

The Power of Professional Learning: Using PLCs to Enhance Accessibility of Instruction for English Learners

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The number of English Learners (ELs) is growing across the United States, yet research indicates that teachers are not receiving enough professional development specifically focused on serving ELs (de Jong & Harper 2005). Teacher leader roles which incorporate both EL program management and supporting teachers in addressing the challenges of instructing this historically underserved student population are one way to address this gap. This article will focus on a year-long action research study I conducted while serving in a hybrid teacher-leadership role as both an EL teacher and middle school Instructional Coach (Margolis, 2012). After conducting a literature review on best practices related to both ELs and teacher learning, I facilitated a professional learning community (PLC) for teachers interested in learning how to make their instruction more accessible for ELs (DuFour, 2014). Qualitative data gathered during this study included field notes, interactive agendas during PLC meetings, and interviews, while quantitative data was gathered through a pre and post intervention survey. Findings revealed that a teacher-leader facilitator with knowledge of both language acquisition and methods to support adult learning influenced shifts in teacher perceptions, which then resulted in meaningful changes in teachers' mindset and practice. My research indicates that skillfully facilitated PLCs can build shared efficacy and cultures of learning that ensure equitable access to learning for culturally and linguistically diverse students longer.

Introduction

The number of English Learners (ELs) is growing across the United States, yet research indicates that teachers are not receiving enough professional development specifically focused on serving ELs (de Jong & Harper 2005). A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that only 12.5% of teachers of EL students have received training specific for supporting EL students over a three year period (Flannery, 2006). Teacher leader roles which incorporate both EL program management *and* supporting teachers in addressing the challenges of instructing this historically underserved student population are one way to address this gap.

This article will focus on a year-long action research study I conducted while serving in a hybrid teacher-leadership role as both an EL teacher and middle school Instructional Coach (Margolis, 2012). After conducting a literature review on best practices related to both ELs and teacher learning, I facilitated a professional learning community (PLC) for content teachers interested in learning how to make their instruction more accessible for ELs (DuFour, 2014). The middle school where this research took place implements a partial pull-out model in which emerging and intermediate EL students receive Language Arts instruction in an EL-specific classroom and then attend mainstream classes for all other subjects, while advanced students are mainstreamed all day (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010).

Literature Review

For several decades, researchers have explored practices for supporting EL students and their teachers (Pawan & Craig, 2011; Peregoy & Boyle, 2013; Walqui, 2006) because it has become apparent that preparation programs for mainstream teachers do not provide instruction in the dispositions and skills necessary to effectively support EL students (Jong & Harper, 2005). For teachers to be fully prepared, they need knowledge of their own biases in addition to culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2000; Hamond, 2014). Through my literature review, common themes of the importance of teacher collaboration, differentiating both instruction and assessment through scaffolding, and using sheltered instruction strategies came up. I will discuss each of these topics while also drawing connections to equity-driven education.

Collaborative Professional Learning

Teachers' professional learning to support EL students must deviate from the traditional "one-size-fits all" nature of professional development—a model that Valli and Hawley (2002) state "has failed to respect teachers' knowledge, contribute to school improvement or advance student learning" (p. 86). There is great emphasis put on providing students with differentiated learning opportunities that are relevant and applicable, so why are teachers still being subjected to professional learning that does not reflect these ideals? In multiple districts I have been "trained": trained to provide equitable education, trained to incorporate positive behavior interventions, trained to use proactive classroom management strategies, to name just a few. This "training approach" for teachers is rooted in a deficit model – the idea that there is something wrong with teachers that needs to be fixed or that we are "containers" to be filled by an expert (Freire, 1970). A more effective approach to professional development for teachers is learning that is collaborative and on-going, with a consistent focus on student learning (DuFour, 2004; DuFour 2014). Transformative learning for teachers, like students, occurs when it is directly applicable and hands-on (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009), not the "banking" kind of education (Freire, 1970).

One way to create this kind of authentic, on-going form of professional learning is to build a school culture where teachers engage in professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, DuFour, 2014; Pawan & Craig, 2011). A PLC has been defined as "teachers' collective engagement in sustained efforts to improve practice" (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). To be most effective, teachers must intentionally make the best use of structured PLC time through a focus on student learning, collaborative processes of inquiry and decision making, and an emphasis on results (DuFour, 2004). When the focus on student learning is how to make lessons more accessible to all students, teachers are implicitly engaged in equity-driven work.

Providing a structure for EL facilitators or instructors to collaborate with content area teachers is vital to ensuring equitable access to quality education for EL students (Pawan & Craig, 2011). This collaboration should also be enhanced by professional learning opportunities that fill gaps in EL instructional knowledge (Pawan & Craig, 2011). Researchers note that EL teachers are meant to be co-planners and collaborators to improve instruction which will result in EL students having "what they need to be successful or achieve equality" in mainstream classes (Jacobs, Beck, & Crowel, 2014, p. 577). In the past, "...because of biased notions of race and ability, 'special' classes... became increasingly populated by minority, immigrant, and other already marginalized students" (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 458). Rather than excluding language

learners from rigorous content, intentionally or unintentionally, teachers must have access to quality professional learning opportunities that expose them to various strategies and processes that break down the language barrier (Flannery, 2006; Pawan & Craig, 2011; Walqui, 2006). Only then, will EL students be closer to receiving educational equity as described by Nieto and Bode; “all students must be given the real possibility of an equality of outcomes” (2012, p. 9).

Importance of Differentiating Instruction and Assessments

Just being aware of equity and cultural differences is not enough though. EL students require differentiated instruction that meets them where they are and accommodates their learning by building on their strengths (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). One effective way to differentiate instruction is to provide literacy scaffolds to help ELs be successful in content area classrooms (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Many content area teachers define scaffolding exclusively as a temporary support that can be removed over time as students become more capable of complex tasks on their own (Walqui & Lier, 2010). Use of a graphic organizer (Janzen, 2008) would be an example of this type of “structured scaffold”. However, differentiation should be thought of as a structure *and* a process—the process being just as important as the structure because it helps us determine when the structures can be removed (Walqui, 2006). A supported opportunity where the student is able to take agency of the learning is a “process scaffold” (Walqui & Lier, 2010). The process of group work, for example, creates opportunities in which “students create zones of proximal development for each other and engage in mutual scaffolding” (Walqui & Lier, 2010, p. 29). Content area teachers need exposure and practice implementing this kind of scaffolding for it to become a seamless part of their practice. Therefore, a collaborative group of teachers, with a skilled facilitator, could investigate strategies to scaffold instruction that go beyond using structured graphic organizers and reflect on the outcomes, resulting in shifts of thinking and instructional practice that create additional access points for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Hammond, 2014).

As with instruction, assessment of EL students should be differentiated because all assessments *in* English are also assessments *of* English (Lenski, Zavala, Daniel & Irminger, 2006). When assessing ELs, it is important to make sure the assessments are being used to inform instruction (Lenski et al., 2006) and that students are given the option of various output methods to show understanding (Flannery, 2006; Hurley & Blake 2000). Creating alternative assessments that provide a clear picture of where an EL student is in her or his learning can guide the teacher in developing future instruction, but how often do content area teachers at the middle school level have the knowledge or time to do this effectively? This is too much work to do in isolation (Lenski et al., 2006; Pawan & Craig, 2011; Theoharis & Toole, 2011). Research indicates that EL instruction would improve if teachers had the opportunity to collaborate in a PLC focused on increasing access to rigorous content.

Scaffolding Instruction through Sheltered Instruction

Sheltered instruction strategies (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000) can be an effective way to help teachers scaffold the learning for ELs in content area classrooms. EL instructors and content area teachers should work together to design lessons that include building students’ background knowledge, providing comprehensible input, and writing language and content objectives (Pawan & Craig, 2011). Studies have shown that students can learn language while being engaged in learning rigorous content as long as there are language supports in place (Walqui & Lier, 2010). For sheltered instruction to really have an impact, though, content area

teachers and EL instructors must ideally engage frequently in collaborative professional learning where they discuss the implementation of various strategies (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013; Walqui, 2006).

Methods

The driving question behind this action research was: In what ways, if any, can a professional learning community led by an EL Facilitator affect the way content area teachers think about and implement differentiated instruction and/or assessments for EL students? I investigated the effects of an intervention (PLC) designed to provide strategically facilitated and supported professional learning opportunities to improve teachers' instruction of ELs (Mills, 2001).

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in a middle school where 26% of the student population received free or reduced-price lunch. The school is in an affluent district in the greater Seattle area. At the time of this research, there were 88 EL students, a rather low percentage for an urban school. 55 students were Levels 1-3 and the majority were in mainstream classes for all content areas.

Participants in this study included four content area teachers (Social Studies, Science, CTE, and Language Arts) and me. For the purposes of this article, I assigned the four content teachers a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. I intentionally invited content area teachers who worked with a significant number of EL students throughout their day and expressed an interest in this type of learning. The voluntary aspect of this PLC in addition to our shared purpose, expedited our ability to build relationships and establish norms that were critical to impacting student learning (Barth, 2006).

At the time of this action research, PLCs were not a common school-wide practice and for many teachers held negative connotation. Most of the professional development available was whole staff, "sit and get" trainings. The ELL Support Group PLC met monthly to think deeply about making instruction and assessments more accessible to EL students. Protocols were used to ensure meaningful learning was occurring for all members, not just the presenting teacher (Allen & Blythe, 2004). This collaborative format driven by teacher questions and dilemmas provided opportunities for teachers to share their expertise with one another in addition to creating a venue for me to present applicable EL strategies in a more authentic and relevant manner.

Data Collection

Methods literature indicates that there are various ways to collect qualitative and quantitative data during an inquiry research project. 'Field notes' taken during and between PLC meetings were a helpful way to capture evidence of change in teacher thinking, as well as teachers' practice over time (Mills, 2011; Stringer, 2008). Pre- and post-intervention surveys helped me identify teacher needs as well as the evolution of teachers' perception and implementation of teaching practices to support EL students before and after the intervention (Mills, 2011). Both surveys started by having teachers think about a focus class while answering

questions about instruction and assessment, teacher instructional readiness, and teacher beliefs around instructing EL students.

Prior to each PLC meeting, I interviewed the presenting teacher. The purpose of this interview was to establish the focus of learning or the dilemma the teacher wanted the group to problem-solve around to guide protocol selection. These one-on-one interviews also provided helpful qualitative data on shifts in teacher mindset.

During PLC meetings, I supported the formation of a story-arc of learning by starting each meeting with time to share strategies that were used or assessments that were modified based on learning that occurred during one of our previous meetings. Then we would close each meeting with reflection time. Members would record their thinking, new ideas, next steps, and questions on interactive agendas that I would collect and analyze at the end of each meeting. These notes were extremely helpful when writing the summary email to my group in addition to providing qualitative data for my research.

Findings

With the research question in mind, I was looking for changes in teacher perception and practice when it came to instruction and assessment of EL students. Since PLCs were not common at this school, I was also interested in learning how participation in this group influenced their feelings on professional learning overall. Finally, I tracked inhibiting factors as well.

Changes in Teacher Perception and Practice

Teacher perceptions. Initial data from the pre-intervention survey showed that even though the teachers in the PLC enjoyed teaching EL students, they perceived that they were underprepared and ineffective in teaching with language needs. They did not feel prepared to provide practices that were identified above as methods that increase accessibility to rigorous content. Three of the four teachers in the group said that their class with the highest number of ELs was their most difficult class. Even more striking, zero members said that it was a class in which they felt comfortable teaching.

This perceived lack of knowledge around best practices drove our PLC sessions. In our first meeting, the presenting teacher, Alexa, shared a dilemma around scaffolding in the moment and during planning to meet the needs of her students. The third and fourth meetings focused on modifying assessments to enable EL students to really show their understanding of the content.

It was clear during the second PLC meeting that teacher perception was already starting to shift, based on the comments they shared during the opening and questions they asked one another during the Descriptive Consultancy Protocol. I made note of comments like, “My most difficult class is getting better”, “Having multiple ways or opportunities for ELs to respond is important”, and “I’m building better rapport and relationships with my ELs because I’m having more one-on-one conversations.” The questions asked during the consulting portion of the protocol—such as “Are the discussions structured?” “Does a protocol exist for discussion and audience participation?” “Are sentence frames provided?” revealed a deeper awareness and thoughtfulness about making learning accessible to EL students. By the third and fourth meetings, teachers were expressing a deeper desire to ensure that their instruction and assessments were accessible to their EL students. Don, the presenting teacher for the third meeting, brought an accommodated and a non-accommodated version of a common assessment

to the group for analysis. His guiding questions were: “Do the two assessments equally assess the content? Are the accommodations even helpful? How can I differentiate assessments to accurately measure what my EL students understand about science?” Analyzing the two assessments side-by-side created many access points for the members to share what they noticed and what they thought would or would not be helpful to EL students. After the analysis, we acted as consultants for the presenting teacher and brainstormed some modifications that could be made to the accommodated version to make it more accessible. Group members, not the EL facilitator, suggested dividing the test into sections, simplifying the language and directions, and providing a word bank.

Ron found this session to be so helpful that he then decided to bring an assessment to our next meeting to discuss accommodations that would make it more accessible. He even went so far as to create his own interactive protocol document with a “Get to Know You” activity at the beginning, which indicated an investment and sense of belonging in our community. The group’s thinking went to an even deeper level during this meeting regarding assessment. Their wonderings at the end of the session revealed that they were grappling with some big mindset shifts. We discussed questions such as:

- Is it okay to grade students differently?
- Does proficient at language level per the ELPS (English Language Proficiency Standards) need to equal an A?
- How do we clearly communicate what the student knows to the student and to future teachers?

In addition to instructional perception, the way each teacher viewed their EL students also started to change. Alexa candidly informed the group that she was “more aware that it’s up to me to reach my ELs.” Don revealed an understanding of language development when he shared, “Students who have strong speaking skills conversationally still need lots of support, and I sometimes forget that.” Laura said that being in this group made her feel more comfortable teaching her ELs because “we can share the challenges and talk about them.”

The fifth meeting was completely planned by the group. Each member of the group wanted to walk away with specific feedback on a plan or idea in the making. I decided that the Feedback Carousel Protocol would be the best structure to organize this type of sharing. Each member created a poster and then the group engaged in a Gallery Walk to provide feedback to everyone. Teachers further showed changes in their understanding of making learning accessible to EL students with the plans they brought and the feedback they provided one another.

Teacher practices. Pre-intervention survey findings indicated that the majority of members (3 out of 4) expected their EL students to demonstrate understanding of concepts in written form more than 60% of the time throughout the school year, while only allowing their students to show understanding through other methods, such as orally or visually, less than 40% of the time. All teachers said that they used a variety of assessment strategies in their classroom 50% or less of the time. This data influenced the protocols and strategies I decided to share with my PLC which made it more responsive and relevant learning time.

Right after the first meeting, members started trying new strategies and began openly sharing successes and flops with one another, thus creating an environment where we celebrated and supported each other. The use of protocols and the focus on our PLC being a learning community, rather than me being an expert with all the knowledge, allowed teachers to share their expertise with one another. Strategies such as, Chalk Talk, Fishbowl, and Socratic Seminar, came from the members rather than me. During the first meeting, we had a great discussion about the importance of verbal brainstorming prior to writing, and one teacher in the group invented a strategy called Word Up right on the spot. In this strategy, a topic or an essential question is shared with the students and then students take turns putting a word up on some kind of shared web. Word Up is basically an interactive way to create a collective word bank. Students then have this group resource to draw words or ideas from while writing.

By the third meeting, three of the four teachers said that they were using visuals more often to support students' vocabulary development and understanding of content. Teachers expressed that this was becoming a "routine", not just a "strategy" used once then abandoned. This was reinforced in the post-intervention survey when two of the four teachers said that they have noticed changes in their practice since joining this group; they are now using more visuals and scaffolding in their instruction on a regular basis. Don noted, "It [the PLC] has made me much more thoughtful and deliberate in my practice. Especially planning." Alexa also expressed, during an informal focus group, that she was being more explicit in explaining words that were being used and using synonyms to ensure students' understanding. Between meetings, we met and brainstormed ways to make Adichie's TedTalk titled, "The Dangers of a Single Story" more accessible to her language learners. Don enthusiastically shared that the actionable ideas that came from this group were the most valuable to him: "As a new teacher, it's a gold mine!"

During two of the sessions we analyzed assessments (described above), the members wondered why assessments are so language heavy. Is there a better way to assess EL students? Are there changes that we can make to assessments that make it easier for ELs to show what they know? The group members shared thoughtful ideas such as, simplifying the language in the directions, using more labels so ELs do not need to infer as much, and using texts that they were already familiar with. These changes would not take a lot of time or work, which made the strategies more realistic and appealing.

Feelings about Professional Learning – Seeing value in collaborative learning

As mentioned earlier, professional development in my building consisted of whole-staff, "sit and get" trainings that year, which were noticeably different from authentic, teacher-driven professional learning. The stark contrast between these two approaches to onsite teacher education also changed the way the members of this group viewed professional learning. Alexa had strong feelings about the value of our group after our first meeting. In an informal conversation, she shared that she usually gets a headache during professional development because she is anxious and worried about all the stuff she "should" be doing – but "today, no headache because I was engaged and learning stuff to help my students." In the post-intervention survey, teachers enthusiastically said they would love to continue our learning as a group next year. They also remarked that they will seek out professional learning communities in the future.

During the first meeting, I asked the teachers what their hopes and fears were in relation to joining this group. The main hopes centered on a desire to meet the needs of all EL students and a desire for more equitable outcomes for this often-underserved population of students. "I hope that this group will enable me to reach at least one student I otherwise would have not".

The group members also expressed the hope to learn realistic strategies to implement immediately to support ELs in their classrooms. The post-intervention survey results showed that the above hopes materialized for the participating teachers. One hundred percent of the respondents felt more comfortable teaching ELs.

Participation in this group influenced other choices the members made regarding professional development opportunities. Instructional Rounds was another opportunity to de-privatize practice and create a culture of professional learning at our school. The Instructional Rounds process implemented was developed from *Instructional Rounds in Education* based on Elmore's research of the "Instructional Core" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Before classroom visits, the rounds participants discussed and decided on a problem of practice or question to focus observations. Two of my group members joined an Instructional Rounds day planned by me and another Instructional Coach about mid-year. When the two enthusiastically shared what they learned, the PLC unanimously decided to participate in a day of Instructional Rounds together, with a specific focus on EL support. Our focus question was a bit general, "What opportunities do students have to demonstrate thinking or understanding", while the evidence we gathered was through an EL lens. For example, one member chose to gather data on teacher wait time and consistently found it to be three seconds or less. This information helped us to have a rich, data-driven discussion about how teacher practice impacts the opportunities available for ELs to share their thinking or understanding.

Inhibiting Factors

There were two primary inhibiting factors that came up during this research, which were also the fears the members shared during the first meeting. The more prominent of the two was time: the lack of it and the constant struggle to use it efficiently. I heard comments such as, "Will I be able to commit the time to all the meetings?" "Will the interventions require a lot of extra time?" "Can I make this commitment because I'm already overwhelmed by all the other things I need to do?" Time has been an inhibiting factor in many other action research studies I've read and seems to be the one generalizable finding for all teacher studies. For transformative PLCs to be sustainable, there needs to be dedicated time that is held sacred. This powerful learning time should never be hijacked for logistical issues or other meetings because time will always be a barrier.

The other main fear that came up multiple times throughout this study was the overwhelming reality of teaching large groups of students, with ever growing demands for meeting the needs of every diverse student every single day. Don shared a great metaphor to illustrate this inhibiting factor. He confessed he often feels like a young boy up on the high dive platform for the first time. The kid envisions himself as a pro diver who will do amazing flips through the air and slip into the water with no splash, but in actuality lands with a tremendous belly flop. The reality is that even though we spend tremendous amounts of time planning our lessons, belly flops occur more often than the perfect dives when we are trying something new. This feeling was reiterated by the other members multiple times over the course of our meetings and the group always rallied around one another to support and encourage risk-taking.

Discussion

The most powerful take-away from this research is that being involved in a professional learning community can make this high-pressure, high-stress job more sustainable, given that a PLC offers teachers a safe space to learn and grow together. Effectively facilitated PLCs can be a powerful lever to build a culture of collective efficacy. My study revealed genuine transformation after less than a year of collaboration. Participants developed the habit of asking questions and providing feedback with and among one another—signs of a true learning community. Thus, the importance of collaboration, emphasized in the literature as the key to equitable education, is affirmed.

Through this research I've developed the strong belief that many teachers really do want to change and grow. Unfortunately, this change isn't always lasting or successful because teachers don't have access to necessary support systems. Enacting and sustaining change alone is overwhelming and difficult, but change done within a group is more likely to be manageable and inspiring. Most people need comradery when they are undergoing transformation. During one of our meetings Ron summed it up well, "I still need this. I enjoy talking through hope. I enjoy talking through despair."

Next Steps as EL Facilitator and Teacher Leader

As an evolving teacher leader, I feel it is my job to advocate for authentic and applicable learning opportunities for teachers, not only as a means to improve student learning but also to make this job sustainable and meaningful for those who dedicate their lives to creating a more just world. I now feel a greater obligation to improving the quality of education for educators, which led me to complete an administrative certification program. I know we can improve educational outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students when we focus on a culture of learning and growth for everyone in the school community because how can we expect teachers to create a strong culture of learning in their classrooms if a strong culture of learning does not exist for the adults in charge?

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