could challenge perspectives that view emergent bilinguals as deficient and variance from the mainstream as problematic for teaching and learning (Nieto, 2002).

This study took place in a southeastern state at a Title I elementary school experiencing noticeable underrepresentation of CLD learners in its gifted education program, where Latin@ students make up 11.2% of the total student body but only 2.6% of gifted identified students. Six elementary school teachers from the school participated as coresearchers in the study. These teachers had at least five years of teaching experience as well as experience working with gifted learners and/or ELLs of Latin@ heritage. My coresearchers consisted of one gifted facilitator, an ESOL specialist, two second-grade teachers, one third-grade teacher, and one fifth-grade teacher, and all identified as Caucasian, monolingual, native speakers of English. While all the teachers had various reasons for participating in the study, all of them had a vested interest in the study, ultimately wanting to improve the educational experiences of ELLs.

Brooke (all pseudonyms) is the gifted facilitator who serves students in first through third grades. She joined the study primarily because she wanted to make a more concerted effort to work with other teachers in the school to help them notice potential talent in the ELLs they serve. Hannah is the ESOL specialist who serves all students in the school who qualify for ESOL services. She wanted to participate in the study so that she could learn more about the gifted referral process, and would feel better able to notice gifts and talents among her students and better equipped to make gifted referrals.

Mary is a second-grade teacher who has experienced the frustration of referring ELLs she “just knows” are gifted but do not qualify for services because of the standardized tests. She joined the study to learn more about how she could better support those learners in the regular classroom and in what ways she might advocate for changes in the gifted evaluation process. Virginia is also a second-grade teacher who participated in the study to learn more about the most effective ways to cultivate the strengths and talents of the ELLs she teaches. Along with the small group of ELLs she typically served each year, she had recently welcomed an emergent bilingual student into her classroom whose language of preference was Spanish, so the study was timely and relevant for her. Lura is a third-grade teacher who was frustrated with the number of advanced ELLs who had reached her third-grade class having never been referred for gifted evaluation. She therefore saw herself in a pivotal role and wanted to learn more about the gifted referral and testing processes. Louise is a fifth-grade ELA teacher who wanted to improve her practice with ELLs. She joined the study to learn new ideas for connecting with students and providing them with challenging and enriching learning experiences.

I, a former elementary school teacher and PhD student, also identify as a Caucasian, monolingual, native English speaker. While I planned parts of the study based on the study’s purpose and goals prior to meeting with my coresearchers, our processes and procedures were flexible and adapted to the group’s collective needs as the study progressed. Additionally, while I developed the NOT-ICE Teacher Discussion Protocol (described below) which we utilized to guide our discussions (Allen, 2016), we collectively refined it prior to experiencing students’ stories. While the driving forces behind our individual participation in the study were somewhat varied as described above, we shared a common desire to provide equitable, challenging, and engaging educational opportunities for our students.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources and how they were collected. Following the table, I briefly describe the critical discussion sessions and the use of the NOT-ICE protocol.

Table 1

Data Sources and Methods of Collection

Participants	Data source	Collection methods	Artifacts	Time frame
Six elementary school teachers	Individual interviews	One per teacher	Audio recordings, interview protocol with written notes	30-minute interview, Aug. 2015
	Introductory teacher workshop	Six teachers, one session to familiarize teachers with the NOT-ICE protocol and modify it if needed	Video recordings, teachers’ comments and notes discussing the NOT-ICE protocol	1-1½ hours, Sept. 2015
	Critical discussions	Six teachers, three sessions, NOT-ICE protocol	NOT-ICE protocol notes, video recordings, transcriptions, reflective memos	1-1 ½ hours/session, Sept.-Nov. 2015
	Focus group interview	Six teachers, one session	Video recordings,	1-1½ hours, Nov. 2015

			transcriptions, “What I Learned” poems, emailed notes, reflective memos	
Meeting to discuss future actions	Six teachers, one session	Video recordings, transcriptions, reflective memos		1 hour, Dec. 2015

The study officially began in August when my coresearchers participated in individual interviews with me to discuss backgrounds, teaching experience, beliefs on the topic, and questions or concerns. We then came together as a small group in early September to engage in an introductory seminar, which lasted approximately 1½ hours. We then participated in three critical discussion sessions, each lasting approximately 1 hour and spanning the months of September-November, where we focused on photographs and digital photo stories that were created during a previous study by emergent bilinguals of Latin@ heritage from my local community. These photos and photo stories the students created focused on their strengths, interests, and hobbies and acted as springboards for eliciting additional data for this study. Our discussion sessions revolved around the children’s photographs and digital photo stories, and the NOT-ICE Teacher Discussion Protocol guided us in critically reflecting on our learning through the following questions:

- N** What **N**oticings can you make about the photos? (Still photographs only)
- O** What did you **O**verlook in the photos? (Digital photo story from this point forward)
- T** How does this discovery relate to your **T**eaching?
- I** What **I**mpact might it have on students?
- C** How have your initial perceptions **C**hanged?
- E** In what ways can we use what we have learned through this process to ensure **E**quitable referral opportunities and outcomes for students from CLD backgrounds?

NOT-ICE is intentionally divided to represent the idea that our (mis)perceptions do not have to remain frozen and static, but instead should be fluid and dynamic. NOT-ICE suggests a melting away or thawing of our current (mis)perceptions in exchange for more holistic, dynamic perceptions that capture students as whole learners and not simply language learners. Figure 1 captures a still shot of the teachers during our first critical discussion session, where we are using the NOT-ICE Teacher Discussion Protocol to document our thinking after viewing a student’s photos and digital photo story. Although you are not able to actually see all teachers in this photo, all seven of us are present.



Figure 1. Coresearchers.

The study concluded with a follow-up focus group interview in late November to discuss topics needing further exploration, followed by a whole-group discussion meeting in December, where our group reconvened to discuss how we might move forward and act as advocates for ELLs at the classroom, school, and district levels.

I chose the *Listening Guide* method to frame my data analysis because of its emphasis on honoring multiple voices and lived experiences (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). In working with a small group of coresearchers, I wanted to be sure that I analyzed my data in a way that acknowledged everyone’s individual voiced experiences, yet allowed me to recognize collective understandings as well. I recorded and transcribed all sessions and listened to each session twice before reading the transcripts. I began by reading each transcript as a whole to gain a holistic picture of the sessions. Then, using the *Listening Guide* as my guide, I moved in closer to the text and began coding voices that emerged.

Just as LatCrit recognizes marginalized perspectives of reality through stories that represent diverse ways of knowing (Delgado, 1989/2011; Sólorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Sólorzano & Yosso, 2002), this process involved multiple listenings/readings of interview transcripts, each amplifying an aspect of a voice, like listening to a piece of music and following a different instrument each time (Gilligan et al., 2003). I used this approach as a mentor for my data analysis method, but my process took on a “voice” of its own. I will summarize the distinct voices that emerged from the data because they provide a foundation for the discussion on the affordances of a practitioner research approach to professional learning that follows.

Audible Voices

The voice of Bias represents the assumptions that teachers made because of the labels we assign to learners in schools, such as “English language learner” or “gifted learner.” Teachers frequently associated the ELL label with assumptions of struggle and deficiency. For instance, teachers presumed that ELLs would struggle academically, lack confidence, and be quieter in class. They also presumed that students with this label would have less parental support. These assumptions were evident in the expressed observations teachers made about ELLs. On the other hand, teachers perceived gifted learners in a more positive light, as they were presumed to have expanded vocabularies, a wide range of interests, increased task commitment, greater confidence, and leadership skills. Even though our group acknowledged that categories of students include a continuum of learners who vary in learning styles, abilities, and preferences, our discussions about student characteristics proved that labels often suggest generalizations that often misrepresent individual students.

The voice of Awareness represents the “Aha! moments” and the new realizations that occurred during our conversations. These breakthrough moments of new understandings generated by our critical discussions of students’ photos and photo stories caused us to see students in a new light and think about how we might teach them differently, in ways that speak to their strengths and interests and engage them in meaningful learning. For instance, the students helped us realize that we often privilege the use of Standard English over expressiveness, style, word choice, figurative language, and confidence. My coresearchers and I also realized that we falsely generalize the idea that Latin@ parents are not actively involved in their children’s academic and extracurricular lives, and we therefore determined that it is unacceptable to discount these students from after-school educational opportunities.

The voice of Agency represents the idea that the children’s stories stirred fruitful discussions that ultimately shifted our perspectives and gave us increased confidence in our ability to act as agents on students’ behalf in order to create more equitable instructional procedures and outcomes for emergent bilinguals. We shifted from seeing ourselves as gatekeepers in the gifted referral process to seeing ourselves as advocates for ELLs with potentially untapped gifts and talents. In addition to breaking down assumptions we carried about ELLs, we also thought about ways we could modify our instruction to reach these students more effectively in the classroom.

Effective Design Elements for Professional Learning

This study capitalized on the use of visual media to drive small-group, cross-specialty, collective practitioner research. Although I did not originally design the study with the intent to investigate the research design’s impact on professional learning, I suspected that drawing a small group of thoughtful teachers together after school for roughly one hour per session to study a common issue of interest using photographs, digital photo stories, and the participatory NOT-ICE Teacher Discussion Protocol would promote the creation of safe, collaborative learning spaces. Those features turned out to be critical design elements that aided our ability to come to new realizations about our perceptions of and practices involving CLD learners.

The Influence of Visual Media and Storytelling

The arts, photography, and other digital media can serve as effective complements to participatory research and professional learning because they allow for participation of all members and stimulate conversation within and beyond the group (Lykes, 2001). Participatory research methodologies that utilize visual media offer participants new and

reflective ways to perceive their world because images act as a springboard for discussion and prompt participants to view situations from different vantage points (Cook & Quigley, 2013; Lykes, 2011; Serriere, 2010). Moreover, photographs can be useful tools for promoting acceptance of diversity because they help bridge connections and develop understanding, encouraging the viewer to accept and respect differences (Lintner, 2005).

The use of storytelling can interrupt complacency by helping both the listener and the speaker construct their own individual meanings and sort through false and constraining perceptions of individuals and cultures (Delgado, 1989/2011; Espinoza & Harris, 1997/1998).

Additionally, because stories are a primary means for understanding ourselves and others, the use of storytelling can interrupt complacency by helping both the listener and the speaker construct their own individual meanings and sort through false and constraining perceptions of individuals and cultures (Delgado, 1989/2011; Espinoza & Harris, 1997/1998). Supplement these images and stories with meaningful community dialogue, and the result is an experience that can promote dynamic and fruitful participation (Cook & Quigley, 2013). In the following exchange, Virginia, Mary, and Louise reflected on how viewing students’ photos and listening to their digital photo stories encouraged them to focus more on students’ strengths.

Virginia: For me, it’s seeing the students that wouldn’t necessarily shine immediately as gifted...It’s helped me to think about the student more as a collective portfolio rather than just test scores. I think maybe that would be a better approach in some ways.

Mary: I think by seeing the videos you saw so much of them and what they *can* do, and how they verbalize things that you may not necessarily see in the everyday classroom...You saw a whole different—

Louise: And the first time when we could only see the pictures, it’s what we see in the classroom. And then when they were able to verbalize, that was a reminder to us to communicate with these students. Do what it takes to bring out the talents they *do* have [teacher emphasis]...

Virginia: It forced us to see inside; it forced us to see deeper into these students who are not so obvious...

Mary: Even just by seeing [the photos and photo story], I felt like I knew more about the kid than what I would know just in the classroom...by them telling what they do, why they like to do it, explaining it in the video, seemed to give you more insight.

This exchange points to some important insights about professional learning that lead to new understandings. For instance, the visual (photos) and verbal (storytelling) aspects of the discussion sessions stimulated the teachers to see and hear more deeply into the children's lives, and reminded them to translate that understanding into the classroom by communicating intentionally with their students to discover their strengths, interests, and hobbies. In another related exchange, Louise, Brooke, and Hannah reflected on their rediscovery of the importance of being intentional in their conversations with students, even amid the hectic pace of the school day.

Louise: Just talking more, too, instead of the basic, "How was your football game?" "Did you cheer this weekend?" Figure out what each kid does on the weekends and talk to them about that. Like, I had mentioned one of my students goes to a car part place, and that's neat. He is helping his dad put together cars that don't work. Just having that type of discussion with my students, instead of thinking, "Oh I bet he didn't do much this weekend." I don't mean me personally, but in general, we do that...

Brooke: Being intentional to create that kind of environment. That's a big deal.

Hannah: It's so hard in this day and age, I can only imagine. It's hard on my end, and I know it's harder on the classroom end... So many things, and having that time to create those conversations and to *listen* [teacher emphasis]. It's just so important.

The photographs and digital photo stories successfully prompted rich and productive discussions among the teachers, serving as reminders for them to seek out student strengths and interests and capitalize on them in the classroom. In order to "bring out the talents they *do* have," students must be offered spaces to learn that provide opportunities for their gifts and talents to manifest themselves so that teachers can more easily notice strengths, especially in CLD students whose gifts and talents are more easily overlooked. Furthermore, because student engagement plays a key role in student achievement (McLester, 2012), learning tied to students' strengths and interests will be more meaningful and engaging for students and should lead to increased levels of success.

However, teachers cannot plan lessons that teach into students' strengths and interests if they do not know what those strengths and interests are. The photo stories were also a reminder of the importance of the role of the student as well. While teachers can successfully create classroom spaces that invite students to engage with them, it is also important for students to use their voice to communicate their interests and talents. While these data segments reveal the importance of visual and verbal communication, other modes of communication might be just as successful in communicating strengths and interests to teachers.

Collectively Wise

Professional learning opportunities that bring educators together allow for the collective creation of valuable knowledge (Forte & Flores, 2014). Harris et al. (2009) asserted that collaborative efforts on the part of educators can serve to bring together information about a child from multiple sources, which allows teachers to truly know students as whole learners, making them better equipped to recognize their gifts and talents. Collaborative efforts among school

professionals, such as general education teachers, gifted specialists, ESOL teachers, school psychologists, and other support specialists are necessary to consider the full range of students’ abilities and to plan appropriate interventions that focus on students’ strengths, interests, culture, native language, and English language development (Bianco & Harris, 2014; OERI, 1998). These collaborative efforts, often referred to as professional learning communities, thrive when they consist of teachers from the same school who are invested in the work they are doing (Stewart, 2014). Additionally, professional learning that crosses grade levels and disciplines connects resources across the school and allows learning to transcend boundaries, thus impacting a wider range of teachers and students (Johnson, 2013).

A shared challenge brings us together. A collective commitment to investigate an issue and a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection are hallmarks of participatory research as well as professional learning (Forte & Flores, 2014; McIntyre, 2008). Moreover, effective professional learning must be relevant to participants and their educational context (NYCDOE, 2014). These tenets propelled this study as my coresearchers and I joined together to establish a collaborative community of teachers—from the same school, but various grade levels and specialty areas—united by a central issue that impacts teachers and students on a daily basis.

Throughout the study, we discussed the benefits of working in a small group as well as working across grade levels and specialty areas. Teachers found that the small group allowed them to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions freely, and they felt that they learned more by working with teachers from other grade levels and specialty areas. The following exchange indicates these discoveries and preferences:

Louise: I think the way this was broken into little segments, it kind of just built. You know, you could take it one step [at a time]. And also having a small group discussion, too...

Researcher: ...And, then, I guess the group discussion part took your “aha” further by allowing you to discuss...because I know, at one time, somebody mentioned that if you did this by yourself, it wouldn’t be as powerful as it is since you can bounce ideas off of others. (group agreement)

Researcher: What would you say would be a group that’s too large for something like this?

Lura: More than 10. Because you have too many opinions...too many people trying to share their thoughts. (group agreement)

Brooke: And also like a balance of what we specialize in. Hannah [the ESOL specialist] has input so much about the populations she works with, and you guys with the younger and older [grades]...

Mary: I think you shouldn’t just do second grade. [Fifth-grade teacher, Louise’s] experience is so much different than our experience in the younger grades. What she sees, you know...

As one of my coresearchers so eloquently summarized when she wrote down her take-away ideas from our sessions, the teachers ultimately realized that “collaborating with other professionals is essential in order to advocate for potential gifted students.” Having the opportunity to bounce ideas off of one another deepened our understandings and allowed for greater learning than any one of us could have accomplished individually. The teachers also recognized the benefits of working with teachers across grade levels and specialty areas as they gained valuable insight and knowledge from venturing outside of their usual confined learning spaces (i.e., grade levels). For instance, the fifth-grade teacher provided the lower grade teachers with a different classroom teacher perspective, and the gifted facilitator and ESOL specialist shared specific knowledge from their respective specialty areas. Moreover, a preference for group size was established, with no more than 10 teachers being most ideal for encouraging open and honest discussions.

Building a community of trust. As illustrated above, effective and high-quality professional learning is grounded in a safe environment that allows for risk taking on the part of the teachers (NYCDOE, 2014). Through our shared commitment to learn and our willingness to be transparent, we established a community of trust by honoring and validating one another’s comments; yet, we also felt comfortable interrogating one another’s assumptions. The children’s powerful counterstories (Delgado 1989/2011) combined with the safe discussion spaces we created allowed us to discover that our assumptions were more likely to shift when we verbalized them because they could be openly challenged. Thus, safe spaces for sharing our thoughts were essential in shifting our mindsets and creating change. For instance, during one of our critical discussion sessions, a teacher questioned another coresearcher’s innocent assumption, as noted in the following exchange:

Lura: Well, she’s Catholic. I can tell you that because the priest was in the background.

Mary: So, the people *married* were Catholic. *She* might not be. [teacher emphasis]

Lura: That’s true. It’s a Catholic church. That’s what I mean. He had the priest outfit on.

Researcher: But, just in that assumption...for [Mary] to say, “Well, hold on a minute...” [interpretation of Mary’s previous statement]; most of the time, our assumptions, we never verbalize them. They remain silent, and we think them. So, no one ever has the opportunity to say, “Well, now actually maybe...”

Lura: That’s good. Good point.

Later, during our focus group meeting, another exchange occurred that highlighted the need for honest conversations where assumptions can be verbalized and questioned.

Brooke: Also, for me, I think being able to identify that I do have some assumptions that I carry with me, even though I don’t feel like it’s in a negative way...but I guess they are still there, and being able to know more about these students kind of broke some of that down.

Researcher: Yeah, along those lines, I had wondered about assumptions that we typically carry with us that we don’t ever speak or verbalize. They are in there, and we’re thinking them, but we are not saying them. And so...by saying them, I think in a group, in a safe space, we feel like somebody might be willing to chime in and say something that might alter that just a little bit.

We clearly made assumptions as we discussed students’ photographs and photo stories. Bringing those assumptions to the forefront and making ourselves aware of these assumptions was a crucial step in our learning process because we were able to use the students’ stories to question those assumptions. In a recent blog post, Ford wrote, “The less we know about others, the more we make up...The more we know about others, the less we make up” (Leavy & Ford, 2013, para. 14). The students’ stories, combined with our willingness to verbalize and discuss those assumptions with others, allowed us to break down some of those assumptions in exchange for more truthful perceptions about students. Instead of making assumptions about students, we can learn and in turn know more about them. Being able to share and learn new ideas freely while also feeling safe to respectfully interrogate one another’s (mis)perceptions means trusting your group members fully; this is integral to creating professional learning communities where teachers learn from one another and shift their thinking.

Empowered Agents of Change

A key feature of practitioner research is its concept of seeing the practitioner as an agent for educational change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), one who makes a decision to engage in individual and/or collective action in hopes of reaching a productive solution (McIntyre, 2008). For professional learning to “stick,” it must allow for ongoing collaboration and promote a cyclical nature of improving instructional practices (NYCDOE, 2014). Seeing ourselves as active and empowered change agents has allowed us to take small steps in altering school structures and practices that marginalize certain students (Bronner, 2011; Comstock, 1982; Hanks, 2011; Kincheloe et al., 2011; Popkewitz, 1999).

Our group has begun taking action to mend the broken practices that have been holding some students back for years. For instance, the gifted specialist and ESOL teacher have already begun collaborating on seminars they facilitate with their faculty, to share about the issue of underrepresentation of ELLs in gifted programming and provide tips for teachers to make doubly sure that they are not overlooking these students for gifted referrals. Notable as well is the fact

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that one teacher from the group copresented about using the digital photo stories and the NOT-ICE Teacher Discussion Protocol to notice and cultivate gifts and talents in emergent bilinguals at our state’s practitioner-based gifted conference. This was the first time she had presented professionally, and she found the experience to be a valuable opportunity for both

personal and professional growth. Our research group also discussed plans to facilitate a participatory critical discussion session using the NOT-ICE Teacher Discussion Protocol with the faculty at their school, and we have also deliberated facilitating a volunteer-based, small-group book study about culturally responsive pedagogy. Furthermore, we have begun considering how we might widen the school district's scope for what counts as data for gifted referrals, to broaden what might be included in students' gifted referral portfolios.

Teachers have individually shifted their thinking and integrated their new understandings seamlessly into their instructional practices and interactions with colleagues and students alike. For instance, Brooke, the gifted facilitator, has shared the gifted referral checklist with Hannah, the ESOL teacher, who had never been informed about the gifted referral process or what qualities often signify potential gifts and talents. Brooke also plans to be more intentional about providing teachers with ideas for outside-the-box work samples they can include as gifted referral data.

After our first critical discussion session, Louise requested from her administration to keep her ESOL students during the writing block. They had previously been pulled out for writing, and she felt that this made them feel disconnected from her learning community. The administration agreed, and she reported that those students "feel like they've been given a chance." Louise also said that our discussion sessions had encouraged her to begin "seeking out the strengths that my ELL students do have, which we should do anyway; but it's helped me realize that maybe I'm not giving certain students a chance to show they are, or possibly could be gifted." Hannah, the ESOL teacher, has encouraged her students to be stronger advocates for themselves. In our final meeting, she shared how she is nudging her students to speak up for themselves and share their successes with all of their teachers, even if the triumph does not happen in that particular teacher's classroom. It is my sincere hope that these small steps will ultimately impact teachers and students on a larger scale so that they might be more in tune with the strengths and capabilities their ELLs possess.

A "Refreshing Change" for Professional Learning: Recommendations

At the close of our introductory workshop, Louise stated, "This is a lot more enjoyable...I had no idea what I was going to be doing." At the end of a later session, Brooke commented, "I enjoy these...I never get to talk with people about this stuff." Similarly, during our first critical discussion session, a classroom teacher commented in writing that these conversations were a "refreshing change from data-driven meetings." These statements stirred me to begin pondering the overall culture of professional learning in schools. Why did these teachers find *this* experience so enjoyably different?

Research has shown that when teachers have opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another, their job satisfaction increases (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1994). I believe that teachers feel a greater sense of self-efficacy, and thus higher levels of comfort and contentment in the classroom, when they feel that they know how best to meet their students' needs and they know they can work cooperatively to improve their practice. Providing teachers with opportunities to participate in ongoing, relevant, and collaborative professional learning is critical to ensuring teacher and student success.

High-quality professional learning should involve effective data-use practices (Gerzon, 2015; NYCDOE, 2014). That does not mean, however, that we should allow quantitative data to drive and completely monopolize professional learning sessions. Instead, we must provide teachers with various and multiple sources of data about students so that they come to truer pictures of students as whole learners through the blending of quantitative and qualitative data. Our meetings were collaborative, and the teachers evidently enjoyed discussing new understandings with colleagues. But our meetings were “data-driven” as well; yet, interestingly, it took some time for the teachers to come around to perceiving the students’ qualitative photo stories as “data.” I think they have been so indoctrinated into the accountability culture of schooling that it took some time for them to see data as anything other than test scores and numbers.

I’ve thought quite a bit about how schools and educators define data, allowing numbers and quantitative measures to speak loudly and boldly for students. Those thoughts led to subsequent group discussions about data and what counts—or what *should* count—as data about students. One teacher said it best when she said that we need to be sure that we “qualify [students] when they can’t see it themselves.”

Today’s students are often overquantified in educational settings. Therefore, allowing students to create digital photo stories about their outside-of-school lives provides students with an authentic means to contest the scores and numbers that often (mis)represent them; instead, these stories qualify them in a way that privileges their strengths and interests. Thus, allowing teachers to use photo stories as qualitative data about students would offer a “refreshing change” from the data that is currently in power, illuminating students’ strengths and interests. Personal narrative writing is generally included among the writing standards at the elementary level, so teachers can invite students to create photo stories about their outside-of-school lives as part of their language arts curriculum. Then, teachers can use the NOT-ICE protocol in conjunction with students’ photo stories to reflect on what they learned about the students, and share that information in a gifted referral as well as translate that learning into their teaching. Of course I advocate for using the protocol collaboratively in a small group setting, but if time or logistics prevent that from being an option, independent study of students’ photo stories with the NOT-ICE protocol would be a practical starting point.

Professional learning should also be grounded in what teachers and students are experiencing on a daily basis in their own classrooms (Stephens et al., 2000). Furthermore, encouraging professional communication through collective participation appears to positively impact changes in teaching practices (Garet et al., 2001). Therefore, to offer the most effective professional learning, educators should promote collaboration that allows teachers to juxtapose their ideas with the ideas of their colleagues. Facilitators should also pay careful attention to group size and teacher expertise, as my study demonstrated the value of small groups with roughly six to ten participants as well as the affordances of including teachers from across grade levels and specialty areas.

The goal of practitioner research is *not* to turn schools into communities where only data—in the form of test scores and numbers—drive classroom practices to be more standardized, causing teachers to attend more to student deficits than their strengths (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Rather, the ultimate goal of professional learning is to generate deeper understandings of how students learn, from the perspective of insiders—the teachers who actually work with the students, as well as the students themselves. This study design brought together the voices of both teachers and students so that, together, we could learn how to expand our views of students and better build on the cultural and linguistic resources they bring to school, in order to create more challenging and enriching educational opportunities for them (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Nieto, 1999).

While this study focused specifically on emergent bilinguals of Latin@ heritage, the design could be used to help teachers interrogate the assumptions they harbor about *all* students, including those from other ethnic minority populations, students of low socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, as well as students of all sexual orientations and gender identities. When teachers shift their thinking about students from deficit thinking to promising thinking and capitalize on students' strengths and interests, the result is improved educational experiences for all students. My sincere hope is that our work together can continue to provide that “refreshing change” that is so desperately needed, both for teachers and for students, so that schools can offer boundless and enriching academic opportunities that challenge and engage all students.

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