

The Power of Professional Learning: Using PLCs to Enhance Accessibility of Instruction for English Learners

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Action Research project was to gather data on the effectiveness of implementing a Professional Learning Community in a middle school to enhance content teachers' ability to make instruction accessible to this historically underserved group. Data included qualitative field notes, interactive agendas during PLC meetings, and interviews. Quantitative data was gathered through a pre and post PLC intervention survey. Findings revealed that this Professional Learning Community provided the supportive space necessary for the participating teachers to alter their perceptions of teaching English Learners which then influenced changes in their practice.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. In what ways, if any, can a professional learning community led by an ELL Facilitator affect the way content area teachers think about and implement differentiated instruction and/or assessments for EL students?
2. Will experiencing professional learning in a collaborative setting with guided facilitation change how teachers think and feel about

RELEVANCE

I am the ELL Instructor/Facilitator in a middle school where 6% of the population receives English Language services. Only 16% of those students transitioned out of services last year, while 41% transitioned out district-wide. State data reveals that a large number of English Learners at this school are showing little to no growth in language acquisition, which demonstrates a clear need to change instructional practices. In addition, there is a clear lack of authentic learning opportunities available to the teachers in this building. Professional development is typically structured as whole-staff, "sit-and-get" trainings.

FINDINGS

Changes in Teacher Perception

- "I'm building better rapport and relationships with my ELs because I'm having more one-on-one conversations."
- "Is it okay to grade students differently?"
- "Does proficient at language level per the ELPS (English Language Proficiency Standards) need to equal an A?"
- "Students who have strong speaking skills conversationally still need lots of support and I sometimes forget that."

Changes in Teacher Practice

- "It [The EL Support Group] has made me much more thoughtful and deliberate in my practice. Especially planning and understanding of content."
- "Teachers expressed [methods were] becoming 'routine', not just a 'strategy' used once and then abandoned."

Feelings about Professional Learning

- "I hope that this group will enable me to reach at least one student I otherwise would have not."
- "I still need this. I enjoy talking through hope. I enjoy talking through despair."
- "Today, no headache because I was engaged and learning stuff to help my students."

- “Being in this group has made me feel more comfortable [teaching ELs] because we can share the challenges and talk about them.”
- “Our PLC then unanimously committed to engaging in a day of Instructional Rounds, with a specific focus of EL support, on April 14th, 2016.”

Inhibiting Factors

Time: Lack of it and the struggle of using it efficiently

- “Will the interventions require a lot of extra time?”
- “Can I make this commitment because I’m already overwhelmed by all the other things I need to do?”

Overwork: Overwhelming reality of expectations and requirements of meeting the needs of each student, everyday

- “Three preps and different dynamics of classes is overwhelming.”
- “I know I’m powerful and strong, but feeling really tired right now.”
- “I feel like I’m constantly struggling to stay above water.”

IMPLICATIONS

The most powerful thing that I learned through this research is that being involved in a professional learning community can make this high-pressure, high-stress job more sustainable. A PLC gives teachers a safe space to learn and grow together. I did not expect to see glimpses of such genuine transformation after so little time, but it’s really there. The participants are developing the habit of asking questions and providing feedback with and among one another – signs of a true learning community.

Through this research and my studies in the MIL program, I’ve developed the strong belief that many teachers really do want to change and grow. Unfortunately this change isn’t always lasting or successful because teachers don’t have access to necessary support systems. Enacting and sustaining change alone is overwhelming and difficult, but change done within a group is more likely to be manageable and inspiring. That’s why there are marathon preparation running groups and daily AA meetings: most people need camaraderie and support when they are undergoing transformation.

NEXT STEPS

PLC Group

We will continue to meet as a PLC for the rest of this year and we will share our learning with the staff in our building. My principal would like to leverage the positive experiences of this group to support the implementation of school-wide PLCs next year. It’s important to me to keep the organic, teacher-driven feel of this group, so I’m wondering how we can intentionally scale this up to the whole school.

The majority of participants in the ELL Support Group said that they would like to continue our story arc of learning next year, and other teachers have said they would like to join. It is my hope that sufficient time will be allocated to make this type of learning more accessible to all teachers.

Teacher Leader

As an evolving teacher leader, I feel it is my job to advocate for authentic and applicable learning opportunities for teachers, not only as a means to improve student learning but also to make this job sustainable for the people who devote their lives to it. I now feel a greater obligation to improving the quality of education for educators, which then would improve student education. How can we expect teachers to create a strong culture of learning in their classrooms if a supportive culture of learning does not exist for the adults in charge?