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Teacher Voice in Cycles for Iterative Improvement

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Abstract

Teachers in a mixed-method action research study of *cycles for iterative improvement* reveal that increased teacher voice would lead to stronger commitments and the likelihood of follow through.

Keywords: implementation cycles, school improvement, teacher voice

In 2017 Champion Academy (a pseudonym), along with four other urban Catholic schools in a Midwest Archdiocese, partnered with Notre Dame ACE Academies for the purpose of school revitalization. At the outset of the partnership, a regional director was embedded within the school to support goal formation, adult learning, and teacher development. In 2019, the regional director and school principal began employing *cycles for iterative improvement* (Jones & Beltramo, 2016) as a vehicle to improve literacy instruction. While the school made progress, it was slow and not all teachers were implementing the changes with fidelity.

After receiving IRB approval, the regional director conducted informal interviews in 2021, asking Champion Academy teachers questions about their experiences with *cycles for iterative improvement*. Teachers reported occasional struggles with making and enacting collective commitments to change practice within *cycles for iterative improvement*. At that time, teachers shared several contributing factors including absence of rationale-building, an adult learning scope and sequence that was misaligned to classroom-level work and expected timelines.

The Champion Academy leadership team made several changes to their approach during the following year to improve teacher buy-in during *cycles for iterative improvement*. They published an adult learning scope and sequence in August, worked to develop a rationale for new learning, and were more transparent about the process. In addition, the leadership team published a running slide deck for teachers to reference throughout the year. To continue to study teachers' perceptions of *cycles for iterative improvement* and the process of making and enacting collective commitments within them, an action research, mixed-methods case study was designed and implemented in 2022.

One of the most important factors to surface during the study was a deep desire for teachers' voices to be amplified in the processes and decisions which affect them. They are not alone. According to a 2018 study of more than 1,000 teachers by Educators for Excellence (2018), "[Teachers] are increasingly interested in becoming agents of change, leveraging their experience and expertise to improve our education system." Ingersoll (2015) cited evidence that suggests that teachers are leaving the field because they are frustrated with their lack of influence over key decisions impacting their work.

Methods

With the goal of understanding the conditions which lead to more favorable teacher experiences making and enacting collective commitments within *cycles for iterative improvement*, a mixed methods cased study was conducted in 2022 at Champion Academy. The descriptive study utilized survey data from the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) by Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman and semi-structured teacher interviews.

The research process could best be described as a funnel (Bogan & Bilken, 2007). The case study began at the open part of the funnel by studying the community of practice through which *cycles for iterative improvement* are enacted at Champion Academy. The decision to study the context was made because *cycles for iterative improvement* are embedded in an intricate school ecosystem and span multiple domains, from goal setting to instructional leadership. At Champion Academy, teachers interface with *cycles for iterative improvement* primarily through professional learning communities (PLCs). Therefore, the PLCA-R was used to assess the overall strength of the community of practice at Champion Academy. Five PLC dimensions were studied: (1) Shared and supportive leadership (2) Shared values and vision (3) Collective learning and application (4) Shared personal practice (5) Supportive conditions.

As the researcher traveled down the funnel and new insight was gained with the PLCA-R, the decision was made to interview teachers about their experiences working in PLCs. Recognizing that teachers make meaning through their experiences in a social context, it was important to further understand the meaning teachers ascribed to *cycles for iterative improvement* within the school ecosystem. Once the researcher had a firm grasp of the context and teachers' perception, the focus narrowed further to the experience of *cycles for iterative improvement*, and then zeroing-in on the process of making collective commitments within them. Quantitative data from survey results coupled with interviews provided different perspectives on the same phenomena - how the process of making collective commitments within *cycles for iterative improvement* is experienced by teachers and how the process can be improved and leveraged to have a greater impact on teacher practice (Mertler, 2020).

Setting

Champion Academy is a state accredited, nonpublic choice school located in a major midwestern city. The school's 287 student population is 98% Hispanic of whom 69.7% are students who are emerging bilinguals. According to the state's data dashboard, 95% of the children are identified as "economically disadvantaged" (Midwest Department of Education, 2021). The school's state letter grade is a "D" and in 2019, at the time of the last statewide test (Midwest Department of Education, 2021).

Participants

Convenience sampling (Lavrakas, 2008) was used to identify teachers to participate in semi-structured qualitative interviews and a survey. Because this is a case study of *cycles for iterative improvement* at Champion Academy, the sample frame specifies that only educators and leaders who were employed at Champion Academy during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school year would be considered for participation. Nine educators met the parameters and were asked to participate in research. All nine educators who were asked to participate are White with at least two years of experience. Eight of the nine teachers asked to participate were female. Seven teachers of the nine who met the research criteria in the school, completed the PLCA-R while only six were able to participate in interviews.

Cycles for Iterative Improvement

Cycles for iterative improvement are implementation cycles designed to be used with an entire faculty to move research-based educational practices forward across an entire school or within select grade bands. They are driven by the administrative team in partnership with the faculty as opposed to micro-cycles or cycles of inquiry which are often teacher-driven small-scale tests of hypotheses to determine what may work in each context.

The focus of each *cycle of improvement* is a research-based pedagogical practice or knowledge-building that has been selected because of data-driven decision making and goal setting (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Levin & Datnow, 2012). Incremental capacity building is an integral part of the process. Dr. Frankie Jones, the former NDAA Director of Teaching & Learning is quoted as saying, “We cannot expect our way to excellence.” (*Personal communication*, 2016). Rather, learning is supported through planned professional meetings, formal observations, and coaching, and during informal work processes, such as impromptu dialogue with a coach (Stein & Coburn, 2008).

As teachers learn pedagogical practices and expand their content knowledge, *cycles for iterative improvement* have a bias towards action. Committing to and acting are the fourth and fifth elements of the cycle. The process of committing one another to enact a change and provide the follow up support on behalf of teachers and administrators is a trademark of *cycles for iterative improvement*.

As teachers begin adding new content and skill to their classroom practices, data is collected and analyzed. In *cycles for iterative improvement*, the process of determining the next focus or course of action takes a Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) approach. As with MTSS, if 80% of teachers have demonstrated proficiency, the leadership moves forward with the next area of focus and provides scaffolded support where there is a need. If, however, 80% or more of the team is ready to move forward, more education and support is provided. As many cycles of building capacity, committing, enacting, and data collection as needed occur until 80% of the teachers demonstrate successful implementation before the team moves forward with the next strategic movement which moves the school towards its goal (Jones, 2021).

Key Finding

Champion Academy teachers overwhelmingly found *cycles for iterative improvement* to be a favorable process for building the capacity of teachers and supporting them as they strive to enact changes in practice. The process of analyzing quantitative data alongside qualitative data revealed that many dimensions of the PLCA-R were named by teachers as conditions which promote the process of making and enacting collective commitments within *cycles for iterative improvement*. Those included ensuring that there is a shared and supported vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and relationships.

Repeatedly, however, teachers expressed a desire to play a more active role in discussing and making decisions about school issues. When asked how the process of *cycles for iterative improvement* could be improved to enhance collective commitments, four of the six teachers interviewed stated a need for increased teacher voice and choice. One teacher said, “We need to be connected to the learning,” while another suggested that administrators, “Ask the teachers at the school or send out a survey and ask what some of the things are that they would like to focus on during the year.” A third teacher explained, “Like when we get to choose what our collective commitment is first of all we are not going to forget it; and it's something that interests us, or something that we feel our students would really benefit from - it will make a major difference.”

There was a push not only for choice of goals and areas of focus, but also for teachers to be called on to share their expertise.

Implications

This study began out of a deep respect for educators as well as an urgent demand to enhance systems, such as *cycles for iterative improvement*, which offer promise in the work of school revitalization. Informal and formal conversations with teachers' over time have convinced me that teachers have an unwavering desire to do what is best for children in their classrooms. They are willing to try new things, to change their practice, and most want to engage in activities which build their knowledge and skill as educators. Yet, a knowing-doing gap continues to exist (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000).

Champion Academy teachers illuminated the conditions which support or hinder the process of making collective commitments and in doing so demonstrated how the process is connected to outcomes. They explained that teachers are more likely to change practice, implementing new knowledge and skills in their classrooms, when they find processes favorable, and their voice is included. Teachers identified having defined or bounded autonomy, the ability to take and apply non-negotiables as they deem most appropriate. However, bounded autonomy alone was seen as insufficient from the teachers' perspective.

It is important to note the tension that exists between teacher choice and voice and the purpose of *cycles for iterative improvement*. *Cycles for iterative improvement* are meant to be implementation cycles and were not designed to test new practices and explore options for improving student outcomes. Rather, they are meant to move evidence-based practices forward in the classroom setting, especially in the context of school reform. When schools need revitalization, it requires more than teacher interest and will. Elmore & Burney (1997) explain that if educators knew what to do to improve student outcomes, they would be doing it because they want what is best for children. School turnaround requires systematic processes and fidelity to research-based practices. And yet, we cannot ignore the fact that teachers are saying that they would be more likely to commit to and enact recommended changes if they had greater voice in the processes and decisions which impact their work.

School revitalization is highly contextualized and therefore prescriptive efforts are often ineffective (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The trajectory of each school in the process of reform is as unique as the individuals leading in and participating in the effort (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The majority of those impacted are teachers. They are the primary agents of the work, and as such, schools need their voice and commitment. Sarason (2002) states that it is essential for educators not to feel as though they are, "objects of change," but rather, that they are, "willing participants in change," (p. 11). Therefore, as educational leaders leading adult learning, we must consider ways to engage teachers in *cycles for iterative improvement* utilizing a more collaborative leadership approach. Collaborative leadership, according to Hallinger & Heck (2010), "focuses on strategic school-wide actions that are directed toward school improvement," and include structures and processes for shared decision-making and accountability (p.96).

As a result of this call for more voice, I have developed a set of sample questions leaders should ask at each stage of *cycles for iterative improvement* (Table 1). The implication of this research is that leaders should reflect on teacher voice, choice, and engagement at each stage of the cycle. While leaders may not have the capacity to engage teachers at every stage for every cycle, it recommended that an effort be made toward increasing teaching involvement to the extent possible.

Table 1: *Sample Questions to Consider at Each Stage of Cycles for Iterative Improvement*

Focus	To what extent were teachers involved in developing the larger objective linked to this focus? To what extent were teachers involved in selecting the focus for this particular cycle for iterative improvement?
Capacity	Are there any teachers who already possess the knowledge and skill the leadership team is working to build? To what extent could the leadership team make the space for this person to lead? What protocols should be considered to amplify teacher voice in the capacity-building process?
Commit	To what extent has the leadership team solicited feedback on the adult learning provided to teachers? How are teachers feeling about their own capacity to enact the new knowledge and skills in their classrooms?
Enact	What does support for teachers look like / sound like as they enact collective commitments? Were teachers asked what they need? To what extent do teachers have choice, bounded autonomy, in the enactment? When will school leaders observe the new learning in practice?
Data	Who was involved in deciding what data to collect and what intervals? Who was in the room when data was analyzed?
Focus	Has the decision-making process for how the next focus will be made been communicated with the teaching staff? To what extent have teachers been involved in selecting the focus for <i>cycles for iterative improvement</i> ?

Conclusion

School improvement through the implementation of evidence-based teaching practice can be achieved using *cycles for iterative improvement*. Improved student outcomes hinges on teacher fidelity to enacting their commitments to changes in practice. Fidelity to enact collective commitments rests on many factors, among them is a feeling that teachers had a say in the process. When employing *cycles for iterative improvement*, reflecting on the extent to which a more democratic process was employed at various stages is essential. When leaders notice an absence of voice, steps to correct and adapt should be made.

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