

***Centering Language, Culture, and Identity at the Nexus of Professional Learning and Practice***

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A Research Paper in response to MOE Reporting Requirements

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association  
San Francisco, April 2013

## Introduction

New Zealand continues to face challenges in ensuring equitable educational outcomes for a significant number of students, particularly those from culturally diverse backgrounds. Though international testing data (PISA 2009, 2012; PIRLS 2006, 2011) indicate that New Zealand primary school students, on average, perform significantly above the international mean in reading and mathematics (Chamberlain, 2008 & 2013; May, Cowles, & Lamy, 2013; Telford & May 2010), there continues to be a relatively large gap between the highest and lowest achieving students, who are predominantly Māori, Pasifika, and students with special educational needs. Moreover, the gap between the high and the low achieving students is one of the largest among OECD nations (May, Cowles, & Lamy, 2013), and remains a persistent problem of practice for New Zealand schools.

It has long been a truism that what teachers do in the classroom matters to student learning and attainment of desired educational outcomes. However, within the last decade there has now also been a growing empirical evidence base that confirms that teacher effectiveness is the most salient factor in student engagement in learning and achievement outcomes (see Alton-Lee, 2003). Moreover, these data also indicate that schools with high concentrations of effective teachers accelerate student learning in ways that actually help close the achievement gap (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Haycock, Jerald, & Huang, 2002). Evidence of this central role that teacher practice plays in student learning outcomes has led to growing attention and research focused on teacher knowledge, learning, and professional development. Governments in many countries are now investing significantly in teacher professional development (Day & Sachs, 2004; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). As a result of this focused attention and growing body of research an initial consensus has emerged about what constitutes effective professional development that can enhance teacher learning and practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lieberman 1995; Little 1993; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

In response to the persistent tail of achievement in New Zealand schools, and drawing heavily from this extant literature on high-quality professional development (Timperley et al., 2007), the Ministry of Education has placed considerable emphasis on enhancing the systematic performance of professional learning and development (PLD) offered to teachers and schools by various PLD providers. Thus, the Ministry of Education's most recent efforts have included a new "quality assurance approach to contract monitoring and reporting that is consistent with the overall capability shifts we need to achieve in schools and kura<sup>1</sup>" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 5). The result is a monitoring and reporting approach situated within an inquiry framework that establishes clear, shared standards for quality provision of culturally responsive

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<sup>1</sup> Kura is the te reo Māori word for school, and is used consistently in Ministry of Education documents to reflect the bicultural and bilingual educational framework within Aotearoa/New Zealand.

PLD. In this context, culturally responsive PLD “refers to a system focus that affirms identity(ties), language(s) and culture(s) of every learner with a view to generating equitable outcomes across the system” (p.17).

The purpose of this paper is to present a documentary account of a team of professional development facilitators as they reframe their work in response to this policy context by placing language, culture, and identity at the centre of literacy focused PLD. Their practice has been grounded in an appreciative inquiry framework (Cooperrider & Srivesta, 1987) where they seek to identify and increase the use of existing practices within the PLD team and the schools that support a culturally responsive learning environment. The inquiry has been guided by the following questions:

1. What does being culturally responsive, linguistically responsive, and inclusive mean in PLD practice?
2. What are the teaching and learning supports within the PLD context that support literacy in culturally responsive, linguistically responsive, and inclusive ways?

These questions have supported the on-going reflection on and refinement of the team’s individual and collective work, and form the basis for this documentary account of how this process has deepened their understanding of teaching and learning with regard to the design and implementation of a culturally responsive model of PLD provision in literacy.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching and Professional Learning and Development: Emerging Constructs of Practice**

Culturally responsive practice is grounded in the assumption that there is a special knowledge base, skills, processes, and experiences necessary for teachers that enable them to work successfully with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Smith, 1998). And, there is a well-established body of knowledge that illuminates the salient characteristics and practices of culturally responsive teachers who produce successful outcomes for students (Alton-Lee, 2003; Bishop, 2010; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). It is therefore disconcerting that we continue to be confronted with a persistent achievement gap among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bishop, 2010; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Professional development remains the most common context in which practicing teachers engage in learning to enhance and change their instructional repertoire, and as noted previously, there is growing consensus about what constitutes effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Guskey, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Putnam & Borke, 2000; Timperley et al., 2007). Among other key factors, effective professional development promotes deep, principled conceptual understanding by engaging teachers in in-depth inquiry focused on specific content-

area knowledge and critical reflection on their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. It actively assists in connecting new information with current practical theories in ways that also support deconstructing and reconstructing prior knowledge as necessary for change (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Darling-Hammond 1997; Lieberman 1995; Little 1993). Thus, it is possible that using models of effective professional development will support teacher learning for culturally responsive practice. However, where some researchers have asserted a consensus around the characteristics of effective teacher professional development (e.g., Guskey, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Putnam & Borko, 2000), others argue that the conceptual model remains insufficiently robust for guiding practice (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008) and thus call for more in-depth research. Though there is a growing body of literature in the area of professional development for culturally responsive practice (e.g., Fickel, 2005; Bishop & Berryman, 2010; Farmer, Hauk, & Neuman, 2005; Sleeter, 2011), the majority of studies in this area tend to be situated in preservice teacher education (e.g., OECD, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). There are very few studies that attempt to delineate the context and content of culturally responsive PLD for inservice teachers. Thus, this seems a key area key area for further investigation and illumination of theoretical and empirical constructs.

Prevailing theoretical framework and resulting models of professional development promote an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001) that integrates purposeful engagement in practice with critical reflection and ongoing dialogue to enhance learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Wells, 1999). Embracing this new model of professional development necessitates rethinking the role of those who plan and organize these professional development opportunities (Fickel, 2002; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). However, there remain few studies focused on understanding the practices and knowledge of the professional educators who design and facilitate learning opportunities for teachers (Fickel, Chesbro, Boxler, & Tucker, 2011; Elliot, 2005; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008).

### **Methodological Framework**

This paper is a documentary account of the experiences, learning, and shifts in practice of a team of literacy focused PLD providers working collaboratively with an external evaluator to enhance their work. The co-authors of this paper are the external evaluator who is a university faculty member, and the two PLD team leaders who work for the university's professional development centre. The project evaluation was co-constructed and implemented by interweaving a number of theoretical frameworks, including utilization-focused (Patton, 2008), and participatory, collaborative, and empowerment (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Cousins & Whitmore, 2007) approaches to programme evaluation and action-research (Whyte, 1991; Noffke & Somekh, 2005).

The goal of this interweaving was to build long-term commitment to and capacity for integrating improvement-oriented evaluation in response to the Ministry of

Education's focus on quality assurance into the fabric of PLD provision and the team's practice-work. Our framework was also informed by an appreciative inquiry approach which argues that organizational improvement is best engaged by paying more attention to what is required to enact change than to focus on existing problems (Bushe, 1998; Billings & Kowalski, 2008; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Through question-posing, appreciative inquiry "strengthens a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential" (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 3).

### **Theoretical Stance**

All aspects of the professional development team's work documented in this paper are grounded in socio-cultural and constructivist theories of learning and knowledge. Socio-cultural theory assumes that "human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). This assumption frames both how the team understand themselves as learners and knowers, and how they frame engagements with the teachers and school leaders with whom they work.

Our theoretical stance recognizes that the construction of knowledge takes place within a social context where new learning is shaped by prior knowledge and cultural perspectives, and learning, motivation, and personal identity are inextricably intertwined (Shepard, 2000). It assumes knowledge is distributed among individuals who thus co-construct meaning and understanding together as they "interact with one another and with cultural artifacts, such as pictures, texts, discourse, and gestures" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). This interaction results in a personalized form of sense making, and a shared, public understanding of the object, problem, or event. This study is further grounded in the theoretical construct of "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice develop and build common stores of knowledge by interacting around problems, solutions, and insights drawn from their practice which are the "social containers" of competence and the basic building block of social learning systems (Wenger, 2000, p.229).

### **Data Sources**

In keeping with the socio-cultural theoretical underpinning of this study, our merging of self-inquiry and programme evaluation have focused on the co-constructed artifacts that typically emerge from the learning context within which groups collectively construct knowledge and make meaning together. Therefore, in rendering this documentary analysis we have focused on examining the varied artifacts that have been developed over the last year by this team.

This body of evidence includes a set of project "smart tools", documents and notes from team learning activities, individual team member's notes and documents of school-based PLD activities and reflections, required summative milestone reports to the Ministry of Education (which include school pupil testing and assessment data for each participating school), and transcripts from an end-of-year focus group conducted by the external evaluator in December 2012. This set of artifacts provides

a robust and varied evidence-base that illuminates both the context and process of the team's collaborative practice-work in PLD. Our analysis of this data set has been on-going throughout the project, as an aspect of our capacity building orientation to the evaluation.

**Participants: The Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu PLD team**

This Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu PLD team (from here referred to as the Literacy Team or Team) documented in this paper is one of several content-focused teams within a self-managing, for-profit, sub-unit within the university. This unit's sole focus is on the delivery of PLD provision to schools. As part of the current contract with the Ministry, the PLD unit has joined into a consortium arrangement with a similar sub-unit of another university. Thus, the Literacy Team includes three team members who are employees of one university, and six members from the other university. Nevertheless, for the purposes of delivery of the PLD contract, the Team functions as a single unit with shared leadership and shared expectations for delivery of the PLD provision aligned with the Ministry of Education contract. A unique feature of the current contract is the co-mingling of the provision for literacy PLD with that of provision for English Language Learners (ELL). Thus, the Literacy Team has focused extensively on merging their expertise from both of this different "literacy learning" frameworks.

The Team is one of four Literacy PLD providers in New Zealand and won the contract from the Ministry of Education for a three-year period, in 2010. The PLD provided via this contract is delivered to teachers of Years 1 – 8 students in primary, intermediate and area schools, that is schools with students from 5-13 years of age, and either English medium or Māori/English bi-lingual medium teaching-learning contexts. A requirement of the contract is that the work of the team is informed by an independent evaluator.

The Literacy Team's nine members include the two team leaders who are co-authors of this paper. All nine members of the team are former primary teachers who have had extensive teaching experience in schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Each team member was hired by the PLD sub-unit of their respective university in recognition of their experience and expertise. Eight of the team members are women. The Literacy Team in its current membership has been together since the beginning of the 2012 academic school year (January), and this paper focuses on the time period of January 2012 to February 2013. During this time the Literacy Team has been working with 23 schools across the South Island (Te Waipounamu) of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Of these, 14 schools are continuing schools with which the team worked in 2011 during the first year of the Ministry of Education contract. The remaining nine schools were new to the PLD programme as of 2012. These schools represent 268 teachers who are directly involved through their school-based PLD activities. Each of the nine team members, depending on their designated workload, works directly with up to five schools; working collaboratively with the school's principal and literacy

leader to establish a PLD programme tailored to the specific needs of the school and its context.

## **Context of Teaching and Learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Self-managing Schools, Priority Learners, and PLD Provision**

### **Self-managing Schools**

As a result of the *Picot Report* (Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988), in 1989 the New Zealand government instituted a series of educational reforms known as *Tomorrow's Schools*. This included the wide-sweeping shift of financial and administrative control and responsibility to schools as self-governing entities, governed by a school Board of Trustees. The implication of such a change meant that leadership roles within schools became more expansive in the tasks to be undertaken, none more so than for those in principal positions. Traditionally schools had a local education board that carried out many of the administrative tasks, which principals now discovered had become part of their jobs. The role of the principal and the notion of leadership were reframed: "The leadership goal is no longer to develop a vision, build a good school-community relationship, or to manage the school or department efficiently. The new goal requires leaders to do all those things in a manner that improves teaching and learning" (Robinson, 2004, p. 40). Unfortunately it was often the case that as principals grappled with the newer responsibilities of property maintenance, personnel, and finances, some of their emphasis on the core work of teaching and learning was compromised.

The reform agenda also included a variety of taskforces, including one focused on literacy. At the time of the formation of the Literacy Task Force in 1998, some concern was expressed about the imbalance between a focus on learning and a focus on the day-to-day management of a school. Both the literacy taskforce and those responsible for schools moved to redress this balance. From this concern, two key recommendations focused on leadership roles within schools were put forth. The first was that of the Principal's role in leading a school professionally: "...as professional leader, [the Principal] should have a thorough understanding of how learners learn as well as the ways in which the school should be organized and the teachers supported to achieve the best results possible" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 14). The second focus highlighted the importance of the role of the *literacy leader* in a school with respect to raising literacy achievement. The intention was to develop the role of literacy leader who would be:

... a teacher or teachers with expertise in literacy learning having responsibility to provide guidance and support in classrooms as well as in the staff meetings that are part of the regular professional development of teachers. To do this, literacy leaders need a thorough understanding of best practice, including the theoretical ideas that underpin best practice and their evolving status. (Ministry of Education, 1999, pp. 13-14).

Today, most primary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand have at least a nominally designated *literacy leader* who guides the literacy programme and supports teachers with literacy pedagogy and their professional learning within this domain of teaching.

The primary schools in Te Waipounamu (South Island of New Zealand) with whom the Literacy Team work reflect the increasingly diverse nature of New Zealand society with school populations consisting of children from a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and students with special educational needs. These students are identified by the Ministry of Education as “priority learners”, as they are the students who have traditionally underachieved in literacy in New Zealand. These students include Māori students (indigenous/first nations people), Pasifika students, new migrants, and New Zealand born and international students from many language backgrounds.

### **Priority Learners**

Though the landmass of Te Waipounamu is quite large, 58 000 square miles, only 23% of the total NZ population of 4.5 million make their home here. The primary schools in Te Waipounamu are responsible for the education of approximately 94,000 primary students, aged from 5 to 13 years. This includes only 13–14% of the total Māori students in New Zealand; the majority of whom live in the North Island. Another significant population group for Aotearoa/New Zealand are Pasifika people. The term Pasifika is used to describe people living in New Zealand who have migrated from the Pacific Islands or who identify with the Pacific Islands because of ancestry or heritage. This is an ethnically and culturally diverse group of people who represent around 2 – 4% of the New Zealand population. In addition, refugee, migrant, and New Zealand–born students who are from language backgrounds other than English are another important grouping of students who represent the growing cultural and linguistic diversity within primary classrooms. Students with special educational needs are also members of these diverse classroom learning environments in schools. The significant difference of Te Waipounamu to other regions in New Zealand is that these groups of culturally and linguistically diverse students are geographically spread across the South Island. A lack of a ‘critical mass’ and lower numbers of these learners in some schools, places them at particular risk of isolation and invisibility within their school setting.

Clearly, these priority student groups described above are not homogenous; within each of these student groups there is wide diversity as well. Each of these students brings a range of prior knowledge and experiences that contribute to the dynamism of classroom teaching. While it needs to be noted that the majority of these students experience academic success, there does remain a gap in achievement for these priority learners. This increasing student diversity and the continuing persistent tail of achievement has meant that teaching has become increasingly complex, necessitating a wider repertoire of knowledge and skills in order to respond to the wide range of student experiences and English language fluency. It is with this in

mind that the Ministry of Education has established its programme scheme for the provision of PLD to schools across all curriculum areas.

### **PLD Provision**

Though schools are self-managing, many aspects of the education system remain centrally organized via the Ministry of Education. This includes most PLD provision. In the case of literacy, PLD is a centrally funded government resource. In contracting with PLD providers, the Ministry tasks them with improving literacy teaching for all students, particularly for priority student learner groups (Māori, Pasifika, Special Educational Needs students, and English Language Learners). Following the findings and recommendations of the *New Zealand Literacy Taskforce Report* (Ministry of Education, 1999) and Alton-Lee's (2003) *Best Evidence Synthesis for Quality Teaching*, the Ministry of Education's literacy and numeracy strategy focuses on the teacher as the major lever in improving student outcomes. Many of the recommendations of the Taskforce were about creating supports for teachers to improve their capability as literacy teachers. These supports included key documents such as the *Literacy Learning Progressions* (Ministry of Education, 2010). With the most recent policy change requiring schools to identify how students were progressing and achieving against a set of standards, these progressions became the foundation document for the development of the *New Zealand Curriculum Standards* (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Culturally responsive PLD provision is viewed as an important lever for key Ministry of Education outcomes, as it is presumed to best support teachers in developing the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate accelerated learning for priority student groups. Thus, it is expected that such culturally responsive PLD provision will have a demonstrable and positive impact on schools' selected PLD foci, and as a result on student learning. In 2011 the Ministry of Education changed its processes for monitoring of and reporting on PLD provision. This change entailed an articulated intervention logic, or chain of influence, outlining key levers of change in schools, and an explicit evaluative focus which included both Ministry-rating and self-rating of PLD providers' 'performance' against a rubric (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 5). In working with schools, these key levers were identified as critical elements of PLD provider success and included: 1) high quality needs assessment, 2) high quality decisions about the PLD response, and 3) the delivery of highly effective PLD with an impact on variables such as school governance, leadership, classroom teaching and school inquiry and self-review. For each of these identified levers, a series of evaluative questions were put forward to aid providers' self-reflection and monitoring, and reporting. In conjunction with these questions, facilitator practice indicators are delineated within a rubric along a continuum of performance from 'detrimental' to 'highly effective'. Coupled with sound monitoring and evaluation design, the rubrics are posited by the Ministry to allow both themselves and the PLD providers to track up and down the chain of influence and therefore measure the quality and coherence PLD provision.

As a funded Ministry of Education programme, PLD has expected outcomes for schools, leaders, teachers, students, and facilitators. These include: 1) evidence of impact on student achievement for the target groups (priority learners) described above and for all students, 2) evidence on teacher professional practice, 3) evidence on school leader effectiveness, and 4) evidence of effective facilitation (Ministry of Education, 2012). Thus, central to any professional development team working within Aotearoa/New Zealand is the need to focus on working with teachers to enhance their culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogy in ways that better meet the needs of the priority learners. The PLD provision provided by the Literacy Team and documented in this paper has occurred and is situated within the context of this described shift in PLD monitoring and reporting for the Ministry of Education.

### **Crafting a Culturally Responsive Stance for Professional Learning and Development**

It is within this wider context of Aotearoa/New Zealand that the Literacy Team works alongside schools to change the picture of achievement for priority learner groups. This team of PLD facilitators is in a position of privilege, working so closely with students, teachers, school leaders, and communities. They provide the vital role of 'interface' between current research and practice. While it is critical that key research findings from educational research is disseminated effectively to teachers, many unfortunately view the findings of 'academia' as irrelevant and of little value in their day-to-day classroom work. Thus, these literacy and ELL facilitators are an important bridge, supporting teacher understanding by drawing on latest research findings. Acting as a conduit for discussions with a practical or applied focus, facilitators have a key role supporting teachers to connect research ideas and see the relevance to their own practice. Facilitators' work therefore, has an important role in the 'in-between the spaces' of practice and research (Ikas & Wagner, 2008; Ortega, 2009).

In working with the 23 schools, the Literacy Team has developed a PLD framework based on three key components: 1) in-depth engagement with schools, 2) explicit leadership capacity-building for principals and literacy leaders, and 3) focus on student voice and learning evidence as the focus for on-going inquiry into practice. This PLD practice-work has been underpinned with the collaborative development and use of smart tools by the Literacy Team members, as well as the intentional development of their community of practice. Each of these key components and underpinning practices are presented in the following section. This examination of each of these aspects of their practice-work also includes a summative statement of the "key facilitative move" and supporting practices suggested by the data as being instrumental as a "lever of change" for their PLD practice, and the resulting changes in schools.

#### **Literacy Team PLD Framework**

**In-depth engagement: Closely examining literacy practices in schools.**  
Using the appreciative inquiry approach and the theoretical frameworks outlined in

the conceptual framework, each member of the Literacy Team works with their allocated schools in a manner consistent with the new and emerging pedagogy and evidence-based practices in literacy. The Literacy Team has used an in-depth school-based methodology that has at its core the belief that each school will become self-sustaining during the time the facilitator works alongside the school leaders and teachers to bring about improved literacy teaching practice. Therefore the facilitators modeled each aspect of the literacy pedagogy, as well as the PLD practices, and overtly demonstrated and explained the theoretical and research-base for these practices in order to support the school to replicate the practice on their own and to 'normalize' the practice.

The key to improving school outcomes was knowing what was currently going on within the school. This involved the facilitator supporting the school principal, literacy leader, and others to undertake an extensive scoping exercise, or needs assessment, to ascertain the current state of literacy practice. This included looking both wide and deep within the school to develop a picture at a school-wide organizational and leadership level, a school-wide literacy level, and at classroom literacy focused level. With this knowledge the school leadership team and the facilitator co-constructed the collaborative school plan for literacy PLD for the year.

The in-depth engagement is an evidence-based PLD approach. Quantitative data and qualitative information gathered within the school was woven together to provide the greatest insights into what was actually happening in a school and the degree of shifts in literacy practices that were achieved as a result of PLD. The collection, collation, analysis, and interpretation of in-depth data provided information on the patterns of student achievement, teacher pedagogical content knowledge shift, and improved capability of leadership of literacy across schools. The PLD plan developed between facilitators and schools was based on the evidence gleaned at the beginning of PLD and then revised as the PLD proceeded based on the subsequent noticings and happenings.

The PLD foci described above reflect the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) emphasis on teachers as inquirers into their own practice. Inquiry is seen as central to PLD, where there is a focus on difficult aspects of teacher practice and with support teachers seek research based or proven solutions to the aspect identified (Cordingley, 2003; Earl & Katz, 2002; Reid, 2004). Inquiry into practice is considered more likely to address the diverse nature of students today with their diverse needs (Alton-Lee, 2003). It also personalizes the professional learning of each teacher allowing fellow teachers to support each other as they seek ways of responding to their colleague's problems of practice within their learning community.

Burr (1995) notes the importance of the interactions in these communities and suggests that each discourse engaged in provides an opportunity to bring different aspects into focus, raise different issues for discussion, and then influence what is done in response. School based learning communities offer the opportunities for

teachers as learners to change, adapt, or alter their practice by having opportunities to discuss, think about, try out, and hone new practices within their own setting (DuFour, 2004; Guskey 2002; Lieberman, 1995; Stoll & Fink, 1996).

Successful PLD requires differing degrees of change for success and it cannot be assumed that because people have learned something, it will inevitably link to improvement in practice and student outcomes. The degrees of change are described by Elmore (1996); Heifetz and Linsky (2002); Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003); and Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer (2002), in different ways but each outlines similar understandings of change. Change that requires a change in belief, assumptions, and routines of practice is more difficult than making minor changes to practice, but it is those changes in belief that are most likely to bring about sustainable change that will endure over time.

**Key facilitative move.** Placing language, culture, and identity at the centre of all data collection tools, discourse with school staff or individual teachers, data analysis frameworks, and evaluation planning with principals/literacy leaders. This included:

- using an appreciative inquiry framework to support the identification of school strengths to be built on;
- overtly deprivatising facilitator practice to model all aspects of the continuous improvement process—thinking/planning, actions, reflecting, leading critical conversations, and disaggregated data analysis so that explicit parts of facilitator practice becomes school practice;
- using language, culture, and identity as touchstone points for introducing and modeling differentiated instruction/teaching in literacy;
- providing “safe” structures for teachers in schools to deprivatise their practice, and share successes and struggles together, and with principals/literacy leaders;
- co-constructing conversations about planning, demonstrating effective literacy practice as teachers;
- engaging teachers in critical conversations about their beliefs; and
- engaging in evidence-based environmental critique of classrooms and the school environment, coaching principals, literacy leaders and teachers to lead the data collection, analysis and discussion.

**Leadership development in support of principals and literacy leaders.** In the Team’s work as facilitators in a school undertaking this in-depth approach to professional development in literacy, the literacy leader played an important role. This professional development/learning model is based on the premise that the school’s Principal and literacy leader will take responsibility for literacy leadership within the school, both while the facilitator is present and then when they are no longer working with the school. Thus, there was the need to focus the PLD on capacity building as both the Principal, as a leader of literacy, and the designated literacy leader have significant roles to play in sustaining gains that are made during

literacy professional development/learning. The role of the facilitator was to build the skills of the leader so that they can continue the focus on improved student outcomes. Gunter (2001) argues that leadership is not a set of behaviours and tasks but is a relationship with a focus on teaching and learning. This notion motivated the Literacy Team's approach.

Facilitators, principals, and literacy leaders were understood to be partners in the development of new knowledge in this PLD model. Research literature highlights the interdependence of professional development/learning opportunities, professional learning communities, leadership, and literacy learning knowledge. This research suggests that principals and literacy leaders need to have extensive literacy knowledge and leadership skills when supporting their school professional development/learning in literacy. To meet these increasing leadership demands there was a recognized need to build leadership capacity in each school not just at principal level, but at all levels of a school (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

**Key Facilitative Move:** Targeting leadership capability by focusing on leadership development within each school. This included:

- engaging school leadership in supporting PLD processes that strengthen teachers' ability to engage in inquiry into their practice for improvement;
- environmental critique of classrooms and the school environment, coaching principals, literacy leaders, and teachers to lead the data collection, analysis, and discussion;
- overtly deprivatising facilitator practice to model all aspects of the continuous improvement process—thinking/planning, actions, reflecting, leading critical conversations, and disaggregated data analysis so that explicit parts of facilitator practice becomes school practice;
- modeling observations, critical conversations, and a focus on priority learners for principals and literacy leaders; and
- supporting principals and governing boards in more closely linking all aspects of PLD to appraisal (teacher evaluation) systems, induction of new staff, and literacy goals.

**Focusing on students; hearing their voice.** The use of a student focus group as a 'probe' for teachers into their own classroom was used in a systematic manner. The student focus group was considered a touchstone for effectiveness in teaching priority students. Using a focus group engaged teachers in discussions about student achievement for an identified small group of students and enabled discussions about specific, targeted literacy teaching strategies. The exact and explicit nature of the discussions had a positive impact on teachers' literacy content knowledge. It also enabled facilitators to gain greater insight into how well each student was 'known' and how well the identified literacy strategies were encapsulated in the classroom.

A major goal of teaching was the development of student understandings, including their deep knowledge and ideas about literacy. This was especially important to unpack with teacher to know if they were making assumptions about some students, or to assist teachers in coming to better understand students and families with whom they were less familiar or just coming to know. For teachers and facilitators, the use of a student voice interview protocol as one of the smart tools was useful for providing a layer of evidence to support (or possibly contradict) teachers' understandings of what was happening in their classroom from a learner's point of view. The students' responses to the interview tool were indicative of what students perceived to be actually happening in the classroom. In this way, the tool was designed to assist teachers as they reflected on the mismatch of what they believed they were doing/ saying, and what the students subsequently articulated about their learning. Student voice therefore came to be seen by the facilitators as an important tool for initiating discussions with teachers around learning and engagement of priority learners, and to interrogate together the possible roles that language, culture, and identity played in teacher pedagogical decision-making and their underlying assumptions and beliefs about learners.

**Key facilitative move.** Giving high status to student voice as an integral part of the data teachers use to “evaluate” their teaching. This included:

- using student focus groups of priority learners in each classroom to serve as a formal system for teacher self-monitoring of the effects of their pedagogy on student learning, especially any differential effects on priority learner groups;
- modeling observations, critical conversations, and a focus on priority learners;
- a relentless focus on well below and below expectation students and asking teachers for these students to “serve as their conscience”;
- focusing on gathering insights and perspectives of parents/family/whānau in a child's learning;
- collecting and analyzing student voice data;
- providing professional readings and research for use within the PLD; and
- engaging in critical conversations about teachers' beliefs about learners and learning.

### **Developing as a Community of Practice: Co-constructing tools and building collective capacity**

**Evidencing practice-work through smart tools.** The creation of specific learning tools for use with schools has been a key aspect of the in-depth methodology used to shape the professional learning that each school ultimately experienced. A considerable amount of thinking time, as well as time for active co-construction of smart tools, has been built into the on-going work of the Literacy Team. These tools have not been ad hoc creations. Rather, each one incorporates a theory about how the purpose in hand can best be accomplished (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). It has therefore been essential for the Team that they are well designed and that they reflect the team's strong commitment to the key purposes of the PLD.

The Literacy Team has worked hard over the previous two years to refine their approach to in-depth schools and the complement of smart tools has enabled deep knowledge generation about each school at a school-wide cultural level, a school-wide literacy level, and at a classroom focused level. The tools have been developed to assist both facilitators and schools to gain a complete overview of literacy learning in the school, identifying the strengths and needs of those within the school. The tools include information on student engagement, achievement and self-regulation, teacher practice, leader practice, family/whānau engagement, school systems and processes, and the schools cultural, linguistic, and inclusiveness. They also include explicit attention on data gathering from students and family voices.

The evidence from our data indicate that this comprehensive set of tools has been instrumental to the PLD practice, as it positively affects the teachers understanding of key messages and outcomes expected as a result of the literacy PLD. The tools particularly have supported the focus on language, culture, and identity and brought this to the fore of the literacy PLD practice-work. Team reflections on, and discussions of, the smart tools and the resulting ongoing changes made continued throughout the PLD process in order to increasingly capture the knowledge of the cultural, linguistic, and inclusiveness of a school. As PLD facilitators, the team members have been adept at using the appropriate tools to support gathering information that will be useful in identifying what the PLD plan will need to include in order to be responsive to student needs. This means they were able to make deliberate choices as to which tools would be most useful in gathering information within a given school context. Using these tools as part of an appreciative inquiry approach assisted the schools in identifying their existing strengths and allowed them to consider how to use and sometimes redirect these strengths to address identified needs or gaps, or as supports for learning new practices.

The tools have also been a critical factor in ensuring the consistency of facilitator practice and for deprivatising the way each member of the team works in her/his school. A particularly salient area of need within the Team was around their engagement with teachers in focusing on priority learners, and addressing student learning needs from a framework of language, culture, and identity. For some teachers who have always been in the position of privilege there was often push back against these foci. The ongoing discussion of the tools and sharing the different ways that team members used them helped individual facilitators to recognize their needed to build their own capacity to manage these difficult conversations with teachers around their often deficit theorizing of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Finally, the tools also provided evidence of each facilitator's reflection process and the generating of 'theory' that supported the identification and analysis of patterns and trends in their own data and evidence of their PLD practice. In this way, they served as learning scaffolds for the development of facilitator knowledge and skills in PLD practice-work.

**Collective capacity building.** Over the course of the year the Literacy Team continued to develop as a community of practice. The team met regularly with the external evaluator. These meetings essentially provided a forum for team members to discuss what they were seeing, hearing, and thinking about in their work in schools. They presented their puzzles and problems of practice, as well as shared their successes and innovations. It is from this deprivatization of practice that facilitators gained greater understanding of the contexts they were working in, how many of these contexts were similar, and how the sharing of experiences provided insights into how a facilitator may meet future challenges by using the experiences of others.

The importance of team meetings cannot be understated when looking for consistency across a team of facilitators spread geographically across the entire area of Te Waipounamu (South Island). The team meetings contributed to a shared understanding of the evidence-base each school gleaned from student achievement information and student engagement across schools. These discussions also allowed team members to see how the range of smart tools were being used and to generate a collective theory of action behind the use of each tool, and how it fit into the team's PLD model. This ongoing dialogue and feedback loop served as a form of validity-checking and moderation process which increased the consistency of implementation of their PLD framework, even as it also supported their skill at contextualizing that framework to meet the specific and unique needs of the various schools with which they were working.

During these regular team meetings members also prepared for the milestone reporting requirements of the contract for submission to the Ministry. This involved making summative, evidence-based judgments for each school in relation to the Ministry of Education rubric of implementation of quality PLD. This moderation process supported facilitators not to focus on schools as single cases, but to look collectively across all their schools for patterns in terms of strengths and gaps in literacy practices and identify the next steps needed for PLD. This cross-school focus also supported the team members as individuals and as a group to identify their strengths as facilitators as well as their own needs for professional learning.

Another key facet of this work that supported facilitator knowledge development was the direct engagement with the evaluation process of the contract. This involved co-constructing focus questions and then systematically seeking to answer these questions about the impact of their facilitator practice on those they work with and the implications of this learning for the team as a whole. It is from this close analysis of what was happening and looking at the effects on teachers and students that the team's processes and actions were strengthened around supporting schools to have more equitable outcomes for priority learner groups.

**Effecting change.** The Literacy Team delivers high quality PLD that includes strong pedagogical and content knowledge and is closely matched to the needs of the school. This means it is not a routine 'colour by numbers' approach but a well

designed and skilled approach to build schools' capability to self review and identify their own needs and solutions. The positive outcome of these efforts is evidenced in the student achievement results at the end of 2012. Across the 23 schools with which this Literacy Team worked using the in-depth methodology outlined here, there were significant gains made by students in all of the priority learning areas. Moreover, Māori and Pasifika student achievement accelerated at a greater rate than for any other group of students within the schools.

### **Lessons Learned: What does it mean to be Culturally Responsive in the provision of Professional Learning and Development (PLD)?**

The Literacy/ELL PLD team documented in this case made a concerted effort to take a collaborative inquiry and development approach to both their own learning, and the PLD programme they provided for the schools with which they worked. During the twelve months of their collaborative work, they focused explicitly on developing amongst themselves a climate of shared learning which was built on the same twin foundations of professional development with which they engaged schools: 1) an appreciative inquiry stance, and 2) deprivatising practice. Within the team members there were varying levels of experience and expertise with respect to both the knowledge and practice of culturally responsive teaching, as well as with respect to quality indicators of professional learning and development. Moreover, they were all equally new in taking up the challenge presented by the Ministry of Education's directive to develop and deliver a programme of culturally responsive PLD.

Using an appreciative inquiry stance within the team has allowed them to in essence, conduct their own needs assessment by first identifying their existing individual and collective knowledge and skills related to PLD programme design and delivery. Having identified their strengths, they were then able to leverage these areas of expertise as entry points for learning and developing new knowledge and extending their repertoire of practices. A key support for the learning within the team was their regular attention to deprivatising their own PLD practices they were using with schools. One facet of this deprivatising took the form of sharing their individual areas of expertise. Through their sharing of the problems and successes of practice, they continued to refine both their tools and their overall repertoire of practices and engagement strategies for the literacy PLD they were providing to schools.

The use of an appreciative inquiry stance and the deprivatisation of practice were clearly important foundations for the team members in enhancing their individual and collective PLD practices. However, while these were two important learning processes for the team, as learning frameworks they do not in and of themselves lead to the enhancement of culturally responsive practices. Therefore, what has been most critical in this PLD process has been the content /knowledge around which they grappled in regard to the use of these learning frameworks. Placing language, culture, and identity squarely at the centre of all aspects of the PLD team practice-work provided a consistent and critical lens for challenging their

assumptions about teaching, learning, literacy, and PLD practice more broadly. It was this consistent theme, or as the Team came to call it, the “relentless focus”, on language, culture, and identity that was the critical lever of change.

While our self-study and evaluation processes continue, stepping back and taking stock of the Literacy Team’s practice-work has illuminated a number of initial lessons regarding the development of a culturally responsive PLD framework. These include:

- Uncovering self and unpacking assumptions.
  - Placing language, culture, and identity squarely at the centre of all aspects of the PLD team practice-work has provided a consistent and critical lens for challenging our assumptions about teaching, learning, literacy, and PLD practice.
  - Changing one’s PLD practice, or even the perspective towards one’s own practice, requires ongoing and explicit critical reflection on one’s self as a socio-cultural being.
- Appreciative inquiry.
  - The use of an appreciative inquiry approach to the PLD work of the team and with the schools and teachers has been a critically important framework for engendering change.
  - This approach is a model for teachers of “strengths-based” learning, and supports their transference of similar literacy pedagogical strategies to their work with students.
- Shared tools and dialogue.
  - The co-construction and on-going revision of PLD materials and tools within the project has been instrumental in re-centering the work on culturally responsive practice.
  - Placing language, culture, and identity at the centre of the PLD work with schools and teachers has required the team members to “become comfortable with leading and engaging in uncomfortable conversations.”
- Evaluation capacity development.
  - The interweaving of multiple theoretical frameworks of evaluation and self-inquiry has led to an empowerment-oriented focus within the team, engendering evaluation competence that builds organizational capacity for continuous improvement and evidence-based practice.

By positioning the findings from our inquiry in the extant literature in culturally responsive teaching, we identified a number of commonalities that appear to be salient across the various learning contexts of classrooms and PLD. These include: gaining sociocultural consciousness; developing an affirming attitude toward learners and their diverse backgrounds; developing the commitment and skills to act as agents of change (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995); using pedagogical practices, learning activities and participatory structures that support the development of a learning community (Alton-Lee, 2003; Fickel et al., 2011); and a central focus on strong norms of “achievement” and capacity-building (Alton-Lee, 2003; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

## **Final Thoughts**

Much has been written about the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching in classrooms with P-12 students and there has been growing attention paid to the preparation of preservice and inservice teachers to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Yet, there has been little that extends the dialogue to a similar examination of the necessary characteristics and learning needs of the education professionals who facilitate the learning of teachers. Further investigation into the development of culturally responsive practice among educators in the professional learning and development sector of the system can provide important understandings and implications for action with respect to closing the persistent achievement gap for diverse students and youth.

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