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Professional Development's Complex Ecology: Examining a Whole-School
Balanced Literacy Professional Development

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Abstract

This descriptive study reports on the structure and implementation of a school wide professional development model in a southwest public elementary school. The professional development effort was designed to support educators' understanding and teaching of balanced literacy. The paper reports on the components of this professional development and discusses the strengths of this model in relation to educational research and findings on professional development. We conclude by discussing this model from the perspective of involved administration, facilitators, and teachers, as they consider the process of crossing the borders from professional development into their classrooms. The study is strengthened by teachers' opinions about the model in their school.

Keywords: professional development, teacher learning

Professional Development's Complex Ecology: Examining a Whole-School
Balanced Literacy Professional Development

Professional development is a difficult topic for educators and administrators. While all involved in education acknowledge the need for ongoing training and theoretical depth of understanding for educators, there are questions about the effectiveness of professional development regarding its direct affect on teachers' classroom practice (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Additionally, decisions about the structure, organization, and theoretical foundations of professional development are subject to controversy. Moreover, the demands that professional development efforts make on teachers' limited time deserve consideration if teachers are to be receptive and active in professional development efforts. This study examined one school's effort to navigate the complex ecology of professional development decisions by implementing a school-wide balanced literacy workshop based on a constructivist, inquiry-based model of learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996). As reported by Darling-Hammond, et al. (2009), opportunities to participate in such professional development are relatively rare for teachers in the US. This study builds on current research on effective professional development, examining the ways that teachers' make sense of new learning and move it from the professional development workshop into their classrooms.

This study positions itself in regards to Borko's (2004) discussion of professional development research models. Specifically, our study fits her articulation of phase one studies, which focus on a single professional development effort at an individual school. These kinds of studies have value to "evoke images of the possible..." (Schulman, 1983, p. 495), because they provide an example of how one school developed and carried out a professional development

plan. These studies also enable researchers to examine the ways teachers increase their participation in the practice of teaching and grow in their knowledge of the teaching process.

Connections to Literature

Over the past two decades as calls for reform in professional development have increased (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996, Little 1994), so have calls for more research to better understand the process of teacher learning and the acquisition of professional knowledge (Wilson and Berne, 1999). Wilson and Berne contend that “teacher learning has traditionally been a patchwork of opportunities—formal and informal, mandatory and voluntary, serendipitous and planned,” (p. 174). Traditional forms include one day in-service workshops, or the “drive-by” workshop model (Stein, Smith, & Silver, 1999), which has been criticized as one-shot fixes provided by outside experts (Wilson and Berne, 1999). Teachers generally report that such in-service programs are irrelevant or teach them very little (Little, 1994). Knapp (2003) criticized them as fragmented approaches that fail to provide for rigorous, sustained learning. These teacher in-service workshops are generally taught by outside professionals with the intent of imparting some new methodology, program, or knowledge aimed at fixing a problem or filling a void in teachers’ knowledge. This type of professional development has been assailed in recent years for its prepackaged design as well as for its deficit view of teacher learning.

More contemporary models of professional development, however, show that well designed professional development can have an impact on teacher practice and learning. Based on a review of research, Darling-Hammond, et al. (2009) describe effective professional development as “intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives; and builds strong

working relationships among teachers” (p. 43). Such forms of professional development have shown to be related to student achievement gains when they involve substantial contact hours (from 30-100) spread over a significant amount of time (6 – 12 months). Teachers also report that intensive, ongoing professional development is most effective for their learning and practice when sustained over time (Garet et al., 2001).

Additional alternative forms of professional development, based on sociocultural views of learning encompass the following key characteristics for effective professional development: 1) professional development that is ongoing and includes training, practice & feedback, 2) professional development which offers opportunities for both individual reflection and group inquiry into practice; 3) professional development that is school-based, embedded in teacher work and collaborative in nature; 4) professional development that is rooted in the knowledge base for teaching and incorporates constructivist approaches to teaching and learning; 5) professional development that recognizes teachers as professionals, making time for adequate support, and 6) professional development that is both accessible and inclusive. (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Little, 1988). While these principles can be applied in a variety of forms or fashions, professional learning communities (PLC) and collaborative teacher study groups are two key avenues of particular interest to the study. Research on these groups is presented below.

Professional learning communities.

To be effective, research has shown that professional development efforts ought to sync with teachers’ questions and the contexts of their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2009). Professional learning communities (PLC) have the potential to support the questions emerging from teachers’ practice through discussion with others who are familiar with their situations. PLCs have received increased attention in recent years, as teachers and researchers increasingly

value talk and its contribution to learning (Florio-Ruane, 2001, Wenger, 1998). These communities can be formal or informal, emerging from the social roles that characterize teachers' lives. Research on PLCs suggests that many benefits are possible for teachers who participate in these communities, including enhanced understanding of professional development content, increased learning about what constitutes good teaching, and reduced feelings of isolation (Egawa, 2009; Hord, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1996). PLCs provide a way to support teachers in a community framework that can enhance their commitment to a shared vision for instruction and learning. Morrissey (2000) asserts "professional learning communities provide opportunities for staff to look deeply into their teaching and learning process and to learn how to become more effective in their work with students" (p. 3). PLCs provided a helpful framework in which to examine the ways teachers took up their own learning, evidenced in the conversations about issues that mattered to them (Egawa, 2009).

Collaborative teacher study groups.

Based on a sociocultural view of learning, collaborative teacher study groups bring individuals together with peers and colleagues to engage in exploring issues of common concern and interest. Such collaborations provide opportunities for members to co-construct knowledge through interactions and dialogue leading to new insights and understanding. These groups can be important structures for the development of teacher professional knowledge, providing time, space, and shared purpose for individual teachers to engage and learn together. This approach to learning is important at all levels. Just as students need to work collaboratively with peers in classrooms, teachers need to engage in collaborative inquiry with colleagues in communities of practice in order to develop their craft of teaching.

Unfortunately, opportunities for participation in such professional development continue to be rare. Darling-Hammond, et al. (2009) surveyed teachers across the U.S. and found that while there were positive signs that high-quality professional development was increasing in many educational systems, few of the teachers surveyed reported access to well-designed professional development that provided regular opportunities for intensive learning over time.

Building on research on effective forms of professional development (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009), this study describes the professional development efforts of one school as a way of exploring the importance of social interaction and collaborative inquiry in professional development learning.

Study Purpose

The professional development effort documented in this study took place in a U.S. public school in the Southwest and was facilitated in collaboration between school administrators and university professionals. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the learning experiences that structured the professional development curriculum and reveal the teachers' opinions about their professional development experience and their discussion of the work they did to make this new learning a part of their own classrooms. Using data from interviews, observations and conversations, we examined the perspectives and opinions of teachers at varying levels of teaching experience regarding the ways this professional development influenced their teaching practices.

Questions that guided our research were:

1. What does the professional development effort at this school look like?
2. Based on the opinion of involved teachers, administrators and facilitators, what components of this model of professional development are especially effective and why?

Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical perspectives bear mention here, both with regards to the ways we describe and analyze the professional development model, along with the theories that supported the professional development effort itself. These perspectives include sociocultural theories of learning and communities of practice.

Sociocultural Theories of Learning

As researchers, we value the social nature of learning and take up sociocultural learning theory as a lens on our work. Vygotsky's (1978) work, and other theorists building on it have led to new perspectives on how human beings learn and develop, forming a sociocultural perspective of learning (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wells, 1999). In this view, learning and knowledge are integrally situated in the particular contexts, cultures, and activities in which they develop, thus, "learning and activity cannot be reduced into separate processes" (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

Sociocultural theory recognizes and values that teachers' learning is situated in social contexts that surround and inform their thinking, even when they are alone. It makes space for the multiple planes of influence on teachers' learning and practice: institutional, interpersonal, and individual (Rogoff, 2003). Ball's (2000) succinct definition of sociocultural theory synthesizes the constructive and social nature of learning which informed this study:

...knowledge is temporary, developmental, internally constructed, and socially and culturally mediated. From this perspective, learning is a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through social activity and discourse (p. 230).

Ball's words indicate the complexity of the learning process, creating a way to examine how teachers' talk demonstrated shifts in their thinking and learning as they negotiated the tensions embedded in growth. Sociocultural theory informed the study, as a means for understanding how the overall design of the professional development supported sociocultural theories of learning, along with guiding our analysis. Teachers' talk facilitated learning and scaffolded members into new ways of understanding.

Wells & Claxton (2002) describe a sociocultural view of education as the development of understanding and the formation of habits of mind and identities which occur through interaction with and support from more experienced others in social environments. Describing the process of human development and learning from a sociocultural perspective, they state:

As people work, play and solve problems together, so their spontaneous ways of thinking, talking and acting—the ideas that come to mind, the words they choose and the tools they make use of—embody an accumulated set of cultural values and beliefs that have been constructed and refined over previous generations. And, as they 'get things done' together, so younger or less experienced people pick up these habits and attitudes from their more experienced friends, relatives, teachers and colleagues. It is through taking part in such joint activities that individual members of a society are inducted into 'ways of knowing' and take over and make their own the values, skills and knowledge that are enacted in the process. (p. 3)

Viewing learning from a sociocultural perspective places "learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world" (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). This contrasts with the more conventional view that assumes learning is an individual process that results from teaching and that can be separated from other life activities. A social theory of learning assumes that learning is a natural part of our human existence; it is not a separate activity nor one that only occurs through concentrated attention, but "learning is something that we can assume – whether we see it or not" (Wenger, 1998, p. 8). From this perspective, learning is as inevitable as any other life process. Wenger (1998) explains that such a view reflects both a difference in the understanding

of learning and also “a fundamental difference in assumptions about the nature of knowledge, knowing, and knowers, and consequently about what matters in learning” (p. 4).

The facilitators and administration who designed the professional development in this study took up a socio-constructivist view of learning, in which social interactions support and scaffold learning (Dixon-Krauss, 1996). They also valued inquiry learning and reflective practice, as demonstrated by the ways they incorporated teacher choice for questions they wanted to address in terms of broad areas of study.

Learning in Communities of Practice

Communities of practice was a second theoretical lens guiding our conceptualization and discussion of participants' roles and actions within the professional development experiences. (Wenger, 1998) It extends the idea that learning is a social phenomenon situated in social contexts, also describing learning as social participation that is deeply linked to changing social relations. Wenger conceptualizes learning as coming to know how to participate in the discourse of a particular community or practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wenger, 1998). For Wenger, communities of practice are the means by which we organize our lives in habitual ways with one another, developing particular shared practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories (p. 6). These communities, he contends, are an integral part of our daily lives, and at any given time, we all belong to many of them, at home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, etc. It is through engaging in and contributing to the practices of these communities that “we learn and so become who we are” (p. i).

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice can become learning communities when the conditions are in place for not only the acquisition of knowledge (which naturally occurs in all communities of practice) but also the creation of knowledge. In learning

communities, members work together collectively to build on expertise and interests that arise from their work as members of larger local and global communities (Chan & Pang, 2006).

Wenger (1998) contends that a well-functioning community of practice with a history of mutual engagement around a joint enterprise can be a good context for exploring new insights and creating new knowledge, thus becoming a learning community.

Interest in learning communities has soared in recent years, particularly in the field of education, leading to the re-conceptualization of classrooms and of learning and teaching (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Many researchers and educators argue that classrooms need to become learning communities where teachers and students work together to co-construct knowledge as they engage in authentic activities. These new ideas have been extended to teacher learning and development as well, with calls for more research on how teachers participate in communities of practice to improve their knowledge of teaching and learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Richardson & Placier, 2001).

Methodological Considerations

Through this interpretive, qualitative study, we seek to describe the interactions between people in learning situations. This perspective enables us to consider teachers' various identities and discourses, which they brought as they opened themselves to new learning. It also allows us to see ways that teachers' conversations and interactions supported the professional development process. Erickson (1986) discusses the importance of interpretive, qualitative research for uncovering and explicating the meaning and action within learning situations. It is a way of research for those concerned with the locality of meaning in the daily life of a classroom, and the ways that the complex social settings can be analyzed for the situated meanings of various participants. Ethnographic methods, including observation, interviews and video-based

reflection, informed this study, enabling a grounded understanding of meaning in action from the participant teachers' points of view.

Using a qualitative research approach, we gathered data in multiple ways over a period of six months. We observed, recorded and took field notes of the bi-monthly whole school professional development meetings on six occasions from December 2008 to May 2009. During these meetings, we recorded and collected data on both the teacher talk and conversations that took place during the whole group meetings as well as small group book club meetings, which constituted a portion of the whole faculty meetings. To examine the influence of this professional development in teachers' classrooms, we asked for a grade level team willing to participate in further examining their own learning and development; the fifth-grade team volunteered. This team, consisting of three teachers and one student teacher, allowed us to take video recordings of their balanced literacy block, twice a month for three months. Classroom observations included field notes of classroom teaching and interactions during mini lessons, students' independent reading time, teacher and peer conferences, small group instruction, and share time. These whole class and small group interactions were audio and videotaped for later observation, reflection, and analysis.

These teachers also agreed to meet four times over a period of two months, in a PLC where they reflected on videos of their balanced literacy instruction, and conversed together about what was significant for them. This PLC spent extra time outside of the whole-school professional development to further extend their learning. This study derives findings chiefly from teacher interviews, although results are informed by the overall data corpus.

Outside of the three-teacher PLC, we conducted interviews with seven teachers, two school administrators, and the two university facilitators, using qualitative interview methods (Erickson, 1986, Guba & Lincoln, 1994, Seidman, 2005). Qualitative interviews lent flexibility to the process and invited the opinions and ideas about the professional development's effectiveness and influence on teachers' practice.

Data analysis for this study was informed by Miles and Huberman (1984) and Erickson's (1986) analytic induction method. Data reduction, data display and conclusion-drawing constituted the major steps to analyzing the large amount of data. Accordingly, the process was an "iterative and cyclical process" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 24) including transcribing, categorizing, synthesizing, analyzing and interpretation. We began the data analysis process by transcribing interviews with teachers and professional development instructors. Questions guided coding efforts, which focused on questions of teachers' opinions about the professional development experience, teachers' discussions of the work they did to make the learning part of their classroom practice, and teachers' perspectives on how the professional development influenced their practice. These major categories were further combed for interrelated themes and ideas. As a research team, we submitted these emerging categories to discussion and referred back to the data for confirming and disconfirming evidence to gather a weight of evidence supporting our assertions.

Context of the Study

When administrators at Hidalgo Elementary School anticipated the start of the 2008-2009 school year, they called on two university professors at a nearby university for input into designing a school-wide professional development effort that would support their teachers' understanding and teaching of balanced literacy. Both university professionals have taught for

many years, and had experience with NCTE's (National Council of Teachers of English) Reading Initiative. The school is a public elementary school located in a high-poverty district in the Southwest. Over the years, the school has maintained and justified their literature-based balanced literacy program to district administration in response to district-supported scripted reading programs. Together, administrators and professors discussed their desires for whole-faculty involvement in the professional development model which included bi-monthly meetings with self-chosen book studies and group exploration and discussions around balanced literacy practices.

Findings

The first portion of the findings is a description of the professional development in existence at Hidalgo, designed to illustrate the complex nature and scope of the effort to meet teachers' needs. An analysis of the descriptive features revealed three characteristics that define this particular collaborative inquiry model. These noteworthy characteristics are examined through the existing literature on professional development. Finally, we examine what teachers, administrators, and facilitators said about the significance and influence of the professional development on their perspectives and practice, contextualizing this in an analysis of the tensions existing in Hidalgo's professional development.

Overview of the Professional Development Model

The professional development model implemented by the school followed a collaborative approach between teachers, administrators and university personnel. The structure of the professional development included whole-group, small-group, and individual components.

Whole group component.

Whole-faculty meetings were held twice monthly on early-release days designated specifically for professional development. These meetings lasted approximately an hour and a half each time. During this time, facilitators engaged teachers as learners by modeling specific reading strategies and providing opportunities for engaged discussion. They also required accountability and support for teachers through Try-Its, wherein they asked teachers to “take and try” the modeled strategies in their own classrooms. The overall content of these meetings began with an intense study of reading theories designed to provide a foundation for examining reading instruction and student growth. The meetings moved to explicit instruction on reading strategies designed to directly support teachers’ implementing a balanced literacy approach in their classrooms. Facilitators ended the year by helping teachers negotiate the tensions of integrating balanced literacy practices into a district provided reading curriculum.

Small group component.

Following the whole-school meeting, teachers broke into small groups to discuss a book addressing a topic of interest for that group. Book study group topics included guided reading, conferencing, inquiry-based learning, emergent literacy, and literature study. Groups assigned themselves reading homework and follow-through of ideas and learning in their classrooms. Individual teachers took turns serving as either a facilitator or recorder for group discussions, to provide a level of accountability and enable facilitators to understand emerging themes and questions, informing future planning. Recorders always turned in notes from the book choice meetings to facilitators, who used the information to guide their planning and future meetings. During these discussions, facilitators moved around the room listening in and inserting comments and support wherever needed.

Individual component.

All of the learning and connection in both whole and small groups had an extension to individual learning through 1) case studies, 2) try-its, and 3) individual reflection. Case studies took place during the first few months. As the facilitators taught the theories of reading that support a balanced literacy framework, they asked teachers to choose one student with whom they could work to lend a practical dimension to their theoretical learning. These case studies constituted an in-depth opportunity for teachers to look at one child's needs and learning. Try-its were a practice strategy incorporated throughout the year and provided a time for teachers to take what they learned from the modeled reading strategies back to their own classrooms to try it out with students. Teachers then brought back anecdotal evidence of their work with their students to add to the whole-group discussions about reading theory. Individual Reflection was another individual learning component that occurred throughout the year. At the end of every meeting, teachers were given time to reflect personally on their learning and understanding. These reflections constituted an opportunity to deepen their learning by focusing on specific elements of their emerging understanding of literacy, strategies and workshop.

Descriptive Features

The following characteristics have been identified as themes across this professional development. These values were generally viewed in a positive and beneficial light by teachers, administrators and facilitators.

Time.

Our conception of the importance of time, as it is contextualized in this analysis, is related to three dimensions: 1) dedicated release time to support professional development, 2)

sustained, long-term engagement with topics, and 3) time as a required component for deep and lasting learning.

Administrators recognized that they could not ask teachers to devote time to professional development without alleviating pressure from another part of the day. They worked with the district to secure regular, early-release days every Wednesday. This consistent, dedicated time was borrowed from the school day, constituting an implicit commitment and expectation that teachers learn. For this school, being a teacher meant being a learner. This message was strongly conveyed through administrative commitment to a schedule that allowed teachers the time to learn.

Sustained, long-term engagement is essential for effective professional development (Borko, 2004, Darling-Hammond & Richardson 2009). The balanced literacy professional development effort at Hidalgo is now in its third year. Schools rarely see this kind of commitment to in-depth study of a particular content area. Such long-term, sustained inquiry provides teachers at all levels of experience and expertise the opportunity to learn new things, reflect on their learning, and work on implementing it into their own practice.

Within this model, teachers were able to sustain their ongoing understanding of balanced literacy through the long-term construction of these ideas. Teachers participated in an evolving discussion, giving them time to develop their own understandings, at their own pace. This model honored the idea that teachers need time to think about their practice if they want to change it. Although administrators held expectations that teachers would implement balanced literacy in their classroom practice, they balanced those expectations with the realization that becoming a different kind of literacy teacher takes time. This gave the administrators patience and commitment to the learning process, as teachers figured out how this learning would look in their

individual classrooms. In this way, the model supported real growth and change, by providing time for teachers to fit this new learning into their overall vision for teaching.

Responsive and multifaceted teaching.

This model provided opportunities for whole group, small group, and individual engagement through a variety of interactional opportunities all aimed at conceptualizing balanced literacy practice. The multifaceted nature of this model provided various ways for teachers to engage and make meaning of these practices for themselves, i.e., modeled lessons, case studies, book clubs, try its, etc. Additionally, school administrators and facilitators collaboratively designed the framework to allow for professional development that evolved and changed, based on teachers' needs, constituting a responsive approach to teachers' questions. This responsive teaching was possible because of the facilitators' expertise.

The facilitators also recognized the importance of deepening teachers' content area knowledge in literacy, enabling them to "understand the central facts and concepts of the discipline, how these ideas are connected, and the processes used to establish new knowledge and determine the validity of claims" (Borko, 2005, p. 5). This fueled their commitment to the case study research, wherein teachers did such close, in-depth analysis of a single student, in order to see the reading process at work within the student's miscues.

Choice.

Facilitators built choice into the professional model through professional book groups. They provided teachers with professional books on a variety of topics, such as shared reading, guided reading, conferencing, literature study, emergent literacy and literature study. These resources provided opportunities for focused, pedagogical study in the broad area of balanced literacy. Teachers selected a topic of personal interest and discussed issues emerging from the

readings as they pertained to their classrooms and experience. Before adjourning book discussion groups, participants decided together on a homework assignment related to the reading and concepts they were studying. Each participant shared his/her experience at the beginning of the next book club meeting, and asked and answered one another's questions. This structure lent an element of accountability while providing teachers the freedom to pursue questions of interest. Additionally, it created space for teachers to actively construct their knowledge, individually while participating in teacher enculturation practices (Borko, 2005).

In Teachers' Words

In this portion of the findings, we synthesize teachers' opinions about the professional development experience and their perspectives on how the professional development influenced their practice. Within this, we provide some counter-narrative to the idea that there were no difficulties to what we and the participants view as a largely beneficial and constructive professional development model. These tensions constitute opportunities for considering how to strengthen professional development opportunities, not only for Hidalgo, but for others considering similar models.

Teachers' opinions about the professional development.

Overall, teachers were positive about the professional development model in effect at Hidalgo, stating that it provided them with a great deal of practical and pedagogical support for their classrooms. These comments point to the complex ecology of professional development models that begin with teachers' questions and provide time for in-depth learning. As many of teachers' comments indicate, they valued that what they were learning was directly tied to their classrooms, immediately accessible while also connected to future possibilities.

Bob, the PLC's first-year teacher, said

...the workshop...was like a refresher course on my last block [in my undergrad program]. It was kind of hands-on application of how to teach...I thought it was useful being able to network with other teachers. I think everyone in my group had more experience than I did, so it was useful for me to kind of learn from them and their ideas..."

Clare agreed with this perspective, saying that the professional development "helped you feel more comfortable with each [time you learn] something." Nicole corroborated this in her comment,

I really enjoyed going every Wednesday because I felt like, if I already knew it, it would refresh my memory. And if it was new, it was a new strategy that I could bring back [to my classroom] and that's one thing I like. I really like learning a new thing and bringing it back here, especially because it's my first year teaching, so I think it helped reinforce a lot of things that I was unsure about.

These teachers' comments speak to the complexity of the learning process and the way repeated exposure to ideas gives learners a deeper understanding of literacy. This is especially important for teachers who are expected to continually improve and grow. Clare addressed this issue by discussing how her learning often supported not only her current practice, but her future ideas:

Well, for me [in terms of] balanced literacy, my group focused on the guided reading groups. So I feel like, even though this year I started implementing them, I have a better idea of how to structure them for next year...I got a lot of ideas from the book that we read and from talking with my group. So I tried out a few [ideas] this year, but not

consistently. So I feel like next year I'm more comfortable going in with [guided reading].

Teachers also felt that the professional development was helpful in terms of its "mandated" nature; Brad stated that although grade level teams were "supposed to" meet every week, the busy nature of teaching prevented them from doing it as much as they should. Meeting in bi-monthly professional development "forced" this kind of interaction by carving time out of the school day and creating an accountability structure wherein teachers were expected to participate regularly. This tension of not having enough time will be forever present in teachers' lives; this professional development model both met and stretched teachers at this point of tension. This is because, while it provided time for the talk and collaboration teachers consistently say they need and want, there was not sufficient structure to prevent "off-task" behavior. Nicole put it this way:

We had to set up guidelines, but it was not as structured as I would have liked. And I feel like it's not their [the facilitators'] fault, I mean, as teachers we have so much to talk about that we never get a chance to talk about...we got off-task a lot of the time...I felt like there were so many "what if's" or "what should we do?"

In this comment, Nicole refers to the messy nature of social learning, wherein the opportunities for teachers to converse about their practice at times leads to distracted and unproductive talk. Further, teachers felt that they did not always have enough time with the facilitators, or opportunities to interact with the "experts." Bob commented,

I wish maybe once a week or every other week, having someone come into my room that really knows what they're doing and model a lesson with my students. So that I can watch and take notes and see how that actually plays out.

Nicole agreed with this idea, stating,

I wish we could have spent more time with them [the facilitators], so they could answer questions. Like there's only two of them and a lot of us.

Comments such as these demonstrated that teachers desired increased opportunities to interact with more knowledgeable others. Despite this, teachers also spoke of the many opportunities they enjoyed to learn from one another. Bob stated that the professional development provided him with opportunities for,

more networking, getting feedback from other teachers. Because everyone has more experience than I do, so it's always great to learn, from people who know a little bit more about things than I do. To hear ideas and be able to reflect, you know?

Ways that the professional development influenced teacher practice.

As Borko (2005) notes, "meaningful learning is a slow and uncertain process for teachers, just as it is for students...some teachers change more than others through participation in professional development programs" (p. 6). We found this to be especially true for the teachers who worked more intensively with us in the PLC. While they each claimed that the professional development was significant for them and influenced their classroom practice, teachers' levels of experience, years in the classroom, personal educational history and personalities all affected the ways they took up this learning. Consequently, teachers responded to the professional development according to their experience. We illustrate these findings by discussing how a Bob, a first-year teacher, and Cassie, an eighth-year teacher took up this learning.

When asked to describe how the professional affected his practice, Bob stated,

I used the writing-to-learn stuff...and poetry is something else I've used—when they talked about two voice poems...

He went on to say,

I would have liked more ideas on writing. It seemed like they [the facilitators] focused mostly on reading and gave us a few examples for writing. But I really would have liked more reinforcement, more practical application for writers' workshop. That definitely, for me, is something I need more of.

Bob's statements were supported by what we witnessed in his classroom observations.

We often saw him take a strategy lesson he learned in yesterday's professional development and teach it for today's reading lesson, regardless of its context with his present literacy instruction. For Bob, the professional development model gave him tools to take back to the classroom, but as is typical of new teachers, he used it as practices to fill his very next day, often without consideration of who his students were, or what modifications they would need to successfully learn the concepts. Olson & Osborne (1991) described a teacher's first year as a time when novice teachers usually focus either on content—what they will teach, or process—how they will teach it. It takes time for teachers to move into a balance between the two. Further, most teachers studied by Olson & Osborne entered the profession with a lack of understanding of their role and responsibilities in meeting process needs. But over time, as the new teachers developed a "sense of security with physical resources and curriculum content, novices were better able to focus on the process needs of students" (p. 338). Similarly, Goddard & Foster (2001) found that once first-year teachers have gained some facility with classroom management and the day-to-day workings of teaching, they begin to re-evaluate their motivation and become more reflective about their experiences.

Bob did not shy away from his status as a first-year teacher. Instead, he used professional development opportunities to inform his practice by asking lots of question about the specific details of how to do something or manage a situation with students. We found support for this conclusion throughout the data; Bob often positioned himself as a learner by saying things like, “everyone has more experience than I do” or “I know I need help with a lot of things.” He used phrases like this to openly state his need for assistance and solicit advice from more knowledgeable others. This professional development met some of Bob’s needs as a new teacher, according to Gilbert (2005), who confirms that novice teachers want opportunities to observe other teachers, learn from mentors, gain feedback on their teaching through classroom observations, and have opportunities to talk through future instructional plans with other teachers. Each of these opportunities were afforded to Bob through some aspect of the professional development or PLC.

Upon reflection, we believe that the small-group talk portion of the PD was what provided Bob with the opportunity to meet his own needs. If the whole PD model had been “stand and deliver,” Bob would have undoubtedly gleaned some helpful practices and strategies for his practice. But it was the talk that provided for differentiated learning opportunities in a whole-faculty setting. The multifaceted nature of the professional development ensured there was something there for everybody. Additionally, teachers were allowed to take it up in their own way; administrators were not coming into their classrooms to ensure that teachers were doing balanced literacy ‘correctly.’ Rather, administrators dropped into classrooms to see if teachers needed support, and ascertain what more they needed. It was not to evaluate. Even though there was a high expectation that teachers would take it up, it was tempered by respect for the learning process. This demonstrates an understanding that teachers were at different places

in their learning and develop in their own time. This speaks directly against the emerging idea that teachers need to do the same thing on the same day at the same time to ensure that they meet all students' needs. This recent push for "fidelity" to program implementation for so many of the scripted basal programs in existence today ignores who teachers are and disregards the complexity of the learning process.

In contrast to Bob, Cassie was an experienced teacher participant in the professional development at Hidelgo. Having taught for 7 years as a kindergarten teacher, Cassie had recently moved up to the 5th grade and as a result, saw herself as a "beginner" all over again. She related to us that she was working hard to understand literacy development and instruction at this level and was very open to learning and figuring things out. Her open personality along with years of experience in the classroom resulted in Cassie being a very reflective teacher, one who approached her learning and teaching with thoughtful consideration and a questioning attitude. She appreciated being able to talk with her colleagues about what she was learning about balanced literacy and about how she was applying in her classroom. She worked to fit the pieces together in thoughtful ways, trying carefully to integrate her new learning from the PD into what she knew about how children learn and how she taught. For Cassie, it was important for her to find ways that made sense for her and her students and she was constantly reflecting on what she was learning and how it gave her a new way to look at her present practice. Cassie describes her learning this way,

Well...honestly...I learned how to teach reading. I didn't go through the block—like it was fifteen years ago, and then I went to the early childhood block, so I knew a lot about pre-readers. On that part, I was okay. And I knew the structures, but to specifically move a child from one level to another, and assess them, and see what it takes, and all the

strategies, the specific strategies—we got so much stuff [in the professional development]. Now, I'm like, "Oh! That's what they mean by that!" and now I'm [able to] go and say, "okay, this is what I do, when the [students] are doing this." So being able to identify, you know, their needs, which was a huge thing, specifically, for every single child...to start with them individually, and to know them individually and assess that, identify that, and then to have the strategy...we had some very, very, good solid ways of how to teach the child. Once I did that, I could see the kids moving and improving. So now that I see that, I'm like "Okay, look, I can do this, and I can do that," and maybe it was just being able to teach knowing, having the knowledge of how to teach reading, and how to do that in my individual conferences.

Cassie's words illustrate that this professional development supported her own thoughtful process, motivating a shift in her teaching that focused on instruction tied to assessment. This model helped her make sense of her teaching in both the structure of balanced literacy and the implementation for individual learners.

Conclusions & Significance

Data reveal that there are many successful elements to this professional development model. Participants felt that opportunities to participate with colleagues in the workshops made a positive difference for them, both personally and professionally. Similar to findings from Darling-Hammond, et al.'s (2009) study of effective professional development, we found that time and talk are two key components for successful professional development efforts.

Discussion between teachers proved to be an important way to process, understand, and reflect on new ideas. We believe that time and talk are two of the critical components to professional development efforts that will enable teachers to cross the border from the professional

development experience to making it work in their classrooms. We also believe that professional development efforts must be tailored to the areas of inquiry that are alive for teachers in the teaching moments of their day (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

With few teachers having opportunities for participation in collaborative, inquiry-based professional development that provides for intensive and sustained learning over time, this descriptive study provides an illustration and discussion of how such a model would work. We believe that a closer look at this school's way of doing professional development could benefit the field, as we operate in an educational system with increasingly greater demands on teachers' time. This study of one school's efforts deserves consideration as a model that honors flexibility, teacher choice, and theoretically supported learning opportunities.

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