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Overview and Rationale

As part of the Pennsylvania High School Initiative (PAHSCI) funded by the Annenberg Foundation, Penn Literacy Network has provided three years of professional development to 26 high schools in 16 districts (with 15 districts and 24 schools in the third year). PLN has also been involved in documenting the experiences of educators participating in these professional development courses as they grapple with PLN concepts and strategies in relation to their local school/district contexts.

The Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative, of which PLN coursework is one component, is unique in that it takes a co-constructive approach to school reform and literacy practices backed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The model includes extensive training in Penn Literacy Network concepts and strategies for all levels of school involvement (superintendents, principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers), in-school math and literacy coaches to support teachers and school leaders in implementation, and financial and educational incentives for participating in the initiative as a whole. PAHSCI represents a large project with unprecedented support from various partners (the Annenberg Foundation, PDE, Penn Literacy Network, Research for Action, Foundations, Inc, and the Philadelphia Foundation).

As a PAHSCI partner, PLN is responsible for providing professional learning opportunities for teachers, school leaders, and instructional coaches. In graduate-level, continuing education courses offered in the participating districts, teachers engage with each other and with PLN frameworks in co-constructing how they conceptualize their practice and their students' literacy learning throughout the curriculum.

The Penn Literacy Network frameworks (Botel & Lytle, 1988; Botel, 2003) focus on looking closely at the co-construction of literacy moments and at what students bring to different school experiences with literacy. This co-constructionist model asks that teachers move away from merely presenting information – “telling” – to engaging with students in literacy inquiries across the curriculum, and applies this philosophical stance in this ways it structures professional development experiences for its participants.

The goals for PLN research have been two-fold: (1) to be in dialogue with participants in order to best meet their on-going needs in course content and structure, including adding areas of focus or fostering increased opportunities for collaboration; and (2) to consider how aspects of the courses affect the ways participants engage with the professional learning

opportunities and make connections to their practice. These investigations have allowed PLN to continually address essential issues for practitioners in local contexts as well as draw implications for furthering implementation of an instructional framework within a supportive instructional coaching structure.

Improving the learning opportunities of students across high schools – including and especially for students who have been traditionally underserved by the public education system – is an essential goal that requires sustained attention. When students seem to be doing well academically in a particular school setting, there is a desire to make these opportunities available to all students, and to expose teachers to techniques that have been successful elsewhere. A danger of many large scale reform efforts, and of professional development as a tool for reform, can lie in separating pedagogical techniques from the context of their development or use. In an effort to replicate stimulating learning environments, at times the tangible aspects appear easier to recreate than the relational work of teachers and students or the philosophical underpinnings that lead educators to choose particular pedagogical techniques in particular situations.

Throughout its professional learning courses and with the support of PAHSCI partners, PLN aims to advocate for a fundamentally different model of student and teacher learning. Broad literacy

goals – such as learners’ active engagement in making sense of texts and concepts, sustained reading and writing across content areas, and invested participation in rigorous intellectual work – can and should be attained by high school students across the educational system. The means of arriving at these goals, however, must be situated in the particularities of the local context. As such, any professional development that seeks to address literacy learning must be dialectically engaged with the expertise of educators who participate in these programs. Coaches, who are steeped in educators’ environments, are signaled by PAHSCI participants as a constant support in navigating the unique aspects of their diverse contexts.

Specifically, rather than primarily delivering information *to* teachers, PLN is interested in the possibilities and challenges of creating spaces to work *with* teachers as they think about their practice collaboratively and over time. This model of professional learning is a departure from the notion of teachers needing to be “brought up to par” in order to become “highly qualified.” Rather, the starting point for the professional courses teachers engage in is the idea that educators are experts on their students, their contexts, and the material they teach. This knowledge uniquely positions them to be able to investigate pedagogical issues and adapt curriculum and techniques to fit the needs of their educational contexts.



Research Literature

School Reform Efforts

At the time when PAHSCI was conceived, statistics showed that high school districts across the state of Pennsylvania are not performing well: According to NAEP data, a little over 30% of students were meeting standards in literacy and math. Additionally, NAEP results indicated that Pennsylvania had one of the largest achievement gaps compared to other states in the country. In terms of No Child Left Behind's Adequate Yearly Progress, the 2004 Pennsylvania state assessment indicates that 215 districts in Pennsylvania – or roughly 43 % – were not performing up to standards.

The research literature has shown a variety of factors to be implicated in the recurring underperformance of schools, including socioeconomic status (Casanova et al, 2005; Muñoz, Cavijo, & Koven, 1999), unequal school funding (Kozol, 1991; Vesely & Crampton, 2003), teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001), student populations with diverse cultural, linguistic, and literacy needs (Jordan & Cooper, 2001), and characteristics of school reform initiatives (Murphy & Datnow, 2003; Warren Little, Horn, & Bartlett, 2000).

There have been many attempts to reform poorly performing districts, but

often such initiatives involve top-down implementation, leaving little room for teacher knowledge, teacher inquiry, and the co-construction of what counts as good instruction and student learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). The professional development PLN provided as part of this initiative disrupts a transmission or intervention model, and instead works *with* educators as they think about and take action on literacy and engagement in their schools.

Key points that contribute to successful professional development were summarized by Klinger (2004), who noted the importance of district involvement and alignment of goals, sharing and dissemination of student data, administrative support, long-term support provided for teachers (including demonstrations and coaching), and teacher ownership of practices and responsibility for mentoring peers (p.252). These elements are embodied in the PAHSCI design, which aims for long-term sustainability and active involvement from all school parties.

Teacher Professional Development

Nationwide, there has been increased attention to improving student achievement, with a particular focus on teacher reform. Studies note that teacher

“effectiveness” is considered a determinant in differential student performance (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Professional development is considered a key piece: Sustained participation in professional learning opportunities seems to produce gains in teacher quality (Cohen & Hill, 1998), and teachers attending standards-focused professional development are more likely to use instructional techniques that raise student achievement (NCES, 1998).

Other researchers have troubled assertions regarding the need to improve teacher quality as a vehicle for increased student achievement. Linda Darling-Hammond (1999), for instance, argues that understandings of “teacher quality” are varied and complex, with many embedded variables. In their work on teacher inquiry, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2001) have raised questions about what counts and knowledge in school and how knowledge travels. They note that many professional development experiences and attempts at school reform focus on the transmission of knowledge from an outside “expert” to teachers whose task is then to implement it (what they term “knowledge *for* practice”). Cochran-Smith and Lytle disrupt this hierarchy and advocate for knowledge *of* practice generated within schools through teacher inquiry groups and teacher research.

Coaching

The trend in school reform initiatives has been job-embedded professional development, and instructional coaching has become an essential component of efforts to change the climate and

pedagogical practices of schools in ways that attend to the needs of particular contexts (Anneberg Institute for School Reform, 2004; Sturtevant, 2003). In the secondary setting, literacy coaching has not been as prevalent or as documented as in elementary schools, largely due to funding issues (Anders, 2002 as cited in Sturtevant & Linek, 2007).

According to the International Reading Association (2006), effective coaches must have both an understanding of the content area as well as familiarity working with adults, components which are addressed through the PAHSCI initiative. Coaches participate in professional development courses focusing on the PLN literacy frameworks and strategies and are asked to consider how they would teach these components to adults in professional development workshops, study groups, or peer coaching scenarios. In addition, coaches for PAHSCI receive support from Foundations mentors who directly address strategies for adult instruction and assist in navigating specific challenges encountered in the coaching practice.

School-Wide Coordination

Research suggests that a challenge in school reform around literacy has been coordinating efforts and grappling with implementation beyond individual classrooms, to the school and district level. Fisher and Frey (2007) note that the risk in working towards cohesiveness across grades and teachers “is that someone will attempt to legislate, mandate, or prescribe curriculum and instruction in an attempt to ensure that evidence-based instructional practices

reach every classroom” (p.32). Their study of a school-wide literacy reform effort in an elementary setting highlights that development of an instructional framework was collaborative, recursive, and context-based.

Fisher and Frey demonstrate that the school-wide implementation of a literacy framework was successful because it was developed and continually revised by educators at the school – importantly, it was generated through the professional expertise of teachers. In addition, time, financial, and professional development resources were invested in support of the framework, thus streamlining efforts to think in depth and over time about whole-school literacy efforts.

Some studies have inquired further into the key role of teacher knowledge and collaboration in grappling with the complexities of classroom practice beyond individual classrooms (e.g. Warren Little, 2003). Our study contributes to this conversation by examining how teachers make sense of a literacy framework within an ongoing, large-scale professional development initiative that targets an entire state. We are interested in documenting the ways a standardized framework can be made permeable and flexible to the unique characteristics of a variety of educational settings, and what implications participants’ professional learning experiences have for the development and sustainability of instructional coaching models.



Research Questions

In this study, we sought to answer the following questions:

- How are participants (teachers, school leaders, school coaches, mentors) engaging with Penn Literacy Network concepts and strategies in PLN graduate courses? How does their engagement change over the span of the three-year initiative?
- How are participants (teachers, school leaders, school coaches, mentors) in PLN graduate courses conceptualizing students and student engagement in the classroom? How do these perceptions change over the span of the three-year initiative?

In addition to our principal research questions, as various trends emerged throughout the course of the study, subset questions were developed that more pointedly sought to investigate the areas of focus. These are further discussed in our Findings Section on the social aspects of learning.



Methodology



This ethnographic study took place over three years, from mid-October 2005 through May 2008. Data collection consisted of audio-taped and transcribed PLN courses, fieldnotes, collected journals from the participants (where they reflect on the course concepts and their adaptation and implementation of lessons), facilitator and participant postings on the online discussion tool BlackBoard, interviews with participating teachers, coaches, and administrators, classroom observations of teacher practice, self-reported surveys of instructional practice conducted before and after participating in the entry-level PLN courses (PLN 1), and reflections from the instructors of the PLN courses. In analyzing the data collected, we were particularly interested in how participants characterize their experiences as they engage with course concepts, including ways that they describe their teaching, classrooms, and professional development opportunities, and how these notions are conveyed and taken-up by other participants, coaches, and the PLN facilitators. We focus on the experiences of educators throughout the initiative and situate participants' grappling with the literacy frameworks of the course within local instantiations of a wide-scale reform effort.



Findings: Frameworks and Strategies

A prevalent theme that emerged from our work was participants' ongoing understandings of PLN frameworks, including their efforts to identify the affordances of different strategies for their particular school contexts. These themes were evidenced across all the data: interviews, journals, classroom interactions, evaluations, etc. One rich source of information regarding how frequently PLN frameworks were implemented was a before and after survey given to educators taking the first-level PLN courses.



Pre-Post Surveys



Pre-Post Surveys are a means for teachers to reflect on aspects of their practice. Given at the beginning and end of their PLN 1 experiences, the pre-surveys ask how frequently teachers engage in areas of focus in the PLN literacy frameworks of the Lenses of Learning and the Critical Literacy Experiences (on a scale of one to five, with zero being no implementation whatsoever, and five reflecting daily implementation). Each area of self-reflection contains concrete examples of classroom activities and structures. Participants complete one of two series of surveys: a Reading/Writing/Talking version, with a focus on literacy and language arts, or a Math survey, which is completed by educators from this department or from mathematics-related disciplines.

All surveys are meant, at the beginning of the seminars, to have teachers think critically about the landscape of their classrooms, and to suggest the co-constructive stance towards teaching and learning that PLN seminars embody. PLN facilitators also use the pre-surveys as an instrument to assess potential areas of instruction.

At the end of the course, teachers are confronted by the same survey and asked to re-assess their classroom practices in light of the seminar's content. This second look at their perceptions of their teaching focuses participants on the changes they've made in their classrooms throughout the span of the PLN seminar. It also provides an opportunity for facilitators to note any increased or diminished familiarity with the various pedagogical components highlighted in the course.

This survey forms part of a qualitative study on teachers thinking about their practice throughout the Penn Literacy Network courses. Though reported on a numerical scale, the findings in this survey are not part of a statistical

analysis. Rather, the surveys provide additional data to better understand how participants in PLN courses are interacting with its concepts and strategies as these pertain to their teaching practice.

Trends from Reading/Writing/Talking Pre-Post Surveys (Fig. 1)

Instruction used more than often:

On the post surveys, 36.4% of the areas scored between a 4 and a 5, indicating that teachers rated those areas of instruction as ones they used more than often. We describe these areas below.

Participants noted their efforts to construct **developmentally appropriate** literacy activities that use student's prior experiences as sources of knowledge with pertinent links to the curriculum. These activities may include, among others, Do Nows that connect content material to students' experiences or prior knowledge, Word Splashes that help students learn multiple meanings of words and use language creatively, and pair-share activities that allow students to collaboratively draw on world experiences.

In journal reflections, participants noted:

"On some occasions, I have been pleasantly surprised to find that my students had more previous knowledge than I would have anticipated. The simple act of sharing that knowledge among their classmates can create interest and curiosity where there was little."

Another area of instruction used more than often centered on structuring a learning **environment** that addresses the social nature of learning through a range of interaction types. This category explicitly focuses on teachers using flexible grouping, i.e. pairs and triads, small heterogeneous groups, small needs-based groups, and working alone.

"Another thing that I walk away with after this course is trying not to be the only person who speaks in my classroom during the forty-odd minutes that my students are in my class. I realize that I need to put more focus on student participation, whether it is in front of the whole group or with a partner. I have already started to notice the difference in the work of my students and their responses and attitudes in class when I change up the instruction and do something 'different.'"

Demonstrating strategies in reading and writing to provide models for students was a third area rated as used more than often. This includes teachers reading aloud and writing with their students.

Teachers commented on how modeling in the PLN course was a vehicle for them to learn strategies and incorporate modeling and PLN strategies in their classrooms:

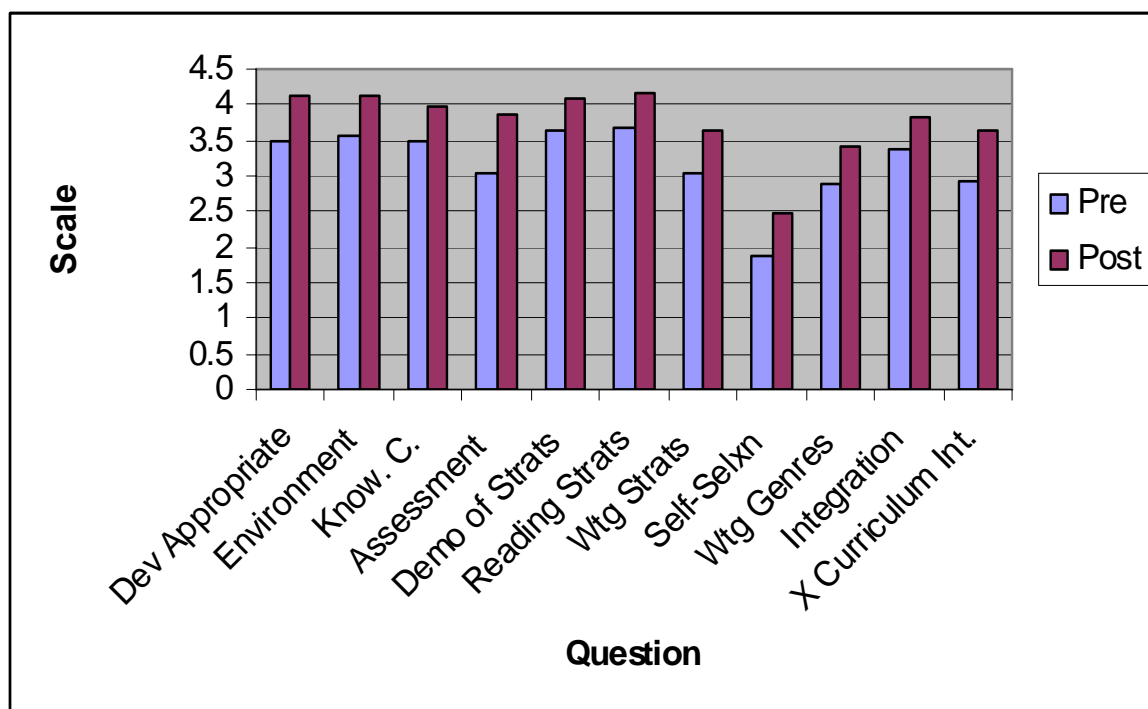
“I found the sessions where the strategies were used on me the most helpful. I learned concepts as well as facts without even knowing I was being taught! When that happened I thought, ‘Wow! What a concept! We can teach without a struggle.’”

Finally, participants indicated that they incorporated **reading strategies** for students to transact with diverse texts. This includes instructing students to read strategically, i.e. to reflect, brainstorm,

predict, question, connect elaborate, retell, summarize, map, etc.

“One of my biggest mistakes as a new teacher was allowing my students to read passively. I would require them to read and then answer, and not have anything in place to monitor comprehension along the way. I thought, and still do think, that independent reading is essential to student success in higher learning. I also think it is a skill that we need to teach some students, but it is something we often neglect. Giving students tools like prereading worksheets, and other charts to help them transact with text, will also help them make meaning of what they are reading.”

**Fig. 1: Pre-Post Surveys 2005-2008
Reading/Writing/Talking**



Instruction approaching often:

When assessing their practice at the end of each academic year, participants in the PLN 1 courses rated 45.5% of the categories between a 3.5 and 4 on the scale, signifying that teachers' implementation of these practices were approaching "often," and more than "moderate."

Educators provided opportunities for **knowledge construction** around texts through multiple modalities. This area centers on creating spaces for students to interpret literary and informational texts before, during and after reading and by listening, talking, writing, enacting, and drawing. This category thus focuses participants on planning lessons along PLN frameworks that encourage multiple and diverse interactions with literacy.

Educators also indicated that they **assessed** learning to inform teaching. This category focuses on on-going student assessment that can provide important feedback for structuring lessons. Sources of data in this area include Tickets Out the Door, Do Nows, and student notemaking and marking up of text, as these documentations supply information about how students are making sense of material, earmarking concepts in need of revision or re-teaching.

Opportunities for **writing**, including **writing strategies** focusing on process and conventions, were rich and diverse. This includes designing learning experiences that allow students to work through the writing process alone and with others (i.e. thinking about purposes

and audiences, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing).

"My students even noticed that they were delving deeper into the subjects. They also became much more at ease with sharing their personal feelings and writing about them. Over the course of a week, I had my students write seven samples. I definitely observed an improvement in the flow of their writing in the last assignments. The students were able to produce the required number of lines in less time, and included much more meaningful thoughts. I intend to continue Type 1 writings in my class, on an almost daily basis."

"As a chemistry teacher, I find that my academic strengths are in math and science and not necessarily in English grammar. In addition, I have perfectionist tendencies so when I grade a paper I have felt compelled in the past to grade everything. Therefore, I have really liked using type one and type two writings as a part of my Do Now at the beginning of the class or as summary ideas. This has allowed me to have my students writing more than ever before. It used to be that they would write only to explain their answers on a test or a lab report. Now my students are writing something practically every class period."

Participants reported **integration** of language and grammar conventions throughout literacy activities, as well as **integration** of literacy activities **throughout the curriculum**. This area focuses on using reading, writing, and talking in other content areas besides

language arts (such as math, science, and social studies).

Overall, the trends for participants at the end of the 2008 academic year indicate that they viewed 81.8% of the areas in the survey as approaching “often” in implementation, with half of these areas

being implemented between “often” and “daily.” This indicates participants’ familiarity with the epistemic underpinnings of the PLN courses and the areas of classroom practice that correlate with these research-based approaches.

A salient lower category:

In the pre- and post- surveys, teachers rated providing opportunities for student **self-selection of reading material**, and for peer conversations about independent reading lower than the other categories on the survey. It is important to note, however, that for this category, the percent change between the pre- and post- surveys was the third highest for all areas of instruction focused on in the questionnaire. While self-selection in reading was reported by participants as the area they implement least of all those presented, there was a 12.4% increase in reported implementation from the beginning to the end of the school year. Thus, the low category may be due in part to the initial less frequent implementation at the beginning of the year, and may be related to constraints in resources or time.

One implication for this finding may be for facilitators and coaches to explicitly address creative ways of incorporating reading choice. For instance, teachers might use excerpts or short texts within the content areas to allow for some negotiated choice in reading materials. It might be worthwhile for teachers to share possible readings and ways of addressing self-selection of texts given the constraints of particular schools,

districts, or content areas. This issue is an important topic for curriculum problem-solving (in study groups or at grade level meetings, for instance), thus using the knowledge of the course participants to collaboratively generate creative solutions to increase self-selected reading in classrooms.

Percent change:

Three areas of instruction that exhibited the highest percent change dealt with integration of literacy strategies across the curriculum, with drawing on students’ prior knowledge and world experiences to make connections to content material, and with assessing student knowledge (categories: **developmentally appropriate, assessment, and integration across the curriculum**). An important scaffold for this change in self-reported practices may have been the composition and structure of the PLN courses: Course participants represented a cross-section of different content areas, locations, and areas of specialization (ELL, Special Education), and course structures which emphasized collaboration and reflection on practice provided a forum for dialogue between a variety of perspectives. Within this environment,

teachers and coaches could draw on the expertise of others in the group to think through cross-curricular literacy practices, imagine how different students might respond to activities, and adapt lessons so as to draw on students' backgrounds as a resource for learning.

The area that exhibited the third highest percent change was assessment, not in the sense of standardized testing, but of educators using assessments in their classrooms to determine how students were engaging with course content and using that data to structure or restructure the learning environment. Assessment, in this case, was directly linked to the adaptability of the educator in supporting student needs.

Trends from Math Pre-Post Surveys (Fig. 2)

Math educators enrolled in first level PLN courses were asked to reflect on their practice through pre- and post-surveys that addressed their specific content and possible literacy connections to their discipline. Educators who felt their area of expertise had more commonalities with math rather than language arts could opt to complete the math version of the surveys as well; typically, some science, accounting, or technology teachers followed this route.

In the Math Surveys, questions regarding developmentally appropriate instruction, classroom environment, knowledge construction, and assessment of learning shared the features described in the Reading/Writing/Talking Surveys. More specific questions focused on providing opportunities for students to actively make meaning in the math classroom in ways that incorporated math

The area that exhibited the lowest percent change between the pre- and post- surveys was **demonstration of strategies**, a category that centers on teachers modeling reading and writing for students using a variety of texts. This may in part be due to the fact that in the pre-surveys, this category was ranked by participants as the practice they implemented most frequently. Thus, there was less room to grow in this area than in others. Overall, though this category represented the lowest percent change, participants still reported that they incorporated the practices in this category more than often.

computations within genuine problem-solving scenarios.

Instruction used more than often:

On the post-surveys, participants described 54.5 % of the areas of instruction as ones they used more than often. Below we explain these areas.

As with the Reading/Writing/Talking Surveys, educators described themselves as frequently constructing **developmentally appropriate** literacy activities which take into account students' prior knowledge and incorporating meaningful **assessment** that informs instruction. Examples of PLN strategies participants noted as fruitful vehicles for accomplishing these instructional goals were described in the Reading/Writing/Talking section (see above).

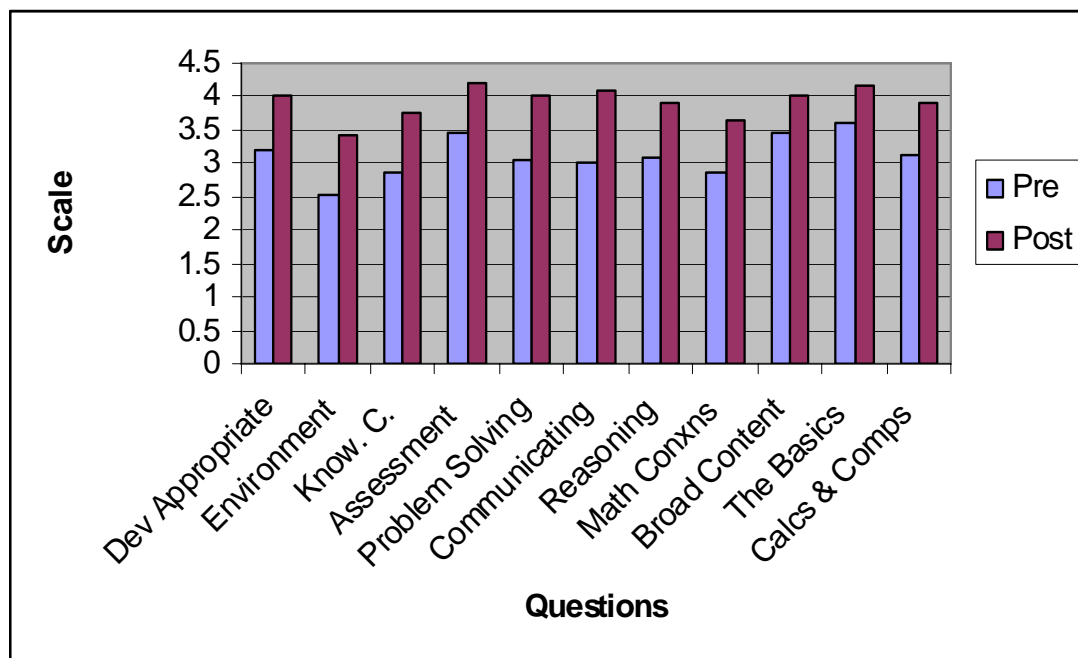
Additionally, participants noted a focus on embedding **the basics** within a **problem-solving** approach to the disciplines, exposing students to the branches of math (**broad content**), and providing invitations for students to interact with math concepts in a collaborative fashion that involves **communication** through reading/writing/talking. These categories focus on increasing student engagement while offering access to understandings of the discipline as a whole.

“It is important for my mathematics students to ‘make sense’ out of paragraph word problems that they are asked to read when we do a text

rendering activity. The students need to draw on prior knowledge in order to set up and solve words problems. By doing this type of activity my students are reading, writing, and talking (transacting with text).”

“I had my students circle key words in open ended mathematics problems. This was a great way for me to understand what my students were actually thinking! Not only did this activity help my students pick out key words to focus on the problem ‘at hand’...it gave them a starting point as to how they were going to work towards a correct solution.”

Fig. 2: Pre-Post Surveys 2005-2008
Math



Instruction approaching often:

When assessing their practice at the end of each academic year, participants in PLN 1 courses rated 36.4 % of the

categories between a 3.5 and a 4 on the scale, signifying that their implementation of these practices were

approaching “often” and more than “moderate.” These areas focused on: providing opportunities for active **knowledge construction** as students approach mathematical scenarios and develop computation and concepts; helping students understand **math as reasoning**, which entails honing their research skills through making predictions, collecting evidence, and building arguments; and using available technology such as **calculators and computers** as a vehicle for inquiring into mathematics.

“The students were the ones doing the talking and asking the questions. They were also sharing their ideas on how to solve multi-step equations, and they were definitely interacting with their classmates. The new learning was connected to what the students already knew, so it was a meaning-centered activity. The students had to apply their knowledge of how to solve single-step equations in order to solve the multi-step equations.”

A fourth area that was ranked by participants as being implemented an average of 3.6 on the scale of 0 to 5 addressed **math connections**. This category focuses on practices that link math concepts to other disciplines and invite students to make connections to areas such as science, social studies, and literature in order to better understand the role of math in real-world situations. Though math educators taking PLN 1 courses had the benefit of math-specific breakout groups where they could grapple with the role of literacy within their context, they also participated in whole-group discussions and activities

that involved teachers and coaches across a range of disciplines. This diverse environment may have been fertile ground to explore connections across the content areas.

Percent Change:

The Math Surveys indicate a significant change between the administration of the surveys in the beginning and end of each academic year. Ten of the eleven categories – over 90% of the areas – increased by 11.4% or more, with eight of those eleven areas increasing by 16% or more. This increase is attributable to lower ratings in the Math pre-surveys than Reading/Writing/Talking pre-surveys, a possible indicator that math participants were initially less familiar with literacy concepts, but by the end of the course were able to make connections between the PLN frameworks and their disciplines.

Three areas that exhibited the highest reported change were: **Assessment**, **Math as Problem-Solving**, and **Math as Communicating**, all with approximately a 20% increase in frequency of implementation as described by educators completing the survey. These categories represent foundational underpinnings of PLN Frameworks: the necessity of embedding knowledge of skills within authentic contexts for learning (such as problem-solving), the social aspects of learning that invite students to make meaning with one another, and the interconnectedness of assessment to instruction, so that practices are continually being adapted and refined by educators and students according to their needs.

■ ■ ■ Implementing Strategies ■ ■ ■

Participants delved into the different teaching practices highlighted in the course, and the data indicates their increased familiarity with aspects of literacy acquisition for adolescents and willingness to make use of techniques for active learning in their teaching.

Throughout the course, participants were asked to reflect on their try-outs of different techniques and urged to make adaptations based on the needs and strengths of their classrooms and the affordances and constraints of their school contexts. In their journals, evaluations, tickets-out, course discussions, and interviews, participants commented that they witnessed increased student engagement as they tried to adapt instruction to assure that all students were actively participating in

making meaning of the content material. Their observations include what was described as better participation, higher interest, and deeper understandings. A key aspect to what stood out for educators as they tried out PLN strategies was the motivation of their students and their capabilities to participate extensively when given openings to take greater ownership of classroom activities.

As well, it is worth stressing that educators across the initiative did not uniformly implement a set of static strategies. Rather, they molded the techniques to fit their discipline areas, school requirements, and student needs, and discerned which of the modeled strategies would be most applicable and beneficial for their contexts.

■ ■ ■ (Re)Considering Frameworks ■ ■ ■

Importantly, as participants grappled with what the PLN literacy frameworks meant for their contexts, this did not result in uniform implementation of a set of strategies. The process of educators making sense of course concepts often led to a re-conceptualizing of the roles of students within the learning environment, creating new and diverse possibilities for interaction and new understandings of students' abilities and intellectual potential.

"Another thing that I walk away with after this course is trying not to be the

only person who speaks in my classroom during the forty-odd minutes that my students are in my class. I realize that I need to put more focus on student participation, whether it is in front of the whole group or with a partner. I have already started to notice the difference in the work of my students and their responses and attitudes in class when I change up the instruction and do something 'different.'"

"They're not relying on me to direct their thinking or to prod them with questions."



Findings: Social Aspects of Learning

Participants in PLN courses emphasize the importance and newness of built-in possibilities for collaboration with colleagues. PAHSCI courses are populated by teachers, coaches, and administrators from different disciplinary departments. This diversity, coupled with the structured opportunities for working together in a variety of configurations as part of the course requirements, provides unique openings for educators to inquire into their practice from a range of vantage points.

Studies show that successful school-wide professional development efforts require conversations beyond individual classrooms, teachers, and departments, and the articulation of theories of learning and of change through recursive, shared work (Fisher & Grey, 2007). Participants' responses in reflections, journals, evaluations, and interviews highlighted that new relationships with other educators served as emotional and professional sustenance for their continued pedagogical efforts.

Participants report that in many instances interactions have extended beyond course boundaries. One educator noted, for instance:

“One of the benefits of these courses is the dialogue that is happening among the faculty. We often sit at lunch and

discuss things that work, ask for ideas, and generally share what we’ve done. I mentor two other language teachers and it’s great to hear their ideas. We’re using the strategies, but adapting them to fit our personality and our classes.”

The coursework institutes several structured opportunities for collaboration that have the potential for permeating into the school setting. For instance, facilitators encourage participants to work on final course projects collaboratively, in either groups or pairs. This results in joint work between: teachers in similar departments, specialists and “mainstream” teachers (e.g. an ESL teacher and a social studies teacher), or instructional coaches and classroom teachers. Coaches, who often have taken the PLN courses before and sit in to assist the new participants from their schools, can at times use the structured openings for collaboration as a way to build or strengthen mentoring relationships that then extend to classroom settings.

Rather than waiting for collaboration to happen during stolen moments in the day, coursework provides a space where such interactions are valued and supported through specific activities, spatial arrangements, and requirements, thus modeling the social lens we advocate for teachers' own practices.



BlackBoard: A Closer Look at Collaboration



Since collaboration was such a prevalent theme in educators' feedback regarding their experiences in PLN coursework, we sought openings to inquire further into the nature and implications of teachers working together for initiatives such as PAHSCI. As we describe below, one rich venue for a more in-depth look participants' interactions with one another in PLN courses also afforded us the opportunity to address educators' suggestions for course content and focus.

In evaluations, interviews, journals, and class discussions, participants identified English Language Learning and Special Needs considerations as areas of interest that warranted more sustained attention in PLN coursework. Teacher hunger for these topics was motivated by interest, advocacy, lack of previous professional development in these areas, changing demographics, and the recent need to be held accountable for all students in their classes as a result of federal legislation. Due to this feedback, PLN was able to offer two third-level courses that address these topics of interest specifically: PLN 9 (Addressing the Needs of English Language Learners) and PLN 12 (Helping Students Needing Learning Support in the Mainstream Classroom). There were two sections of each course held, one in the eastern and one in the western part of the state.

Given participants' interest in these topics as they relate to their practice, and their observations of the importance of collaboration in professional development courses as a whole, we decided that online communication using BlackBoard technology (described below) from the four PLN courses that explicitly address these themes would provide a rich site for further investigation of interactions around specific pedagogical issues.

BlackBoard is an online tool that provides opportunities for personalized experiences and active learning. Though this technology is a relatively prominent element in graduate seminars housed at the university, it is less frequently employed within a professional development context. BlackBoard was new technology for some facilitators; for the courses we selected to examine, the instructors did have prior familiarity with this tool.

BlackBoard features such as discussion boards offer forums for posting and responding to issues of practice in ways that are directed at all seminar participants, and not merely the instructor. As well, this tool affords participants the ability to connect to readings, seminar activities, and their own teaching outside the boundaries of physical meeting spaces. BlackBoard technology also provided a vehicle for

educators to keep in touch with one another in between course sessions and across schools and districts (another significant suggestion from participants during the first two years of the initiative).

As a whole, BlackBoard discussions became fertile ground for both attention to participants' needs and suggestions, and for further inquiry into the social aspects of learning within professional development settings.

This technology resource dovetails with the PLN emphasis on increasing student engagement, and models philosophically-congruent experiences in a professional development context.

Our focus questions for this subset of the research were as follows:

- What nodes of inquiry do participants identify in their postings on BlackBoard for PLN ELL and Special Needs courses?
- How do participants explore these nodes of inquiry in their BlackBoard conversations?

We examined BlackBoard postings from these four courses to identify sustained nodes of inquiry (which we defined as issues forwarded by initial postings and taken up in at least two response threads). Having delineated these topics of interest, we looked within and across our generated categories to determine the ways participants interacted around

the various inquiry strands. In the sections that follow, we take a closer look at trends in response for each of the two seminar types. We then move on to unpack several representative discussion threads that highlight the collaborative process of meaning-making educators engaged in around these self-identified topics.

A Note about Special Needs and English Language Learning

We purposely structured this subset of our study on considerations for exceptional learners and for ELL students because of participants' interest and desire for further information on these topics. We do not intend to

conflate these two topics, and are aware of the dangers of making too close of an association between the learning needs of and pedagogical considerations for very different types of students.

Much research has exposed the over-representation of English Language Learners in special education programs (e.g. Cummins, 1984; Gottlieb & Hamayan, 2006). This identification of language learning as a disability or intellectual delay occurs in part because cognitive learning differences and the process of second language acquisition typically manifest similar behaviors, though they have different underlying causes (Cummins, 2000). Identifying a special education need for language learners requires assessment in a student's native language, since a difference in ability will be present regardless of language. If a student exhibits behaviors that appear to encompass intellectual delays or processing difficulties, yet these are only present in the second language, such behaviors are part of the progression of second language development and not attributable to a learning disability.

Hamayan et al (2007) contend that whether a learner's difficulties in school are attributable to a learning difference or to second language learning is no longer a useful question. Rather, they argue that "a more useful approach in this problem-solving process is to reframe the question as one of whether the difficulties the ELL is experiencing are indicative of an underlying intrinsic LD in addition to normal manifestations of learning another language or just the usual difficulties related to working in a

second language that must be addressed differently (ELL with or without LD)" (p.43).

Though the research literature rightfully goes to great lengths to disrupt a direct association between learning differences and second language acquisition, in the educational arena these two topics are often paired. NCLB legislation requires that schools present assessment data disaggregated by subgroup and mandates explicit attention to ELLs and special needs students, groups often excluded from standardized testing. As a result, students who are classified under these categories are now more "visible" to mainstream educators and not the primary responsibility of specialists within the school. Teachers across content areas and job descriptions hunger for information about how to meet the needs of their students, and professional development efforts often try to address testing requirements and information gaps on these topics.

We took as the basis of our inquiry into collaboration educators' expressed interest in and questions about the topics of English language acquisition and special education, which were often described jointly. This focusing decision reflects the ways that participants described their pedagogical inquiries, and is not intended to consider these topics interchangeable.

BlackBoard Areas of Inquiry

Our data analysis suggests four main nodes of inquiry from participants' postings on BlackBoard within the Special Needs Considerations (PLN 12) and the English Language Learning (PLN 9) seminars. Though there were differences on the nature of conversations within each type of seminar, participants' thoughts, wonderings, concerns, and reflections across all seminars took on various nuances but fell into similar areas: students and their experiences; classroom practices; assessment and accountability; and roles and responsibilities.

For purposes of clarity we present a typology of themes participants forwarded in their postings, but this is not to suggest that such inquiries were separate and distinct. Participants grappled with interconnected topics as they worked to make sense of these issues from a variety of vantage points. In later sections, we look more closely at the intricacies and overlaps of these interactions to further inquire into the process of collective negotiation of such topics. For the moment, however, we turn our attention to the areas of inquiry participants forwarded and took up in their online discussions.

Students and their experiences:

Participants expressed opinions and raised questions regarding who their students are and the nature of their experiences at home and at school. Postings under this category regarded motivation, behavior, academic preparation, home life (including

language, education, and migratory histories), and the implications of classroom structures in exacerbating learning struggles because of ability or language.

Classroom practices: Participants grappled with considerations regarding ELL and special needs students in relationship to their classroom practices. They inquired into the balance between teaching language and content and whether native language and bilingual skills could be seen as a resource, shared practices that had been previously successful in their contexts, identified classroom areas of concern, and brainstormed possible adaptations based on specific strategies (such as the incorporation of group work, modification of directions, alternatives for calling on students, and use of graphic organizing and note-taking routines).

Assessment and accountability:

Especially within the current climate of standardization and high stakes testing, educators voiced questions and concerns regarding the issue of "fairness." They asked, for example: What will happen to students in the 'real world' without accommodations? Are we enabling? Are we setting the bar too low? How do we grade assignments of students with differences in language and ability? Are we passing students on from year to year without addressing their needs? Are accommodations (for language or learning differences) fair to regular education students?

Roles and responsibility: Participants wrestled with aspects of the relationship between ‘mainstream’ teachers and specialists (ESL and special education teachers). Issues addressed within this theme include access to student information (IEPs, language proficiency scores, details of a students’ country of origin or prior schooling), availability (or lack) of professional development on learning differences and language acquisition, possibilities for and tensions around collaboration between mainstream teachers and specialists

(such as co-teaching within an inclusion setting), and disagreement as to breakdowns in responsibilities. Some participants argued for increased dialogue with specialists trained in special education or second language acquisition, or unpacked challenges in collaboration and forwarded possible solutions. Others emphasized variations of “somebody else needs to do something about it,” and advocated for programmatic changes that would place students in classroom settings other than their own.

BlackBoard Interactions

In this section, we unpack two representative discussion threads to illustrate the interrelated nature of these topics of inquiry, as well as examine the nature of participants’ engagement with each other around these topics.

A Discussion about Special Needs Considerations

During a Special Needs seminar session, participants watched a video called “F.A.T City” by Rick Lavoie (1991), which leads adults in a series of exercises that result in “frustration, anxiety, and tension,” thus mirroring schooling experiences of students with

learning differences. Pete, a special education teacher who is supporting students in three high school biology classes, begins his online response to the video by discussing what stood out from it, and going on to expand on what he is questioning and trying:

The BIG thing that I am noticing is that while our regular educators accept having our students in class, they have little understanding as to why the learning disabled student is different and how to work with them. They can see a difference in performance in some of the students, but usually attribute it to laziness or behavioral issues.

What am I questioning?

I have to question why teacher preparation programs do not address, to a sufficient degree, the needs of the exceptional student. Too often I hear comments like, "I'm not a special education teacher. I'm not trained

to teach these kids!" What they fail to realize is that if they have a student with a learning disability in their classroom they are a special education teacher. With recent legal decisions (i.e. Gaskins vs. the Department of Education) and current legislation, the days are over when we segregate, to any degree, a student with a disability, whether we are prepared to work with them or not. Teacher preparation programs and school district policies will need to address this concern.

What am I trying?

In my new position, I have been helping the regular classroom teachers adapt their instructional methods and materials to meet the needs of a wider range of students. Many of the strategies acquired through PLN I have been beneficial in this effort. At times I provide the teachers with the information and materials, while at other times, I model the concepts for them. It is also our intent to develop a teacher in-service program with the F.A.T. City presentation at the center. It is hoped that the in-service will prompt teachers, who were unaware of the difficulties experienced by students with learning disabilities, to seek further information and training in working with learning disabilities.

I look forward to learning new strategies and methods of assisting the regular educator work more effectively with students with disabilities.

Other educators in the course go on to respond to Pete within this thread. Below we highlight a selection of these postings:

Hi Pete,

As a regular teacher I am grateful for people like you. Unfortunately our district does not provide for special teachers (I like that term for you guys, because you are!) in my world language classroom. You're right that we were never taught how to deal with special students. I'll never forget one time when I was at a social function, and one woman was going on and on about how awful the teachers [at my school] were because they didn't make accommodations for her son in their classes. I just happened to have had her son in my French class the year before. (of course I didn't admit it) I never knew he was LD, and I had at that time never been taught how I could adapt the curriculum. I also had 33 other students in the class which included college bound honors students. I have since figured out ways to adapt, but it's difficult for me to slow the pace of the entire class when most of the class is college bound. Do you have any idea about how to deal with special students who want and need my attention every minute? I really want to help, and I want to be a good teacher to everyone.

Hi Bella,

This is probably the most common question I receive. My responses vary nearly as many times as I am asked. It really depends on the individuals needing the assistance. Some considerations may be to alter your presentation style to reach a wider range of students. Probably the most common answer is to alter the type of work required of the student. I'm not saying that the student should be able to "skate" through the program by not doing anything, but the types or number of assignments could be adjusted so the student can keep up with the class. This is not "unfair" to the other students, they do not have a disability. Would we deny a wheelchair or elevator access to someone with a handicap, even though everyone cannot have access to the assistance?

It's not easy, probably requiring more work on part of the teacher. One resource I've found is to consult with the student. They know best what they can and cannot do and can provide valuable insight into what you can do to help them. It is important that disabled students learn to advocate for themselves and let people know what their specific needs are.

I hope this helped.

From instructor:

I agree. We often forget that the student may be our best resource!

From Shirley:

Hello, Pete.

You have the same concern that so many of us have: regular education teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of the special needs students now in their classrooms. I know that many of them are not adequately prepared, especially the more veteran ones, because, as a regular ed English teacher for thirty-four years before becoming a literacy coach, I was not adequately prepared. I am so grateful for this course, not only because the course material itself begins the process of giving teachers the knowledge and skills needed for today's classrooms, but also because people like me, who are looking for guidance, get to engage in dialogue with people like you, who know much more than we do.

I hope that all of you who know much will be patient and instructing with all of us who need your knowledge. Please share any ideas you think will be helpful.

Trends in Response with the Special Needs Seminars:

In initial posts, participants presented aspects of current classroom practices and nested practical concerns within individual systems. Pete, for instance, made reference to legislation that guards the right of students with disabilities within a school environment.

Participants also discussed classroom practices as embedded within the pressures of high-stakes testing and accountability, the tensions and affordances of schools programs for special needs populations, and perspectives on disabilities in society at large, including the opportunities for students beyond the high school experience. Subsequent posts regarding special needs students asked clarifying questions, validated frustrations and efforts, shared adaptations, and requested examples of successful interactions with students.

Throughout the different discussion threads, typically marginalized voices like that of the teachers or parents of exceptional learners found a platform for sharing situated knowledge generated through formal training and personal experience. Pete, a special education teacher, was able to provide his colleagues with information, advice, and support. Importantly, this was spurned by the comments and questions of other course participants, and by the BlackBoard structure that supported exchanges between educators. Through common assignments that allow all educators to jointly address the learning of special needs students, this setup

challenges the disjuncture and tensions that often exist between “mainstream” teachers and “specialists.” The direct experience of Pete and others (including parents of special needs children) serve as sources of information, and position individuals often marginalized within the school system as uniquely situated to make necessary and valuable pedagogical contributions.

An important aspect to note is the posting by the instructor. Significantly, it is neither the first response to Pete’s post nor the most elaborated.

BlackBoard discussions disrupted writing assignments that had the instructor as the primary audience. Rather, through postings participants were able to make public their ideas, thoughts, and questions to colleagues who could offer a situated response based on their own experiences.

As a result of its formatting and organizational features, BlackBoard as a tool served to shift the nature of what the written reflections were about and who they were for: As a public forum, BlackBoard became an institutionalized (within the seminar structure) means of privileging the expertise of the group, who had the authority and responsibility of responding to the inquiries of colleagues. This alternative process of sharing writing decenters the instructor as the expert, and fosters a sense of collective knowing steeped in the local context.

A Discussion about English Language Learners

Ann, a mainstream content area high school teacher, describes in an initial post the ELL students in her class and her goals:

This semester I have 6 ELL students. The majority of the students are from the Dominican Republic. The others are from Puerto Rico. As far as language proficiency, three of them are at a level 2 and four of them are at a level 4. They are all seniors so I am assuming they are either 17 or 18. We really don't get any type of educational background on our students. The majority of my students really do not have an interest in learning. They don't even want to be here (in the US).

My goal for students would be to have them actively engaged and understand the abstract concepts taught in my class. It is very difficult to teach students these ideas when they don't even speak or understand English. So far all of the ideas that I have learned for ELL students, the students have a basic understanding of English. Many of the students that we deal with in our school are just coming into the country with no English language skills.

There were thirteen total responses to Ann's post in this discussion thread. Below we highlight a cross-section of them, and use these to illustrate trends in response for the seminar on issues of English Language Learning.

A group of teachers shared thought similar to Ann's posting about "not know[ing] much about this group of students," the frustration of not having or understanding the information presented ("we are told only their ELL level and if we don't go and speak to the ELL teachers about each student individually then we would never find any information out"), the belief that "these kids simply do not want to be here," and connections to the difficulties of a recent "huge influx" of ELLs and immigrant students. Such responses to the post validated the frustration of mainstream teachers not trained in

second language acquisition, and raised questions about programmatic or systemic changes the school needed to make.

A number of the responses seemed to address the real frustration of teachers in a district new to considerations for immigrant populations with a deficit perspective on students and families, a discourse which was quite prevalent in the region (for example, the idea that "these" students and families don't want to learn, don't value education, and are unmotivated or incapable of high academic achievement). As we will discuss later in this report, the context for this course was an area where immigration was a charged issue, and where immigrants and language learners were criminalized in the media and in legislation, which certainly informed the ideologies of educators in the districts.

Other participants in the course challenged this deficit perspective implicitly and explicitly, and offered alternative understandings of the behaviors teachers observed in classrooms. Participants shared contexts in which ELL students were performing well, unmasked the struggle for language learners and immigrant students in a new environment that may lead to their frustration or disillusionment with school, made suggestions about where to

get additional information about ELL students (including taking professional development courses, talking to the ESL teachers, and talking to the students themselves), and described program models that had been successful with language learners. One participant noted, “If you show students that you want them in your class and that you are interested in them as people, they will be more likely to put more effort into the class.”

Another educator responded more explicitly to the undercurrent of what was being communicated in several of these posts:

It hurts me to hear that students do not want to learn. All students want to learn... whether they are from the mainland or immigrants, English speaking or ELL. They might not want to learn what we deem important; but there is something everyone wants to learn more about. Categorizing and stereotyping ELL students as non-learners defeats the purpose of setting high expectations for all students. Yes, a number of immigrant students might not want to be here... they just left their friends, family, and familiar surroundings. But isn't this the same process that mainland born students go through when parents abruptly move them to another city or state. Do we classify these students as non-learners? Not knowing English does not equal inability to think and learn.

Trends in Response with ELL Seminars

There was a marked difference in the tone and content of posts depending on the educators’ district of origin and their job descriptions. In initial posts, participants expressed uncertainty about resources, access to information, and the nature and availability of support programs. Subsequent postings validated frustrations or they offered constructive alternatives in thinking about ELL students. Posts that essentialized ELLs and viewed them from a deficit perspective were

challenged by some respondents who had more experience and contact with language learners.

The topic of English Language Learners and immigrant students is a heated issue, nationally and locally, and this is evident in the ideas, thoughts, and concerns participants expressed in online discussions. One of the ELL seminars was held in an area with a long history of immigration and with established programmatic structures for addressing

the needs of language learners in the school system. Postings for this seminar section exhibited less range and variation in tone and ideological perspectives, though the same areas of inquiry were taken up. The second ELL seminar, from which the above discussion thread was taken, has experienced a radical demographic change within the last 6 years: The 2000 census reports that only 4.5% of the population was categorized as Hispanic, while in 2006 it is estimated that up to one third of the town was Latino. Within these years the area experienced a growth of 10,000 inhabitants. Thus, for participants coming from this district,

immigration and language learners are recent concerns and even recent experiences. Many posts expressed frustration at such rapid demographic change and revealed a lack of information about immigrant families and schooling considerations for language learners. It was within this context that participants with more knowledge of the subject and/or histories of working with language minority populations (some from other districts) could counter prevalent deficit orientations regarding language learners and offer alternative constructions and modes of action.

Insights on Interactions

The data illustrates how the professional development courses we examined were structured to recognize and capitalize on the social aspects of learning. BlackBoard as an online communication component of the professional learning experience encouraged responses from a variety of voices. The public nature of the postings invited replies across departmental boundaries and job descriptions, and participants shared responsibility for challenging and deepening understandings. When the instructor was not the primary respondent, it created space for meaningful feedback that originated from educators' own experiences. As such, understandings of language learning and classroom practice were not "transmitted" to participants by the instructor, but co-constructed by all participants through online discussions and in-person meetings.

Learners from multiple perspectives interacted with each other around topics regarding issues of language development and learning differences. Participants drew on their personal histories and classroom experiences to connect to the material, bringing a variety of understandings to bear on the seminar online discussions. In this online medium, educators forwarded a range of perspectives on students, their abilities, and their roles in the classroom context. For instance, we saw special needs teachers disrupting a deficit perspective on students and providing resource-oriented alternatives for how their actions might be viewed within the classroom setting.

The sociolinguistic and political context was also a factor in shaping interactions around topics of interest. In the previous section, we discussed the rapid influx of Latino immigrants experienced in one of

the districts. This has also been the site of controversial anti-immigrant, English-Only legislation currently still being addressed in the court system, but which has spawned discrimination against Latinos in the area (regardless of whether they are considered “illegal”) and the criminalizing of Latino immigrants by legislators and the media. Moreover, this situation is indicative of the national discourse regarding immigration.

Postings that express deficit orientations, including racist comments, are not directly mapped on to individuals. Rather, educators who have language learners in their classrooms are working within a national system that does not value multilingualism or multiculturalism, and that is assimilationist in nature. Even engaging in discussions with alternative perspectives and making pedagogical adaptations constituted a radical

departure from the dominant national discourse about immigration and ELL students.

As was evident in the above threads, participants’ discussion was not neat and tidy. Rather, this collaboration was contested and recursive, and nodes of inquiry were elaborated but not necessarily resolved during the duration of the seminar. Postings did not stand in isolation, but informed the climate and content of in-person professional development experiences. BlackBoard worked in conjunction with seminar sessions and interactions with coaches to extend the space of inquiry beyond the physical location of the course, allowing participants to make their thoughts visible to one another and establishing dialogue across boundaries as a necessary foundation for addressing the needs of English Language Learners and special needs students at school.



Findings: Support from Facilitators and Coaches

Participants across all levels of PLN coursework emphasized the key role of facilitators and coaches in their professional development experience. There was a synergy between the PLN seminars and the school setting as mediated through facilitators and coaches: Within the course sessions, facilitators structured opportunities for participants to interact with literacy concepts in ways that drew on their local expertise, while back in their schools it was the coaches, with greater familiarity with PLN frameworks and with their specific institutions, who could help teachers make sense of what new material meant for their classrooms and to consider possible adaptations.

Facilitators

Many of the PLN facilitators have extended teaching experience in high school classrooms (where some are even currently employed), and draw on this background in the professional development setting. They frequently share stories of practice to illustrate how they implemented a certain concept into their classroom, approached a particular pedagogical challenge, or worked with colleagues to think through an issue and devise possible avenues of response. Connections between facilitators' and participants' classroom experiences were explicitly noted through instructor comments such as "your kids are my kids." The facilitator stories of practice help ease the tensions of the difficult work of participants by making visible the frustrations of school change and offering narratives of productive alternatives.

The importance of this teaching background in working with adult

educators is captured by comments from participants such as, "*It is not some theory or idea presented by a person that has NEVER been in the classroom OR hasn't been in a regular classroom for 30+ years.*" Educators who took the PLN courses valued the school experiences of facilitators and the credibility of their work as a result of familiarity with school settings and students.

The teaching experience of facilitators was more than a means of connecting with participants: It was an ideological stance that allowed them to organize the classroom in ways that respect teacher knowledge. Following the work of Dr. Morton Botel, PLN professional development sessions are structured around a desire to provide educators with opportunities to work collaboratively around issues they identify as important in their practice.

Facilitators, who themselves have amounted many years of teaching in schools across the state, use these experiences as a lens for imagining more productive and respectful learning opportunities for educators (who are

often not treated as professionally as they should be). As one participant described, *“The information was presented in such a way that I did not feel as though the instructor was telling me I was doing something wrong.”*

Coaches

Coaches are familiar with the intricacies of the context in which participants work, and as such can help identify and navigate issues for exploration and possible nodes of contention. This in-depth knowledge of particular schools is essential both within the course sessions, as they work collaboratively with teachers to make sense of new concepts, and outside the sessions, as teachers try out and adapt new strategies and teaching philosophies.

Participants across the board mentioned the significant support they received from coaches. One math teacher noted, *“I would like to acknowledge my math coach who helped me create many of the writing activities I use. She also held my feet to the fire to make sure I followed through on our joint venture.”* This comment speaks to the complex nature of coaching work: Coaches were at once partners and collaborators to whom teachers could turn to for planning and improving lessons, and also a source of support and accountability for work that could at times be uncomfortable. Their presence helped teachers stay the course and sustain their efforts despite feeling out of their comfort zones.

Coaches are also uniquely situated to organize collective resources and advocate for students and teachers. At

the beginning of the initiative, the role of coaches was nebulous, and through much hard work they were able to negotiate job parameters so as to best serve the teachers and students in their schools. Coaches were able to resist pressure to disclose information about teachers to administrators, instead advocating for their roles as teacher supports and not teacher evaluators. Coaches used their positions to collect existing materials and make new purchases, and to assist teachers in using these to best benefit student learning.

It is important to note that coaches carried out their roles in a variety of arrangements. Some educators expressed that coaches came to them to offer assistance and feedback, which for many – including recently hired teachers – was a lifeline for navigating a new job, new frameworks, or new requirements. Other educators shared their initial resistance to coaching; As a result, this cohort was more receptive to study group formats or collaborative coaching sessions. Coaches discussed with us their need to be flexible and provide for multiple ways for educators to engage with coaching support, noting that often a group experience where teachers came to them served as relationship builders and as an entry point for further collaboration.



Dissonances

Participants' interactions with course materials and their subsequent changes in practice were not without tension. This meaning-making process often involved anxiety regarding the redefinition of student and teacher roles. Many educators commented on the difficulty of altering classroom arrangements to foster active student participation. As one participant put it, *"In the classroom I've always had trouble letting go of the reins... With the social lens, that's a huge weakness for me, because I'm afraid to let go of control."* Comments such as these were prevalent in our data, and speak to the inherent discomfort involved in such ideological work. The task for facilitators and coaches is to help participants navigate these challenges and understand them as part of the learning process.

The PLN professional development courses asked participants to implement and adapt new practices as exemplars of possibilities for structuring learning scenarios around the Lenses of Learning and the Critical Literacy Experiences. A dissonance with this work occurs when participants view the literacy framework as solely "content" rather than as part of a "stance" on teaching and learning. Representative comments in this category include finding strategies such as a Do Now, Ticket-Out, or Word Splash repetitive (or even helpful, but isolated from any philosophical underpinnings), when the focus of PLN courses is not any particular strategy, but

how educators might select from a repertoire of strategies in order to increase student engagement in learning. These comments were more frequent in entry-level PLN coursework, and third-level participants were much more likely to see specific strategies as embedded within a constructivist framework. This speaks to the benefit of ongoing work that allows participants to grapple with concepts over time and grow as learners.

Course participants also at times struggled to bridge mandated curricula and existing textual and supplementary material with PLN frameworks. They noted the difficulty in thinking creatively about new classroom practices when the specter of state and federal testing was an omnipresent consideration, one that sometimes seemed at odds with PLN's instructional framework.

The intricacies of reconceptualizing classrooms to reflect the Lenses of Learning did provide an avenue of critique. In order to advocate for students, participants worried the relationship of student engagement to state and federal requirements, and began to assess the slippage between student learning and the instruments currently in place to measure that learning. This dissonance can be perceived as a profitable, if anxiety-producing, outcome of increased teacher reflection.



Implications

When educators' expertise is acknowledged and valued in professional development settings, participants are able to successfully investigate pedagogical issues in their schools. By recognizing that teachers bring a rich and complex perspective to professional development courses – a perspective that has been developed in dialogue with students, administrators, parents, staff, and other teachers – facilitators invite the sharing of ideas, strategies, and teaching philosophies that reflect local contexts. Rather than imposing instructional frameworks that have been developed externally, professional development that validates teacher experience creates space to extend and heighten teachers' understandings of their students and classrooms.

One aspect of this shared community of knowledge creation rests on the social facet of learning around which PLN coursework is structured. Just as the courses stress that one tenet of successful learning is social interaction coupled with content, professional development that organizes content so that it can be meaningfully questioned and debated by educators creates fruitful dialogue that informs classroom practice. This face-to-face interaction in PLN courses was extended when educators accepted the invitation to deepen course discussion through BlackBoard postings.

A third unique aspect of the PLN frameworks involved educators working

across departmental boundaries and job descriptions. When goals for students are discussed and formulated across academic content areas by educators who occupy different roles (i.e. teachers, administrators, coaches), visions for student learning were jointly formulated. Educator buy-in is increased when participants understand that irrespective of job description, they all have valuable insights and experiences that can shed light on pedagogical decisions, and that those decisions have been informed by multiple perspectives.

This co-constructive literacy framework exists in synergy with coaching support. Participants noted that PLN frameworks provided a common language to talk with colleagues, coaches, and administrators about their practice; this anchored the coaching practice by having a concrete referent for dialogue and reflection. Coaching practices using the Before-During-After consultation cycle also dovetails with PLN practices and lesson planning formats. Likewise, coaching was essential to the ways participants made meaning in the professional development setting, enhancing on-going reflection and adaptation both within and beyond the PLN course sessions. The success of programs such as PAHSCI is based on pairing coaching support with professional development frameworks and content in ways that allow participants to collaborate with each other to improve the learning experiences of their students.



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