

Students' Voices and Professional Learning Communities: A Creative Intersection in an Elementary Mathematics Classroom

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"Ha! Looks like we're going to be teachers today." These words, from a Grade 5 math student as he entered our classroom, set a path to approach mathematics assessment and instruction through a PLC framework. His comment, and my response to it, created a pivotal moment and a creative approach to knowledge building and the work of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for my students and me.

Following a disappointing performance on a district-wide assessment, our school-based Grade 5 math teaching team and district math mentor co-created a 10-item assessment tool based on the outcomes in the Grade 5 math curriculum in an effort to impact our students' mathematical achievement. Initially, this assessment tool and the work that would occur around it was focused on the students' academic achievement. The plan was to administer, and re-administer, the assessment (different aspects of the questions but maintaining the question outcome) as a formative tool for the teachers to analyze and use to plan for our instruction until the students' success rate with the questions was satisfactory. Upon the students' achievement of a satisfactory level, we planned to then move on to further assessments focused on other outcomes. What originated as a teacher-driven plan of action developed into a teacher and student co-driven action plan and what I observed was an improvement in student achievement, as Linda Lambert (1998) "broadly conceived" (p. 23) it to encompass

"academic achievement, positive involvement and resiliency" (p. 23).

On the day that my student wondered if he and his classmates were going to be teachers, the students had entered our classroom where Table 1, which noted their achievement following the first completed assessment, was projected onto the Smartboard. The shaded rectangles indicated correct responses to questions and hatched rectangles indicated incorrect responses.

Table 1

Student:	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
A	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
B	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
C	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
D	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
E	Hatched	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
F	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
G	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
H	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
I	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
J	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
K	Shaded	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded
L	Shaded	Hatched	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded	Shaded

My instructional objective behind displaying the table for the students went no further than to have us collectively observe the initial results. We later go back to this table to see improvement at a later date once further instructional and learning work had been accomplished. What actually transpired, based on the student’s comment and an intuitive pedagogical decision made around that moment, was a conversation which involved engaging my students in analyzing their results in much the same manner as

my teacher colleagues and I had done while participating in numerous collegial conversations during our weekly PLC meetings.

Riveros, Newton, and Burgess (2012) noted that “the professional learning communities approach to school improvement is arguably the most ubiquitous strategy currently used in Canada” (p. 205) with each Ministry of Education in the country referencing the concept in their policy documents. The work of DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) has figured prominently in the establishment of PLCs. The big ideas and key questions (pp. 32 – 39) they outlined guided the work our school engaged. In particular, the big ideas listed below and the three key questions associated with the first big idea formed the basis for the conversation that evolved on that February day between myself and my students:

Big idea #1. Ensuring That Students Learn

Key question #1. What do we want each student to learn?

Key question #2. How will we know when each student has learned it?

Key question #3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

Big Idea #2. A Culture of Collaboration

Big Idea #3. A Focus on Results

Over those winter days, the students and I examined the data which I had compiled (Table 1) to see where improvement was needed. We co-constructed plans, prioritized the areas to be addressed, decided how we would address these areas, followed these plans, reassessed, supported and encouraged one another, and analyzed the data repeatedly over a six-week period. A succession of five tables, each with data that depicted improved academic achievement, was created and utilized. Our final table

(Table 2) was the source of celebration as it depicted unprecedented growth for our class.

Table 2

Student:	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
A										
B										
C										
D										
E										
F										
G										
H										
I										
J										
K										
L										

While the students’ academic achievement with the outcomes was worthy of celebration, it is the recollection of the many moments of students encouraging one another, their resiliency and their engagement with working to impact the achievement of the class that continue to resonate with met. There was greater autonomy with the assessments as a result of the students having a voice in processes surrounding them and an energy for achievement that had not been a part of our class previously became the new norm. Perhaps this was in part generated in much the same manner as Mitchell and Sackney (2016) noted in their study of 15 high performing schools where: “As teachers moved forward in a spirit of pedagogic experimentation and flexibility, the students caught the innovative spirit and their learning was energized” (p. 863).

Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) cautioned that the professionals within the school cannot “go it alone” (p. 240) with PLCs and cite the success of including partnerships with “parents, governing bodies, their district, local community members, social services agencies, psychological services, businesses and industry” (p. 241). Despite their acknowledgement of the potential of including others, beyond teachers, within the work of a PLC, and earlier work in which Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, and Wallace (2005) noted a promising direction for PLC where the “important aspect of PLC membership - namely pupil voice” (p. 149) which was touched on in their project and suggested as an “aspect [to] be included in future thinking and practice about the membership and operation of PLCs” (p. 149), there appears to be a gap in PLC literature regarding the inclusion of students’ voices. How might contesting this power differential offer possibilities to strengthening the work of a PLC?

The concept that consulting with students requires further endorsement or encouragement is perhaps a bit perplexing. Among others, Lansdown (2004), Tangen (2008), Schiller and Einarsdottir (2009), Hayward (2013), and Horgan (2016) remind me that in 1989, the year following my entry into the teaching profession, there was a significant benchmark in the framing of childhood with the adoption of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). In particular, the first component of Article 12 addresses the topic of voice:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with

the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations, 1989).

On December 13th, 1991, Canada ratified the Convention affirming parents' and government agencies' roles in administering children's rights under this document. In response to the question of why there is a need for children to have separate rights, United Nations Children's Fund Canada (UNICEF Canada, 2017) noted children's vulnerability, reliance on the adults in their lives, their exclusion from voting and stated that: "Without special attention to children in decisions affecting them, there is a risk that the impacts on children will be harmful."

"I'm big - you're little. I'm right - you're wrong. I'm old - you're young and there's nothing you can do about it." Lansdown (2004) cited these harsh words uttered by a father (actor Danny DeVito) to his five-year-old daughter (actress Mara Wilson) in the movie version of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and noted that his perspective "encapsulates, albeit somewhat brutishly, assumptions held about the status and capacities of young children" (p. 4). The view that adults, by virtue of their age and experience, hold the authority even on those matters that most significantly impact children is one which has context in power relations within educational facilities such as elementary schools.

However, researchers such as Barker and Weller (2003), MacNaughton, Hughes, and Smith (2007, 2008), and Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) have noted a paradigm shift which began in the 1990s. The shift they outlined was one in which children's competencies, as capable social actors who have the ability to contribute to our social world, began to take hold. Holloway and Valentine (2000), Lansdown (2004), and Tangen (2008), among others, discuss the notion of children being increasingly viewed as "beings" (Tangen, 2008, p. 157) and not as "becomings" (Tangen, 2008, p. 157). Tangen refers to this as the "new sociology of

childhood” (p. 157) and noted that the concept of “the competent child” (p. 158) has become part of the Western worldview, “increasing adult interest in children’s lives and learning” (Kryger, 2004, as cited in Tangen, 2008, p. 158).

Despite children’s right to be involved in decisions affecting them and a paradigm shift of children being increasingly viewed as competent to do so, Hatchman and Rolland (2001) found: “When decisions are carried out in classrooms the only voices that are heard or listened to are adults, yet, it is the student who experiences what we adults view as the way to do business” (p. 3). They also noted: “Educators continue doing this even though some basic premises of teaching are to know your students, engage, challenge and empower them in their own learning” (p. 3).

In their study regarding the impact of the high stakes Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests in the UK, Reay and Wiliam (1999) indicated that “students as young as 11 have very clear perceptions about the influence of external assessment on curriculum” (p. 350). In Reay and Wiliam’s study, emotions such as fear and anxiety surfaced regarding the testing vehicle and preparations for it with the processes having an undesirable impact on student identities. Students exhibited negative feelings about their current selves as well as negativity regarding their future prospects of success.

As math classes progressed during the winter of 2016, I became aware of how the students were not only improving in the number of questions they were answering correctly but also in their increased motivation to do increasingly better with the tasks, sticking to the work, encouraging one another, and being excited when new improved data were displayed for co-analysis. It was these attributes that highlighted, for me, the benefits to how our classes had proceeded, as I had not witnessed such engagement from these students prior to our PLC conversations.

Elwood and Lundy (2010) have specifically looked at assessment through the lens of a children's rights approach, noting that "while the assessment community has not yet engaged with human rights discourse to any great extent ... a rights-based framework does not have to be seen as a threat or imposition, but rather an opportunity to review assessment in a constructive new light" (p. 345). Of particular interest to my focus regarding the inclusion of student voices within PLCs is their question for teachers: "Are children meaningfully involved in the design and development of classroom assessment systems: the development of assessment criteria, moderation systems, and reporting mechanisms to parents/guardians and other accountability audiences" (p. 348).

What might be the lessons to be gleaned from classroom experiences such as mine? What might be learned by merging our knowledge of, and experiences with, PLCs and those of valuing students' voices as active participants in a collaborative focus on learning? These questions guide the trajectory of my research.

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