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## Professional Learning of Literacy Teachers of Specialized Populations

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## Professional Learning of Literacy Teachers of Specialized Populations: The Case for Relevant, Connected, Joyful Learning

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### Abstract

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In this article, the researchers share results from a study on teachers' responses to professional learning experiences with a focus on balanced literacy methods to best meet the literacy needs of their d/Deaf students. The authors use theories of communities of practice, connected learning, and collective hope. Findings indicate that for professional learning to be meaningful and actionable, it needed to include the following four criteria: (1) must be relevant to the specific population of children; (2) must acknowledge and value organic, teacher-initiated professional learning; (3) must incorporate a collaboratively decided-upon shared purpose; and (4) must be joy driven and reflection oriented. This study serves as a model for school leaders and literacy professionals seeking to renew hope within their school community with the belief that all students can learn and thrive.

**Keywords:** *professional learning, balanced literacy, communities of practice, d/Deaf students*

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“There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope.”

—Paulo Freire (1994, p. 91)

*Hope.* It's a word like *love, joy, or happiness* that tends to be more of an aspiration than a practice. This is true in many of our personal lives but especially in our professional lives. This is even truer for educators charged with supporting striving readers and writers who may need extra support to master skills and strategies to be independent and fluent. Yet hope is theoretically rooted in critical pedagogy, part of our communal discourse, and part of how many of us sustain ourselves in the work of teaching toward transformation. In the context of literacy teaching, there are myriad things we hope for every day. We hope the best for our students. We hope that they become lifelong readers and writers. We hope that they use literacies to change the world. We hope that teachers cultivate hope for their students.

Yet hope can be hard to hold onto, especially for teachers working in isolation and behind closed doors. Our partnership began from a shared belief that hope could help teachers collectively reimagine something better for their students. Over the course of four years, we supported teachers at the Hoy School (pseudonym) who work with children who are d/Deaf to grow in the language and literacy skills needed to be communicators in both a d/Deaf and hearing world. After years of collective thought and action, we started to witness changes in teachers' beliefs and practices that gave us a new sense of hope for all children to engage in meaningful, memorable, joyful literacy learning.

In this article, we interpret teachers' responses to professional learning experiences with an interest in determining what elements of professional learning experiences impacted their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Specifically, we offer the argument, rooted in our data, for why relevant, connected, joyful professional learning supports teachers to enact change in their classrooms. In doing so, we further knowledge in the field about what constitutes effective professional learning for teachers working with a highly specialized population of d/Deaf students and we discuss explicit ways that our findings could be adapted for teachers of other populations. Although this article details the responses specific teachers had to professional learning experiences, we believe that teachers in all contexts want to be positioned as active agents in their own professional growth. Our findings offer school leaders possibilities for co-constructing professional learning experiences with their teachers, particularly teachers working with specialized populations.

### **Hopeful Literacy Learning in Practice**

Walking through the halls of Hoy School, you might see students from sixth, seventh, and eighth grades browsing dozens of books that are spread out on folding tables during their reading workshop. Some students find something of interest immediately and start quietly reading in the corners of the large room. Other students keep browsing and sharing favorite titles with one another as a community of readers. Picture books, early readers, and graphic texts are mixed with middle-grade novels. Later in the day, these students will be viewing clips from the film *Jaws* to begin noticing the characteristics of horror films. Soon, they will be taking what they have learned from books, films, and graphic texts to create their own horror comic books. In this unit, they are tackling big questions like "How do readers use text evidence and the language of horror to share their thinking?"

Down the hall, first graders are using emoji cards to learn new words that describe emotions. They are familiar with emojis from sending family members text messages. They routinely send the school principal emoji texts to share how they are feeling that day. They will use the emoji cards to play charades acting out and guessing one another's dramatized emotions. This serves as a language primer to support students to leverage more specific words to infer characters' feelings in books. Later in the unit, they will be using their new knowledge of feelings to write and illustrate "I remember" stories from their own lives.

The literacy and language learning at Hoy School is rich, varied, multimodal, and multigenre. The multiple literacies the teachers immerse students in are designed to intentionally support students with all kinds of texts including visual, print, digital,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *d/Deaf students* and *teacher of the d/Deaf* are the norm; *d/Deaf* is a cultural identifier for the d/Deaf community. The uppercase *D* represents the Deaf Culture, and the lowercase *d* denotes deafness as an audiological condition.

multimodal, and performance based. Engaging teachers in professional learning about what, why, and how we read and write helped support the teachers to reimagine a literacy curriculum that is empowering, context specific, and workshop oriented.

When we began partnering to design and facilitate professional learning sessions for teachers, we wanted to support them to be agentive in their own classrooms and in their collaborative approaches with one another. Over a period of four years, we collaborated to build a schoolwide literacy culture rooted in the instructional methods of balanced literacy (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2009) and engagement with multiple literacies (Guthrie, 2001; Hinchman & Sheridan-Thomas, 2008) with the belief that all students can become independent and fluent readers, writers, and communicators. In this exploratory study, we were both researchers as well as presenters and facilitators. We created specific pathways for teachers to interact with one another and to continuously provide feedback on the process. Katie was a literacy consultant partnered with the school, and Jodi was the supervisor of teachers whose role it was to oversee the teachers' instructional methods, assessment practices, and care of the students. We chose this school as the site for this study because we found that innovative, impactful professional learning practices were taking place that were worth sharing with other literacy professionals.

Designing and facilitating professional learning experiences is complex, particularly when supporting teachers working with specialized populations of students. English language skills and reading levels of d/Deaf students are well below those of their hearing peers and have remained at the fourth- to fifth-grade ceiling for more than 100 years (Easterbrooks & Beal-Alvarez, 2012; Trezek, Wang, & Paul, 2010; Wang, 2010). Additionally, the students at the site of this study came from low-income homes where families often speak languages other than English. Isolated teacher workshops planned without teacher input would limit the professional learning or engagement that could occur for teachers working with this highly specialized population of students. Instead, as presenters, facilitators, and architects of the professional learning experiences, it was imperative that we honored the teachers' existing skill sets, emotional resilience, and deep interest in their students' success as literacy learners.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for this study was threefold. First, professional learning for teachers is often implemented without direct input from teachers. Yet professional learning often requires significant financial as well as human capital. Given the resources required to initiate professional learning, this research can help provide a better understanding of the professional learning models that teachers find most impactful. Second, the voices of teachers who work with specialized populations of students are often missing from the literature on effective professional learning. Finally, this study can serve as a model for school leaders and literacy professionals seeking to renew hope within their school community with the belief that all students can learn and thrive.

### **Elements of Effective Professional Learning**

To design professional learning experiences for teachers working with a highly specialized population of children, we started by asking ourselves: "What constitutes 'effective' professional learning? What professional learning practices have been found to most likely impact classroom instruction?" Although there is no precise formula given the diversity of needs of schools and teachers, there is some consensus in the international research literature about the qualities of effective professional learning. Research continues to show that effective professional learning is school-based, collaborative, progressive,

ongoing, and closely tied to student progress and learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 1999). Fraut (1994) argues that the type of professional knowledge that is acquired through professional learning is important but not sufficient. Rather, it is the context in which professional knowledge is acquired and subsequently used that most impacts instruction. Additionally, research on professional learning for special educators shows that special education teachers are often isolated and that professional learning experiences must help bridge interpersonal connections (Billingsley, 2003; Otis-Wilburn, Winn, Griffin, & Kilgore, 2005). Further, research shows that professional learning in special education settings must address some of the unique curricular and instructional constraints under which special education teachers operate (Brownell, Ross, Colon & McCallum, 2005).

In June 2017, the Learning Policy Institute released the report *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Darling Hammond et al., 2017), which examined the wide body of international literature on professional learning. A meta-analysis was conducted on 35 studies that demonstrated a link between changes in teachers' practices and positive student learning outcomes. Findings yielded seven design elements that contribute to effective professional learning.

**Element 1: Focus on content.** Content is the foundational knowledge teachers need to enact curriculum. In this study, content included an understanding of genre, print and thinking strategies, conventions of language, and reading and writing processes such as making book choices and choosing writing topics.

**Element 2: Active learning.** When learning is meaningful, teachers are more likely to engage with content (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Active learning for teachers in this study included examining student artifacts, collaboratively planning lessons and units of study, participating in and leading lessons, and making classroom materials such as anchor charts that visually display processes and strategies.

**Element 3: Support for collaboration.** It has long been acknowledged that there is power in social learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Yet for collaboration to be meaningful it must support a collective purpose. Ultimately, collaboration requires trust in one's colleagues, and it takes time to ensure authentic rather than contrived collegiality (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In contrived collegiality, challenges are sometimes discussed but instructional practices are rarely changed. Truly collaborative relationships and inquiries enhance professional learning and support solution-oriented thinking. In this study, collaboration occurred in one-on-one, small-group, and whole-school settings.

**Element 4: Models of effective practice.** Teachers benefit from seeing practices in action. In this study, we used videos, analysis of live lessons, and peer observations to model effective practices. We also analyzed student artifacts to consider what methods could be adjusted to increase student learning.

**Element 5: Coaching and expert support.** Instructional leaders, coaches, university faculty, outside consultants, and teachers can all serve as experts. In highly specialized settings, teachers become the primary expert for peers to collaborate and apply active learning strategies with. Expert does not mean someone who is "all-knowing" but rather someone who takes a co-learner stance to see multiple possibilities for instructional decisions. In this study, teachers were positioned as experts in d/Deaf education to complement the expertise we were bringing from the field of literacy.

**Element 6: Feedback and reflection.** Feedback and reflection are distinct but complementary processes. Professional learning must support opportunities for teachers to frequently “think about, receive input on, and make change to their practice” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 14). Feedback must be helpful and constructive rather than critical. In this study, feedback was intentionally nonjudgmental and followed the format of I see/I think/I wonder to facilitate dialogue.

**Element 7: Sustainable.** Sustained focus over time is essential for effective professional learning. Teachers need time to meet, discuss, implement ideas, and return to share. When professional learning is sustainable, it allows teachers to engage in cycles of continuous learning. In this study, we set yearly goals and sought feedback from teachers to redesign professional learning experiences to build a sustainable model.

These seven criteria were continuously considered as we developed professional learning experiences with teachers to create a schoolwide instructional literacy culture.

### **Balanced Literacy: A Schoolwide Instructional Goal**

Balanced literacy is a curricular methodology that integrates various modalities of literacy instruction aimed at supporting students toward proficient and lifelong reading, writing, and receptive and expressive communicating. Research on balanced literacy for d/Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students is not new (Mayer, 2007; Schirmer, 1994; Schirmer & McGough, 2005; Wurst, Jones, & Luckner, 2005). For over two decades, researchers have been advocating that children who are d/Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing benefit from instructional practices including independent reading and writing, strategy instruction, and setting a purpose for reading and writing. Yet a knowledge base of balanced literacy methods is not typically part of coursework for special education programs or programs for teachers of d/Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students. As such, continuous professional learning experiences in balanced literacy can give teachers a new knowledge base to operate from as well as specific practices to enact in their classrooms.

Characterized by explicit instruction and the use of authentic texts, balanced literacy includes several instructional approaches that were emphasized at the site of this study. One method in balanced literacy is the interactive read-aloud, where teachers model fluent reading typically from a work of children’s literature by incorporating their own think-alouds and soliciting students’ responses to the text before, during, and after reading. Read-aloud texts are typically beyond students’ independent reading levels and are chosen for the opportunities they provide for higher level thinking and discourse. Such texts support students to use the full range of their cognitive resources. Read-alouds at Hoy School were often linked to interdisciplinary studies. Science and social studies topics were heavily emphasized in the read-aloud experiences.

Shared reading is a method in balanced literacy where students read an enlarged text with teacher support (Button & Johnson, 1997; Holdaway, 1979). This was often accomplished through the SMART Board at Hoy School, and students were encouraged to participate through choral signing of the text or through individual students signing select sentences that all of the students could see.

Mini-lessons in both reading and writing are a part of balanced literacy, where teachers explicitly model a strategy for students to then apply in their independent reading or writing. Mini-lessons at Hoy School followed a clear and consistent structure of Warm Up (refer to previous teaching or support students to make a connection), Teach (model a single strategy with a text students are familiar with), Try (give students an opportunity

to try the strategy in a small way), and Clarify (remind students about the strategy before they try it further on their own with an independent text; Allyn, 2007). During independent reading and writing, teachers conferred one-on-one with students using a variety of techniques to further support students to make progress as readers and writers and to think metacognitively about their work with the goal of transferring skills across texts.

Small-group work, in the form of guided reading, was also used as a part of balanced literacy at Hoy School; students met in pairs or small groups, with the teachers guiding student reading with a text at an instructional level. Teachers were encouraged to model for students various reading strategies or to offer students new ways of furthering their reading based on Fountas and Pinnell's (2016) continuum of literacy learning.

The teachers at Hoy School met with Jodi on a regular basis to discuss their unit plans for the month and to select works of children's literature for use across the balanced literacy methods described above. These meetings served as opportunities for teachers to share their thoughts about plans and to ask clarifying questions about methods, their students, and the ways assessment of student learning was informing instruction. With permission, we analyzed lesson plans and unit plans as a continuous part of the professional learning process.

Additionally, units of study were co-created by the teachers with an emphasis on mini-lessons to provide students with targeted, purposeful learning experiences across genres every year. These curricular maps were revisited each year by grade-level teams and were revised with our support. Teachers were given release time to revise the documents, and a grade-level team leader was responsible for the maintenance of the documents. Teachers were positioned as owners of these living documents and were encouraged to annotate and make informed changes. They were also encouraged to share their thinking with us about what was working and what they wanted to change to strengthen their students' literacy learning experiences.

Additionally, photographs were taken of balanced literacy practices at the school and were hung in a communal faculty area for teachers to have a quick reference as the methods were taking root in the building.

Workshops were led by Katie on each balanced literacy method with accompanying classroom videos. These workshops were followed up with peer coaching visits where teachers were paired with a colleague to serve as a peer coach who offered compliments about instruction as well as probing and clarifying questions about instructional choices, with the goal of activating the teachers' thought processes. The peer coaching process was initially guided by Katie to help the teachers gain comfort with observing each other's practices and with using language associated with compliments and questions to further their colleagues' thinking and teaching.

In support of the peer coaching process, teachers were encouraged to create SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) goals for themselves, with a focus on one aspect of balanced literacy. Teachers chose goals such as increasing wait time during mini-lessons, providing closure at the end of mini-lessons, integrating read-alouds into science and social studies, and integrating word study words into the warm-up routine of guided reading.

Over the 4 years of partnership, we continuously planned for professional learning experiences based on teacher feedback. This constituted a continuous plan of improvement

as the teachers worked to learn about and then refine their use of balanced literacy methods to support their students. Our process in designing professional learning was imperfect, but signs of impact became evident as we analyzed teachers' written and verbal responses and as we studied curriculum documents.

### **Our Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What meaning and significance can be drawn from teachers' reflections on their professional learning experiences?
2. What do teachers' responses tell us about creating and sustaining a comprehensive schoolwide literacy program for children who are d/Deaf?

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to analyze teachers' responses to professional learning experiences and to glean what teachers who work with a highly specialized population of students who are d/Deaf can add to the existing body of literature on effective professional learning. Data in the form of teacher surveys, our anecdotal notes from professional learning sessions, focus group interview responses, and curricular documents were collected and analyzed to determine what teachers considered effective professional learning for their specific context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Reviewing data from teachers led us to conclude that the concepts of communities of practice, connected learning, and collective hope offered the greatest potential for helping us understand and explain the degree to which the work we established with teachers increased a sense of agency and hope among the teachers.

Lave and Wenger's theories on the effects of communities of practice on social learning and social change helped us consider the teachers' statements from focus group interviews and in survey data (Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2007). Wenger (2007) defines communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). Lave (1991) argues that developing an identity as a member of a community of practice and becoming knowledgeable skillful are part of the same process.

Connected learning theory is rooted in theories of communities of practice and is based on the notion that learning is about expanding the connections between people and information in a learner's personal network (Reynolds, 2015). The connections made possible by the Internet have reminded us that learning is an open and social activity that takes place in communities. In particular, the Internet has changed the way we view information, making expertise distributed and multilayered. Learning then becomes something that happens flexibly across time and space. As articulated by Reynolds (2019),

Connected Learning is based on the notion that learning is about expanding the connections between people and information within a learner's personal network. In this model, the individual learner exists at the center of his/her own learning network and expands knowledge and understanding by increasing the number of connections between nodes, people and information, in that network (para.1).

Connected learning theory and research emphasize learning experiences that are/practice the following:

- **Interest-powered:** Content is focused on relatable knowledge and skills.
- **Peer supported:** Professionals are encouraged by peers who work together and give feedback in authentic collaborative relationships.
- **Production-centered:** Production is valued through the creation of tangible lesson plans, unit plans, rubrics, and assessment tools.
- **Shared purpose:** Teachers have a say in the goals of the professional learning.
- **Openly networked:** Professional learning is well resourced, and teachers have the tools and guidance necessary to use the tools.

Connected learning posits that the most meaningful and resilient forms of learning happen when learners have a personal interest that they are pursuing in a context of cultural affinity through social support and a shared purpose. Learning is accrued and enriched as learning networks expand over time.

Collective hope theory (Braithwaite, 2004; Drahos, 2004; McGeer, 2004) provided a productive conceptual lens for interpreting teachers' responses to professional learning experiences. After reading and considering the data and the literature, we came to conceptualize hope and agency as inextricably linked. Victoria McGeer (2004) contends that in addition to being a unifying and grounding force in human agency, hope is one of its essential and distinctive features. Scholars from positive psychology like Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, and Feldman (2003) define hope as a "cognitive set" that is made up of agency and pathways to achieve goals.

As we looked at the teachers' responses to professional learning experiences, we also considered the ways that collective action is sustainable when individuals engage in a collective hope process demonstrated through a "shared desire for a better society, articulated through a broad set of agreed-upon goals and principles, and developed and elaborated through socially inclusive dialogue" (Braithwaite, 2004, p. 146).

## Our Research Methods

### Site and Participants

Local school districts placed students at Hoy School who met the following criteria per their Individualized Education Program (IEP): (1) at least 80-decibel hearing loss (pure-tone average in the better unaided ear) and (2) a class ratio of 6:1:1 or 6:1:2 (students:teacher:aide). The research site was a privately owned, state-funded school in an urban, northeastern U.S. setting. The school followed a total communication philosophy, which included American Sign Language (ASL), spoken English, and simultaneous communication (i.e., signing and speaking English simultaneously). The school had a total population of 82 students from the Parent-Infant Program through eighth grade, and 100% of students qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch. All of the classroom teachers have graduate degrees in the education of the d/Deaf and are state certified to teach d/Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students. Participants ranged from teachers new to the school who had experienced less than 1 year of professional learning focused on balanced literacy to seasoned teachers with more than 8 years of balanced literacy professional learning.

### Data Collection

Data included anecdotal notes, lesson and unit plan analysis, an electronic survey,

and a focus group interview. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the duration of the professional learning experiences designed to frontload workshops facilitated by Katie and the frequency of data collection methods.

Table 1

*Duration of Professional Learning Experiences and Yearly Focus*

Year	Professional learning	Focus of learning
1	10 full days comprising half-day workshops and classroom observations	Establishing peer coaching protocols and peer observation, SMART goal development, curriculum revision
2	8 full days comprising half-day workshops and classroom observations	Co-teaching, balanced literacy methods, curriculum revision
3	5 full days comprising half-day workshops and classroom observations	Balanced literacy methods focused on new teachers, curriculum revision
4	4 full days of digitally led workshops and discussions	Balanced literacy methods, curriculum revision

Data were gathered in the form of anecdotal notes following each professional learning session, which included, at times, classroom observations. Lesson plans and unit plans were collected for analyses throughout the 4-year partnership, with particular analysis on shifts in planning. An electronic survey distributed to all of the teachers focused on their reactions to professional learning experiences and how well these initiatives supported their growth. These data were used to further design professional learning experiences. All of the teachers in the school across grade levels and departments (N = 29) were invited to participate in the survey; 10 elected to respond. After reviewing the survey responses, we invited all of the teachers to participate in a focus group interview over lunch; five elected to participate. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about teachers' experiences with professional learning and their current sense of success with balanced literacy methods as well as what they could attribute to that success. Here are some examples of focus group questions: In what ways has professional learning fostered your thinking about what's working in your classroom? What changes do you see in yourself as a teacher following professional learning? What changes to your practices have you made following professional learning? What do you think contributed to those changes? When something isn't working in your instruction, what do you look for (or what could help you) to try it again or to do something differently?

### **Data Analysis**

Using tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and a process of analytic induction, we engaged in an iterative process of independently examining data for emerging themes, then discussed findings and emerging hypotheses, revisited the data for additional or contradictory cases, and finally revisited and revised themes accordingly.

First, we examined teachers' survey responses and their language from our notes of sessions and from focus group comments. After initial coding for themes, we then looked closely at where teachers' responses changed over time with specific attention to the ways in which the teachers were discussing how their agency was fostered through professional learning experiences. We then analyzed teachers' lesson and unit plans for potential shifts in practice. We then revisited all of the data and came to four themes based on teachers' statements across data sources and our interpretations of the shifts in practice found in teachers' plans that were confirmed through our classroom observations.

Table 2

*Frequency of Data Collection Methods*

Data collection method	Frequency
Anecdotal notes	Ongoing; following each professional learning session
Lesson and unit plan analysis	Ongoing; monthly for 4 years
Electronic survey	Following second year of professional learning
Focus group interview	During final year of professional learning

### Findings

After analyzing the data, we found that four themes emerged as essential conditions for professional learning to have an impact on teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices that add to existing literature on professional learning for teachers working with specialized populations of students. In this section, we explain the four themes and provide teachers' comments that led us to determine each theme. We also describe the professional learning experiences tied to these statements.

#### Relevancy Generates Interest

It has long been acknowledged that professional learning for teachers benefits students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Jacquith, Mindich, Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2010). Yet sometimes teachers want more impactful professional learning experiences and are willing to ask for them to better support their students. As professionals, it is no surprise that teachers seek meaningful growth experiences with other educators and that one key to finding meaning comes from professional learning that feels context driven and student specific, particularly for teachers working with specialized populations.

As we coded data, we started to realize a clear emphasis from the teachers on how relevancy was a critical factor for them to commit to the learning experience and to value balanced literacy methods as worthwhile for their students. One teacher adamantly stated:

I think a lot of times when we have professional learning—I don't feel like it applies to our students even when it is specifically for the d/Deaf. We have a population that is not your traditional d/Deaf student. So, when we do get someone who comes in and I really feel is talking about our kids, I feel that those PD opportunities...I get a lot more out of them. When I can see my class in the presentation, I get a lot more out of that.

Similarly, another teacher reported:

I find that professional learning that helps me explicitly visualize some of my students when the presenter is speaking, then I can utilize those techniques. I can learn a lot in those moments and it helps me become a better teacher.

In order to strengthen the relevancy of the professional learning experiences we designed, we searched for research from the field of d/Deaf education on the role of balanced literacy and shared those articles with teachers. We also explicitly offered bridges between literacy practices to show teachers how sight word study guided by d/Deaf education specialists could be incorporated into guided reading, shared reading, and conferring moments with readers and writers. Classroom visits were organized through the peer coaching process for teachers to observe one another's practices across balanced literacy methods so that teachers could see their peers using balanced literacy methods with success. Making the professional learning experiences relevant supported teacher buy-in to the methods, thereby strengthening the balanced literacy framework across the school and the teachers' sense of agency.

### **Recognize and Value Organic Professional Learning**

As facilitators and architects of the professional learning experiences, we recognized that we were not seen as peers. One of the primary drivers for engagement with professional learning was that it be collaborative, which is consistent with research from the field. However, teachers expressed a strong need for the organic nature of peer support that happens during impromptu hallway conversations and over conversations during lunch to be valued as professional learning. Teachers shared statements such as this: "When something isn't working in instruction, I go to colleagues. If I see something on a bulletin board I say, 'Can you share it with me?'" Teachers also utilized assistant teachers and viewed them as support systems to strengthen their instructional methods and student learning as evident through statements like this: "Sometimes I ask my assistant, 'Do you think they understand that? Can you try to explain it in a different way?' You get ideas asking other people." A culture of idea sharing was facilitated through workshops but also through teachers' willingness to share their questions with one another as evidenced by this statement:

I might go upstairs to a colleague with one agenda and then see something and question her about it: What is that? How do you use it? Why is that there? And then a conversation opens up. Oh. And then I get an idea how can I modify that for my students and we'll talk about it. And then a whole other door opens.

A key condition for peer support to organically develop was the need for mutual trust to exist within and across grade levels. When asked about how nonjudgmental relationships with their peers developed, teachers responded that the amount of effort they saw their colleagues putting in to the students made them want to approach them with questions and ideas. There was also a pedagogical humility that developed as the teachers learned about and tried balanced literacy methods with successes and missteps. As one teacher stated, "None of us knows it all." Likewise, we began to see teachers self-advocate as peer coaching went into its third year of implementation with teacher statements like this: "I now feel comfortable advocating for myself. By that I mean if I have an area that I feel I need to develop, I will seek out a colleague more skilled in that area to confer with or to observe." These organic, self-directed moments of professional learning needed to be highly valued for more formal professional learning to have an impact.

To foster a sense of pedagogical humility and to honor the organic nature of peer learning, we strove to position ourselves as lead learners especially during workshops. We

frequently asked questions and asked teachers to stop and jot their thinking or turn and talk to a peer about their ideas. More importantly, we tried to acknowledge the expertise across the building in the use of balanced literacy methods and in the ways teachers' were innovative and student responsive.

### Shared Purpose Builds Meaning

To support an entire school in valuing balanced literacy methods, we needed to establish a shared purpose. To achieve a shared purpose, teachers were asked to define what it meant to be a reader and a writer. Teachers shared statements like this: "Reading requires one to think, feel, and imagine." Teachers were also periodically asked to reflect during workshops on the ways they saw their students growing as literacy learners and what felt good in their teaching. Teachers responded with statements like this:

My students have learned to trust their own instincts and even each other while I am conferring. They are using all of their resources available to them. It is one of my personal goals that students in my classroom are able to work and problem solve independently.

These statements were very different from teachers' original thinking about reading as an independent, word-based skill, with themselves as the sole teacher in the room.

Analysis of teachers' lesson plans and unit plans also demonstrated a shift from activity-based descriptions of daily lessons to more meaningful teaching points. The following chart shows a unit plan sample at the start of the professional learning (see Table 3) and a revised version of the unit plan at the end of the professional learning (see Table 4):

Table 3

#### *Original Unit Plan Sample, Eighth Grade*

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#### Original

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##### Week 1

- Watch *Jaws* (requires 2 days, some double periods)
- Watch *Poltergeist* (requires 2 days, some double periods)
- Compare (e.g., both are horror, both scare you, but only *Jaws* has blood and gore; both use suspense to scare audiences)
- Create feature list for horror and suspense

##### Week 2

#### ASL storytelling:

- Edgar Allan Poe's "The Telltale Heart" (from *Tales of Mystery and Terror, Great Illustrated Classics* edition); staff member signs the story (takes about 2 days to read and discuss)
  - "The Black Cat" (video or DVD from Deaf Studies Room); Patrick Graybill is the presenter (1 day, watch the video several times, can have kids try to copy parts of it)
  - Read aloud "The Cask of the Amontillado" (from *Tales of Mystery and Terror, Great Illustrated Classics* edition); staff member signs the story (takes about 2 days to read and discuss)
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Table 4

*Revised Unit Plan, Eighth Grade*

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Revised (ML=mini-lesson; IP=independent practice)

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**Step 1. Viewers begin to notice characteristics of horror films.**

ML: Teacher shares the film *Jaws*.

IP: Students view *Jaws* and share their thinking about one thing they noticed on a post-it (thinking square).

**Step 2. Viewers begin to notice similarities across horror films with emphasis on the purpose of horror to scare your audience.**

ML: Teacher shares the film *Poltergeist*.

IP: Students view *Poltergeist* and share their thinking about one thing they noticed on a post-it (thinking square).

**Step 3. Viewers make comparisons across horror films.**

ML: Teacher shares post-its from previous day to begin to construct a feature list.

IP: Together as a class or with partners, students generate a feature list (suspense, blood, gore, fear, make you nervous, death, series of events, shock, urgency, foreshadowing)

**Step 4. Readers identify connections between horror on film and horror in print.**

ML: Teacher reads aloud “The Masque of the Red Death,” modeling thinking about connections between horror on film and horror in print using the language of features of the genre.

IP: Students jot down their noticings about how authors of print use some of the same techniques as filmmakers.

**Step 5. Readers retell horror stories by including key features of horror.**

ML: Teacher shares the video of “The Black Cat.” At the end, teacher models thinking about features noticed in the story.

IP: Students retell through the air with an emphasis on features of the genre.

**Step 6. Readers identify typical characters represented in horror especially horrific villains and victims.**

ML: Teacher reads aloud *The Cask of the Amontillado* modeling your own thinking about characters in horror.

Table 4 (cont'd)

IP: Students choose a character from the story to provide text evidence for why they are a villain or a victim.

**Step 7. Readers identify the technique of foreshadowing in horror.**

ML: Teacher reads aloud “The Telltale Heart,” modeling thinking about foreshadowing and using the language of features of the genre.

IP: Students provide evidence of foreshadowing in the text of “The Telltale Heart.” If possible they refer back to previously read/viewed stories and provide examples of foreshadowing.

**Step 8. Readers provide evidence for several features of horror in a single work.**

Teacher shares the video of “The Pit and the Pendulum.”

IP: Students provide evidence of all features of the genre previously studied, with a focus on character traits, foreshadowing, and suspense.

**Step 9. Readers compare and contrast horror stories by the same author.**

ML: With teacher guidance, in a large-group setting, students compare and contrast two or three previously studied stories by Edgar Allan Poe.

IP: Students (independently or in pairs) compare two or three previously studied stories by Edgar Allan Poe (including but not limited to presence or absence of blood, presence or absence of insanity, presence or absence of a murder, presence or absence of hidden body, etc.).

**Step 10. Readers closely read for a specific feature in a horror story.**

ML: Teacher reads aloud to a small group from Scary Stories, More Scare Stories, Short and Shivery Tales, etc. Teacher rotates tables, reading to about two tables per day.

IP: Students jot down their thinking on an excerpt from the story, labeling features of horror. Or students name a feature in the air that they noticed the story has as a hallmark of horror.

**Step 11. Readers apply what they know about horror to write a new ending.**

ML: Teacher reads aloud “Just Delicious,” modeling thinking about possible endings.

IP: Students write their own endings in groups.

**Step 12. Readers share their original stories by acting out their horror endings.**

ML: Teacher emphasizes techniques for performing for others.

IP: Students act out their stories for other groups with an emphasis on horror features.

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The shifts in planning translated to shifts in practice around the shared purpose of redefining reading and writing for empowerment.

Anecdotal notes from classroom observations also showed that teachers were using the language of the teaching points at the start of each lesson and that modeling increased with this shift in planning. Teaching was more targeted, and students were more able to apply the teaching points with greater independence and fewer interruptions or scaffolds. The shared purpose of literacy learning at Hoy School had shifted from a limited purpose of supporting students with skills to a more expansive purpose of also supporting them with strong reading, writing, and communicating identities.

### **Joy and Self-Reflection Offer Hope**

The final theme that emerged in our data from teachers was the need for collective hope to be continuously kindled through a focus on joy and self-reflection. As facilitators and architects of the professional learning environment, we made conscious efforts to infuse a spirit of joy into the learning process. Teachers were asked to reflect on what made their teaching joyful. They were also asked to reflect on how their students would respond if asked what about literacy learning was joyful for them. Teachers were guided to think about goals they had for themselves through “one little word” exercises where they chose one word that could serve as a touchstone for making joyful learning a priority and a reality in their classroom. Teachers chose words *like honest, effort, brave, creativity, trying, and ever-changing*. Teachers also responded to end-of-year reflections with statements like this:

Our session on joy jumped out at me and I yelled out, “Can I make that my professional goal for this year?” It didn’t just become my SMART goal but it reminded me that there should be joy in all the things they are doing. That PD we had really reminded me to bring the joy back to the classroom. It shouldn’t be drudgery but to try to make it a place where they are enthusiastic about what they are learning. It’s something easy to lose sight of when you bogged down in the requirements and the assessments. To not lose sight of that joy part.

This showed us that emphasizing and giving actionable ways to make joy a priority fostered teacher buy-in.

As with joy, teacher reflection was evident in statements like this: “Sometimes I often do this when I’m driving. I evaluate myself pretty much every day. What did I do? Could it do it a different way? Do I need to break it down further? It’s a self-reflection/evaluation every day.” Although we were there to facilitate the professional learning environment, it was the teachers themselves who chose to be reflective, collaborative, joyful, and open to new possibilities for teaching and learning in their classrooms.

### **Implications for Teacher Professional Learning**

There is a wealth of literature on professional learning for teachers, but the voices of teachers, particularly the voices of teachers working with specialized populations of students, are rarely placed at the center. Our goal in this work was to share the perspectives of teachers often marginalized or forgotten in the literature. As architects of professional learning, we were prepared to be met with some resistance from teachers who were comfortable with their methods of literacy instruction or who doubted the impact balanced literacy methods could have on their students. However, our data countered that assumption. Instead of resistance or frustration, we found that with an intentional and collaborative effort to support teachers to be agentive, the professional learning that we were designing

was working and it was being met with positivity.

There are several key implications for other schools for the d/Deaf and for other school settings with specialized populations given the common issues teachers confront as they engage with professional learning. First, professional learning must be relevant for teacher learning to be strengthened. We urge staff developers and building leaders to focus on making connections and crossing boundaries. Rather than assume disconnection, assume connection with one another and work to establish a shared purpose. Establishing a shared purpose about what it means to be a reader or writer was fundamental in building consensus around the work. Daring to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching is challenging work. Second, we strove to honor the funds of knowledge that teachers had, particularly when it differed from Katie's as a literacy staff developer. Recognizing teachers' expertise helped open pathways for shared learning. It also supported peers to view one another as experts. Recognizing one another's expertise can help launch a peer coaching model and establish trusting relationships among teachers. Finally, emphasizing joy and the power of reflection makes the learning process itself more meaningful for teachers. When teachers set goals for themselves that included what joy would look like in their classrooms, they, in turn, became more joyful. We recommend using professional learning time to give teachers a chance to reflect on what joyful learning looks like in their classrooms and what it could be.

### **Limitations**

This exploratory study yielded results with implications for teacher professional learning, but several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, this study focused on one school where approximately one-third of the teachers participated in follow-up surveys and one-fifth participated in focus groups. The inclusion of additional teacher responses would help to gain a more complete understanding of study implications. The teachers who elected to participate became a convenience sample and, as such, did not represent the full range of perspectives of teachers who participated in literacy-based professional learning. Additionally, we decided to include teachers who had a range of years of experience, including new and veteran teachers, and we gave their responses equal consideration. Further research could delineate the specific responses of each of these groups of teachers for a more nuanced understanding of how professional learning for teachers with specialized populations must change over the course of their career.

Further, not every goal we set forth in designing professional learning for teachers came to fruition. Although the teachers who responded to the survey and participated in the focus group demonstrated changes in beliefs, attitudes, and practices, some teachers who elected not to participate in the research did not show anticipated changes. A few teachers held fast to their beliefs about the limitations of students and sustained their deficit-oriented beliefs about their students' literacy and language skills. A few teachers remained committed to a belief that word work was sufficient for the development of literacy skills and struggled to deepen their understanding of a comprehensive literacy program or the value of workshop methods. These same teachers valued the routines and assessment practices associated with word work and did not allot sufficient instructional time to modeling, independent reading, or independent writing associated with workshop methods. Yet by the fourth year many teachers who had initially shown resistance to balanced literacy and workshop methods began to participate more positively in professional workshops. This, in part, was due to changes in grade-level teacher placements, which allowed more resistant teachers to learn from new peers who embraced a hopeful stance about their students. These changes could

not necessarily be attributed to the professional learning, rather to building leader decisions for the benefit of all students.

### Final Thoughts

At a time when it feels like teachers are facing unprecedented changes and pressures, we were heartened that the teachers in our study found that professional learning could be both joyful and purposeful. This was not the product of chance. Rather, it was fostered by design. We learned from the teachers that they wanted to grow professionally and develop their craft. Much of their feedback was about a natural or organic process for professional learning. A bulletin board by a colleague displaying student work may support one teacher to ask questions of another. Another bulletin board showing balanced literacy methods in action at the school strategically placed by the microwave allowed the teachers to reflect on previously learned topics and encouraged them to keep trying to incorporate balanced literacy methods into their instruction. Much of what we learned from the teachers was about the importance of trust in any professional learning relationship. Trust in each other was critical for peer-to-peer coaching models to be effective. Teachers trusted in us to support their professional learning in meaningful and purposeful ways that would directly influence the literacy learning of their students. Likewise, we trusted in the teachers' intrinsic motivation to grow in their practices and to be open to changing their beliefs about literacy learning.

Drawing from existing and extensive research from the field on professional learning and balanced literacy with d/Deaf children, this article adds to the professional discourse so that other school leaders and literacy professionals can make professional learning meaningful for teachers. It is our hope that all teachers will find themselves in professional experiences that allow them to grow and change in ways that benefit their students and that inspire them to connect with each other to make their schools stronger.

### About the Authors

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Jodi L. Falk is the executive director of St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf (SFDS), in Brooklyn, New York. Her education, work, and research experience are in fields of language, literacy, professional development, d/Deaf studies, and special education. Prior to joining the SFDS community, Dr. Falk was an educational supervisor at St. Joseph's School for the Deaf, in the Bronx, New York. Dr. Falk received both her MA and PhD in the education of the deaf from Teachers College, Columbia University.

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