






Exploring the role of instructional leaders in promoting agency in teachers' professional learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study used structural analysis of conversational episodes and content analysis to examine how two instructional leaders fostered teacher agency and collaboration in planning ongoing structures and content during a yearlong professional learning experience in one elementary school. Framed within a theory of agency, we found a merging of insider and outsider knowledge in the interactions between university partners and the two leaders of the English language arts leadership team that occurred across time, that agentive discourse was topically coherent among the leadership team as a collective group, and that the collective group maintained reflective and forward-looking common professional learning goals. We argue that meaningful professional development contexts position all participants in ways that value and trust their individual contributions and prompt them to act agentively to meet individual learning goals while maintaining a focus on the school's collective goals.

Keywords: teacher agency, collective agency, literacy professional development, content analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Professional development (PD) is a complex interactive process that is most effective when it fosters the implementation of knowledge in teachers' daily instruction (Desimone, 2009; Dillon et al., 2011). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Desimone and Stuckey (2014) have summarized the core features of PD associated with meaningful effects, as follows:

- (a) content focus that builds teachers' subject matter knowledge and improve students' abilities to learn the content;
- (b) active engagement with academic content, pedagogy, and evidence of student learning;
- (c) alignment with school and district goals and with teachers' classroom contexts;
- (d) long-term focus; and
- (e) collaborative and interactive learning community.

Over the last two decades alone, literacy PD initiatives have documented similar features that converge on effective literacy PD characterized by situated learning communities (including coaching partnerships) or teacher study groups that engage teachers in cycles of

instructional planning, modeling, co-teaching, observation, and reflection (Firestone et al., 2020; Gersten et al., 2010; Matsumura et al., 2013; Sailors & Price, 2010).

Large-scale studies, especially those with randomized populations, generally examine the average effects of a particular intervention. These findings are important for telling us, as a field, that particular PD interventions are likely to work for the populations on which they are normed. However, these controlled experimental studies are not designed to tell us what it will take to transfer or scale-up this work for varied subgroups of students and teachers across differing school contexts (Bryk, 2015). Although there is a general understanding of the features of effective PD, "identifying aspects of PD that reliably change teacher behavior [in unique and varied contexts] is more elusive" (Desimone & Stuckey, 2014, p. 469).

The role of school leaders—both administrators and teacher leaders—in PD process is an important influence on its outcomes (Kindall et al., 2018; Parsons et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2011). Another influence is the extent to which teachers can exercise agency (e.g., autonomy, intentionality, and professional judgement) over their own professional learning (Brodie, 2021; McChesney & Aldridge, 2021; Robertson et al., 2019). In this study, we explored the ways a school leadership team and university partners at one elementary school fostered teachers' agency

and collaborative involvement in their respective professional learning planning processes. Through an exploration of discourse, we focused particularly on the “leaders” on the school team—Amanda and Natalie at Echoland Elementary (all names are pseudonyms)—in the context of planning for professional learning. In doing so, we explored, specifically, the actions taken by PD leaders that prompted teachers to assume agency and ownership of their own learning, even as they remained collectively invested in schoolwide goals.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. Which topics yielded more focus during the professional learning leadership team meetings? What was the nature of the conversational turns during these topics?
2. During instances, where participants did act agentively, what was the nature of their actions?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a theory of agency (Bandura, 2001), individually and collectively in social contexts, to explore and describe interactions between the university partners and elementary school leadership team. We surmised that the types of discourse used by the university partners and educators as they planned for and reflected on shared professional learning opportunities and structures would influence leadership team members’

- (a) sense of agency in their own professional learning,
- (b) sense of collective agency towards school wide professional learning goals, and
- (c) how they attended to, and talked about, both planning for and reflecting on their professional learning goals.

Bandura (2001) describes three different modes of agency: *personal*, *proxy*, and *collective*. *Personal agency* involves someone intentionally making things happen by their own actions. More specifically, personal agency is attributed to individuals who iteratively demonstrate the capacity for autonomous action, intentionality as they strive to accomplish what they set out to achieve, and the reflectivity to adjust and monitor their plans as needed (Bandura, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Agentive educators use their knowledge and experiences to actively create, critique, and adapt curricula and instructional approaches based on personal and professional convictions of what is best for their students (Paris & Lung, 2008).

At times, individuals may not be able to directly control the conditions of teaching that affect their lives. As such, they exercise *proxy agency*, where they “try by one means or another to get those who have access to resources or expertise or who wield influence and power to act at their behest to secure the outcomes they desire” (Bandura, 2001, p. 13). An example of *proxy agency* in an educational setting is when a teacher chooses to send a student to the principal’s office for misbehavior in the classroom. In this case, the teacher is exerting *proxy agency* perhaps believing that the principal can address the student’s inappropriate behavior more effectively, or the teacher may not want to be burdened with the student’s inappropriate behavior.

Although *personal agency* and *proxy agency* provide insights into the ways people intentionally influence how they live their lives, people are always situated in contexts, where they also need to work in coordination with others through socially interdependent effort to accomplish what they cannot on their own. Agency is always situated with regards to one’s social context (Li & Ruppap, 2021). As such, people

exercise *collective agency*. They act in coordinated and interdependent ways (Bandura, 2001). Yet, *collective agency* is not simply something that a group of people do together; rather, there is an intention to do something together (i.e., a common goal) with a plan that has considered the multiple perspectives of the people acting together within the system (Butterfill, 2015). *Collective agency*, thus, involves a belief that people have been, are, and/or will be performing the actions together towards achieving the common goals. Hence, there is a bidirectionality of influence between the social structure and people’s personal agency (Bandura, 2001). As the social and environmental influences and structures play a hand in an individual’s agency, the individual’s agency also influences the social structures and environment in reciprocal fashion.

Bandura (2001) writes that “human functioning is analyzed as socially interdependent, richly contextualized, and conditionally orchestrated within the dynamics of various societal subsystems and their complex interplay” (p. 5). The complexity of this interplay lies in these synergistic dynamics of the group’s transactions as people bring *personal*, *proxy*, and *collective agency* to bear as influences on their intentional actions. Collective actions demand social interaction, yet in school PD contexts, where new understandings and practices are socially constructed, the “co-construction of meaning is messy, [and] filled with struggle, participant needs, tensions, ambiguity, and shifting power relationships” (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011, p. 109). How people exercise personal and proxy agency in ways that are also collectively coordinated and interdependent within the group has the potential to influence how professional learning unfolds.

To understand the dynamic interpersonal processes of interactions in the focal professional learning context described herein, we examined the discourse (i.e., talk) among the school leadership team and university partners to articulate the nature of the talk as it related to individual teacher’s sense of agency (*personal* and/or *proxy*), while also maintaining a sense of *collective agency* in the school’s common professional learning goal. We see this framework as fundamentally important in illuminating the complexities inherent in the elusive nature of teacher professional learning.

METHODS

This qualitative study used structural analysis of conversational episodes (Korolija & Linell, 1996) and content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) and to examine the interactions between university partners and a school-based leadership team at one elementary school as they worked to co-construct an ongoing professional learning opportunity framed around the idea of a school working towards a collective goal while also supporting teachers’ abilities to exercise agency over their own professional learning.

Context

Echoland Elementary is a rural pre-K-5 school of approximately 273 students and 23 faculty and instructional staff located in a Mountain West State. The school is designated as a title 1 school with 70% of the students receiving free or reduced meals, 11% receiving supplemental English language services, 14% receiving special education services. According to school reporting, 25% of the families identified as Hispanic/Latino, <1% as Asian, 3% as more than one race, and 71% as White. The faculty worked in looping teams, where classroom teachers

looped with the same class of students for two consecutive years. Looping teams were grouped as kindergarten and first grade, second grade and third grade, and fourth grade and fifth grade. Specialist teachers worked across these grade levels to support students within and outside of the classrooms, and one teacher oversaw a school-based preschool classroom with separate morning and afternoon classes.

The leadership team meetings that are the focus of the present analysis occurred during a yearlong professional learning opportunity. Echoland initiated the professional learning experience for yearlong, job-embedded literacy PD to be provided by the university partners. The university partners, in turn, coordinated with the school to research how the professional learning processes unfolded. The professional learning experience emerged when the university partners asked the school to co-construct the structures and processes with them so as to establish professional learning contexts, where teachers would be positioned as professional decisionmakers (e.g., Paris & Lung, 2008) and feel empowered to exercise agency towards their individual literacy learning goals as well as a collective school literacy goal (Brodie, 2021).

After working closely with the school's faculty to identify a focal topic for PD (i.e., vocabulary), the university partners provided a one-day whole school workshop in August. The workshop was followed by monthly English language arts (ELA) leadership team meetings of which the university partners became a part. The meetings occurred via video conference to

- (a) reflect on the unfolding of the professional learning to that point in time (i.e., structure and content) and
- (b) develop upcoming professional learning plans, such as refining structures or processes and setting new topical goals.

These team meetings are the focus of the present analysis to understand how the leadership team—and specifically, Natalie and Amanda—exercised agency in charting the path of their school's vocabulary professional learning.

As part of the co-constructed structures, the faculty at large also met in monthly small-group professional learning communities (mostly by grade-level) to discuss, plan, and implement instruction related to ongoing professional learning plans. Interactions during these small group discussions were typically focused on professional readings (i.e., books, articles, and videos) that were shared by the university partners, student data, and curricular resources. The partners also visited Echoland for follow-up coaching throughout the academic year. These face-to-face interactions occurred over two full days (January and April). Based on leadership team input gathered from the entire faculty, these visits involved small-group coaching interactions (i.e., observing, modelling, co-planning) around vocabulary instruction. The interactions that occurred in these professional learning communities and coaching interactions are not the focus of the present study.

Participants

University participants included two literacy faculty members and one graduate student (involved in PD interactions). The faculty members each held doctoral degrees, worked previously as elementary teachers and/or literacy coaches for over 10 years, and had been leading professional learning in schools for more than a decade. The doctoral student had been an elementary teacher for six years and coach for three years.

The school's ELA leadership team comprised voluntary representation from each grade level as well as specialists (e.g., special

Table 1. School leadership team participants

Role	Participants
Principal	William
Pre-K	Jasmin
K	Emily
1 st	Holly
2 nd	Rose
3 rd	Natalie*
4 th	Amanda*
5 th	Kaitlin
Special education	Melissa
Intervention	Nora
Instructional facilitator	Kelly

Note. An * refers to designated team leaders

education, title 1) and the principal (**Table 1**). Given our focus on examining the discourse at play in professional learning interactions as it relates to school leaders and educators' agency in professional learning, we specifically profile the two designated school leaders: Natalie and Amanda. Notably, neither Natalie nor Amanda was the school's instructional facilitator (i.e., coach); they were general education classroom teachers who were designated by ELA leadership team (including the school's principal) as the team leaders. Within the professional learning experiences described in this analysis, they led the planning of and reflecting on PD during leadership team meetings with the university partners, yet they were also learning from PD provided and implementing the practices in their own classrooms.

Natalie & Amanda

Natalie was a second and third grade looping teacher, on the third-grade loop at the professional learning's initiation. She had taught for 15 years at Echoland, as well as three years in other elementary schools, and had worked across grades K-3. Natalie had also previously been an instructional facilitator, as well as an interventionist and tutor for K-fifth grade students for one year. Her work with Echoland's ELA leadership team spanned 12 years, most of her tenure at the school. She was also a national board certified teacher, one of several at Echoland.

Amanda was a fourth and fifth grade looping teacher, on the fourth-grade loop at the initiation. She had taught for five years total, all at Echoland, and had served on ELA leadership team for the past three years. Natalie and Amanda worked as co-leaders for ELA leadership team, and both were primary communicators with the university partners as PD relationship developed. Though they took on most of the facilitative work for PD (i.e., scheduling visits, arranging schedules for rotating substitutes), they also created structures in which all teachers could participate directly with the professional learning in ways that responded to their individual teaching needs. For example, Amanda and Natalie created a "communication link" on a Google Doc that allowed teachers to write directly to university partners about their professional learning needs and questions, effectively eliminating the need for Amanda and Natalie to mediate each interaction while still allowing all members of the leadership team and the school at large to account for the various professional learning practices enacted by grade levels and specialist groups.

Data Sources & Data Collection Procedures

We sought to describe how collective group reflected on and planned for ongoing professional learning, and, more specifically, to describe how the talk among the leadership team in the segments of

meeting data analyzed fostered the team members' sense of individual and proxy agency, as well as a collective sense of agency, in setting the course for their future professional learning experiences. To examine these interactions, all eight video-recorded leadership team meetings across the school year were gathered. Additionally, university partners recorded field notes to document the nature of the interactions as well as real-time interpretations of those interactions. Leadership meetings lasted between 12 minutes in length to 45 minutes in length, and each was recorded in its entirety. The agendas of these leadership team meetings were set and led by Natalie and Amanda.

Data Analysis

All the eight sessions were transcribed verbatim. We then used a combination of inductive and deductive analysis (Miles et al., 2020) across three phases:

- (a) structural analysis of leadership team meetings by episodes—or topics of discussion—and frequency of talk by participants,
- (b) content analyses of interactions during the meetings, and
- (c) examination of within-site comparisons across the year.

Field notes were referenced to corroborate interpretations across all three phases.

Phase one: Structural analysis

Structural analysis of leadership team meeting episodes (Korolija & Linell, 1996) was used to describe *what* was discussed in each of the meetings to answer research question one (RQ1). Transcripts were read (aided by viewing of the videos) to segment the conversations into topical episodes; that is, segments of talk during which participants connect with one another through focus on a common area of interest. Episodes were defined as a series of turns between participants focused on a particular topic, such as agenda setting or PD goal setting. In addition, the frequency of talk enacted by the different participants in the leadership meetings was calculated to begin to understand the nature of those conversations: *who* was providing most talk turns, and about *what* topics. We theorized that calculating who was (or was not) engaging in talk during the leadership meetings might provide insights into who was directing the focus of conversations, and thus the overall enactment of PD process. Descriptive statistics were also calculated to determine the frequencies of topical episodes. Frequencies were calculated within and across each transcript, enabling us to look chronologically for evidence of patterns regarding who enacted talk, and about what topics.

To establish trustworthiness, three of the eight transcripts were read by all five authors to identify topical episodes. Each author

- (a) independently read the first transcript to become familiar with the content and
- (b) segmented the transcript into topical episodes.

Then, the authors met and discussed to reach 100% consensus about how to label the episodes. The goal was to “reach agreement on each code through collaborative discussion rather than independent corroboration” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 401). These same steps were followed with the next two transcripts, which led to refined definitions for topical episodes. As appropriate, these three transcripts were re-coded to reflect updated topical episodes.

Next, three authors collaboratively coded the remaining five transcripts, meeting to resolve questions and reach consensus. Initial

codes were collapsed into patterns that resulted in a set of eight recurring topics, as presented later. Throughout this process, all authors maintained ongoing memos of questions and initial interpretations that were recorded in a shared spreadsheet.

Phase two: Content analysis

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) was used to describe the nature of the topical conversations (RQ1) and the nature of the conversations in instances, where participants exercised agency related their professional learning (research question two [RQ2]) (Paris & Lung, 2008; Reeve & Tseng, 2011) across the school year. We engaged in this more detailed analysis of conversational turns surrounding instances of agentive actions with three focal transcripts that represented the beginning (October), middle (February), and end (May) of the year-long experience in order to capture the chronological unfolding of agency within the selected topics of transcribed discussion.

To further answer RQ2, we then chose to focus our analytic attention on conversational turns about *next/future steps* topical episodes identified during the structural analysis of the transcripts. We chose these episodes because

- (a) we noted evidence of reflective cycles in these conversations among participants in our phase one analysis, and
- (b) these episodes occurred more frequently (outside of “miscellaneous” topics such as greetings and connecting to technology).

While other topical episodes (e.g., *impacts of PD*, focus of PD) likely also show evidence of agentive talk, *next/future steps* episodes had the potential to highlight participants' reflectivity leading to forethought in exploring the role of agency in human behavior (e.g., Bandura, 2001). We examined these episodes holistically as a unit of analysis.

To establish trustworthiness, we engaged in collaborative coding (Smagorinsky, 2008). Four authors reread the selected transcripts (and viewed videos as needed) and then engaged in coding of *next/future steps* topical episodes for the three focal transcripts. First cycle coding (Miles et al., 2020) consisted of deductive a priori coding (Table 2) for elements of agency drawn from the literature review on agency (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Paris & Lung, 2008; Reeve & Tseng, 2011) and process codes that inductively described “observable to conceptual action in the data” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 66). When appropriate, multiple codes were assigned to an episode. Within these multiple codes, we noted questions about the distinctions between *collective agency* versus *individual autonomy*, as well as the tensions that arose between *controlling actions* versus *intentional actions* in relation to the *proxy agency* seemingly given to people in power (i.e., principal).

Phase three: Examining within- & cross-site comparisons

To examine patterns in these data, we compiled three-column charts that described agency and conversations over time. Four authors individually read these compiled charts noting patterns. Then, we came together to discuss the patterns and collaboratively draw conclusions about how the school's team leaders fostered agency, both individually and collectively, in the professional learning process.

Table 2. Agency codes & description

Code	Descriptions
Autonomy	Makes choices and takes own action based on own judgements. Choices and actions are undertaken willingly and in keeping with one's values and purposes (Bandura, 2001; Castle, 2006; Paris & Lung, 2008; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).
Collective agency	Intentional socially coordinative and interdependent effort where people are working conjointly on a shared belief. Working together to set common approaches and timelines for a common PD topic/goal (Bandura, 2001; Butterfill, 2015).
Efficacy doubt	Experiencing efficacy doubts where limits to self-efficacy propel further learning (Wheatley, 2002).
Intentionality	Initiates intentional action on behalf of goals (Bandura, 2001; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).
Planfulness	Engages in purposeful planning (Paris & Lung 2008; Wilkinson, 2005).
Principled resistance	Not following the status quo but having the self-assurance and confidence to take a different path (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006).
Proxy agency	Perceived as mediated agency because (1) someone else is better equipped, (2) task is too onerous & they do not want to, (3) someone (or [4] something) else has power (Bandura, 2001).
Reflectivity	Engages in inquiry and self-reflection about own practice and/or PD processes (Bandura, 2001; Wilkinson, 2005).
Responsivity	Student centered teaching. Teachers report centering student needs in teaching practices (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).
Self-efficacy	Believes self is capable of effective action, is motivated to take on challenging tasks, and persists in the face of challenge or frustration (Bandura, 2001, 2006).

Table 3. Phase one topic-centered episodes

Topic	Description	Example discourse from transcript	P (%)
Agenda	Talk associated with reviewing items teacher leaders prepared to talk about during PD meetings.	"Should we move on down? So, we have quite a robust agenda today. We wanted to start by talking along lines of our (university) partnership."	8
Structure of PD	Talk associated with the organization of the professional development in practice.	"So, one concern that came up was perhaps giving teachers more time to implement some of these strategies before we jump onto another article or another idea."	10
Focus of PD	Talk associated with the establishing or refining the purpose of the professional development.	"But I think thinking about vocabulary is going to help us as to why [unclear] piece."	1
Tools for PD	Talk associated with resources associated with or needed to carry out the purpose of the professional development.	"Those articles are not the magical articles. Those are the ones that were just found and kind of get us going."	14
Impacts of PD	Talk associated with the effects of the professional development on practice.	"It's been exciting to me to see how much more passion there is just about reading instruction in general."	12
Reflection	Talk associated with personal understandings of the professional development.	"I liked the structure a lot. They talked about doing some more on like observation days where they meet with us and discuss the lesson ahead of time and kind of take it through a learning progression of the lesson, not just a one-and-done, and I really liked that."	12
Next/future steps	Talk associated with making decisions for the subsequent meetings and moves within the structure of the professional development.	"I think what we are saying is a couple of action steps for next time. Everyone's going to go back to their grade level, and share this information at their grade level"	19
Miscellaneous	The miscellaneous category is comprised of greetings, technical issues, celebrations, closings, and other talk unrelated to the work of the professional development.	"Click on that - can you hear us?" "Have a great day, all." "If the city could fix the light at 25 th and Poplar ..."	24

Note. P: Percentages of episodes

FINDINGS

This investigation sought to better understand how two instructional leaders fostered teacher agency and collaboration within a professional learning experience by describing and analyzing the conversations in leadership team meetings across one school year. We

- describe the topics of conversation during the meetings, as well as the frequency of talk turns by the school participants and university partners—as well as
- describe the nature of the talk used by the school's team leaders that surrounded other team members' individual and collective sense of agency as they reflected on and planned for ongoing PD structures and topics.

First, we address **RQ1** by presenting frequencies of topical episodes and talk that occurred across all of the meetings. Then, we address **RQ2** by presenting our analysis of conversations that co-occurred with other teachers' agency in shaping professional learning processes.

RQ1. Describing School Leadership Teams' Topical Focus & Talk Frequency

Topical focus

Structural analysis of interactions during leadership team meetings led us to identify eight topic-centered episodes (**Table 3**). The frequencies of these topics are based on the total number of eight episodes and describe the topics of conversation related to PD process during each episode (Korolija & Linell, 1996). We then used the frequencies of episodes reported to compare the topical nature of leadership team meetings across the school year.

The intention of these leadership team meetings was to guide the organizational and topical direction for the school's professional learning, and we found that this was determined quickly in just one topical episode. Echoland identified vocabulary instruction, and that focus remained constant throughout the remainder of the year. With this focal coherence, 12% ($n=12$) of topical episodes focused on the *impacts of PD* teachers were reporting in relation to their implementation of new vocabulary-related teaching practices and their

impressions of observations of student behaviors. Another 12% ($n=12$) focused on *reflection* on the overall PD process and structures.

In addition, the leadership team discussed *next/future steps* during 19% ($n=19$) of the topical episodes. They discussed how they were thinking about extending their understanding of vocabulary instruction or exploring new topics during the subsequent school year. *Tools for PD* were the topic of conversation 14% ($n=15$) of the time, and the *structure of PD* was the focus during 10% ($n=10$) of the episodes. In sum, the leadership team spent 43% of their total topical episodes discussing the organization of, resources for, and future planning for the work being done. Of note, the leadership team spent a sizable proportion of topical episodes ($n=24$) on considering their perceptions of the outcomes of the professional learning that had already occurred. Thus, there was a consistent focus across the year on reflecting upon their common goal and considering how they might continue to advance this work.

Talk frequency

Structural analysis of the interactions during leadership meetings also included the frequency of talk produced by the participants, calculated as percentage of words spoken out of the total words across leadership meetings. We report talk produced by Natalie and Amanda (the school's designated leaders), the research team, and other individual educators—members of the leadership teams who were not designated as team leaders.

Natalie and Amanda, the two designated leaders of the school's leadership team, consistently dominated the conversations across all three meetings. Natalie and Amanda produced 67% of talk in October, 58% of talk in February, and 54% of talk in May—a fact that we consider important relative to our findings for **RQ2** regarding the overall leadership team's sense of agency in the professional learning process. The other individual teachers working on the leadership team played a more variable role across the meetings, with 14% of talk in October, 4% of talk in February, and 27% in May. This may suggest the possibility that the teachers experienced their PD as developmental, with a sense of agency and self-determination emerging as the professional learning progressed. Comparatively, the research team produced 19% of talk in October, 38% in February, and 19% in May, which we interpret as possibly indicative of our intended supportive, rather than authoritative, role we played in the professional learning process as external supports.

Collectively, these findings also relate to the previous findings regarding the leadership team's topical attention. As the two team leaders dominated the talk, they did so in episodes mostly focused on *impacts of PD*, *next/future steps of PD*, and *reflection*, all of which seems to paint a picture of a leadership team focused on forward motion and procedural progress. Further, it suggests that the school itself was taking the lead with PD with the university partners as external resources to support their process. The next section provides more fine-grained analysis of the nature of agency while teacher leaders and university partners discussed these topics.

RQ2: Talk Surrounding Agentive Action in Leadership Team Meetings

As we examined the topical episodes to discern patterns in how the school leadership team focused their conversations when discussing *next/future steps*, we noticed interaction patterns in which the teachers individually and/or collectively made intentional choices in their professional learning and willingly acted based on what they felt was

keeping within their values and purposes as evidenced through their talk (Bandura, 2001; Bratman, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Paris & Lung, 2008). Instances of individual agency are first exercised as internal processes, yet these internal processes often manifest into action. Given that actions, as such, are also socially interdependent (e.g., Bandura, 2001), we surmised that discourse could serve as a useful proxy for describing how individuals exercised agency relative to the professional learning process. In the section that follows, we present instances of talk and its relation to agency (i.e., agentive discourse) from the beginning of the year to the end.

Collective agency at Echoland

Early in the year, agentive discourse functioned as a means of navigating the practical complexities of scheduling professional learning interactions for many grades with different schedules on a single day. Natalie initiated an interaction around planning for an upcoming coaching day (i.e., when the university partners would be on site to observe, model, and co-plan with teachers as coaches), wherein she attempted to reflect the autonomy of each grade level group expressing their unique professional learning desires, while also facilitating the overall collective structure. For example, in the following exchange, Natalie and Rose, the second grade teacher representative on the leadership team, are reckoning with a tension between exercising grade-level autonomy for their own learning experiences and compromising this autonomy to maintain the collective schoolwide direction:

Rose: ... I know just from our second grade we would be interested in a sit-down with them [university partners] to cover these bold areas - some strategies for when a student finds an interesting word. So not necessarily how we're teaching it [1]. This could be like the vocabulary (??) so when a student comes across a word (??) ways to address that. ///And also, how to incorporate more nonfiction. We've been talking about that (??), too.

Natalie: Do you think you'd rather have a sit-down, or do you want like a lesson demonstrated, where students are given the opportunity to record some of their own words? [2].

Rose: I guess we could ask what they thought would be better for the first step [3].

Natalie: I mean, it could be both, because I think third grade would, probably falls into the same similar category, because we're interested in like vocabulary journals, kind of a personal collection ... And so, it sounds like second grade and third grade might be interested in the same things, and so it might make sense to kind of combine those two groups when we meet on November 6th depending on how we can make it work with subs or before or after school times [4]. Maybe we can find a little bit.

Rose: That sounds good [5]. And as far as the nonfiction, we're just trying to find—like the biggest thing for—we're exploring different ways to do that, but we'd like to do it as a weekly nonfiction repetitive—so we were going to talk to them about how that might look [6].

At point [1] in this exchange, Rose voices the second-grade team's desire to explore instruction for when children encounter "interesting" words in their own reading, later combined with an emphasis on nonfiction text reading. Natalie requests specificity at point [2] related to practicalities of scheduling professional learning opportunities to which Rose immediately suggests asking the university partners for their input at point [3]. However, Natalie does not take up Rose's suggestion to defer to outside expertise; instead, she suggests that the interests of second grade are like that of third grade and that the groups can combine to meet on the upcoming coaching day. Natalie then further rationalizes her choice by referencing the logistical need to "make it work with subs" at point [4].

Natalie appears to uphold the second grade's sense of autonomy for the coaching day topic, but she also exercises leadership autonomy in deciding how that coaching encounter will look without input from second grade or the university partners. In doing so, she combines second and third grade's meeting times without outside input. However, Rose takes up these decisions at point [5], seeming to defer to the practical interests of scheduling coaching interactions for the whole school. Rose reinforces the needs of the second-grade group at point [6], reiterating their desire to look specifically at nonfiction. This reiteration is neither taken up, nor contested by Natalie. Rather, the conversation turns to other practicalities of the professional learning experience.

Whereas instances of instructional decision-making autonomy were evident early the year, there were also instances of shared authority early on among the school's leadership team members and the principal. For example, when Dana requested permission to record modeled lessons (not to be used as research data) during an upcoming coaching day, Natalie recognized that she does not carry the authority to confirm or disconfirm, responding, "That's a good William question." William, the principal, having been seemingly given proxy agency, immediately said, "Yes," but Natalie then overlaps with, "Is that ok?" Her question leads to the following exchange:

William: Yes, as long as ... [1].

Natalie: It is only used in school for that purpose [2].

William: Yeah.

Natalie: As long as it is only used in school for that specific purpose [3].

In this instance, William begins to qualify his response, but Natalie overlaps with a response at point [1], qualifying for him with her statement at point [2]. Then, William simply agrees. Lastly, Natalie revoices the statement, repeating the qualifier about recording back to the university partners at point [3]. This navigation of authority at Echoland points to a distributed nature of autonomy amongst teacher leaders, principal, and teachers: a pattern that holds across time in the agentive discourse from February to May.

Whereas Natalie was the primary voice of teacher leadership in October, Amanda, the other designated leader of the team, takes on a larger leadership role in the later meetings. By February, Natalie and Amanda are sharing authority in an exchange, where both are requesting the other teacher representatives to reflect on their vocabulary instruction thus far. In doing so, both teacher leaders use

language that reflects individual agency in the professional learning enactment, while also calling for a *collective agency*: the macroanalytic workings of social contexts, where the individual agentive acts function in ways that are "socially interdependent, richly contextualized, and conditionally orchestrated within the dynamics of various societal subsystems and their complex interplay" (Bandura, 2001, p. 5). In other words, the individual agentive acts came together to form a community's agentive acts, with everyone working in unique ways towards a common outcome. The following exchange illustrates one instance of collective agency:

Natalie: So, we'll just kind of set an informal—well, I guess it could be a formal due date. So, by our next staff meeting, if you could have for sure gone over your old rubric, and if you need copies of that again, I do have copies. Just let me know. I know a lot of you make copies yourself. Make sure that you have gone through that rubric and kind of re-evaluate yourself so that we can discuss how you've grown [1]. And if for some reason that one—maybe you did not work really hard on that one because you had already had all of those areas. Maybe you've already handpicked a different rubric and taken a look at that [2]. And then we'll just kind of go from there.

Amanda: Yeah. Maybe that will become our next discussion when we do meet in March for the goal team—kind of what did you find in the rubrics, just kind of a share-out of what your next step is—just kind of a share-out of what's going on [3]. I did create a folder. It just is called self-assessment rubrics, and all of those are in there now.

At point [1], Natalie has requested collective participation in a common professional learning action but also references individual growth and self-evaluation. Her language positions teachers as part of the collective as well as individual autonomous agents who can judge for themselves the nature and progression of their professional growth. This is reinforced at point [2], where Natalie invites teachers to report from "handpicked" rubrics that are different from the ones already in use. Amanda follows up at point [3] with another request for teachers to autonomously contribute to the collective agency of schoolwide vocabulary focus. In short, their language demonstrates both reinforcement of the school's common goals and the individual paths that teachers and grade levels are taking to achieve those goals.

In establishing this balance between individual agency and collective agency early in the professional learning experience, Natalie's leadership seemed to provide an important influence. In October, for example, she explicitly acknowledged the fourth-grade team's decision to frame their professional learning through a book study across the year, a marked departure from the other grade levels' decisions to read various practitioner articles in three-month cycles. She said:

And just to comment on your question—to me, that's totally fine. You guys have figured out your specific need, and you are working on that. As long as you're doing your readings but out of a different resource, that's perfectly fine with us, too. That makes total sense.

Here, Natalie responds to the fourth-grade team's principled decision-making about what process would work best for them within the larger framework, reinforcing that if their readings are speaking to

the larger collective vision for vocabulary professional learning, “that’s perfectly fine.”

This balance of individual and collective agency carried over to May, where individual grade levels freely shared their desire to extend their vocabulary work toward an emphasis on informational text reading. In this excerpt, Kaitlin, a fifth grade teacher representative, shared the grade level’s decision-making [1]. Natalie and Amanda were facilitating this conversation, focusing on how individual grade levels contributed to a larger building-wide focus [2].

Natalie: And we’re also looking at our next steps. I know a lot of groups that met on our [university] day like already started talking about next steps, and so we’d like to kind of try to come to some sort of consensus on what we’re envisioning for next year and what path people are wanting to go down. So, we open up that to you guys to talk to us about.

Kaitlin: What we talked about was sort of how to approach informational texts, higher-level nonfiction kinds of things that our kids might have some struggles with. We are ready to kind of move on to some support from something beyond vocabulary [1].

Amanda: And that seems to be a consensus building-wide, I think ///(??) [2].

Across the Echoland leadership team interactions, the “fine-ness” of making autonomous choices as grade levels and individuals to contribute to a collective agentive professional learning experience is evident, and it seems that the teacher leadership, and the space that William provided for this distributed leadership, played a defining role in making this balance between the individual and the collective a reality. When considering the importance of balancing “insider” and “outsider” knowledge in ongoing professional learning experiences (Snow, 2015), the “embedded” teacher leaders for this team, as opposed to the principal or coach or external partners, seemed to provide space for a more horizontal distribution of expertise (Robertson et al., 2020) as Natalie and Amanda facilitated both planning and reflection. In doing so, this “embedded” teacher leadership honored the individualities of the other educators on the leadership team (and those colleagues they were representing) as well as the collective mission of the school.

DISCUSSION

With the university team’s collaboration, the two school-based instructional leaders facilitated the leadership team at Echoland in establishing situated professional learning opportunities (e.g., Gersten et al., 2010) that balanced insider and outsider experiences and knowledge with a more horizontal distribution of expertise (Robertson et al., 2020; Snow, 2015). Across the year, there was a merging of various aspects of insider knowledge and dispositions (e.g., the implementation of specific lessons and approaches, the use of rubrics to reflect, high expectations for the teachers to explore and respond to novel ways of teaching and assessing vocabulary in their classrooms, respect for colleagues’ individual choices) with outsider knowledge brought by the university partners (e.g., evidence-based teaching practices, responsive coaching, attending to the collective needs of the school). This merging occurred as the leadership team engaged teachers

in cycles of planning and reflecting to set organizational directions for their school. These organizational structures demonstrate one way that schools can implement PD practices, for example, collaboration, extended duration, situated contexts, active teacher participation; aligned with the general tenets of effective PD (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone & Stuckey, 2014).

In this analysis, we set out specifically to explore the role leadership (e.g., administrators and teacher leaders) plays in the professional learning experience. In unpacking these roles, we did not set out to document agency for agency’s sake; rather, we documented agentive actions interpreted through discourse to understand the complexities of professional learning contexts and how school leaders might foster or constrain teachers’ voices in their own professional learning processes.

We found that the leadership team showed evidence of agentive actions in their interactions with the university partners in ways that focused on autonomous reflection and the charting of a path for continued professional growth. Related to the topical patterns of conversational flow, the leadership team came to consensus on vocabulary instruction as a common goal. Subsequently, in their leadership team meetings, they maintained a focus on looking back to look forward. They used their reflections purposefully to consider their future steps for teaching and learning. These reflective cycles to prompt future steps are important in taking agentive action. Through reflection, people can act with intention and make principled choices about what is right for them in their contexts (Bandura, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). The teacher leaders were able to articulate what worked and what did not work; likely, they were able to build on their successes and work agentively to address their challenges.

We found evidence of the power relationships among the leadership team and the external partners. Natalie and Amanda invited participation from the teacher representatives and the university partners around the next and future steps for the schoolwide professional learning. Whereas Natalie and Amanda talked more frequently and longer at the beginning of the year (e.g., 67% of talk in October), teacher representatives on the leadership team talked more as the meetings progressed over time (e.g., 27% of talk by May). Additionally, the quantity of talk by the university partners increased slightly at the mid-year point, then decreased as meetings continued and teachers took up more of the conversational floor (e.g., 19% of talk by May). Thus, from the beginning of the year to the end, there was evidence of “equal footing” (Snow, 2015) between the university partners and teachers in terms of conversational contributions. This balance of participation and positioning is essential for teachers’ sustained engagement in professional learning opportunities (Desimone & Stuckey, 2014; McChesney & Aldridge, 2021; Snow, 2015). Teacher representatives were actively critiquing and making principled decisions about their own professional learning in relation to the collective goal moving forward. Giving voice provided a sense of distributed leadership among the leadership team, which seemed to welcome an ethos, where ideas were malleable, efficacy doubt (Wheatley, 2002) was supported, and teachers have a sense of purpose and freedom to pursue individual needs within the larger school wide goal (Castle, 2006).

These findings provide descriptive evidence for the importance of individual autonomy and teacher empowerment, yet also for a collective coherence towards a common goal as critical factors for teachers’ sustained engagement in professional learning opportunities

(Desimone & Stuckey, 2014). Whereas we cannot make causal or even correlational claims from these data, we do provide descriptive evidence of educators across an entire school year noting positive perceptions of PD in relation to their own learning and that of their students, and these descriptions were intertwined with their expressed instances of autonomy, individually and collectively. Employing a lens of agency, we found that this coherence was associated with how agency was enacted and sustained within the leadership team meetings. Natalie and Amanda seemed to foster a sense of collective agency among the group as they worked individually yet also towards a common school wide goal. They facilitated reflective conversations with their leadership team and the university partners for the purpose of looking back to move forward in intentional ways (Bandura, 2001).

In doing so, the professional learning experiences facilitated by the instructional leaders with the support of the university partners aligned with several key factors often associated with sustained engagement in teacher professional learning (Desimone & Stuckey, 2014). The professional learning experiences were designed in a way that put teachers first, providing space for them to autonomously explore aspects of the school-wide vocabulary goal that most resonated with their pedagogical and student needs. As such, the experiences also addressed teacher variability, both in content knowledge related to vocabulary learning and in pedagogical knowledge of how to implement new instructional practices (McChesney & Aldridge, 2021). Further, teachers were provided time to learn by doing and “stumble as they first experiment with new practices” (Desimone & Stuckey, 2014, p. 478), all while being supported by the instructional leaders’ reflective opportunities and the university coaches. And finally, whereas the collective goal of improving vocabulary instruction that was established and sustained by the teachers across the year could have broad implications for improving overall literacy achievement (e.g., Blachowicz et al., 2006), teachers had the opportunity to experience “narrow success” (Desimone & Stuckey, 2014, p. 479) as they honed their pedagogical content knowledge of particular aspects of vocabulary instruction.

Implications

These findings prompt several new questions as to the relationship between individual and collective agency as leadership teams facilitate professional learning conversations with their colleagues. First, it may be that Natalie and Amanda had reflective dispositions prior to the university partners setting out to foster reflection and agency in the professional learning process. This study did not explore the dispositions espoused by members of the leadership team. Future research should try to tease out possible differences in the characteristics of leaders to provide more context for agency within PD relationships. For example, what happens when leaders do have this level of reflectivity already in place? Second, it may also be that the roles of Natalie and Amanda as classroom teachers (i.e., peers) prompted the other teacher representatives on their respective team to position each of them in ways that may have been different if they were an instructional coach, administrator, or district-based employee. As classroom teachers, Natalie and Amanda may have been seen more as equals among the other teacher representatives, and thus better able to prompt distributed leadership among their peers. This study did not set out to compare the fundamentally different roles in leadership teams. Knowing that different structures within schools affect the outcomes of professional learning and the agency enacted by different educators

(e.g., Coburn, 2001; Lai et al., 2016), future research should further explore how enactments of agency are related to people’s contracted roles in schools, and how those enactments are associated with educators’ uptake of professional learning (e.g., Brodie, 2021; McChesney & Aldridge, 2021).

In addition, this study only explored agency within a small subset of interactions focused on discussions of the episodes coded as “*next/future steps*,” and with only one school. Exploring instances of how leadership teams establish conditions that promote or hinder teachers’ sense of agency over their own teaching and learning is important as we work to support other schools in the same processes. Continued analysis of other topical episodes within the leadership team meetings of this data set, as well as instances collected from other school contexts, may unearth other patterns in agentic actions to help us further understand how we might forefront agency as a pathway towards professional learning in schools that empowers individual agents working collectively towards shared goals.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlighted talk moves in relation to teacher’s agentic actions and collaboration in planning ongoing professional learning experiences when university partners and school instructional leaders worked collaboratively in one elementary school. Whereas many elementary schools focus on establishing teacher collaboration and professional learning communities (Gersten et al., 2010), the evidence of which aspects of PD interactions establish robust collectives of professional learning that may reliably change teachers’ behaviours is more elusive (Desimone & Stuckey, 2014) and messy (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011). PD providers and school faculties need to understand how they might leverage understandings about leadership, agentic actions, and discourse so they can recognize ways to promote more meaningful and sustained engagement in professional learning processes, as well as the merging of insider and outsider knowledge (Snow, 2015) related to literacy teaching and learning. Ultimately, we argue that these more meaningful contexts are facilitated by school leaders who position all members of the faculty in ways that value and trust their individual contributions and faculties who take up opportunities to act agentially in the process when leaders offer them.

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