

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFTS, AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

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At the most recent Literacy Summit conference held in San Antonio in February 2016, Drs. Jack Cassidy, Stephanie Grote-Garcia, and Evan Ortlieb presented the results of their annual “What’s Hot” survey. Identified as “very hot” and “hot” topics for 2016 were *close reading, common core state standards, college and career readiness, digital literacies, disciplinary literacy, high-stakes assessment, informational texts, and text complexity*. And the “very cold” and “cold” topics, respectively, were *creative writing, fluency, motivation, oral language, phonics and phonemic awareness, summer reading and summer loss, and literacy coaching and reading specialists*.

And now, a year later, you may be thinking that these topics, by category, remain the same. Perhaps you would change their assignments. Then and now, I had a different perspective on the assignment of literacy coaches and reading specialists to the “cold” category. From my view, a “hot topic” would be *professional learning*. And what I envision are professional learning communities that engage literacy coaches and reading specialists to support classroom teachers within shared and collaborative learning opportunities. Such opportunities can be vital for advancing professional knowledge and effective instruction.

I found it interesting, then, to learn that professional learning was once again a “hot topic” in 2017. Building on Dr. Cassidy’s legacy of surveying literacy educators to determine “what is hot”, the International Literacy Association recently surveyed 1600 respondents from 89 countries. *Teacher professional learning* was identified on all three lists – “top hot topics”, “top

important topics”, and “what needs more attention” (Literacy Today, 2017). Additional “hot topics” for 2017 are *assessments/standards, early literacy, digital literacy, disciplinary literacy, diversity, parent engagement, and literacy in resource-limited settings*. How do these topics correspond to your life as a literacy educator? And to your community needs? Do you rate these topics as “hot”?

For me, recognizing the importance of continuous teacher learning underscores a need for reading specialists and literacy coaches as optimal leaders of literacy professional learning opportunities. There is a need for expertise guiding the changes in literacy instruction that are taking hold in our schools nationwide. Yet this potential for increased attention to expertise and knowledge building is met with a national decline in numbers of highly prepared literacy specialists employed in school districts, and among contributing factors is the decision by school leaders to hire instructional generalists to support teachers’ classroom literacy instruction. At a time with major shifts (e.g., shifts in state standards, national reports of students’ low literacy achievement, an achievement gap that continues to widen, new assessments being implemented) that are impacting literacy instruction, there is a growing need for highly prepared reading specialists and literacy coaches. The decline in their preparation and hiring, however, persists.

My goals for this paper are as follows. First, I discuss the power of professional learning that is supported by knowledgeable others and recommend a multi-talented approach that draws on the

expertise of reading specialists, literacy coaches and classroom teachers. Second, I discuss the challenges we face when implementing professional learning opportunities and identify elements that are evidence-based and most likely to support optimal professional learning. Third, I identify possible dilemmas we face when implementing our responses to current shifts in literacy instruction. These dilemmas may be best described as missed opportunities.

THE POWER OF LITERACY EXPERTISE AND TEACHER OWNERSHIP FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

New standards for K-12 literacy instruction adopted by states (e.g., state adopted standards, common core state standards) are sweeping the nation, and with these new standards are accompanying shifts in instruction (e.g., teaching with complex texts, integrating foundational skills in authentic reading and writing applications). With these shifts, a major question abounds – do teachers feel prepared for the expected changes to their instruction? In an attempt to address that question, the National Center for Literacy Education conducted a series of studies (i.e., two survey studies and one qualitative study) from 2013-2015, asking teachers if they felt prepared for instructional shifts required of them. Their goal was to identify specific conditions that support literacy capacity building (NCLE, 2015).

In response to survey questions, teachers who felt unprepared explained that their time for collaborative planning was brief and that their curricular materials were poorly aligned to new standards expectations. In contrast, when teachers reported that they felt well prepared for the new standards, they attributed this to their own involvement and ownership of changes that were implemented and that they were supported by knowledgeable school leaders. More specifically, progress for both teachers and students in strong-implementation schools was associated with (a) a multi-talented approach, that recognizes teacher expertise and supports high teacher involvement and ownership in the change-making process; (b) high expectations and time allotted for collaborative problem solving across teams of school educators; (c) strong leadership that is balanced with teacher ownership and involvement; (d) multiple formative assessments in place to provide feedback on learning and teaching, rather than compliance; and (e) teachers adapting and developing their own instructional materials to meet their goals, rather than relying on “purchased materials and focusing on fidelity of implementation” (p. 3).

With the results of this survey as a backdrop to our work, MaryEllen Vogt and I began a careful analysis of professional learning research. We had been asked to write a text that provides direction for high quality professional learning for literacy educators (Risko & Vogt, 2016). And while we have experienced and conducted many professional learning sessions during our teaching careers, our writing task took us deep into the research literature driven by our quest to identify those factors that hold power for achieving change in ways that make sense to the educators involved. We were quick to realize that top-down forms of “professional development” must be replaced with the concept of “professional learning” that more aptly represents the activity of shared learning opportunities among educators and in which teachers’ questions are at the heart of the work.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND ITS RESEARCH BASE

There are several outcomes from our literature review. First, our findings were quite consistent with the results of the NCLE studies (2015) as described above (e.g., classroom teachers' expertise is valued, time and resources are required to support collaborative efforts, strong collaborative activity is associated with high teacher involvement). Additionally, we learned that changes are more durable and respected when professional learning activities are supported by reading specialists and literacy coaches who are prepared to guide adult learners during shared activities, who demonstrate how and when to use data to inform instructional decisions, and who along with classroom teachers demonstrate that they are problem solvers – carefully identifying, analyzing, and responding to dilemmas (Risko & Vogt, 2016). Strong professional learning opportunities attend to both academic content and pedagogical knowledge, thus, identifying what K-12 students should learn and what may be problematic for them, while advancing knowledge of appropriate pedagogy (Blank, de las Alas, & Smith, 2007). There is an emphasis on collective problem identification and problem solving that invites shared visions and shared and agreed upon enactment plans. Adopting a problem-solving approach has benefits for both beginning and more experienced teachers (Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011).

Identifying essential elements of effective professional learning, we concluded that optimal professional learning is *collaborative, situated, personal, substantive, intensive, and dynamic* (Risko & Vogt, 2017). At its heart is collaboration, learning from and with trusted peers. Also, optimal professional learning addresses problems that are familiar – those that are situated within our own teaching contexts, and thus, solutions are specific to our students, our teaching goals, the materials, and the curriculum. And with professional learning connected to teachers' classrooms and students, it is more likely to have a positive impact on students' achievement (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Yet adopted solutions require us to keep the focus personal, as the vision for professional learning is engaging educators to learn about their own practices (Leiberman & Miller, 2014) (i.e., answering the questions of what makes sense to me and my history in my classroom, and with my students and their histories). With a problem-solving approach, it is more likely that the content under study is substantive (requiring the examination of multiple perspectives) and intensive (sustained over time). Long-term and sustained professional learning opportunities are associated with greater gains for students and teachers (Banilower, 2002). The dynamic aspects of professional learning encompass high expectations for changes that are appropriate and responsive, informed by continuous assessment of the interplay of instruction and learning, and that lead to "just right goals – not too many, and not too few" (Risko & Vogt, 2016, p. 66).

TAKING RESEARCH TO *PROSPER* WITH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

PROSPER is an acronym that we used to frame a problem-solving approach to professional learning (Risko & Vogt, 2016). It references setting a *purpose*, taking on *responsibilities*, *organizing* time and space, assuring teachers that they are engaged in *safe* communities of learners, identifying *problems*, *examining* and testing possible solutions, and *reflecting* on iterative cycles of implemented changes. At the center of this framework is problem identification--noting the importance of defining explicitly the teaching dilemmas we face. Dilemmas may become evident when we ask questions, such as *Are we meeting our goals for developing students who see themselves as readers and writers? Are we developing students who read and write for authentic reasons – to advance their knowledge and the knowledge of others, to present their analysis of different perspectives and advocate for just causes, to enjoy and share their enjoyment of different text genres, and to become active users of information in their speaking and writing about texts that they read?*

INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFTS ARE VISIBLE

The above set of questions are examples of questions teachers share with me when I visit their classrooms. There is much to notice when I visit K-6 classrooms. The goal for building students' comprehension of increasingly more complex texts is at the forefront of literacy instruction. There is an increase of complex and informational texts. Interactive read aloud and shared reading instruction, in addition to guided reading instruction in small groups, are robust elements of a literacy block. Foundational skills, such as print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and other word learning skills are taught in the early grades with explicit and authentic connections to reading and writing. Writing about texts to build knowledge and within writing workshops prepare students to communicate for different purposes and for different audiences. Digital literacy communities are supporting students' research and generative capabilities as they construct meaningful and multimodal texts. Also, there is an increased use of formative assessments that provide a method for teachers to carefully track students' responses to instruction, changes that are both positive or problematic and that inform instructional decision making.

FROM POSSIBILITIES TO MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

As I reflect on instructional changes that are occurring and help teachers make sense of the data they are collecting, it is not unusual to identify new challenges and dilemmas we want to address. Often these challenges and dilemmas are the result of unintended consequences of our actions and/or missed opportunities. As Calkins (2001) noted, "One of the distressing things about teaching is that in an effort to solve one problem we so often create new problems" (p. 310). And it is these problems that we tackle during our professional learning activities.

As educators, we often talk about unintended consequences of our actions. We intend for our students to take an active role in text discussions, but the review of our informal notes tells us that far too much teacher talk occurs. An unintended consequence. Hirschman (1977) also pointed to unrealized consequences or missed opportunities that are the consequences of actions. I believe that often these missed opportunities are overlooked when we analyze our teaching and our students' learning. Missed opportunities are often nuanced outcomes of actions and not as easy to detect.

For example, if students are asked to read texts that seem to be too difficult for them, we may over-attend to students' multiple miscues during reading (and of course, we do need to consider these). During the process of thinking about how to adjust the choice of texts for future instruction, we might fail to notice the multiple strategies that students *are using* to cope (e.g., rereading, drawing on previous paragraphs to predict meaning of subsequent ones) and fail to encourage students to use these strategies when they again meet a challenging text. Thus, we may fail to realize the full potential of some actions that might be productive if actualized in constructive ways.

Drawing on my most recent classroom observations, I identify additional examples of potential missed opportunities that may be embedded in our current practices.

POTENTIAL MISSED OPPORTUNITIES WITH CHOICE OF COMPLEX TEXT. Is it possible that we are over-relying on lexile levels when choosing texts for our instruction, with less attention to the qualitative and reader-task variables? If so, we may be *missing opportunities* to extend students' prior knowledge. Students need to use what they know to build new understandings and they need tasks that carry new knowledge forward during multiple applications that will deepen knowledge development (Clay, 1998).

Increasing access to complex texts across the grades is becoming a common practice in our classrooms. The goal is to prepare high school graduates to read and comprehend the complex texts they are likely to face as college students or in the workplace. And importantly, providing access to complex texts for all students has the goal of knowledge development as students learn new concepts and about their world.

Yet it is evident that choosing the most appropriate texts for students can be challenging. We are judging texts and their appropriateness for our students using quantitative, qualitative, and reader-task variables. I worry, though, that the quantitative variables might outweigh the other two; once we have identified a lexile level or grade level equivalent score, how often do we stop to analyze the text further for its relationship to students' prior knowledge and experiences? It is much more difficult to judge complexity of a text based on the qualitative and reader-task dimensions. To do so we need to *know about our students* (e.g., their history with similar texts, their prior knowledge) and *what is expected of the students* in the work they do around the text content.

For example, when reading with our second graders about kapok trees that grow in rainforests, are we considering whether our students have prior knowledge of trees' dependence on their surroundings to survive? Are they prepared to distinguish conditions needed for plants and trees and animals and birds to survive in a rainforest vs. surviving in their own neighborhood? Are there students who have lived in countries with rainforests and if so, how will we draw on their prior knowledge? Are there students who have little knowledge of plant life and forests, and if so, what adjustments are required? When qualitative and reader variables are considered, instruction focuses on making connections to what students know already or builds knowledge that may not have been established previously. Similarly, tasks are responsive to students' knowledge and experiential history. More or less guidance may be needed to scaffold students' ability to complete tasks that extend their knowledge to consider real world problems, such as writing their own persuasive texts or identifying arguments for conservation of trees. The potential of deepening knowledge with complex texts may not be realized without adequate consideration of students' prior knowledge and experiential history. *A missed opportunity.*

POTENTIAL MISSED OPPORTUNITIES WHEN WE DIMINISH STUDENT INQUIRY. As teachers, we plan carefully for classroom routines (e.g., openings to text discussions, modeling of comprehension strategies, text-based questions for developing students' comprehension, demonstrating how to use mentor texts for writing) that are intended to engage our students' in thoughtful reading and writing activities. With our planning, however, do we also plan for our students to take the lead in their own learning? To ask and answer questions that are important to them?

Decades of research have provided strong support for students' gathering of evidence and information to address questions they generate. When rich concepts (e.g., conditions that support plant growth) are introduced and situated, perhaps when building a school garden, students are invited to ask questions about how plants grow (e.g., roots grow down into the dirt, roots need water and minerals and sunlight to grow), and as they observe changes in plant growth they are learning how to represent disciplinary-specific information (e.g., graphing growth of plants, comparing plant growth in sunny vs. dark conditions; drawing and labeling parts of plants). This process of learning is associated with students' gains in knowledge and disciplinary vocabulary (Windschitl & Thompson, 2006) and higher confidence in their problem-solving abilities (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). If teachers are doing too much of the work providing information, students have fewer opportunities for self-directed learning that can have important benefits for acquiring new knowledge. *A missed opportunity.*

POTENTIAL MISSED OPPORTUNITIES DURING TEXT TALK ACTIVITIES. The turn-and-talk strategy is widely implemented in classrooms. The goal is to create students' ownership of new ideas, encouraging them to represent these ideas "in their own words" and from their own perspective. And as we observe this routine, we need to ask if these conversations are productive for students. Are students learning from their peers and sharing what they are learning with each other? Are they advancing knowledge as they participate in the discussions or merely repeating what they heard from their teacher and/or peers?

Too often students across the grades are unsure about what is expected of them during turn and talk routines or other structures that invite student discussion. And with this uncertainty about expectations, students may shift frequently from one idea to another or fail to make connections to each other's talk or to the text they are discussing. These conversations may fail to extend meanings as they lack "progressive discourse" (Nachowitz & Brumer, 2014), the deepening of knowledge that occurs with iterative cycles of discussion.

Additionally, we need to examine our role in text discussions. Do we listen to what students are discussing, so that we can bring their talk to the larger group discussion? Referencing students' ideas is useful to support students' learning from each other as they question and elaborate on ideas that are entered into the conversation. Additionally, are we listening for misconceptions that can be addressed immediately by taking students back to the text for clarifying and/or extending understandings? For example, when discussing earthquakes with a class of third graders, students may have difficulty understanding the function of tectonic plates and descriptions of their movement below the earth. Taking students back to the text to examine charts and seismograph photos and reread how energy is transferred and how the earth is cracked during the movement of the plates may be necessary to support students' comprehension of the text passages they are reading. When we do not listen carefully to students' interpretations, misconceptions can be overlooked. *A missed opportunity.*

TAKING ACTION ON MISSED OPPORTUNITIES WITH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

A problem-solving approach to professional learning offers many possibilities for continuous analysis of our instructional decisions and impact on students' learning. And part of our analysis should identify missed opportunities for instructional moves—missed opportunities that require changes in our actions. Each of the missed opportunities that I describe above, and many others that can be identified, can direct the work of our professional learning. Perhaps we will form a book study group to examine more carefully how to apply qualitative variables to analyze complex texts, or we may choose to participate in a lesson study that focuses on inquiry-based learning environments; and/or we may initiate a teacher research project in which we collect data on our students' talk during book discussions. These methods for engaging professional learning are research based and hold promise for sustaining the professional learning plan (Risko & Vogt, 2017). And when we analyze our teaching and our students' learning, we can advance what we know and do during our instruction and during our shared learning with our colleagues and students. A powerful opportunity for professional learning.

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