

## **‘It Will Be a Ripple Effect:’ Coaches Cultivating Teacher Leadership for Inclusive Education through Professional Learning Communities**

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### **Abstract**

Traditional approaches to professional development for inclusive education narrowly frame inclusive education as a special education reform. Such approaches emphasize technical practices rather than surfacing and disrupting harmful ideologies that normalize the segregation of students with disabilities. Alternatively, there is potential for a transformative ripple effect for inclusive education when professional development prioritizes the critical inquiry, collaboration, and collective action of teacher leaders. Professional learning communities offer a model for professional development through which teacher leaders can cultivate the tools and support needed for taking action for inclusive education in their own contexts. Coaches are uniquely positioned as advocates and teacher leaders who can facilitate such professional development. This action research study explored how four inclusive education coaches (1) worked to cultivate a professional learning community for developing inclusive teacher leaders in response to the needs of their district and (2) reflected on the impact of this professional development to plan for their ongoing support of the district’s inclusive teacher leaders. The findings highlight the importance of professional learning communities as a professional development approach for supporting the collaboration and agency for teacher leaders for inclusive education.

In the United States, inclusive education has been narrowly understood as a special education initiative to educate students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers in general education classrooms. More specifically, inclusive education, or inclusion, is often conceptualized as providing students with disabilities individualized instruction and access to standards-based instruction in the general education classroom (Cook et al., 2021). As a special education reform, however, the field of inclusive education has been grounded in the logic of the medical model of disability that perceives students with disabilities as broken or deviant, the very same logic that has always been used to justify the segregation of students with disabilities (Danforth & Naraian, 2015).

Professional development for inclusive education is one site through which these dominant conceptualizations of inclusive education are created and reproduced. This lens on inclusive education is not only narrow, but also unjust, as it is rooted in the ableist logic of the medical model. Guided by this logic, professional development for inclusive education often positions educators as technical practitioners of best practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Schlessinger & Oyler, 2015) whose purpose is to get students ready to fit into general education classrooms, as well as to determine if this readiness has been reached (Thorius, 2019). Therefore, the learning that is often prioritized through professional development for inclusive education is frequently focused on implementing special education practices within the general education environment. While educators certainly need ongoing skill development throughout their careers, this emphasis on making “students less intrusive rather than to make schools more inclusive” (Erevelles, 2011, p. 2158) must not be the exclusive focus of professional development. Given the persistence of segregated special education classrooms, it is clear that dominant forms of

professional development for inclusive education have yet to disrupt these long-standing inequities in schools (Schlessinger & Oyler, 2015).

Dominant approaches to professional development for inclusive education often fail to recognize the many complex layers of this work, as inclusive education is shaped by a range of context-specific factors and dynamics characterized by intersectional injustice in schools. More specifically, traditional forms of professional development, often referred to as “one-stop shop” (Odom, 2009) or “sit and get” (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002) approaches, have been found to be ineffective in the work of systems change towards inclusive education (Nishimura, 2014). Not only are such approaches often rooted in the medical model of disability, but they tend to emphasize technical practices rather than critical inquiry, collaboration, and collective action. While some individual teachers might be able to apply such practices in a meaningful way within the contexts of their own classrooms, such approaches do not have the transformative “ripple effect” on broader systemic practices and structures (Nishimura, 2014, p., 21).

Moving a school or broader school system towards inclusive education requires recognizing the transformative power of teacher leaders, defined as “those who lead in various formal and informal ways in their classrooms, schools, districts and communities,” which is work that no one person can do alone (Levin & Schrum, 2017). Such work requires a critical and collective inquiry-based approach to inclusive education defined as “a social justice project to transform educational systems through a continuous cycle of analyzing, disrupting, and restructuring social processes that produce inequity” (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Siuty, 2019, p. 1033). Coaches, the focus of this action research study, are uniquely positioned as teacher leaders who can expand the work of inclusive education by engaging developing teacher leaders as critical and agentive practitioners. While the literature on coaching as a form of professional

development for inclusive education is limited, it is quite clear: Coaching is an essential component of growing and sustaining teacher leadership for this highly context-based, collaborative, and complex form of systemic change (Leko & Brownell, 2009).

This action research study (Mills, 2018) is situated within the context of a year-long participatory multiple case study that took place in a mid-size school district near a large coastal city as it underwent district-wide inclusive education reform. The participants in the study were four coaches hired to support seven schools that were the initial focus of this reform work in their district. These schools include six elementary schools and one high school. The larger study consisted of several data generation activities including phenomenological interviews, individual and group participant observations, document analysis, and ten inquiry group sessions which were the primary focus of the study (Reilly, 2010). These inquiry group sessions supported the coaches as a professional learning community (PLC) as they sought to create change within their district. This article will focus on a smaller action research project within this larger study to highlight the collective action that the four coaches took to cultivate a critical professional learning community for developing inclusive teacher leaders in their district.

Through multiple data generation methods, including (a) one inquiry group session; (b) three action planning sessions; (c) three participant observations; and (d) document analysis, this action research study explored the questions: *(1) In what ways do coaches cultivate a professional learning community for developing inclusive teacher leaders in the district? (2) How do they make sense of the impact of their work?* To ground this study within the literature on professional development for inclusive education, the following section will review the need for and impact of coaching as professional development for critical inclusive education; the roles coaches play in cultivating collaborative teacher learning and leadership for inclusive education;

and the landscape of coaches' experiences in the context of school and district change towards inclusion.

### Literature Review

The literature on professional development highlights how the most effective approaches have a set of defining characteristics. These characteristics include being coherent, collaborative, and multifaceted with the goal of changing teacher knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices towards an impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Leko, et al., 2022). More specifically, effective professional development approaches are rooted in job-embedded and school-based contexts, utilize coaching to support sustained implementation and support, as well as prioritizing and fostering collaboration at multiple levels throughout the school (Bull & Buechler, 1997; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Nishimura, 2014). In the context of professional development for inclusive education, coaching is specifically highlighted as a crucial element. Coaching in this context can be defined as providing modeling and feedback on particular instructional strategies (Cook et al., 2021; Leko & Brownell, 2009), supporting teachers to grow more confident utilizing such practices, as well as providing a space to problem solve and brainstorm collaboratively (Nishimura, 2014), all of which are essential components in supporting schools to navigate this complex change.

Given the limited scope of the literature, however, it is important to gain a sense of what is known with regards to the impact and role of coaches for inclusive education, as well as what insights and new questions their experiences and perspectives can illuminate. In this section, the literature on coaching for inclusive education research and practice will be reviewed with a focus on the following questions: (1) *What does the literature say about the need for and impact of coaching as professional development for inclusive education?* (2) *What roles do coaches play in*

*cultivating teacher leadership and collaboration for inclusive education? (3) What do we know about coaches' experiences in the context of school and district change towards inclusion?*

### **What does the literature say about the need for and impact of coaching as professional development for inclusive education?**

Inclusive education is interpreted in a wide variety of ways at the school and district levels and teachers implement this work in very context-specific ways. Contextual factors that shape teachers' implementation of inclusive practices and approaches include teacher beliefs and attitudes about inclusion, teaching structures, service delivery models (i.e. co-teaching, push-in support services, etc.), instructional approaches, district curriculum, and classroom make up (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Thus, it is important for professional development for inclusive education to be responsive to these contexts.

Coaching is a form of professional development that can adapt to unique contexts and prioritize creating learning opportunities alongside educators that are responsive to their needs and the needs of their students (Włodarczyk et al., 2015). In fact, when coaches provide professional development in ways that reflect the needs of educators and take on a supportive and asset-based stance, teachers are better able to meet the needs of students and contribute to the broader work of creating an inclusive school culture (Boyle et al., 2012; Scheeler et al., 2010; Strieker, 2012). Furthermore, when approached in a collaborative and responsive manner, coaching has been found to increase teacher commitment to ongoing learning around the knowledge, skills, and practices that support the work of inclusive education (McLeskey & Waldron 2002). Given the risk of schools stagnating in their development towards inclusion or reverting back to traditional exclusionary structures, coaching as an approach to professional

development provides the support necessary for school teams to engage in continuous improvement via the everyday work of teachers (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002).

### **What roles do coaches play in cultivating teacher leadership and collaboration for inclusive education?**

Whether coaches are university consultants, district instructional specialists, or teacher leaders based in specific school contexts, there are several key roles that coaches play in the work towards inclusive education systems-change. For example, coaches engage in modeling, co-teaching, differentiation, support with behavior, and collaborating with administrators and school teams on action plans and professional development needs (Strieker, 2012). Regardless of the activities coaches are engaged in, it is crucial that coaches prioritize developing relationships with teachers in order for their work to support inclusion in the school (Cunningham et al 2017). By embedding their work in the daily lives of teachers based on their needs and contexts, the collaborative relationships that coaches develop can support teachers to engage in new learning and take the risks necessary to apply this new learning (Wlodarczyk, et al., 2015). Furthermore, daily interactions and support from coaches via modeling and other approaches have been found to be crucial in changing the attitudes of teachers towards including students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Wilkins and Nietfeld, 2004).

One way that coaching supports teachers in the work of inclusive education, is through supporting and strengthening communities of practice among teaching teams, whether they be professional learning communities or co-teaching partnerships (Cook et al., 2021). With support from a coach, such teams can engage in collective inquiry and critical reflection regarding instruction (Berry, 2011). Additionally, coaches can guide teaching teams through collaborative planning practices that elicit the expertise and capacity of all members of the team (Cook et al.,

2021), while also developing and reflecting on instruction and management strategies to support students with a wide range of strengths and needs (Wlodarczyk et al., 2015). Such collaborative practices have been found to foster a culture of trust in schools and promote teacher advocacy for collaboration as a valued and necessary practice for the implementation of inclusive education (Postholm, 2008).

### **What do we know about coaches' experiences in the context of school and district change towards inclusion?**

Although the literature clearly affirms the value of coaching as a form of professional development for inclusive education, the complexity of this work is highlighted when examining the experiences of coaches themselves. Wlodarczyk and colleagues (2015), for example, studied the experiences and perspectives of coaches and their findings highlight the need for further research in this area. In this study, coaches reported that the schools they worked with did not understand why they were there or what their role was. Furthermore, because of the lack of clarity around their role, as well as the lack of clarity related to the district's broader work towards inclusion, the coaches often felt like they were on the receiving end of teachers' resistance. In a way, the coaches themselves were targeted for the frustration teachers had with the district process and communication, as well as their own fears and concerns related to implementing inclusion. As a result, the coaches in this study felt like they had to largely shift away from their big visions for change with which they had entered their positions, and instead focus on making baby steps in the context of some very challenging systemic barriers. Throughout this study, the coaches met regularly to share their experiences with one another and support each other through challenging and complex situations. This professional learning

community was ultimately found to be essential to the successes that they did have, as well as sustaining them through the dilemmas they faced in their daily work (Włodarczyk et al., 2015).

Professional development literature highlights that there is a need to move away from traditional sit and get approaches towards sustained opportunities for collaborative learning through supports such as coaching. However, there is limited research related specifically to coaching for inclusive practices and critical orientations to inclusive systems change (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Nishimura, 2014; Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004). Furthermore, there is very little research on the experiences and perspectives of coaches engaged in the work of inclusive education reform, as the research primarily focuses on changes in teacher practice, attitudes, and beliefs and student achievement data. There is a need for research that specifically highlights the barriers surfaced by coaches and how they seek to remove those barriers (Włodarczyk et al., 2015). Given that coaches have direct insight into the processes and complexities of inclusive school change they are well positioned as action researchers. Engaging in their work in such a way has the potential to strengthen the field of professional development for inclusive education.

### **Methodology**

As an exploratory action research study, this project centered the collective inquiry of the coaches' PLC as they sought to cultivate a professional learning community for developing inclusive teacher leaders in the district. To do so, the coaches reflected on their own journeys as special educators and inclusive coaches in the context of their district and drew on these experiences to identify a focus for their professional development session. They also prioritized collecting data to understand and analyze the impact of their profession developing session to plan next steps for growing meaningful teacher leadership and commitments to inclusive education in their district. This inquiry process was characterized by the dialectic action research

spiral consisting of iterative and recursive cycles of (a) identifying a focus; (b) collecting data; (c) analyzing and interpreting data; and (d) developing an action plan (Mills, 2018). Across each phase of this inquiry cycle, the four coaches prioritized modelling and growing teacher leadership and collaboration for inclusive education in their district.

## **Context**

The context of this study was West Mountain School District (WMSD), a district that includes five small cities located near a large city. There are just over one thousand classroom teachers and two thousand overall staff employed across approximately forty schools in the district. With approximately eighteen thousand students, WMSD is a very diverse district in which about ninety-nine languages are spoken across the community, including English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Somali, Amharic, Punjabi, Arabic, and Khmer. About 15% of students qualify for special education services. Additionally, WMSD currently has several segregated special education programs to which students are assigned and leave their neighborhood schools to attend. These include segregated programming for students labeled with emotional and behavioral disabilities, for students identified with needing extensive academic intervention, and for students with more complex support needs. Additionally, they have a resource program for students with learning disabilities which is a much less restrictive setting than the other three special education programs.

As part of the district's inclusive education reform work, a collaborative design group, composed of district administrators, education specialists, and university partners, was formed and tasked with drafting a six-year inclusive education plan to fully desegregate the district's special education programs and ultimately enroll all students to their neighborhood schools.

WMSD prioritized coaching support for the first cohort of seven schools to engage in this work

as inclusive “start-up” schools. Each of these schools hosted one or more of WMSD’s segregated special education programs and they worked closely with the four inclusion coaches (Amy, Alison, Cameron, and Meg) to develop their inclusive culture, structures, and practices. The design group also hosted monthly optional professional development sessions for educators in the district who were interested in learning more about inclusive education and the work being done in the district. The coaches were invited to join this design team when they were hired and ultimately served as co-facilitators for these sessions. This study is centered on the first of these sessions that the coaches co-facilitated.

### **Participants**

The four coaches in this study (Amy, Meg, Alison, and Cameron) are each former special education teachers who describe themselves as “natural advocates” and as having a “drive for advocacy” for students with disabilities and inclusive education. Their experiences as special education teacher leaders committed to inclusive education largely informed their commitments as coaches. For example, Cameron characterized her role as a special education teacher as “very isolating” as an advocate for inclusion because “without a team and community of support, it was really hard to shift [deficit] mindsets” towards students with disabilities. These experiences of isolation reinforced for the coaches that this work can’t be done alone. Thus, as coaches they hoped to identify and grow the “little pockets” of teacher leadership for inclusive education already happening in their district. As Alison expressed, “it will be a ripple effect that hopefully will expand throughout the rest of the district.” It is this desire to build community, capacity, and shared commitments to inclusive education that shaped much of their work as a coaches’ PLC.

Although the coaches were eager to take on facilitator roles in the district’s inclusive education professional development sessions, they felt frustrated by the lack of clarity around the

district’s vision for inclusive education that had characterized the inclusive education reform initiatives thus far. The coaches recognized this lack of clarity as a barrier to effective, meaningful, and sustained professional development. However, the lack of clarity simultaneously presented them with the opportunity to enlist teacher leaders in shaping and defining the work collectively. When asked by the design team to present about their coaching work in one of the professional development sessions, the coaches identified this as an important opportunity to begin cultivating a professional learning community space through which to spread the work of inclusive education district-wide.

**Table 1**
*Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Alison</b>	<b>Amy</b>	<b>Cameron</b>	<b>Meg</b>
<b>Age</b>	30’s	40’s	30’s	30’s
<b>Racial identity</b>	White/multiracial	White	White	Black
<b>Gender identity</b>	Female	Female	Female	Female
<b>Ethnicity/ancestry</b>	European & Mestizo Mexican	Irish, Welsh, Lebanese	European	Unknown
<b>Disability status</b>	Nondisabled	Nondisabled	Nondisabled	Nondisabled
<b>Languages spoken</b>	English & Spanish (emerging bilingual)	English	English	English
<b>Years in education</b>	14	19	8	11

<b>Educator positions</b>	Paraeducator; Special education teacher; Inclusion specialist	Special education teacher; Inclusion specialist	Special education teacher; Inclusion specialist	Speech/language pathologist assistant; Speech language pathologist; Paraeducator; Special education teacher; Inclusion specialist
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*Note.* Participants were invited to share demographic information utilizing words of their choice.

### **Researcher background**

Through the various roles I have held as an educator (i.e., special education teacher, general education teacher, coach, inclusion specialist, and preservice teacher supervisor), I have witnessed and participated in collective action between students, families, teachers, and teacher educators working to forward the work of inclusive education, particularly during the seven years that I taught in WMSD. For three of the years that I worked in WMSD, I worked as a coach to support one school’s journey to enact inclusive education. As a coach, I facilitated a PLC for four co-teaching partnerships to support their learning and leadership in this work. The co-teachers and I collaboratively sought to create classrooms in which students felt belonging and engagement. We unearthed, challenged, and shifted our own beliefs and assumptions, and those of colleagues, students, families, and administrators. Along the way, we processed barriers, tensions, and conflicts and we witnessed students thrive, struggle, and grow. As I have continued to support the ongoing work of inclusive education in this district, I have learned how this work is deeply collective, inevitably messy, and always unfinished. These experiences and lessons have shaped my commitments to cultivating professional learning communities as an essential component of district and school change towards inclusive education.

As a researcher and facilitator of the coaches’ PLC, I prioritized positioning myself not as an expert but rather as a “worthy witness” (Paris & Winn, 2013), one who asks questions, listens

deeply, and facilitates dialogue that pushes participants “beyond what *is* to what *could be*” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 129). This humanizing approach to professional development and research centered the coaches’ development as leaders and collaborators in this work and supported them to gain the confidence to cultivate the leadership and collaboration of educators throughout their district.

## **Data generation**

### ***Inquiry group session with coaches’ PLC***

Participants of this study gathered for one ninety-minute meeting which was recorded and transcribed and took place over Zoom. During this meeting, the participants sought to identify an intentional focus for their upcoming professional development session (Mills, 2018). The group discussed questions including: *(a) What themes have we surfaced from our work across the district as a coaches’ PLC? (b) What is the intention of bringing people together in this professional learning community? (c) What can people learn from our experiences? (d) What impact do we hope to have within and beyond this group?* These questions were designed to elicit critical reflection on their own critical inquiry process as a PLC to best support others to find their starting place in this work and to build the courage and collective support to do so.

### ***Action planning sessions***

The coaches participated in three action planning sessions to prepare for their professional development session. Based on their initial inquiry group discussion, they designed a session that prioritized sharing their journey as coaches and as a coaching PLC, as well as supporting attendees to plan their own next steps as developing leaders for inclusive education. Additionally, they planned to create space for attendees to share stories, ask questions, and gather tools to begin cultivating the relationships necessary to establish a strong and supportive

professional learning community. During these sessions, they worked collaboratively to plan this agenda, as well as creating a PowerPoint for their session.

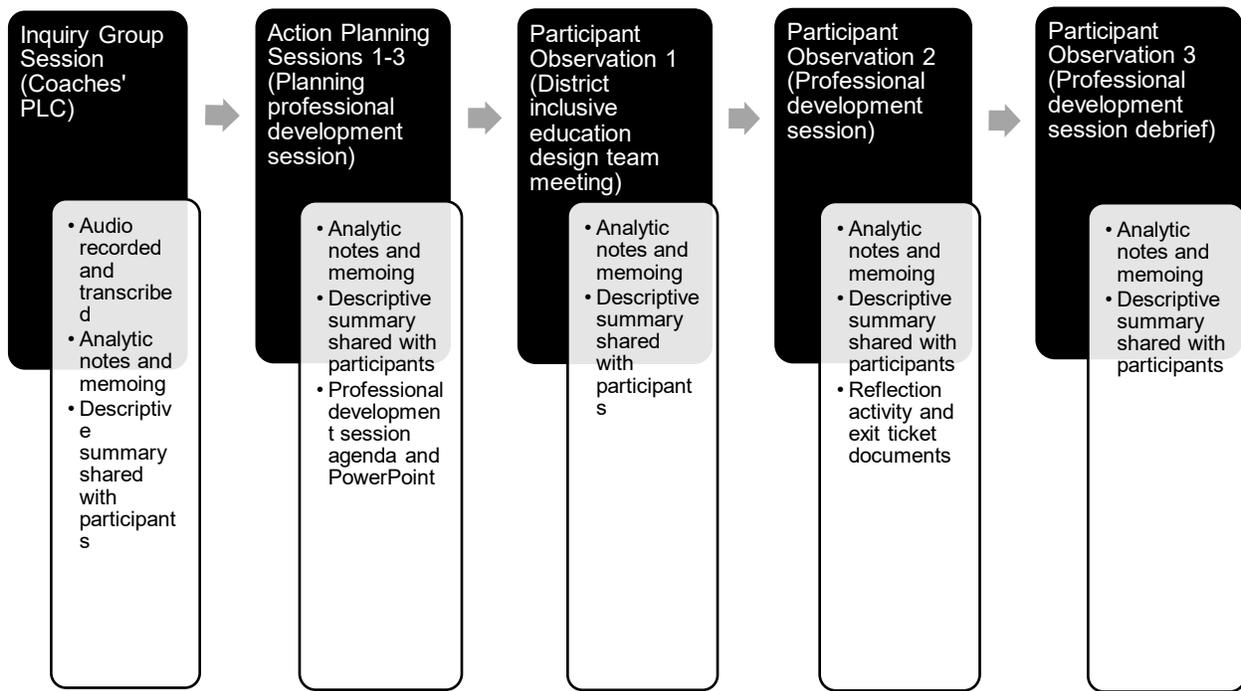
### ***Participant observations***

This study included three participant observations that followed the initial group inquiry and action planning sessions. The first observation took place during an hour-long meeting over Zoom with the district design team. The purpose of this meeting was to go over the plan for the coaches' professional development session. Observing this meeting supported a deeper understanding of the context shaping the coaches' decisions regarding how best to facilitate their session and why. The second observation was conducted at the presentation itself. Thirty-six people were in attendance and the attendees included special education teachers, general education teachers, paraeducators, related service providers, specialists, and family members of students in the district. Data collection from this session included a reflection activity document and exit ticket completed by all participants. The third participant observation took place during a meeting after the session in which the coaches reflected on the session and planned next steps.

During each data generation activity, initial analysis was supported by jotting notes related to the research questions. This included details of each activity, themes, and any "hunches, emotions, and impressions" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 144). Following each activity, these notes supported the process of analytic memoing. Additionally, descriptive summaries were shared with the coaches following each activity, in which the event was described and initial themes were discussed. The coaches were also prompted to share any feedback, including clarifications, additions, or revisions to these summaries. This served as a form of participatory analysis and member checking to further the validity of the study and centering of the participants' perspectives.

**Figure 1**

*Data Generation Activities and Artifacts*



**Data analysis**

Throughout the data analysis process, I focused on the analysis of a particular artifact to answer each of my respective research questions, while remaining closely informed by the literature and an understanding of the broader context in which this study was situated. To answer my first research question (*In what ways do coaches cultivate a shared critical inquiry space for developing inclusive teacher leaders in the district?*), I engaged in cycles of initial (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), focused (Charmaz, 2014), and deductive coding to explore and clarify themes from the coaches' slide presentation, while drawing on the initial inquiry group

session, action planning sessions, and participant observations for further clarification and context. Throughout this process, I stayed close to the data to identify initial codes, which I then clustered into fewer and more salient categories. I then returned to my literature review to revisit key themes to inform my third deductive phase of coding.

I engaged in a similar process to answer my second research question (*How do they make sense of the impact of their work?*). I did this by analyzing the reflection activity document and exit ticket from the presentation that attendees completed, while triangulating this data with my notes and analytic memos from their debrief session. Ultimately, drawing on multiple data sources throughout multiple phases of analysis allowed for data triangulation and contributed to the validity of the study (Mills, 2018).

**Table 2**
*Coding Phases and Sample Codes*

	<b>Research Question 1:</b> <i>In what ways do coaches cultivate a shared critical inquiry space for developing inclusive teacher leaders in the district?</i>	<b>Research Question 2:</b> <i>How do they make sense of the impact of their work?</i>
<b>First Phase:</b> Initial Coding	<i>Teaming</i>	<i>“Ongoing”</i>
<b>Second Phase:</b> Focused Coding	<i>Prioritizing reflection and inquiry</i>  <i>Facilitating teachers learning from each other</i>	<i>Context-based next steps</i>  <i>“Find allies”</i>
<b>Third Phase:</b> Deductive Coding	<i>The power of collaboration</i>	<i>Planning for and taking action</i>

## Results

The findings from this study reflect the importance and power of inquiry as a crucial part of learning about and enacting inclusive practices and commitments. The findings also highlight the power of professional learning communities as necessary structures for growing and sustaining the work towards inclusive school and district change. In the following section, two specific findings will be highlighted: (1) The power of collaboration for inclusive education and (2) planning for and taking action towards inclusive education.

### **The power of collaboration for inclusive education**

In their professional development session, the coaches presented their journeys as educators as an ongoing cycle of collaborative reflection and action. This was reflected in several ways throughout their session, including how they chose to introduce themselves. Each coach described what brought them to their current coaching position through the lens of reflecting on their time as special educators and seeking out ways to take action towards enacting inclusive education more broadly throughout the district. Alison, for example, described how as a special educator in a dual language school she often felt like multilingual learners with disabilities were excluded from opportunities to participate in their dual language general education programs and questioned, “How come my students can’t have those same opportunities?” She described feeling pressure to “provide intense interventions” to prove her students were ready for general education, especially given the commonly held assumption that her students were “so much lower than the rest of the class.” Such deficit assumptions about her students not only isolated her students but isolated her as well, as she did not have a collaborative team to learn and grow with in ways that mirrored her commitments to inclusive education.

Alison shared how reflecting on her experiences as a special educator shaped her priorities as a coach. As a coach in a dual language school, she described prioritizing work with

grade-level PLCs (including general and special educators, specialists, and paraeducators) to reflect on their beliefs, practices, and to collaboratively work towards creating accessible communities of belonging across their classrooms. These grade-level PLCs have learned to use their shared space to generate questions, gather data, and reflect on their goals of creating engaging classroom environments for all students. Alison emphasized the importance of working with teams because there isn't only ever one "expert in the room." Similarly, Cameron shared how creating spaces for teachers to learn from and collaborate with one another had been a very powerful shift for teachers. She described how through such collaboration, teachers were developing the belief that all students are "all our students and everyone has different strengths that they bring to the table and they can all be really valuable." Both Alison and Cameron's narratives highlighted how PLCs are a critical space for educators to share expertise with the purpose of disrupting the deficit-positioning and exclusion of students with disabilities while cultivating collective capacity to create engaging, inclusive, and equitable classroom environments. Ultimately, by sharing these professional development practices in their session, the coaches offered attendees a vision for what such collaborative learning might look like in their own schools.

The coaches also shared how learning, inquiry, and action shaped their practices as a coaches' PLC. For example, Amy shared how much like the process of growing inclusive schools is a collaborative inquiry-to-action process, their own learning together has taken that shape. She shared how together, their coaches' PLC surfaced themes from their school contexts, sought to understand the root causes of exclusion and their own underlying mental models, explored emotions that came up along the way, and worked together to create and try on new practices (Aguilar, 2020). She explained how while they engaged in this cycle of inquiry

together, they have supported their schools to do the same. As the goal of such inquiry is to ultimately engage in taking purposeful action, the next section will describe how the coaches highlighted the importance of planning for and taking action towards inclusive education.

### **Planning for and taking action towards inclusive education**

Much like the process of action research, collective inquiry as professional development guides participants towards taking action in their own contexts. Emphasizing the agency of attendees to take action in their own contexts was a priority for the coaches and they found various ways to not only bring this to attendees' attention, but to guide them in this work, as well. For example, Meg began the session by naming the priority of "building capacity" for and "commitment" to taking action for inclusive education across the district. Additionally, each coach modeled what this could look like by sharing some of the next steps that they would be taking with their school partners. This included not only what those next steps were but how the next steps were generated based on the collaborative inquiry processes occurring through professional development and teaming at their school sites. Some of these next steps included making intentional "connections between inclusion and racial justice work" and "bringing an intentional focus on [supporting] students' communication" through context-based professional development. Each of these examples showed how knowing a context is important when determining action steps for inclusive education. Additionally, these action steps highlighted how adopting an inquiry stance for inclusive education can support teams in shifting away from identifying and remediating student deficits and instead moving towards a focus on strengthening collaboration and shared commitments to equitable and inclusive practices.

With each example of action that they shared, the coaches deliberately emphasized that taking action for inclusive education is not an individual act, but rather a collective and

collaborative one that must occur across various levels of the system. The coaches emphasized this through the final messages they left attendees with at the end of their presentation. These included such statements as “gather community and start the conversation” and “find allies and keep the work moving.” They also engaged attendees in this collective work through the use of breakout rooms during the session, each of which was facilitated by one of the coaches.

Attendees could select a breakout room based on teaching context (elementary or secondary) and based on their interests (co-teaching, collaborating for inclusive classroom communities; flexible service delivery) so that they would best be able to ask questions, engage in discussion, build community, and brainstorm next steps in small groups. Using the breakout rooms in this way offered attendees a supported way to engage in inquiry, begin envisioning action within their own contexts right then and there, and to build relationships with colleagues who share similar commitments.

As part of their own action research and inquiry as a PLC, it was important for the coaches to gather and reflect on data regarding the impact and implications of this professional development session. They did so by reflecting on what came up in their breakout rooms and identifying themes across the takeaways and next steps that attendees generated within the reflection document and exit ticket from the session. Across each of these forms of data, the importance of collaborating with colleagues was a clear theme. For example, one attendee reflected on how inclusion means “the ongoing learning and collaboration of adults.” She shared that when she entered the session, she felt one barrier to inclusion was this idea of “expecting a finished product or system (we have arrived).” However, she noted that she left the session with the idea that inclusion is “ever evolving way of supporting students through adults learning skills and working together.” Additionally, when attendees were asked directly to share their next

steps, many named who they were going to reach out to to bring them into this work. Examples included “bringing ideas and tools to the shared leadership team” and “connecting with my speech-language pathologist PLC.” Ultimately, by highlighting their own collaborative processes towards inclusion, the coaches were able to effectively support attendees to envision and plan for such collaboration in their own school communities.

Based on the exit ticket feedback and reflection documents, it was clear to the coaches that attendees valued this collaborative space and opportunities for support from educators and specialists across the district. The coaches created a follow up session based on this feedback to continue cultivating this space as a district-wide PLC. In this follow up session, the coaches planned to offer several breakout room spaces for attendees to join based on their interests. In each breakout room, the coaches designed experiences for attendees to collectively explore and process relevant and critical resources and to engage in extended discussion and planning with the others in that breakout room. These breakout rooms included topics such as (1) collaborating to support multilingual learners with disabilities; (2) exploring problems with practice with critical inquiry protocols; and (3) co-teaching. They drafted a district-wide communication for the session that emphasized the importance of bringing additional colleagues to the session as a strategy to encourage greater collaboration and to support the effort of spreading this work throughout the district. The design of this follow-up session reflects how the coaches understood their roles to be facilitators of inquiry and collaboration, while also recognizing the need to expand and sustain structures for collaborative teacher leadership beyond the teams that they themselves worked with directly.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This action research study sought to explore how inclusive education coaches cultivated a shared critical inquiry space for developing inclusive teacher leaders in the district, while also making sense of the impact and implications of their professional development session. While this study centered the action research of just four coaches, the findings highlight the power of ongoing collaborative inquiry in the work of school change towards inclusive education. Not only was this important to the coaches' own learning and practice, but also for their work with teacher leaders from across the district. Through their professional development session, they were able to cultivate a collaborative space of shared learning, reflection, and action for attendees by sharing stories and examples of practice. They were also able to position attendees as agentive leaders in this work by supporting them to plan for collaborative action and offering a space for ongoing learning and development in community.

So often, school districts approach inclusive school change without addressing the need for professional development rooted in inquiry, that is based in the actual contexts in which educators work, and that prioritizes disrupting the ways professional development has historically reinforced deficit-orientations to students with disabilities. As the literature suggests, coaching as a form of professional development for inclusive education can address this need when coaches create learning experiences that are context-based and sustained through collaborative relationships (Włodarczyk, et al., 2015). Moving districts towards inclusive education requires cultivating spaces for such collaborative relationships to develop and in which educators can engage in learning, unlearning, and taking action based on that learning process. The coaches in this study worked collaboratively as a PLC to figure out how best to support the learning and process of change for staff across their district. By creating this professional development session and reflecting on the impact, they were able to create an ongoing

collaborative space for cultivating teacher leadership for inclusive education and supporting these leaders to do so as well across their own contexts.

Traditional “sit and get” approaches of professional development position educators as technical practitioners to remediate perceived student deficits and have not been effective at cultivating critical, collaborative, and agentic teacher leaders for inclusive education. Shifting away from such professional development models is essential to disrupt the ongoing exclusion and marginalization of students with disabilities. This study specifically provides insight into how coaches can create opportunities for inquiry towards inclusive education by cultivating professional learning communities for teacher leaders. Action research is well situated to support future research in this area given how it positions educators and teacher leaders as agentic and transformative practitioners who can work collaboratively to understand and create change within their own contexts. Future studies could explore how coaches support PLCs to engage in action research related to their developing inclusive classroom practices or how coaches support school-based teams engaging in school-wide inclusive education transformation. Cultivating inquiry-based PLCs can ultimately support educators as agentic leaders who can work together to advance inclusive education in meaningful, collaborative, and sustaining ways.

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