

Sustained Professional Development for Common Core Implementation: One Network's Journey

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This article presents the summaries of a year-long collaborative effort among members of the Children First Network (CFN) 410 ESL teachers in the participating schools, and Dr. Andrea Honigsfeld, professor at Molloy College. Hector Uribe, who helped facilitate many of the PD sessions, sat down with Audrey Cheng (30Q122), Vaughan O. Danvers (20K227), Robin Finnan-Jones, and Andrea Honigsfeld—who also presented a session at NYS TESOL on this topic—to conduct an interview about the experience.

Hector Uribe: Why did CFN 410 decide to go on this journey?

Robin Finnan-Jones: Our network schools, which cover all five boroughs of New York City, have many English language learners. Our network leader, Altagracia Santana, was looking for a professional development series that would focus on the Common Core Learning Standards for ESL teachers. I mentioned that I knew Andrea Honigsfeld and that I had participated in a couple of her workshops. We called her up—and that is how it all began! In addition to the workshops offered by Andrea, we conducted classroom visits in the host schools where the PD sessions were held, so we participated in learning rounds as well.

Hector Uribe: How did you know this comprehensive approach to PD would work?

Robin Finnan-Jones: Last year, I worked in one of the network schools where trust was built between teachers as they visited each other's classrooms and gave "Glow and Grow Feedback." We documented this experience (Santana & Finnan-Jones, 2014), and I wanted to extend this kind of feedback to the schools we visited in this new series of workshops. Often, we would visit the classrooms and then the principal or assistant principals would join us at the end of the day for the "Glow and Grow Feedback" from the network's ESL teachers.

Hector Uribe: What theoretical framework guided this professional development series?

Andrea Honigsfeld: Two decades of research on effective professional development identified several key factors to be critical for high-impact teacher learning. These factors included strong content focus, inquiry-oriented learning opportunities, collaborative participation, and coherence with school curricula and policies (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013).

Hector Uribe: How did theory translate into practice through the PD series?

Andrea Honigsfeld: We created a professional development program that synthesized all the elements just mentioned through (a) a focus on the Common Core State Standards and the literacy curriculum for ELLs; (b) a guided professional book study of *Common Core for the Not-So-Common Learner, Grades K–5* (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2013); (c) classroom-based learning rounds and low inference; and (d) participants' ongoing reflections on having an impact on ELLs' achievement.

Hector Uribe: How did this sustained professional development enhance your teaching?

Vaughan O. Danvers: *Common Core for the Not-So-Common Learner* focused on best practices and research-based strategies for speakers of languages other than English. I expect professional development to strengthen my ESL pedagogy, and Dr. Honigsfeld's workshops did just that. The sessions were meticulously arranged so that each successive meeting built on the other. It fit very well with my mode of teaching.

Hector Uribe: Can you offer a specific example of how you applied what you learned in the PD series to your own teaching?

Vaughan O. Danvers: I prefer teaching long units because I've found them to be most effective in developing critical thinking and promoting deep engagement with the material. Through the PD workshops, I was able to work with other teachers and gain valuable perspective. I am always mindful of being in alignment with the Common Core, and the Honigsfeld/Dove book is organized to follow the anchor standards. For my Martin Luther King unit, the chapter on reading informational texts was invaluable. Most important, though, was the intellectual stimulation promoted by regular meetings with like-minded individuals. Because I felt excited, my students were excited about learning.

Hector Uribe: How has this professional development series affected your work with ELLs?

Audrey Cheng: This PD series has affected my work in three ways: (a) improved my teaching craft; (b) increased student engagement and reading comprehension; and (c) created a community of teachers that share this knowledge. At the heart of what I learned was how I could help my struggling students meet the challenges brought on by the CCSS. I learned how to make their learning fun and at the same time incorporate the rigor expected by the CCSS.

Hector Uribe: How has your role as an ESL teacher changed in the past year or so?

Audrey Cheng: As a result of these practices, I have seen my role in the classroom move into the shadows while my students have moved more front and center in taking control of their learning. The benefits were multiplied when I turn-keyed what I learned with the ESL teaching staff at my school, who in turn shared this information at their grade conferences. This experience has been a gift that has kept on giving.

Hector Uribe: Having a series of workshops on learning how to approach the CCSS with ELLs—with enough time between sessions to allow pedagogues go back to their classrooms and practice what has been presented—is the best way to facilitate effective and sound professional development that sticks. This is what building capacity is all about: establishing solid foundations upon which the schools can develop well-anchored and proven strategies that will benefit not only the speakers of other languages but the whole school community as well.

References

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