

## **Educators' Perceptions of Professional Growth Plans in the Context of Professional Learning Communities**

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### **Abstract**

Professional Growth Plans (PGPs), a model of professional development for educators, were completed in the context of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as part of a grant from a state Professional Educator Standards Board. Participants were in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and represented different educator roles in two urban elementary schools. The PGP process was introduced in PLCs and focused on the implementation of High Leverage Practices (HLPs) for inclusive classrooms (McLeskey et al., 2019). In a collaborative effort with university facilitators, educators engaged in tenets of Participatory Action Research (PAR) through the enactment of the PGP process to implement and reflect on outcomes related to their use of HLPs. Educators selected PGP goals focused on areas of instructional growth and improvement of student performance. PAR was enacted in the context of educators' individual instructional settings through the implementation of PGPs. The purpose of the grant was to familiarize and support educators in the PGP process. The purpose of the study was to identify educators' perceived benefits and challenges with the implementation of PGPs within the context of a collaborative PLC. Educators indicated that collaboration with educators across roles, including university partners, and the structure of the PGP process within the context of a PLC positively influenced their professional growth and student outcomes.

*Keywords:* professional growth plan, professional learning community, professional development, collaboration, participatory action research, high leverage practices

Preparing educators to work with diverse populations in inclusive settings is an ongoing and critical need. States and institutions of higher education are immersed in work to reform teacher preparation programs to better prepare future educators to effectively serve an increasingly diverse student population through equity-based and culturally responsive practices in inclusive settings. To do this work, it is important that institutions of higher education and local schools partner in a reciprocal fashion where school leaders, teachers, paraeducators, and faculty support and inform each other about issues related to teacher preparation. This type of collaboration drives teacher preparation program reform, and professional development efforts, and creates school environments that effectively serve students and provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn from well-prepared and supportive mentors.

The authors were awarded a \$14,929.29 Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) Professional Learning Grant focused on collaboration across roles in school settings. The grant required a focus on educator growth through the facilitation of collaborative learning communities and the completion of Professional Growth Plans (PGPs). This grant served as the introduction of PGPs to paraeducators in the state and had the goal of exploring the collaboration of educators across roles through PGPs (Johnson et al., 2019). In addition, the grant emphasized teacher and practitioner leadership, support of culturally responsive teaching and learning practices, and integration with current building or district initiatives. To support this work, participants were compensated for their time with a monetary stipend and awarded clock hours, which are state-recognized units for professional development (PD) that can be applied toward career advancement. Grant participants were in two urban elementary schools (students ages 5 through 12) in a Pacific Northwest state in the United States.

As part of the grant, we facilitated Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in each school that included school leaders, general and special education teachers, English Language Development teachers, paraeducators, and educational staff associates (ESAs). The PLCs engaged in reading and discussion of a common text, *High Leverage Practices for Inclusive Classrooms* (McLeskey et al., 2018). Participants also self-selected a text geared toward an area in which they wanted to grow professionally. Participants were supported by university facilitators in developing individualized PGPs focused on serving diverse student populations through high leverage practices in inclusive settings.

Participation in the grant provided the opportunity to engage in collaborative work between the university teacher preparation program and partner schools with renewed intention. Support of partner schools in this way influenced administrators, teachers, practitioners, and students. This support also helped to influence an environment needed for placement of pre-service teachers in field and student teaching experiences; specifically, equity based, culturally responsive, and inclusive school environments that emulate the instructional practices taught in our teacher preparation program.

### **Professional Growth Plans**

Educators have indicated the value of PD that includes collaboration with colleagues and is tailored to their own unique needs and that of their students in the context of their teaching environment (McLeskey, 2011; Author, 2016). Professional growth plans, first conceptualized in 1997 as a tool for educators to have autonomy in their own PD, have the purpose of improving teachers' skills, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors, with the goal of improving student outcomes, attitudes, and school culture (McCormick, 2001; Peine, 2003; 2008). PGPs were developed because of one school district's dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of teacher evaluation

systems, and the need for a method of professional development that aligned with needs of individual teachers and impacted student achievement (Peine, 2008). Also influencing the development of PGPs was the need to recognize teachers as learners and to empower them in determining and engaging in their own professional growth. Since their inception, PGPs have been intentionally aligned with and used as part of teacher evaluation processes with the goal of increasing teacher quality (Ziemki & Ross, 2014), and in teacher preparation programs to support teacher candidate learning and to strengthen partnerships between schools and universities (Tichenor, Heins, & Piechura, 2017).

In the state where this research was conducted, PGPs are a job-embedded form of self-directed PD (Johnson, 2019; Peine, 2008). The opportunity to participate in PGPs is available to administrators, teachers, paraeducators, and ESAs. Educators align their PGP to the state's professional standards determined for their role. Upon completion of the PGP, 25 clock hours are awarded by the PESB at no cost to the educator. In the case of paraeducators, PGPs may count toward the requirements of a General Paraeducator Certificate, to renew a Subject Matter Certificate, or to attain and/or renew an Advanced Paraeducator Certificate.

The written component of the PGP used for the grant consisted of five sections: 1) Educator information; 2) Needs assessment and goal selection; 3) Professional growth action plan; 4) Evidence and reflection; and 5) Review. The first section asked for educator information including name, school district, and academic year. Section two included a self-assessment based on state certification standards for their role, selection of a standard to focus on, selection of a professional growth goal, and a description of intended outcomes. Section three, the professional growth action plan, required a description of activities that would be engaged in for learning purposes, and a description of evidence that would be collected to support growth goals. The

fourth section, intended for completion after the action plan was implemented, required a description of the evidence collected and a reflection on how it contributed to professional growth. Finally, the fifth section included a statement of declarations that the plan and evidence was completed and factual.

### **Participatory Action Research**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) encompasses a community-based approach to problem solving (Herr & Anderson, 2015). PAR stems from the research traditions of Kurt Lewin, and in educational contexts, PAR is rooted in Freire's methods of critical inquiry (Bradbury, 2015; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). PAR places an emphasis on collaboration between facilitators and participants to engage in an iterative process of resolving local issues by walking "shoulder to shoulder," rather than one step ahead, as in many hierarchical contexts (Swantz, 2008, p. 2). As a research method, PAR merges inquiry and action in a cyclical process consisting of four procedural, collaborative steps: 1) identifying an area of focus; 2) collecting data; 3) analyzing and interpreting data; and 4) developing an action plan (Mills, 2011). The PGP structure has this cyclical process built into it.

Implementing aspects of PAR through PGPs allowed university facilitators to support educators in a critical examination of their own inclusive practices and how their instructional decision-making impacted various aspects of student learning. For educators, this iterative process served as a platform for systematic inquiry into one's own practice to improve aspects of teaching and learning within the classroom (Johnson, 2008). Researchers and educators have called for meaningful PD that is learner centered, embedded in the context of the instructional setting, and conducted in the context of PLCs (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Leko & Brownell, 2009; McLeskey, 2011). PAR, positioned within PGPs, potentially enables teachers to

understand the value of their effort reflected in the progress of their students and empowers them to improve their practice (Guskey, 1986). This serves as a meaningful form of PD and contrasts with the traditional PD model which consists of a one-way dissemination of information from leadership teams to teachers, an approach that does not typically result in meaningful learning experiences and direct application to classrooms (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2003; Khan et al., 2019).

### **Inclusion and High Leverage Practices**

The content chosen for PD during this grant was from the text *High Leverage Practices (HLPs) for Inclusive Classrooms* (McLeskey et al., 2019). This text was used for PLC readings and discussions, and participants selected HLPs for development of their PGP goals. HLPs were originally conceptualized by Ball and Forzani (2011) as a set of essential teaching practices to achieve student outcomes. They were developed with the intention of providing common teaching practices that could be used across teacher preparation programs and in schools. Given the changes in recent decades in the field of special education and the increased emphasis on inclusion of children receiving specially designed instruction in general education classrooms and curricula, HLPs for inclusive classrooms were developed by McLeskey and colleagues (2019). This set of HLPs align with that of Ball and Forzani's and are practices that vary in intensity and focus with the diverse needs of learners in inclusive classrooms in mind. HLPs for inclusive classrooms are intended for the preparation of inclusive educators, both pre-service and in-service. They include a set of 22 critical practices grouped into four areas of practice: collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral, and instructional. These practices are commonly implemented in general and special education classrooms and have been demonstrated to improve student outcomes when used effectively (CEC, 2020). HLPs were

designed to address challenges teacher preparation programs have had in adequately preparing teacher candidates to meet the needs of students in inclusive settings. In addition, the HLPs were intended to address the research-to-practice gap that exists between the research and evidence-based practices that are known, yet minimally used, in practice (McLeskey et al., 2018).

## **Purpose**

The nature of the awarded PESB grant presented an opportunity to provide PD to university partner schools through implementation of PGPs within the context of collaborative PLCs. PGPs served as a framework to guide educators in PAR as it embeds the cyclical learning process of identifying a goal, implementation, collection of evidence, and reflection. It is known that engagement in this process leads to changes in the educator, is linked to high quality teaching, and impacts student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016). This process and the support offered in the context of a PLC were intended to increase the likelihood of implementation of HLPs in a way that was personalized to the educator's context, increasing the likelihood of long-term implementation. This is consistent with the research on effective PD which indicates the need for focused and sustained opportunities to learn that go beyond the single workshop model (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017).

This design emulated a structure for partnerships we hope to continue and enhance over time. The purpose of the present study was to explore the following questions 1) Did educators better understand the PGP process through participation in this grant? 2) What were educators' perceived benefits of implementing a PGP? 3) What were educators' perceptions of collaboration in the context of a PLC? To explore these questions quantitative and qualitative data were obtained and analyzed.

## **Methods**

An introduction to the PGP process, grant requirements and professional development and collaborative conversation around inclusion and inclusive practices took place at a meeting with all grant participants. During the four-month grant period, participants collaborated in PLCs and individually with university facilitators on writing and implementing their PGPs. At the time of PGP completion, each participant submitted their finalized PGPs to the lead facilitator and completed an exit survey administered by PESB. Participants then had the option to submit for clock hours through the state. At the conclusion of the grant, participants were asked to participate in the study, which was based on the analysis of their PGPs and survey responses. The following is a detailed description of training and support provided, PLC activities in each building, the PGP process, and data collection and analysis of PGP reflections and survey responses.

### **Participants**

Grant participants were determined on a voluntary basis. Established rural and urban partner schools were contacted and invited to participate in the grant. Schools who self-identified interest in participation were then asked to solicit interest from 10 or more educators across the school building. Schools were asked to ensure that participants included educators from across roles (general education teachers, special education teachers, English language teachers, paraeducators, administration, and educational staff associates). Three university facilitators were assigned to buildings, with the lead facilitator assigned across buildings and co-facilitators each assigned to one building.

Twenty-four ( $n=24$ ) educators participated in the grant (Authors et al., 2020). Twenty-one ( $n=21$ ) participants completed the exit survey. One educator dropped from the grant mid-way and two educators chose not to complete the survey. Roles of participants are reported in

Table 1. The role of teacher included three special education teachers and 10 general education teachers. The role of Other included a Library/Instructional Technology Specialist, a Title/Learning Assistance Program Teacher, a Math Interventionist, and an English Language Teacher. Other job specific demographic data for educators who completed the survey are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographics of Educators Completing Survey (N=21)*

Demographics	<i>f</i>	Percent
<b>Organization</b>		
School 1	9	42.0
School 2	12	58.0
<b>Current Role</b>		
Paraeducator	5	23.8
Teacher	13	61.9
School SLP	1	4.8
Other	4	19.0
<b>Certificate Held</b>		
Paraeducator	3	14.3
Teacher	15	71.4
Administrator	1	4.8
School SLP	1	4.8
Missing	---	2.8

**Number of Years in Current Role**

0-2	2	9.5
3-5	7	33.3
6-10	4	19.0
11-15	5	23.8
Over 20	3	14.3

**National Board Certification**

Yes	3	14.3
No	21	85.7

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*Note.* --- indicates missing data.

**Procedures**
***Whole Group Training***

The grant was initiated with a meeting of university facilitators and all grant participants. Requirements of the grant were explained, and participants were introduced to PGPs. The emphasis of the time together was placed on inclusion and collaborative practices, as well as an introduction to the 22 High Leverage Practices for inclusive classrooms (McKleskey et al., 2018). Time was spent in discussion about the definition of inclusion at an individual and building level. Teams had the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon this and to discuss challenges associated with inclusion. The last part of the training included a self-assessment using role specific standards. Upon taking the assessment participants began to consider goals they might choose to focus on for their professional growth plan. Particulars such as meeting dates and times for PLCs during the grant period were discussed. One PLC member from each

site was designated as the site facilitator to coordinate with university facilitators on the grant.

The final activity consisted of a pre-survey, required for participation in the grant.

### ***School One Professional Learning Community***

The PLC for school one consisted of 14 members that represented educators from across the school and two university facilitators (Authors et al., 2020). PLC members included seven classroom teachers, one special education teacher, one Title One/LAP teacher, a Library Information Technology specialist, an English Language Development specialist, and three paraeducators. The PLC met during a regularly scheduled meeting time every other week for one hour. Members each selected a chapter to read alone or with a partner from the text *High Leverage Practices for Inclusive Classrooms* (McLeskey et al., 2018) to review and share highlights with the group. Time after these presentations was spent discussing the practical application of the strategies to their teaching context. Additionally, PLC members refined their goals and action plans for their PGPs, working collaboratively across roles. Release time was provided for participants to work for an extended period with subgroups or alone to finalize their plans and complete the PGP.

Two main subgroups formed to provide greater focus for the PGPs and to align existing building initiatives. One group chose to focus on language arts integration in science and the second focused on the implementation of HLPs to create measurable goals for students receiving special services. Example goals included the use of explicit instruction to teach Tier 2 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, or STEM, vocabulary words to increase comprehension and transfer to written responses, and the use of explicit instruction to increase positive student behavior in small groups and capitalize on student strengths.

Participants at school one spent between two and seven weeks collecting data for their PGPs with students in their traditional classroom setting. Due to COVID-19 school closures, the original plans required modifications to complete them with students through remote learning.

### ***School Two Professional Learning Community***

The PLC for school two consisted of 10 members and two university faculty members (Authors et al., 2020). The PLC consisted of four classroom teachers, two special education teachers, one speech pathologist, a math coach, and two paraeducators. The PLC met three times after school for two hours. During the first meeting participants selected a chapter from the text *High Leverage Practices for Inclusive Classrooms* (McLeskey et al., 2018) to read independently or with a partner. At the beginning of each meeting members shared content from their pre-selected chapter with the group. A discussion followed the presentations which focused on practical application of the strategies to specific teaching content and classroom scenarios. The last hour of each meeting time was set aside to work on refining PGP goals and action plans in collaboration with educators across roles. Release time was available for participants to work on their PGPs in small groups or independently, though the release time was not used.

As participants determined goals for their PGPs, three main areas of focus stood out. One group focused on the integration of technology with writing to increase immediacy of student feedback and student engagement, a second focused on the implementation of effective instructional practices to increase academic skills (number identification, letter identification, and decoding skills) for students who were at risk, and a third worked on the development of tools and processes to increase collaboration with support staff in order to improve communication, provide feedback, and/or increase the quality of services to students receiving math intervention, or special education support.

The participants at school two spent approximately two weeks collecting data on their PGP goal in the traditional school setting. Due to COVID-19 school closures, the original PGPs required some modification to complete them in keeping with requirements.

### ***Completion of PGPs***

Educators completed a needs assessment aligned to the certificate standards for their role and identified an area of focus as well as a professional growth goal. Next, educators determined the steps needed to carry out their goal as well as how they planned to collect evidence to determine progress and/or accomplishment of the goal. Educators spent between two and seven weeks carrying out the steps of their PGP and collecting data. The educators were then asked to describe the evidence collected and how it contributed to their professional growth. In addition, each educator was asked to reflect on the evidence, the process, and lessons learned, as well as the next steps to continue professional growth.

### ***Final Steps***

Upon completion of the PGPs, participants had their PGPs reviewed by another PLC member and made edits. The university facilitators played a large role in this process. Upon final completion, the lead university facilitator signed the PGPs so educators could apply for clock hours through the state. Personal information from all PGPs was redacted before sending them into PESB; a requirement of the grant. A final requirement of the grant was for each participant to complete a web survey designed to evaluate the grant and PGP process to inform future PGP projects across the state for administrators, teachers, paraeducators and ESAs.

### ***PGP Sampling Procedures***

To gain insight into participants' diverse perspectives about PGP development, we analyzed written statements from a sample set of PGPs across two separate school settings.

Analyzing written statements helped us triangulate survey results and see areas where the data converge or diverge. Using purposive sampling procedures, we analyzed 10 PGPs total out of 21 submissions. Our criteria for including PGPs into the sample set were the following: 1) PGP had to be written by either a paraeducator, teacher, or support specialist, as someone who works directly and frequently with students, and 2) the sample had to include an equal number of PGPs from educators who worked at each school site. These criteria allowed us to see common threads of data between schools because of the PD format, despite any apparent differences in school systems. After dividing the PGPs by school site, we then selected five samples at random, based on the type of position held. The sample included written responses from four paraeducators, four certified elementary teachers, and two specialists. As previously noted, we included an equal number of participant PGPs from each school site to search for similarities and differences.

### ***Instrumentation***

As part of this grant, educators were required to complete a survey developed by the state PESB (2019) and administered at the conclusion of the grant and upon completion of the PGP process. The instrument was comprised of 22 items (Authors et al., 2020). Quantitative data were obtained from items 1-10, and qualitative data were obtained on items 11-22. Items 1- 3 requested name, sponsor organization and the focus of the PLC. Items 4 -7 were structured to obtain demographic information and items 8-10 requested information regarding participant familiarity with the PGP process, state standards-based benchmarks and state endorsement competencies. On items 8-10, respondents were asked to rate their familiarity using a Likert-type scale with a range of 1 to 5, 1 being unfamiliar and 5 being very familiar. Items 11-18 were open-ended response questions focused on processes outlined by the PESB related to the use of PLCs in combination with PGPs and the structure of the PGP template. Items 19, 20, and 22

asked participants to identify positive and challenging aspects of completion of PGPs in the context of PLCs. Question 21 was phrased in a select-response format, requesting participants to identify preference of completion of a PGP in the future, independently or in the format of PLCs.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed how their responses would be used for analysis and assured of confidentiality. Participants were asked to provide voluntary consent for their PGP and survey responses to be included in analysis through an online consent form. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, time involved in completing the survey, and assured of confidentiality. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw consent or refuse to answer any question(s).

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Professional Growth Plan Evidence and Reflection Responses***

After reviewing the data from the completed PGPs, we conducted a first cycle coding analysis that included InVivo coding (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This coding method uses words or short phrases from the actual language derived from the PGPs. This is an appropriate coding method that aligns with the tenets of PAR, as the purpose was to honor the participants' voice within a small-scale study. This method was highly applicable analysis of educators' PGPs because it allowed us to objectively capture meaning preserved from the educators' accounts of their own experiences (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Stinger, 2014). The second cycle coding method used included pattern coding (Miles, et al., 2014). Using this method, we grouped summative statements and condensed them from the first cycle. The purpose of this was to combine codes for thematic analysis and development (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This method was also appropriate given the small sample size and the amount of data

within the corpus. Finally, we refined the themes according to similar patterns observed in the data. Qualitative analysis of PGPs provided insight into educators' understanding of the PGP process and perceived benefits of implementing PGPs.

### ***Survey***

**Quantitative Data Analysis.** The demographic data were collected from survey items four through seven and summarized using absolute frequency distribution (Rubin, 2013). Likert scale responses were compiled from survey items eight through ten. A rating of 1, 2, or 3 was categorized as *unfamiliar* and a rating of 4 or 5 was categorized as *very familiar*. The total number of respondents for each item (items 8-10) were calculated and divided by the number of total respondents and multiplied by 100. Results were reported in percentages. Likert scale responses were analyzed to determine if educators felt that participation in the PGP process helped them to better understand the PGP process, and to develop familiarity with standards-based benchmarks for certification and state endorsement competencies for their unique role.

**Qualitative Data Analysis.** The open response questions on the survey were analyzed using qualitative methods of categorizing responses into common themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following this method, the open response questions were reviewed, and codes were generated to identify initial patterns or themes. The themes were then defined, and key quotes were identified and included in the data as they related to the defined themes. Qualitative analysis was used to more deeply understand educators' perceptions related to completing PGPs, the benefits of participation, collaborating with educators across roles, and completing PGPs in the context of a PLC. The following is a detailed description of each of these main elements.

## **Results**

### **Professional Growth Plan Evidence and Reflection Responses**

After reviewing frequency statements across participants, three primary themes emerged from a thorough analysis of data from the PGPs. First, actionable tasks for professional growth included an emphasis on collaborative learning. Additionally, professional development materials were a catalyst for perceived professional growth. Finally, educators' perceptions of professional growth were contingent on varied reports of student performance data. Each of these themes is discussed with supporting data excerpts below.

### ***Actionable Tasks for Professional Growth***

Participants repeatedly emphasized the value of a PLC in the pursuit of professional growth. Statements such as, “discussions with colleagues,” and “purposeful communication” were frequently associated with professional growth. They also annotated the value of a collegial university partnership, noting that university faculty would provide helpful feedback and support in their development and pursuit of professional goals. Several noted how university faculty had provided helpful resources and support in the development of their PGPs, which had a direct impact on their teaching practices. Each of the paraeducators from different school sites had originally established goals emphasizing individual professional development, excluding any mention of collaboration with teachers. At the conclusion of the PGP cycle, they cited that their professional growth was a direct result of being embedded in a PLC and made more references to “we as teachers” and “our grant.” This degree of stated ownership has implications for PLCs across student service models which are discussed in a subsequent section.

### ***Professional Development***

Another theme to emerge from data analysis was that PD materials were a catalyst for perceived professional growth. Nearly every educator, regardless of role, emphasized the relevance and applicability of the text used for the PD sessions regarding HLPs. It was evident

that the professional book study, guided reflections, and plan for implementation had increased educators' knowledge about meeting the needs of students who struggle to learn in inclusive classrooms. Educators reiterated the value of the text, believing it to be an "excellent resource," and a "valuable roadmap." It was also clear that the modality in which they accessed the material had an impact, as 75% of participants in their PGPs noted a positive impression of the HLP training videos provided in addition to the text. This finding has implications for the ways that PD is conducted, notably that that most educators cited the benefits of learning in multiple modalities.

### ***Perceptions Contingent on Student Performance Data***

Educator perceptions of professional growth were closely connected to reports of student performance. Because educators had complete autonomy regarding the type of data they collected, as well as the length of the assessment cycle, measures of student performance were not standardized. Educator comments about student performance included reviews of pre- and post-assessments over varied units of time that ranged from two to seven weeks. Further, understanding of student "mastery" or "proficiency" was ambiguous. Most comments about student performance referred to positive perceptions of academic and/or social growth. Whether student performance was anecdotal, performance-based, or included informal observed measures, the primary finding in this data set was that several educators reported increased engagement, and some had experienced an increase in assessment scores and observed students spending more time on task. This theme has implications for the focus PD in additional iterations of PAR in the future.

### **Survey**

#### ***Levels of Familiarity with Process and Standards***

Percentages of responses are reported and grouped based on participants' level of familiarity with the PGP process, state standards-based benchmarks, and state endorsement competencies (see Table 2). A response of *unfamiliar* includes participant responses of 1, 2, or 3 on the Likert Scale. A response of *very familiar* includes participant responses of a 4 or 5. Fifty-two percent of participants reported they were unfamiliar with the PGP process prior to their involvement with the grant. When asked about familiarity with state standards-based benchmarks for certification, 71.3% of participants reported they were unfamiliar. Finally, 85.5% of participants reported they were unfamiliar with state endorsement competencies related to their specific educator role. This has implications for the utility of a collaborative PD model for familiarizing educators with tools and processes to assist them in ongoing professional growth.

Table 2

*Level of Familiarity with Process and Standards (N=21)*

	Unfamiliar	Very Familiar
	%	%
Familiarity with PGP Process	52.3	47.6
Familiarity with State Standards-based Benchmarks	71.3	28.6
Familiarity with State Endorsement Competencies	85.7	14.3

***Results of Open Response Analysis***

Four main themes emerged from analysis of open-ended survey responses. First, self-assessment was helpful to educators in setting goals. In addition, educators found value in the PGP process itself as well as value in being involved in a PLC that included educators across

roles. Finally, educators found that completion of a PGP in the context of a PLC was preferred to doing so independently. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

**Benefit of Self-Assessment.** Surveys indicated that participants generally chose the self-assessment tool aligned to their role to reflect on their practice and determine areas of growth and strength. One participant noted that the self-assessment helped determine the general area of focus for the plans, whereas the prompts on the PGP provided the opportunity to refine and clearly specify each person's goals (Authors et al., 2020). "As I reflected on areas of strength and growth opportunities, I was able to narrow down my focus as to what I could work on that would be beneficial to myself as an educator and to my students." This finding suggests the value of embedded self-assessment and goal setting as part of professional development opportunities.

**Benefit of the PGP Process.** All participants found the process outlined in the template provided to be helpful in some way. The majority indicated that the template was helpful to lead them through the PGP process (Authors et al., 2020). Participants stated that, "The PGP template in general is helpful because it guides you to your final reflection" and that it "... provided me with a chance to try something new with an action plan that made me feel like I could be successful." Four participants indicated that determining the intended outcome helped identify the learning targets and the steps to complete the plan assisted them the most, one stating, "The most helpful section was #4: Intended Outcome (What will you or your students be able to do that you/they are not able to do now?). This section was helpful because it required me to look to specific standards and identify exactly what I needed to teach. Once I identified the standards, then I was able to identify learning targets for students to help them meet the intended outcomes." The reflection question was also noted as helpful by four participants. A participant stated that, "I found the reflection section helpful. It was helpful to reflect on what worked and to

create a plan for going forward.” The most challenging aspects of the PGP included establishing the research goal and the evidence to collect (Authors et al., 2020). While some found it helped them determine what evidence to collect, others indicated collecting evidence due to school closures and a shift to remote learning was an issue. Most notable from these findings are the benefit of a structured format to guide individuals in carrying out a PGP as well as the value of goal setting and reflection.

**Benefit of Professional Learning Community.** The PLC model for PGP completion was valuable to participants because it allowed them to collaborate with colleagues on establishing goals, share ideas across roles, and provide and receive support. The group composition of the PLC was also noted as strength. Some indicated hearing perspectives from different roles was valuable. Additionally, having a shared text to provide a common set of strategies and language assisted participants in defining their plans (Authors et al., 2020). While collaboration was by far the greatest benefit of the PLC that was noted, finding time to do so was indicated as an area of challenge. Other challenges included different goals due to roles and time to complete the process because of school closures. One participant stated that, “One challenge was that we were each so different, not just different grades but such a variety of ideas and focuses. So, there was not another teacher or group of teachers that was working on the same goal as I was, but the professionalism and willingness to listen and brainstorm and share ideas was fantastic.” An important implication from this theme is the value of shared learning with educators across multiple roles within a school building.

**Benefit of Engaging in a PGP Within a PLC.** When asked “If you were to complete a PGP in the future, would you prefer to complete it independently or with a professional learning community (PLC)?” 85% of participants stated with a PLC, and 5% stated independently. The

remaining 10% indicated no preference. Additional feedback solicited reinforced the value of the PGP process and working in a PLC. Responses included, “I loved this experience and because of it I have grown as an educator” and, “This was a valuable activity for me and ultimately my students!” Participants also indicated the value of participation across roles. One stated, “Thank you for including paraeducators in the PGP process. The information I gathered on the many different high-level practices will benefit myself and my students. This was a great learning experience.” Worthy of note is that participants identified a preference for this type of PD in the context of a learning community.

### **Discussion**

Educators identified several benefits in the process of completing a PGP within the context of a PLC. They found the PGP structure assisted with determining a goal for professional growth and with carrying out an action plan intended to influence professional growth and/or student outcomes. Collaboration with educators across multiple roles and with colleagues and university faculty with multiple years of collective experience provided support for educators through each step of the process. Educators experienced autonomy as well as the benefit of a learning community; both viewed by educators as impacting their professional growth as well the growth of their students.

Over half of the educators involved with this grant reported that prior to the grant they were unfamiliar with the PGP process, state standards-based benchmarks for certification, and endorsement competencies specific to their role. Engagement in the PGP process as part of this grant served an important role in ensuring educators are familiar with standards and competencies expected as part of their role. This familiarity is necessary to determine areas of mastery and growth needed. Further, this awareness is critical for meaningful engagement in PD

and evaluation processes that are designed to facilitate change in educators to result in high quality teaching, ultimately influencing student outcomes. Participation in this grant helped educators to familiarize themselves with state certification benchmarks, endorsement competencies, and the structure of the PGP.

The emphasis on collaboration in this study provided the context for educators to think not only individually but also collectively in setting goals. Consequently, the 23 PGPs that were completed as part of the PESB grant covered a broad range of topics including school initiatives, program initiatives, and individualized program or classroom needs. This individualized approach to PD is powerful. As noted earlier, educators have reported that some of the most effective PD is that which is tailored to their unique needs and takes place in the context of a collaborative community (McLeskey, 2011; Author, 2016).

Collaboration across varied roles and years of teaching experience within the PLC was appreciated for the different perspectives provided and the applicability to multiple educational contexts and educator needs. It also provided opportunity for participants to develop a shared understanding of an issue and how to proactively address it for the maximum benefit of the students. Additionally, this type of collaboration led to a deeper understanding of the role each educator had within the school structure and how to leverage this knowledge to implement inclusive strategies for students. For many of the participants, this was the first time they had an opportunity to work in a PLC with educators who had roles different from theirs.

A required element of the PGP grant was that evidence of increasing teacher and practitioner leadership be included. The instructional facilitators in each building took leadership roles, assisting in coordination of PLC meetings and other grant related details. In addition, each PLC member had the opportunity to fill a leadership role through providing PD to the group on

their selected content from the common text on HLPs. This provided a unique opportunity for each member, regardless of role, to be an equally contributing member of the PLC. For example, paraeducators had the same level of leadership, learning, and participation as general and special education teachers; roles that often are marked by hierarchical structures that inherently limit voice.

The inclusion of paraeducators was an intentional requirement of the grant as the PESB used this grant as an opportunity to pilot the PGP process for paraeducators. Of the 24 grant participants, five were paraeducators. Initially, the paraeducators indicated some discomfort in participating in PLC activities at the same level as their certificated colleagues; some who served as supervisors for the paraeducators. As the PLC and the PGP process unfolded however, they become more comfortable. Paraeducators collaborated with certificated members in development of PGPs and participated in providing PD to all members of the PLC. As a result of this they anecdotally indicated increased confidence and feelings of being a true member of the learning community. They felt empowered to identify and implement professional changes to better serve students.

### **Implications**

This conjoined effort in research and practice between the university and local schools has value in lessons learned. Universities working in concert with school districts have potential to impact teacher practices in a significant way. As mentioned in the PGP and survey results, educators found that connecting with university faculty enhanced their learning opportunities. Many teachers find that there is a disconnect between research conducted at the university level and their day-to-day practices in classrooms. This type of “in-house” PD has strong potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Though beyond the scope of this study it is worthy of mention that university partnerships have potential to impact teacher practices, and that such partnerships help to create clinical settings for pre-service candidate placements that align with what is taught in university teacher preparation programs. The reciprocal partnership emulated in this model of PD provided the opportunity for university faculty to provide PD to educators in a school setting, and university faculty were able to learn from educators who are engaged in the work daily. Further the focus of HLPs as the content for PD provided common language between the teacher preparation program and potential clinical placements for pre-service teachers. This type of partnership has the possibility of creating strong teacher preparation partnerships bridging gaps between what is learned in teacher preparation programs and practiced in school settings.

### **Limitations**

Despite the many benefits experienced as part of the grant and PGP process, there were a few notable limitations. Coordinating common times for PLC meetings provided some challenge due to conflicting teaching schedules with university facilitators. This limited one facilitator's ability to participate in a large portion of the PLC meetings. There were also challenges with being able to utilize resources offered by grant. Money for substitutes or release time to collaborate on PGPs was initially written into the grant budget but schools encountered challenges using these resources due to availability of substitutes, or teacher willingness to be out of the classroom. While one school was able to use some of these resources for additional release time, the other was not. This led to one school having more time to collaborate within the school day. Finally, school closures due to COVID-19 occurred four weeks prior to the initial end date for the PGPs. Some educators were able to modify their plans and complete them through remote learning, yet others were not able to complete their intended plan. This

modification of PGPs resulted in the inability to carry out their full PGP and benefit from the outcomes that may have been recognized.

Finally, as we approached the analysis process with a critical lens, we acknowledge we could have supported educators more intentionally in the development of their PGPs with established standardized measures for data collection. We also could have bolstered the content of PD sessions to include information about effective methods for collecting assessment data in the context of PAR and used it as an indicator of student growth or other outcomes aligned to educator PGP goals. In doing so, is likely that we would have been able to draw some additional data points between educator perceptions of professional growth and actual student performance or attainment of other identified PGP goals.

### **Future Research**

Overall, the structure of the PGP process, the collaboration across roles in a PLC setting, and the collaboration between partner schools and university faculty provided opportunity for educators to recognize the many benefits of goal-oriented and reflective practice. The implementation of PLCs in the context of PGPs with elementary school educators and university faculty provided a much-needed framework to coordinate how governing and decision-making bodies, school districts, and educator preparation programs can work together in complementary fashion to support educators K-12, as well as to improve educator and student outcomes. Our hope is that this is an initial step in more broadly using the PGP process in combination with PLCs to facilitate meaningful educator PD and certification processes between state offices of education, schools, and educator preparation programs.

### **Author Note**

This work was supported by the State Professional Educator Standards Board,  
Professional Learning Grant, Collaboration Across Roles.

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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