Inquiring into PLD Facilitator Practice to support Culturally Responsive Literacy Pedagogy

A Research Paper in response to MOE Milestone Reporting Requirements.

Prepared in collaboration with the
Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu PLD Team by

Professor Letitia Fickel, Ed.D
External Evaluator
Professor and Head of School, School of Teacher Education
University of Canterbury

Christine Henderson M.TchLn
Literacy/ELL Team Leader
Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu
National Leader: Accelerating Learning in Literacy
UC Education Plus
University of Canterbury

Gaylene Price M.TchLn
ELL Leader
Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu
National Leader: Accelerating Learning in Literacy
UC Education Plus
University of Canterbury

January 2015

Abstract

This paper presents a documentary account of one aspect of the PLD programme being implemented by the Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu PLD Team. The Team's ongoing inquiry, research and evaluation processes identified appreciative inquiry and 'smart tools' as "high leverage acts" within the PLD programme. We focus here on a particular 'slice' of this ongoing embedded inquiry, namely the use and impact of the "Focus Student Protocol" as a PLD innovation. The protocol is used within the Teaching as Inquiry process that underpins the PLD programme. Through this account we highlight the positive outcomes of this approach for both teachers and students.

Introduction

This paper presents a documentary account of one aspect of the in-depth literacy PLD support being implemented by the Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu PLD Team. This group of PLD facilitators works as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) within which the ongoing programme evaluation and research is conceptualised as iterative cycles of inquiry, which are embedded and woven into the regular pattern of the Team's PLD work. An external evaluator is also a member of the community of practice, serving to support the team to increase their evaluation capacity in support of continual improvement of PLD practices and programmes.

By being engaged in ongoing inquiry, research and evaluation the Team seeks to contribute to the praxis that enables the opening of the "black box" between acts of PLD facilitation, associated teacher learning, and student outcomes (Timperley, et.al., 2007). The overarching focus of the Team's inquiry has been to examine what it means to place identity, language and culture at the centre of PLD in literacy. What is presented in this documentary account is a particular 'slice' of this ongoing embedded inquiry focused specifically on the use and impact of a team generated 'smart tool' as a PLD innovation.

Situating the Inquiry: Literacy Language Learning Te Waipounamu PLD Team

In the New Zealand policy context the focus of the Literacy Team has been to work alongside schools to change the picture of achievement for priority learner groups i.e. Māori, Pasifika and Students with Special Educational Needs. They provide the vital role of 'interface' between current research and practice. These literacy/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 response to this context, the Literacy Team has developed an in-depth literacy 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 student agency and learning evidence as the focus for on-going inquiry into practice.

The Team's PLD framework has been informed by an appreciative inquiry approach. Such an approach is grounded in the assumption 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). In this way, the Literacy Team has sought to identify and increase the use of existing practices within the schools as leverages for enhancing and further developing culturally responsive practices in literacy.

Another key aspect of the Team's PLD practice-work has been the collaborative development and use of 'smart tools' by the Literacy Team members. As described by Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd

(2009) '**smart tools**' are tools and routines that are well designed and based on sound evidence-based theories. Over the course of the last three years, the Literacy Team has co-constructed and collaboratively refined through use and feedback with schools, a set of 'smart tools' in response to the varied context, strengths and needs of the schools' with regard to their leadership, literacy and culturally responsive practices. These 'smart tools' are embedded into and woven through all aspects of the facilitator practice.

The Reflective Turn: Co-construction of a "Strengths-based PLD Framework" and Iterative Cycles of Inquiry

The Team's ongoing inquiry, research and evaluation processes identified appreciative inquiry and 'smart tools' as "high leverage ways of working" within the PLD programme. These were identified as "high leverage" in that they were aspects of the PLD programme that appeared to be particularly salient and powerful in the development of leadership and pedagogical capacity-building to support changes in literacy practices (see Fickel, Henderson & Price, 2013). These two aspects appear to have been the critical supports in the co-construction with schools of PLD support that was contextually sensitive and culturally responsive to the varying needs and existing strengths of the teachers and their priority learners. Thus, the cojoining of appreciative inquiry and 'smart tools' has resulted in the development of a practice-based, research-informed "Strengths-based PLD Framework" that has demonstrated its effectiveness in engaging schools and teachers in promoting collective and individual inquiry into practice that leads to pedagogical change and enhanced student outcomes.

One smart tool in particular, the "Focus Students Protocol" had emerged as a key facilitative tool for centering students' identity, language and culture at the core of the literacy PLD. The "Focus Student Protocol" is a scaffolded template that supports teachers to operationalise the *Teaching as Inquiry* model of the New Zealand Curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007) through a targeted focus on priority learners. On the 'smart tool' template, the protocol is described for teachers as follows:

Figure 1: Excerpt from the Focus Student Protocol

This inquiry document will be used throughout the year as a tool to monitor and target named students. Evidence to support this will include: conversations; observations; data; and student voice.

Please record evidence relating to students'

✓ identity, language and culture

✓ accelerated progress

✓ leading their own learning

✓ self regulation

Within this Focus group of students achieving Below / Well Below curriculum expectation where applicable include a sample

Using the "Focus Student Protocol" the teachers are asked to identify up to 4 students they will 'focus on' more systematically through the year in relation to the inquiry into their literacy practices. The Literacy Team's theory of action in using this protocol was that by looking more closely at a small sub-group of priority learners, the teachers would gain clearer insight into both the needs and strengths of these students, and be able to identify specific pedagogical strategies or learning activities that would best support their learning. In this way it also served as a touchstone for considering the diverse learning needs that would support all students in the classroom. Thus, using the focus students as the anchor for their inquiry, the teachers are better positioned to regularly turn a critical lens on the impact of their current practices on student learning as related to specific students' learning strengths and needs, and therefore make more targeted changes or refinements to their repertoire of literacy practices in response to this group of learners.

This past year has been focused on a more systematic approach to implementation of the tool across the team, to support the team in investigating the use of this smart tool within the PLD context with a new set of teachers and schools. In 2014 as in the previous two years, the Literacy Team used a "Strengths-based PLD Framework", using the "Focus Student Protocol" to anchor the team's ongoing collaborative inquiry into their facilitator practice.

The overarching question for this phase of the Team's inquiry, research and evaluation was:

What are the impact and implications of a "Strengths-based PLD Framework"?

A set of five secondary questions guided the inquiry. However, for the purposes of the documentary analysis presented in this paper, the focus has been limited to a consideration of two of these secondary questions: 1) What is the impact of the use of "Focus Student Protocol" in relation to teacher thinking, decision-making and teaching practice?; and 2) What are the outcomes for focus students in these teachers' classrooms?

Methodology

The on-going PLD programme inquiry, research and evaluation has been 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 has been 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.

Inquiry Process

In conducting this inquiry, each Literacy Team Facilitator implemented the following inquiry methodology:

1. Implemented the "Strengths-based PLD Framework" with all of their schools, including the use of the "Focus Student Protocol" with all teachers.
2. In accordance with the University of Canterbury ethical research guidelines, the facilitators invited all teachers to participate in the formal research associated with this study. From this invitation, each facilitator was able to identify 2-4 focus teachers either within one of the in-depth schools with which they worked, or with several teachers from across their respective schools.
3. The facilitators conducted initial observations of each of the focus teachers as part of the needs assessment process for developing a PLD programme in support of evidence-based, culturally responsive literacy practices.

4. Using the Literacy Team's "Effective Classroom Practice in Literacy" document, each of the focus teachers was then identified by the facilitator as either high, medium or low in implementation.
5. Throughout the year, the facilitators regularly and systematically used the "Focus Student Protocol" to engage the focus teachers in carefully examining the impact and implications of the use of this protocol to support priority learners.
6. The facilitators specifically documented their engagement with the focus teachers, as well as continued documenting their PLD practices with all schools and teachers using the established processes and protocols. This provided a wider context for the examination of the data from the "focus teachers" with regard to changes and shifts in practice.
7. Discussion of the "Focus Teachers" learning and development was a regular point of discussion and debriefing at the PLD team meetings.

Focus Teacher Participants & School Contexts

The 11 facilitators worked with a total of 37 teachers across 12 different schools. The majority of facilitators (10 of 11) worked only with a group of teachers at a single in-depth school. One facilitator had two teachers at two different schools. Only eight of the 37 participating teachers were men, and all but five of the teachers held permanent continuing teaching roles. They ranged in experience from 4 provisionally registered teachers or first/second year teachers to nine teachers with more than 20 years of experience. Within that range, 16 had between 3-10 years experience, and the remaining eight had 11-20 years in the classroom. Each of the focus teachers selected between 2-4 priority learners to serve as focus students for their inquiry, resulting in a total of 137 students. However, during the course of the year two students moved from their school leaving a final total of 135 focus students in the data set for analysis.

The schools within which these teachers worked included both high and low decile schools, including eight schools that were at decile 5 or below. The other four schools were either decile 7 or 8. Four of the 12 schools were continuing from previous years, and eight were schools new to the in-depth literacy PLD model.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data for this focused inquiry was completed in three iterative phases. Each facilitator analysed the data documented from their PLD practices with the focus teachers in order to develop individual case studies of each focus teacher and their use of the "Focus Student Protocol." As part of this round of data analysis, the facilitators also rendered an overall judgment for each focus teacher regarding their end of year level of implementation of effective literacy practices. The rating scale was the same as initial scale of three levels: high, medium or low implementation. Within these case studies the facilitators were also asked to theorise on the relationship of their facilitation practices to the teacher's learning and development, and priority student learning. In completing their individual focus teacher case studies, the Literacy Team facilitators drew from a variety of data sources including: 1) their journals and PLD practice logs, 2) focus teacher documentation from and feedback on the use of the "Focus Student Protocol", 3) evidence from implementation of other classroom-based 'smart tools'.

At the final team meeting for the year, the external evaluator then supported the Literacy Team in a final round of data analysis. This included having each facilitator complete a secondary analysis of the findings across their individual focus teacher case studies, in order to create a synthesising case study of their PLD facilitator practice.

Each of the facilitators provided the external evaluator with both their individual teacher case studies, and their synthesising case study of their PLD practice. The external evaluator then compiled the summarised data related to focus teacher changes in practice, and analysed the synthesising

cases as a single data set. This allowed for the identification of key learnings to emerge from the data for a summative cross-case analysis of teacher learning and practice and student outcomes in relation to the use of the "Focus Student Protocol".

Surveying the Landscape of Teacher Learning

The findings presented here concentrate on exploring the relationship of the use of the Focus Student Protocol to elicit changes in teacher literacy practices, with a corresponding consideration of the resulting literacy outcomes for the focus students. While acknowledging the Literacy Team's collective interest in seeking to understand the relationship of this chain of influence, we are also mindful that in doing so there is no intention to put forward causal claims. Rather, as noted previously, the Team's inquiry focus is to further explore and deepen our understanding of the "black box" between acts of PLD facilitation, associated teacher learning, and student outcomes (Timperley, et.al., 2007).

The summative findings related to the two guiding questions underpinning this paper are presented as two perspectives on the landscape of teacher learning. The first perspective provides the terrain and landscape of teacher learning through engagement with the Focus Student Protocol, within the Strengths-based PLD Framework. The second perspective focuses on the literacy learning outcomes for students as markers of change and enhancement within the teachers practice terrain.

Expanding the terrain of literacy practice

Within the Assets-based PLD Framework the facilitators made the use of the Focus Student Protocol a "non-negotiable." All of the in-depth schools, and thus all of the teachers, used this protocol in a variety of ways to support them in maintaining focus and urgency on accelerating student literacy learning. For the focus groups of teachers, the more detailed data gathered by facilitators helps us paint a more nuanced and detailed landscape of teacher learning. From this data, the Focus Student Protocol appears to have been a key leverage point for engaging these teachers in examining their thinking and decision-making in ways that for most of them ultimately resulted in significant changes in their literacy practices.

As a key lever of teacher learning, the facilitators noted that the Focus Student Tool served as a scaffold for 'teaching as inquiry' by more closely considering their classroom literacy practice as a context for their ongoing professional learning and resulting changes in pedagogy. In this way the protocol assisted teachers in deepening their understanding about literacy practice and what worked for their students, as well as enabling them to gain a more robust understanding of 'teaching as inquiry' as an ongoing platform for their professional learning. Moreover, for nearly all the teachers, the use of the tool within the inquiry process seemed to be a key lever for change to a more responsive and learner-centred consideration of the effect of teacher decision-making and action on student engagement and learning. This is evidenced in the teachers' perceptions collected in their conversations with the facilitators. Teachers talked about how the use of the protocol had helped them "dig deeper" into their practice, helped them "make critical decisions," and served as a "way to prompt good self-review." As one teacher summed up:

> 'Using the teaching as inquiry model and the relating sheet [Focus Student Protocol] was truly beneficial. It helped me really pinpoint teacher actions- it was a constant reminder/check in to ensure my focus was relevant. Using the sheet also helped all of my students because what worked for my focus students enhanced the level of writing across the class immensely.' (JP)

The teachers clearly saw this "smart tool" as an important aspect of their professional learning journey in the PLD programme. This teacher perception of the value of this tool in supporting their learning, was further evidenced in the observational data collected by the facilitators. At the beginning of the PLD support, each facilitator gathered classroom observations and used interviews

in order to sketch an initial sense of the terrain of their practice. As indicated in the methodology section, the facilitators then used this data in conjunction with the Team's 'Effective Classroom Practice in Literacy' document to map the initial terrain of teachers literacy practices. Through this process they both identified areas of strength to build on, and areas of need in their professional learning. These identified teacher needs and strengths were incorporated in the whole-school PLD plans that were subsequently co-constructed with the wider school community.

The focus teachers and facilitators then collaborated through the year on the engagement in the PLD programme, as well as additional observations and discussions related to the Focus Student Protocol. At the end of the year the facilitators drew on the documentation from these ongoing interactions to again map the teachers' practice in relation to effective literacy practices. In this way they were able to provide an overall judgment of where the teacher started on this journey, and where they arrived. Across the year, the Literacy Team was able to identify significant shifts in teacher literacy practice. These shifts are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Shifts in Teachers' Levels of Implementation of Effective Literacy Practices

Level of Implementation of Effective Literacy Practices	*Beginning of PLD* *N=37*	*End of PLD* *N=37*
Low	13	3
Medium	20	15
High	4	19

All of these shifts in the use of effective literacy practice related to the PLD were demonstrated by teachers moving to the next level of implementation; that is either moving from low level implementation to medium level, or medium to high. No teachers showed dramatic shifts from low to high. There were, however, three teachers who remained at low levels of implementation at the end of PLD. The four teachers who demonstrated high levels of implementation at the outset, continued to maintain a high level of effective teaching throughout. Just as their own self-reflections suggested, this data indicates that the overwhelming majority of the focus teachers demonstrated enhancement of their pedagogical repertoire in literacy. Moreover, the data also revealed positive changes in other aspects of teacher practice. In looking more closely at the specific changes identified by the facilitators, key shifts in teacher literacy practices included:

- Increased explicitness and deliberate acts of teaching
- enhanced knowing about the student and knowledge of student's identity, language and culture, and increased perceived value as a strength to learning
- taking more time to share student's work with family/whānau and having ongoing conversations with whānau
- using a range of scaffold and frameworks with increased confidence and differentiating to meet different learner needs
- increased skill at monitoring student learning, and used this as evidence to judge effectiveness of their own teaching practice
- provided increasing opportunities for students to actively participate in decision making about the classroom reading/writing programme
- chose learning intentions based on identified student need using evidence and explicitly shared these with learners
- provided more explicit and detailed feedback and increased use of exemplars
- conversations in group settings supported deprivatising teacher practice
- shared ownership of all students.

The facilitators also noted a shift in teacher confidence and willingness to try new ideas, as well as increased sense of urgency in addressing the needs of priority learners. They also noted an expanded willingness to examine student data and assessments with colleagues, and to shared "problems of practice" with others.

Student Literacy Learning Outcomes: Markers on the landscape

The "Focus Student Protocol" served as a valuable lever of change, and scaffold for teachers' learning. It supported them in being more explicit in their consideration of specific student learning strengths and needs that fostered more deliberate acts of literacy teaching. As they engaged more consistently with effective literacy practices, and increased their ability to draw on student's culturally-based knowledge, the literacy outcomes for their students were similarly enhanced. The data suggests that these enhanced outcomes were attained both with respect to attainment of NZC National Reading and Writing Standards, and in relation to student engagement and agency.

As part of the in-depth literacy PLD, the schools and teachers were supported in gathering evidence of initial student literacy attainment using a range of information and including assessment tools. This resulted in teachers then being able to identify students who were At, Below, or Well Below the NZ Curriculum National Standard (NS) for their year level. These measures were then undertaken again at the end of the school year. The summary of these data of student learning grown is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Changes in Overall Teacher Judgments of Student Literacy Levels

Overall Teacher Judgment of Focus Student Literacy Level	Beginning of PLD N=135	End of PLD N=135
Well Below	44	23
Below	89	37
At (fragile at this level)	3	75

The summary data indicates that these focus students, taken as a whole, made important learning gains across the year. More than half of the students were able to make accelerated literacy gains and attain year level standard. Of the 75 students who were identified as being At Standard at the end or the year, 70 had shifted from Below Standard, while a small group of five students actually moved from Well Below to being At the National Standard. The other three students maintained their steady progress of learning, and remained At the National Standard throughout. There were 16 students who shifted from the Well Below to Below category, again showing accelerated gains in their literacy learning. There appeared to be only a small shift of students out of the Well-below category, however a more fine-grained examination of the individual student data gathered through the Focus Student Protocol showed a different picture. Looking more closely at the various levels of Well-Below, 15 of these 23 students actually made accelerated gains within this category. This meant that a Year 6 student may have shifted from a Well-Below best fit year level of 'after two years at school' to a best fit year level of 'by the end of year 4'. This indicates a shift of two years achievement, however a student may still remain in the Well-Below category. While this acceleration may not have achieved the third definition of acceleration of reaching the benchmark of their Year 5 peers, the student has made considerable progress at this point in time.

Along with the acceleration of literacy learning achievement, the teachers and facilitators documented a range of other positive outcomes for the students. The most common expression of this change was a sense of "increased student agency" and "positive views of self as a learner."

Across the case studies developed by the facilitators, a number of observed student behaviours stood out as common, positive changes signalling increased engagement in learning. These included:

- demonstrated increased independence and agency across all learning
- used models (writing) from the classroom to support their learning
- revising their own text and making changes where needed
- the ability to talk about what they have learnt, how well they're achieving and their next learning steps
- responding to teacher feedback for learning and acting on this
- sharing their progress/attitudinal shift with family whānau
- increased confidence evident in using literacy knowledge in other areas of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Over the course of the last three years, the Literacy Team's ongoing inquiry, research and evaluation processes supported the identification of a number of "high leverage" PLD strategies, appreciative inquiry and 'smart tools.' The Team wove these together to craft the "Assets-based PLD Framework" that now supports their engagement with their in-depth schools. This documentary analysis has presented a "slice" of this PLD work by focusing on how a particular 'smart tool', the "Focus Student Protocol" that had emerged previously as a key facilitative tool for centering students' identity, language and culture at the core of the literacy PLD.

This in-depth examination of the facilitators' engagement of teachers has further illuminated the ways that this tool has supported teacher learning. The resulting changes in teacher practice have been evidenced through the cross-case analysis of facilitator practice, and highlight the strength of this protocol to deepen teacher inquiry and increase their ability to draw on student identity, language and culture as assets and supports for literacy learning. Further, the inquiry has illuminated the chain of influence from the changes in teacher practice to enhanced learning outcomes for students. By doing so, the lid has been lifted just that much more on the "black box" of PLD.

References

Billings, D. M., & Kowalski, K. (2008). Appreciative inquiry. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing, 39*(3), 104.

Bushe, G. R. (1998). Appreciative inquiry in teams. *The Organization Development Journal, 16*(3), 41-50.

Cooperrider, D. & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco, CA, USA: Berrett-Koehler Publisher.

Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (1998). Framing participatory evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, *80*, 5–23.

Fetterman, D. & Wandersman, A. (Eds.) (2005). *Empowerment evaluation principles in practice.* New York, NY, USA: Guilford Press.

Fickel, L.H., Henderson, C. and Price, G. (2013) *Centering Language, Culture and Identity at the Nexus of Professional Learning and Practice.* San Francisco, CA, USA: American Education Research Association Annual Meeting (AERA), 27 Apr-1 May 2013.

Ikas, K. & Wagner, G. (Eds.) (2008). *Communicating in the third space*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.

Noffke, S. & Somekh, B. (2005). Action research. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.). *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 89-96). London, UK: Sage Publishing.

Patton, M. (2008) *Utilization-focused evaluation*: *The new century text* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publishing.

Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why: Best evidence synthesis iteration.* Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development: Best evidence synthesis iteration.* Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education. Retrieved from: http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/15341

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker,9*(5), 1-8. Retrieved from http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml

Whyte, W. F. (Ed.) (1991). *Participatory action research*. Newbury Park, CA, USA: Sage Publishing.