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Scaffolding Learning for Teachers of Multilingual Learners Through Agency, Leadership, and Collaboration

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Grounded in findings from multiple disciplines (e.g., neuroscience, human, development, cognitive science, and social psychology), Lee, Meltzoff, and Kuhl (2020) propose a framework to understand human learning. Composed of multiple propositions, one aspect of this framework emphasizes the social nature of learning. Specifically, they argue, “A comprehensive theory of human development must take into account basic motivations for *learning from, through, and in relationship with social others*” [emphasis added] (p. 25). Education researchers and practitioners working with multilingual students and their teachers have extensively argued for attention to “learning from, through, and in relationships with social others” (Lee et al., 2020, p. 25) (e.g. Hawkins, 2019; Viesca & Teemant, 2019). In fact, Viesca and Teemant

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(2019) describe how this should occur through attention to three assumptions from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978): (1) learning is social, (2) teaching is assistance and situated performance, and (3) knowledge is cultural and competent participation. These perspectives on learning are often taken into account when designing learning opportunities for students in K-12 classrooms and we argue they should for teacher professional learning as well. Further, our work and the study described here suggest that such learning for teachers is best accomplished through teacher agency, leadership, and collaboration.

Quality Teacher Professional Learning

Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, and Birman (2002) engaged in a longitudinal study of teacher professional learning and found that the best learning opportunities for teachers are more than just sitting in a lecture, should last as long as possible, should include as many from the same school community as possible, should focus on active learning, are meaningfully connected to teachers' professional lives, and are more than just pedagogy. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) also made impactful distinctions about teacher knowledge that should be considered in professional learning contexts. They noted that teachers need "knowledge-*for*-practice," [emphasis in original] the knowledge generated from research and theory that is for teachers to improve their practice. Teachers also need "knowledge-*in*-practice," which is the knowledge generated by teachers working and reflecting in their classrooms. Most importantly, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argue for teachers to develop "knowledge-*of*-practice" by "working within the contexts of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work and connect it to larger social, cultural, and political issues" (p. 24). Across decades of research examining teacher professional learning, the need for teacher learning to occur "from, through, and in relationship with social others" (Lee et al., 2020, p. 25) is clear. In fact, it guided the professional learning examined in this chapter.

One effective way to create these kinds of professional learning opportunities for teachers is through online professional development. School districts often prefer online professional development due to the reduced cost from eliminated expenses in transportation and class

substitutes, as well as the lessened disruptions to workflow (Carr, 2010). Studies have also found that teachers tend to value online professional learning due to its inherent ability to be responsive to current needs, and the opportunities the online format can provide for engagement and collaboration with peers across greater distances and at more convenient times (Russell, Kleiman, Carey, & Douglas, 2009; Smith, 2014). Some researchers have found online professional learning to be at least as effective as face-to-face coursework (Carr, 2010; Fishman et al., 2013) and to have a positive effect on teachers' instructional practices and content knowledge (Borko, 2004; Cady & Reardon, 2009; Cavanaugh & Dawson, 2010; Russell et al., 2009). Our team has spent the last decade developing, researching, and offering professional learning for teachers of multilingual students, grounded in these perspectives around online professional learning as well as the research on quality professional development for teachers and important teacher knowledge.

Agency, Leadership, and Collaboration in Professional Learning

Teacher agency is a critical factor in translating successful professional development into classroom practice (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012). However, teacher agency is generally understudied and undertheorized (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015; Riveros et al., 2012). In research on professional development, teacher agency is often set up as a binary: the teacher is either an autonomous actor in complete control—she “has” agency—or she is a total victim to her circumstances. However, recent research (e.g., Priestley et al., 2015) suggests a more complex and ecological definition of teacher agency. Teacher agency is not something the teacher *has*, but rather something she does (Biesta et al., 2015), and that doing is an emergent phenomenon of the teacher and her assemblage— that is, agency is not an individual phenomenon, but is collective and distributed, and encompasses both human and nonhuman elements (Strom & Viesca, 2020).

As such, agency is closely linked to teacher leadership and collaboration in professional learning. For example, Teacher Practice Networks have been shown to provide important opportunities for

teacher agency, leadership, and collaboration in professional learning (Gerdeman, Garrett, & Monahan, 2018). Teachers are often situated to help other teachers learn through formal and/or informal learning opportunities (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) and teachers often learn well in collaboration, particularly when collaborating across disciplines and content areas (Babinski, Amendum, Knotek, Sánchez, & Malone, 2018; DelliCarpini & Alonso, 2014; Martin-Beltrán & Peercy, 2014; Russell, 2014, 2015; Vázquez, López, Segador, & Mohedano, 2015). That agency, leadership, and collaboration are important principles undergirding successful teacher learning initiatives is supported by existing research, but more research is necessary to understand their nuances, complexities, and impacts individually and in combination, both from teachers' perspectives and in terms of impacts on teacher beliefs, attitudes, and classroom practice.

eWorkshops: Professional Learning for Teachers of Multilingual Students

In 2011, a National Professional Development grant from the Office of English Language Acquisition¹ was awarded to a group of faculty in Colorado who began developing teacher learning opportunities that were grounded in sociocultural perspectives as well as the research described above regarding quality professional learning for teachers. Specifically, eWorkshops were developed that created the context for meaningful learning from, through, and in relationship with other educators via the affordances of online professional learning (Viesca et al., 2016). Additionally, these eWorkshops offer multimedia resources for professional learning communities of educators to engage in collaborative inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and to grow their own culturally and linguistically responsive/sustaining practices with multilingual students (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Paris, 2012).

In the eWorkshops, learning opportunities focus on developing teachers' "knowledge-of-practice" particularly in their work with multilingual students, informed by critical sociocultural theory and pedagogy (e.g., Teemant & Hausman, 2013), culturally sustaining pedagogies (e.g., Alim, Paris, & Wong, 2020; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017)

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and linguistically responsive approaches (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). To accomplish this, the professional learning model of each eWorkshop allows for a great deal of flexibility, personal choice, opportunities for leadership, and the expectation of thoughtful collaboration from all participants. In other words, the eWorkshop model is grounded in the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration. Teachers enact agency in selecting which content to engage with and how to put it into practice in their classroom, as well as how to share and discuss it with their eWorkshop colleagues. Teachers also collaborate throughout the eWorkshop via online discussions and by sharing their work and additional resources with each other. Because agency is built into the eWorkshop learning model, collaboration is also quite open and can be sculpted to meet the wishes and needs of the participants. Finally, the eWorkshops provide various opportunities for leadership as teachers can decide how to work with one another and even take leadership beyond the eWorkshop itself by sharing ideas with colleagues offline. The eWorkshops are where teachers lead one another to great ideas and push their practices and approaches. These professional learning opportunities are exciting spaces of shared learning through the collective application of agency, leadership, and collaboration.

Once the eWorkshops had been developed, used, and studied for nearly a decade, we wanted to know more about teacher perspectives regarding agency, leadership, and collaboration. Specifically, we reached out to interview eWorkshop completers and asked them to share their perspectives on these elements of teacher professional learning both within and outside of the eWorkshop structure. Through the analysis of participants' responses, we were able to expand our understandings of the value of these principles in teacher learning, specifically in relationship to the concept of scaffolding.

Scaffolding Learning for Teachers of Multilingual Learners

Scaffolding is essentially the practices that create the learning conditions where learners can learn from, through, and in relationship with social others (Lee et al., 2020), particularly to reach a state of independent competence that would not have been possible without such assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). Much research on preparing teachers to

work with multilingual learners has illustrated the value and power of teacher learning in collaboration for strong learning outcomes (e.g., Brancard & Quinnwilliams, 2012; Jimenez-Silva & Olson, 2012; Martin-Beltrán & Peercy, 2014; Peercy & Martin-Beltrán, 2012; Peercy, Martin-Beltrán, Silverman, & Nunn, 2015; Russell, 2014). This research guided much of the work we did in creating collaborative learning possibilities for teachers through our eWorkshops.

As we examined and learned from our experiences providing collaborative professional learning for teachers in varied contexts across varied geographies and spaces, we began to understand collaboration as intricately linked to agency and leadership in scaffolding transformative learning experiences for teachers of multilingual learners. Therefore, in our work providing eWorkshops to teachers of multilingual learners, we have sought to create the context for teachers to accomplish in collaboration what they would not have been able to achieve on their own. We have also aimed to support teacher learning which leads to the independent state of competence by creating professional learning opportunities grounded in the principles of teacher agency, leadership, and collaboration. This study is an examination of some of our eWorkshop completers' perspectives to see whether our objectives have been met. The research question that guided our inquiry was, "What roles and relationships do the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration have and/or play in scaffolding learning for teachers of multilingual learners?"

Methods

This qualitative interview study examined teacher perspectives regarding the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration in their professional learning experiences (our eWorkshops and other forms of professional learning).

Participants

We selected participants purposively rather than randomly because we chose to recruit those who were deemed as interesting and important for the current study, thus more likely to help fulfill the

research purposes (Henry, 2009). Specifically, participants were recruited for this study because they had all taken one or more professional learning eWorkshops previously and indicated their willingness to participate in further interviews in the exit survey of the eWorkshops. Recruitment information was sent to them via email and 26 of them consented to participate in the study. For various reasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic, attrition occurred and interviews of 15 of the 26 consented participants were successfully completed. The 15 participants were either in-service teachers of multilingual learners (60%, $n=9$) or coaches, specialists, coordinators, or leaders who had previously taught in multilingual contexts (40%, $n=6$). They had diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education background, geography, race, and so on, and differed from each other regarding the specific content or subject area and grade level they taught, as well as years of teaching experiences, ranging from 3 years to 27 years.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data-collection method for this study due largely to the flexibility that they allow for, creating the space for interview modifications depending on participants' individual responses. As a result, both the participants and the interviewers were engaged in dialogue, and the latter were also able to more closely explore themes that emerged from the participants' responses (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The interviews were conducted during the 2019 to 2020 academic year, each lasting 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and de-identified for analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed through various rounds of re-examination and coding. Attention was intentionally given to identifying unique perspectives between interviews as opposed to looking only for similarities. This qualitative descriptive data analysis led to the emergence of four salient themes across the 15 interviews.

Findings

Throughout the interview process, participants consistently described how agency, leadership, and collaboration worked together to scaffold their learning and improvement of their pedagogy. They also frequently repeated the frustration they felt with “one size fits all” professional development and how their leadership, agency, and collaboration were not components of top-down professional development. In fact, participants often described feeling disempowered with those forms of traditional professional development. To further understand these findings, we explore four themes that emerged from our data analysis: leadership as role versus action, self-directed learning, meaningful learning impacting meaningful teaching, and adapting and applying learning so that all learners can thrive.

Leadership as Role Versus Action

When asked to describe leadership, participant perceptions resided within a dichotomy of *leadership as a role* or *leadership as an action*. Our analysis revealed that leadership is difficult to disentangle from agency and collaboration and may, in fact, be most poignant when both agency and collaboration coalesced. However, there was a vast difference between the two perceptions of leadership as a role and leadership as an action.

The majority of participants sharing the perspective of leadership as a role used descriptions of top-down leadership. Leadership roles ranged from state, district, and school levels, and included mentions of superintendents, principals, instructional coaches, and team leaders. The professional learning led by people in these roles were often described as highly standardized experiences centered around checking all the right boxes as opposed to creating meaningful learning opportunities. Participants conceptualizing leadership as a role described their professional learning experiences as something “given” to them (P23) or something they were “trained in” (P25) so they could teach others. Thus, leadership as a role lacked the agentive qualities to nurture the actualization process for teachers. One participant lamented this approach saying, “there’s a lot of like human capital that I think doesn’t really get leveraged when you don’t have agency to work with

each other and so a district determines what (is) valuable and imposes it” (P08). Some participants (P22, P14, P16) also described leaders as those with the passion and the motivation to achieve the goal, seeming to imply a lack of inherent value and voice for the rest of the participants in the experience. In fact, the only way some participants felt they could have agency within the described dynamics would be through the act of “becoming leaders” themselves. They went on to explain that this would mean abandoning their roles as a teacher, which they phrased as “jumping ship,” and/or “stepping up” into administrator roles, illustrating and highlighting the lack of avenues for lateral leadership as teachers (P08).

Some participants noted the role of leadership as responsive and proactive, focusing on top-down leadership initiatives addressing teacher and student need. Such perspectives reflected more agentive qualities in leadership roles that provide tools and supports to address the unique needs and strengths of teachers and students specific to their learning communities. These kinds of learning experiences from those in leadership roles also appeared to provide choice to teachers and originated from existing professional learning communities and teacher feedback. While these accounts of leadership as a role did illustrate some responsive qualities in designing and implementing teacher professional learning, the overall content and delivery were still imposed on teachers from those in leadership roles.

In contrast, some participants understood leadership as an action that wasn’t restricted only to those in official leadership roles, providing descriptions of collegiality, growth, and support. One participant described leadership as “shared responsibility” (P03). Leadership as action requires everyone bringing their ideas to the table with the common goal of helping more expansive ideas emerge from the collective consciousness. Participants noted how this can occur through dialogue and conversations, providing good feedback and questioning one another.

Another participant (P25) named leadership as action as, “Leadership would be like taking the things that you’ve learned in my classes and being able to show them to my teammates.” As this quote illustrates, when leadership was described as action versus a role, the principles of agency and collaboration were also present. In these instances, meaningful learning was described as including new skill

development and discovering assets in themselves and others. It appears that great learning assets surfaced when they might have otherwise gone unrealized without leadership being enacted with the principles of agency and collaboration as well.

In the context of the eWorkshop, one participant (P22) noted how teachers were able to emerge as leaders through their actions and engagements within the eWorkshop:

interestingly enough, there were a lot of people who emerged who weren't typically leaders in other areas, but they were during that workshop for a host of reasons. One is, interestingly enough, we have a lot of teachers at our school who themselves were second language learners.... And so sometimes their own leadership as second language learners came out during the workshop about how to teach English language learners and that was really interesting. I myself am not a second language learner so it was really interesting and illuminating to hear from people who had gone through that themselves.

As scaffolding in teacher professional learning, the principle of leadership appears to matter most when conceptualized as action rather than as a role, particularly in connection to agency and collaboration. Overall, the lack of voice and choice with top-down leadership practices hindered the learning process for teachers when leadership was confined to a role. However, when leadership was taken up through actions and behaviors, leadership, agency, and collaboration were present together. Based on these findings, as we discuss leadership further in this chapter, we will be focusing on leadership as an action versus a role.

Self-directed Learning

Another prominent theme emerging from the participants' qualitative interview data is the operationalization of the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration scaffolding self-directed learning. As noted above, these principles do not work in isolation from one another in shaping in-service teachers' professional learning; rather,

they share a reciprocal and dynamic relationship, thus working collaboratively in creating the contexts for meaningful and impactful learning gains. For instance, one participant (P16) specifically explained how they are aided by the principles of leadership and agency to take ownership over their professional learning:

I'm in the process of taking leadership over my own learning right now so that I can and I get to pick and choose basically what I want to learn to help me in the areas that I find passionate.... So probably trying to see if there's anything new in those areas that I love doing such as music and seeing if I can become as passionate with the new stuff as I am about the old stuff. That would be my context of leadership is taking responsibility for my own learning.

This participant took the initiative in choosing the areas that they felt passionate about and took charge of determining how these options could be used, thus exhibiting a sense of control and ownership, which is shared by several other participants. Here the principles of both agency and leadership are manifested and intersected, thus playing a vital role in scaffolding the participants' self-directed and autonomous learning. In addition, many participants (P03, P05, P7, P10, P14, P16, P22, P25) indicated their preferred type of professional learning opportunities, that is, those affording them a variety of choices and flexibilities in what they learn, how they learn, and how they apply the knowledge. This finding resonates with an overarching theme identified by the study conducted by Bonk, Lee, Kou, Xu, and Sheu (2015), which suggests the preferred online instruction is the one that provides adult learners with choices in the modes and construction of learning. The analysis of our data lends support to the potential of the three principles in helping the learners maximize their autonomy and agency, thus approaching their own learning in a more meaningful and liberating way.

Meaningful Learning Impacting Meaningful Teaching

Throughout the interviews, agency and collaboration were described as working in tandem by participants to help negotiate the unique

opportunities of their learning environments. As a result, a reciprocal relationship between collective efficacy and individual accountability manifested to create supportive environments where participants had the freedom to be able to take what was learned in the eWorkshops and make it fit the reality of their classroom instruction (P10).

Beginning with the option to choose the topic of their professional development, agency served to enable teachers to grow the learning abilities of their multilingual students but was also reinforced by the commitment of other eWorkshop participants' desire to do the same. Participants described how difficult teaching can be, but further explained that, by collaborating, they were able to achieve a level of learning that they couldn't necessarily have achieved on their own. P24 stated, "we all have our different strengths and different weaknesses ... and so I think collaboration is taking all of those different strengths and putting it together, putting together something amazing." While this level of collaboration was described as "critical," several participants also noted the need for *authentic* collaboration. Participants noted times when they were in the same room with colleagues and were supposed to be collaborating, but were actually just going through the pre-prescribed motions to achieve a pre-determined outcome. Their notions of authentic collaboration appear to be grounded in dynamic spaces of innovation, creativity, problem-solving, and actual co-construction. There also appears to be a strong role for agency in the notions of authentic collaboration shared by our participants for the work to be individually and collectively relevant.

Through the eWorkshops, participants exerted their agency by creating work that was applicable to their own classrooms. They sought to learn the things that would help them improve the learning of their own multilingual students. In doing so, participants learned to differentiate their lessons to respond to the learning assets and trajectories of their students—from providing deadline extension to remediation and all possible additional supports a teacher might provide. P05 stated, "I was able to take the information given to me and apply it. I was able to use work other teachers have tried, and use it [their work] in my classroom. I was able to talk about my practice." The teachers described this combination of agency and collaboration as a way to further their own learning by then adopting

others' ideas. They strategized, problem-solved, and were inspired by each other. The participants described the sharing of experiences as empowering, and stated that they grew as professionals through collaboration.

Additionally, participants reported how such empowerment led to their own leadership by enabling them to share their learning with their colleagues in their school or district. Participants reported leadership actions that occurred by sharing content and resources, along with tools that had been successful in their own (or other eWorkshop participants') classrooms with educators outside of the eWorkshop.

Ultimately, the multilingual students in the participants' classrooms were the beneficiaries of teacher learning, as the participants felt better able to support their students' learning. When describing the way agency, leadership, and collaboration translated learning into meaningful practice, P05 stated it best when she said, "it allows me to be the teacher my students need, not just the teacher I want to be."

Adapting and Applying Learning So That All Learners Can Thrive

We found that agency, collaboration, and leadership not only scaffolded teachers to learn to adapt and apply instruction generally into their classroom, but specifically toward the different learning assets and abilities of students that they serve. P22 stated, "We were all trying to improve the language instruction for the students at our school, but how we did that in the specific way that we did was different for everyone." As participants engaged in dialogic and inquiry-based processes, the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration in combination kept professional development experiences student-centered and focused on multilingual learners.

Adapting and applying eWorkshop content to classroom environments was driven by the desire to help all multilingual learners self-actualize through learning. To accomplish this, growing student discourse opportunities in the learning environment was an important commitment shared by multiple participants. One participant highlighted the significance of funds of knowledge as a pivotal touchpoint of learning in the eWorkshop that was later applied to lesson planning for the students in their class.

one of the things that came up in the workshop quite a bit was the idea of funds of knowledge of the idea that students have these pieces of knowledge or these pools of knowledge that are oftentimes unfortunately really untapped, personal knowledge and cultural knowledge that they may bring with them that they don't necessarily or that they can't because of language limitations right now. They can't necessarily verbalize fully but that are there. And if you tap into them. That can be hugely helpful when you're designing lessons and designing activities (P22).

As participants spoke about the importance of student discourse, funds of knowledge, reflection, and collaboration, the ebb and flow of leadership behaviors among participants modeled what they themselves wanted students to do.

Agency, collaboration, and leadership provided conditions in the learning community for educators to replicate what they aspired to plan and enact in their classroom settings with students. Ultimately, through experiencing the impacts of questioning and reflection themselves through scaffolding teacher learning through the principles of agency, leadership and collaboration, many participants emphasized the importance of student discourse in their classes, which they discussed as individualized based on students' particular language acquisition trajectories. Thus, the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration worked together, scaffolding teachers learning, which enabled teachers of multilingual learners to adapt instruction to be responsive to learning environments so multilingual students could thrive.

Implications and Conclusion

The nuanced understandings of the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration scaffolding teacher learning for teachers of multilingual learners found in this study have multiple important implications for professional learning efforts. First, it is clear that teachers prefer learning opportunities that are grounded in these principles and that, in combination with agency, leadership and collaboration

are strongest. Second, together, agency, leadership, and collaboration scaffold learning for teachers to grow their collective as well as independent abilities around implementing strong teaching practices that support multilingual student learning. Finally, professional learning for teachers should include the principles of agency, leadership, and collaboration to create the strongest possible context for their learning to matter in terms of their classroom practice.

To us, principle-driven work scaffolding teacher learning should undergird the development and implementation of strong professional learning programs. Our eWorkshops are one example of principle-driven professional learning that can have a strong impact on teacher learning. We envision a variety of ways that these principles scaffold teachers' learning in a variety of different contexts for a variety of different learning outcomes. That is why they are particularly valuable as a foundational tool for designing meaningful professional learning—scaffolding strong teacher learning, agency, leadership, and collaboration in ways that are flexible and capable of meaningfully enduring across extensive difference—something that has particularly emerged with the popularity and reach of our work during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, they are principles that also scaffold the possibilities of difference as positively productive and democratic pluralism in teacher professional learning.

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