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Collaborative Professional Development

One School's Story

Susanna M. Steeg ▪ *Dawn Lambson*

In an ever-changing landscape of priorities for teachers and principals, professional development (PD) is an increasingly significant set of decisions deserving attention from all stakeholders. Those who work in PD settings are often challenged by limited time and resources, navigating various stakeholders' priorities, and designing creative and engaging models to support teacher change. Fortunately, research on teacher learning over the last decade provides guidance for making such decisions, suggesting a set of core features common to effective teacher PD. These features include (1) a focus on subject matter content, (2) active teacher learning, (3) coherence with knowledge, beliefs, and school reforms and policies, (4) duration of activity over an extended period of time, and (5) collective participation as an interactive community (Desimone, 2011). While teachers learn through a variety of informal and formal activities and interactions and PD may take on many different forms, Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) contend that it's the features of the PD, not its structure, that matter most when it comes to positively impacting teachers' knowledge and practice.

Schools committed to a strong theory of practice uniting them around common goals sometimes seek increased ownership over their professional development, choosing to foster university-school partnerships for PD designs that may replace or extend beyond district-oriented practices (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Hermosa Elementary is one such school where administration initiated a cooperative effort with teachers and university faculty to create a PD model with unique characteristics tailored to the school's teachers, population, language needs, and cultural contexts. This article describes elements of this multifaceted whole-school PD model, which translated into observed growth for new and veteran teachers, strengthening knowledge and practice around balanced literacy.

School Context

Hermosa Elementary is a distinctive public elementary school in a high-poverty district in the Southwestern U.S. Its key stakeholders—administration, teachers, and parents—have committed themselves to political activism against the state's English-only policies, which have been in place over the past decade. Despite increasing pressure for standardized curriculum practices and restrictive language

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policy, the school has maintained its arts-based focus and bilingual and dual-language programs through the support of committed teachers and a vibrant parent community. During the time of this study, teachers and administrators placed a particular focus on maintaining their balanced literacy program in response to district-emphasized scripted reading programs and accompanying PD.

During the 2008–2009 school year, Hermosa experienced additional challenges when its district's changing demographics forced the closure of another neighborhood school. Teachers and students from that more traditionally oriented school were incorporated into Hermosa, changing the school culture significantly. This shift underscored the need for Hermosa's principal and teacher leaders to clarify the school's vision, unite teachers around common values, and recommit to a holistic learning culture. Hermosa administration worked alongside education faculty from a nearby state university to collaborate on a PD design that could accomplish these tasks. These faculty teacher-educators had long-term relationships with the school and its aims, and they committed themselves to the constructivist and inquiry-based approaches so valued by themselves and Hermosa teachers. Thus, the PD initiative balanced the need for unity of purpose and understanding around balanced literacy

with a commitment to inquiry and the need to provide space for learners to go at their own pace.

For Hermosa educators, the concept of balanced literacy aligned with Spiegel's (1998) conceptualization of a decision-making approach toward literacy instruction where teachers make thoughtful choices each day about the best way to help each child become a better reader/writer. Teachers make these decisions with the goal of developing effective and efficient independent learners. Balanced literacy was important to Hermosa's overall vision for providing children with a student-centered education and holistic language, learning, and literacy practices.

Launching the PD

One of the major design decisions for the PD was to require that all teachers participate, regardless of content area or instructional focus. This was done to unite teachers from varied school cultures and norms in support of the idea that "every teacher is a literacy teacher" (Vacca & Vacca, 2002). Consequently, the design was constructed to provide measures of choice and flexibility for teachers to move into new ideas at

their own pace. Early on, efforts to unite every teacher around key ideas was a challenge that became especially evident as faculty and teachers began with understanding the reading process, learning how to conduct modified miscue analysis to support and deepen the work teachers were already doing with running records embedded in the Development Reading Assessment they used. Teachers had varied levels of prior knowledge and experience with this, resulting in varied levels of engagement and understanding. PD leaders adjusted soon after, opening up book study groups with options of professional titles that could support their instructional work (see Figure). Teachers selected the title of most interest and suitability for their classrooms; this move proved worthwhile for reorienting the pace and direction of the PD. These book groups were composed of teachers with varied levels of experience and knowledge; conversations around texts provided multiple entry points into concepts and ideas, as was evident in the ways we heard a first-year teacher appropriating ideas about guided reading in a way that was very different from his 20th-year colleague. Expert/novice dichotomies were softened within conversations

Figure   Professional Literature Used in Study Groups
Allen, J. (2000). *Yellow brick roads: Shared and guided paths to independent reading 4–12.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Collins, K. (2004). *Growing readers: Units of study in the primary classroom.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Harvey, S., & Goudvis, A. (2007). *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension for understanding and engagement.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
McCarrier, A., Pinnell, G.S., & Fountas, I.C. (2000). *Interactive writing: How language and literacy come together, K–2.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Miller, D. (2002). *Reading with meaning: Teaching comprehension in the primary grades.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
Peterson, R., & Eeds, M. (1990). *Grand conversations: Literature groups in action.* New York, NY: Scholastic.
Serravallo, J., & Goldberg, G. (2007). *Conferring with readers: Supporting each student's growth and independence.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
Taberski, S. (2000). *On solid ground: Strategies for teaching reading K–3.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Table Design Elements of Hermosa's Professional Development Initiative	
Component of PD	Purpose of This Component
Directed experiences/ demonstration lessons	These sessions were direct and explicit explanations or demonstrations of the concept under study, guided by constructivist and inquiry-oriented approaches. Typically, faculty leaders demonstrated an element of balanced literacy (such as teaching inference through read-aloud), connecting this concept to theory and asking teachers to think of how they might carry these demonstrations back to their own classrooms.
Book study	Teachers chose one of eight suggested titles for intensive study with their book study group. This learning experience provided opportunity for a deeper dive into particular aspects of balanced literacy that were oriented to teacher interest and need.
Try Its	Teachers were directed to take one thing modeled during the biweekly whole-school PD meeting and try it with their students. The expectation was that teachers would reflect on it and report progress/learning to small groups.
Case studies	Teachers chose one student to study closely throughout the PD, to practice understanding and applying concepts of balanced literacy to the learning gains of a single student. Teachers conducted modified miscue analysis and reported back to their small groups on what they saw their student learning or understanding in Try It settings.
Textbook/curriculum explorations	This learning experience provided opportunities for teachers to explore how to use textbooks within the framework of a balanced literacy approach. Teachers discussed curriculum use in book study and in grade-level teams.

where everyone was learning, and administrator observations took teachers' experience into account.

Another significant design decision was to model the PD after the reading workshop model, both in content and form, so that there were aspects of minilessons, shared reading, guided reading, and literature circles available as a structure for learning how to teach literacy in and through the same workshop model teachers were using with their students. Subsequently, the whole-school PD meetings typically began with a minilesson or lecture on a principle of balanced literacy and included demonstration lessons, whole-group discussions, small-group book studies, and individual case studies or Try Its. Try Its were so named as opportunities for teachers to make a low-risk effort and try out new ideas in their classrooms. Teachers were encouraged to plan which element they would try during the forthcoming week and bring an informal report of what happened

and what they learned to their next PD meeting. The major elements of the entire PD are briefly described in Table.

Accountability for learning was built into the PD in several ways. First, teachers were expected to be at all meetings and everyone participated, even the principal. Teachers joined book study groups and turned in reading progress and reflection slips at regular intervals to inform PD leaders about progress and questions. Try Its comprised an opportunity for teachers to try something they learned in that week's meeting or from their book study group, reinforced by the expectation that teachers would report back to their book study groups on what they were learning. Administrators and curriculum leaders

supported teachers at varied levels of competence through observations and coaching. As the PD proceeded, university faculty made weekly decisions about upcoming content based on teacher feedback. In this way, the PD was highly responsive to what teachers said they understood and what they needed.

The authors' research relationship to Hermosa was one of support for the PD model and the teachers. We were involved in the second year of the project (the 2008–2009 school year) and entered with the goal of documenting what was happening for teachers. We observed and recorded whole-group meetings and worked alongside three fifth-grade teachers inquiring into their own balanced literacy practices in their classrooms. We met with the teachers biweekly during their planning times to discuss ways to move their learning into teaching. Our explanation of this PD model is particularly informed by our work with that team, which was composed of a first-year teacher, a third-year teacher, a veteran kindergarten teacher instructing fifth grade for the first time, and a student teacher. This team was representative of the varied levels of experience teachers brought.

Qualities of this PD Model

We offer three broad categories to share how this PD model constituted a unique opportunity that other schools might conceptualize for themselves. These qualities are as follows: (1) teachers take care of their own learning, (2) individual learning in group contexts, and (3) coherent design: connectedness on

"The PD was highly responsive to what teachers said they understood and what they needed."

> *"The model cycled through teachers bringing their own questions, studying those questions through inquiry methods, and taking that learning back to their classrooms."*

many levels. In each section, we describe our conception of these ideas and illustrate them with specific examples.

Teachers Take Care of Their Own Learning

Professional development research in recent years supports collaboration and teacher inquiry into topics and issues happening in teachers' classrooms. These qualities ensure that PD is not disconnected from teacher practice and brings teachers together for conversations about the questions arising out of their practice (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Stakeholders and teachers co-designed this PD in response to current research and the particular needs and desires of the teachers and administrators. As a result, the PD directly reflected what they wanted to accomplish in their classrooms and school. While participating in the PD was not optional, teachers had multiple opportunities and ways to engage with the ideas in individual, small-group, and whole-group contexts. Reflection opportunities built into every meeting provided feedback that PD leaders reincorporated into the following meetings. Teachers brought questions and reflections from the Try Its, actively taking care of their own learning. They had a voice in determining the focus of their studies and in shaping the directions they took. Teachers were also encouraged to voice their questions and identify their need for additional support. The model cycled through teachers bringing their own questions, studying those questions through inquiry methods, and taking that learning back to their classrooms.

Teachers were informally held accountable for implementing new learning in their classrooms with students. At each meeting, teachers shared their successes and challenges with Try Its, as previously described. Teachers also responded with exit tickets or reflection points to help facilitators determine how teachers were making sense of these ideas and implementing new practices in their classrooms.

One fifth-grade teacher, Carmen, inquired thoughtfully into her conferencing practices and changed her workshop time to better meet student needs. In a grade-level team meeting, she exclaimed, "I figured out that I just wasn't getting to all my students!" Frustration was written on her face as she voiced this new realization about her conferencing habits in her fifth-grade room. "I tend to focus on the ones that I think need me the most, and that's okay, but I can't ignore the 'good' readers, and that's what I've been doing." Over the following weeks, Carmen worked alongside her student teacher, Audrey, in the context of their book club's discussion of *Conferring With Readers* (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). Carmen and Audrey adjusted the conferring procedures in their fifth-grade classroom and started by taping weekly schedules to their conference table to ensure they could get to every student. Their conversations continued as they experimented with record keeping and helping their students take responsibility for the content and direction of conferences. These decisions led them to a trial period wherein they used and adjusted resources from the book as they continued for six months a conversation with their book study group about conferences. As time went on, Carmen and Audrey addressed conferring considerations for bilingual students and discussed how they could make conferences more purposeful for their bilingual readers, who were using reading strategy skills competently in Spanish but not making that transfer to English texts and tests. As Carmen reflected on a videotaped group conference she had with several students, she commented, "I've gotten better at making my conferences more purposeful and have moved away from the idea that I have to do individual conferences with every student. I now see the benefit of group conferences for students who need support with the same strategy. I need to keep growing, but I feel like I'm getting closer to where I want to be."

> *"They needed time to process the implications of learner-centered theories of reading instruction and to adjust to the nature of literacy instruction without basal scripts."*

Individual Learning in Group Contexts

Flexible grouping was a major component of this PD model and reinforced the idea that although everyone was at different places in their learning, collaborative work around topics of interest could support everyone. Group work took place in several components of the PD:

Book Study Groups. As facilitators launched the PD model, some teachers new to Hermosa and balanced literacy ideas said they needed more time to understand this new way of looking at literacy, commenting that they weren't even sure what questions to ask. They needed time to process the implications of learner-centered theories of reading instruction and to adjust to the less tidy nature of literacy instruction without basal scripts. The facilitators responded to this need by having teachers spend the first several months in case studies with close observation of readers in their classrooms before starting book clubs. Book study groups then formed around topics of interest, including conferencing with readers, inquiry-based learning, guided reading, and literature study. Of key importance were the features that supported productive work in these groups. Administration and university faculty held high expectations for what would be accomplished in these groups and made those expectations clear. Groups chose a facilitator and timekeeper to monitor discussions, keep groups on topic, and record conversational topics and discussion summaries. Discussions ended with a quick-write opportunity for teachers to reflect on their new understandings. Facilitators used the summaries from each group as feedback to guide the next PD meeting. During discussions,

facilitators moved around the room, listening and inserting comments and support wherever needed.

Case Studies. At the beginning of the school year, teachers chose one child to study as a reader. They were to conference with the student, ascertain the child's reading interests and preferred genres, conduct a miscue analysis, and come back to the group with questions to discuss in small groups. This gave teachers the chance to make individual inquiries about a particular student, work through principles of balanced literacy assessment, and bring that learning to a supportive environment for discussion and input. It provided a way "into" balanced literacy concepts and made space for contextualizing the theoretical ideas in practice with a single student.

Demonstration Lessons and Try Its. Facilitators provided these opportunities for participants to observe and discuss balanced literacy practices, sometimes in grade-level groups and other times in spontaneous groups. This flexibility supported a community mindset and gave people opportunities to work with all faculty members. Later, teachers took those practices into their classrooms to try them out, informally reporting back on how it went. These ongoing conversations supported the idea of learning as a process and provided a safe place for teachers to take risks. Because there were built-in expectations that teachers would try demonstration lessons and be prepared to talk about how it went with their groups, many teachers took this seriously and kept themselves accountable to try strategies and report back for group feedback and advice. The following example illustrates how this played out in Clare's fifth-grade classroom.

"These ongoing conversations supported the idea of learning as a process."

During February, facilitators took advantage of poetry month to construct and demonstrate a lesson on making inferences using Langston Hughes's poem "I Am the Darker Brother" (Adoff, 1968). They discussed how the complex skill of making inferences could be conceptualized in three stages: making an observation in the text, asking a question, and answering (or inferring a possible reason) based on all they knew of the characters and events. In this way, teachers learned how to explain this reading strategy to their students and push students beyond prediction to higher levels of meaning making about literature.

Clare took this lesson to her class the very next week, posting a chart on her board and engaging her learners around *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1998), a text they had experienced before: "I want you all to listen to me read this again and listen to the way I think aloud about my inferences. I want you to understand how important the skill of inferring is for you as readers." She began to read, her voice a lilting hook for her listening students, who leaned forward and offered unsolicited but helpful contributions to Clare's first and second think-aloud. The lesson continued as she invited them to join her in making more inferences. In reflecting on the video later, Clare commented, "I wanted for us to get to the line in the book where it talks about the little girl's grandma letting go of the grass. The first time we read it, my students had

fantastic inferences about what that line could mean, and I wanted them to see how smart they were in making those comments."

This vignette illustrates the power of the demonstration lessons and Try Its. Teachers saw demonstration lessons conducted in whole-school meetings and gained confidence as they were supported to try it in their own classrooms.

Coherent Design: Connectedness on Many Levels

A consistent link between theory and practice in the local school context provided a coherent design for Hermosa's PD on many levels. From a theoretical perspective, balanced literacy aligned with Hermosa's goal for student-centered education. It also connected to the school context because it emerged from the teachers' questions about the readers they worked with every day.

Additionally, there was direct connection between the PD content and the teachers' classroom practice. Because there was an established culture and expectation for teaching this way, Hermosa teachers took that up in both language and practice, developing a common language around balanced literacy, which supported the culture envisioned by school administrators and teachers alike.

One of the most telling aspects of coherency in the PD model was the consistent, long-term study of students' literacy development with built-in expectations and opportunities for teachers to develop their knowledge, understanding, and practice over time. Administrators knew this kind of growth required a long-term commitment and recognized that they could not expect teachers to take up balanced literacy without giving them time from the school week to support it. They accommodated these expectations with weekly release time and ongoing support. Neither did administrators count on a quick fix; during this study, the school was in its second year of inquiry on balanced literacy and continued this model into the 2009–2010 school year.

Conclusion

During the end of the 2009–2010 school year, Hermosa underwent further changes and chose not to maintain this PD model. The principal took a position in another state and the faculty members who were most involved in the PD retired. The teachers who were involved in the planning and implementation were moved into district-level leadership positions, illustrating how leadership often means promotion or change. We conclude that leadership and people committed to change are substantive parts of the success of a model like this. One way this model could be strengthened is to consider and address factors that contribute to ongoing attrition in educational contexts. Nevertheless, this model offers a vision of what is possible through collaborative and coherent PD, which places increased expectations on teachers within a supportive learning environment. Because collaborative PD holds the potential to build community, provide contexts that support risk-taking, and foster inquiry, the benefits of this model are significant, creating opportunities for teachers to look closely at their own practices in the company of others.

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