

Research Brief

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An Investigation of a Professional Learning Measure to Support Teacher Leaders' and Teachers' Learning

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the use of a collaborative professional learning measure in SFUSD. Research suggests the importance of ongoing explorations of validity evidence for the use of measures in particular contexts. In this study, we are looking closely at how SFUSD district mathematics leaders used the measure of professional learning to support their professional development meetings with site-based teacher leaders as they focused on issues such as African American students' learning and sense of belonging. The three original research questions were:

1. How are the district mathematics leaders using the collaborative professional learning measure to support teacher leaders' development?
 - a. How are they adapting the measure to address the goals of their site-based professional learning? What are their reasons for adapting the measures?
2. How does the teacher leaders' facilitation of site-based professional learning evolve?
 - a. How are changes in facilitation related to the measure?
3. What are the district mathematics leaders' and teacher leaders' perceptions about the affordances and limitations of the measure as a support for their learning?

Data for this study were collected between August 2021 and July 2022. Because of a variety of factors in the district, including the shift to virtual learning and teaching during COVID, we were only able to address the first research question and the part of the third research question related to the district mathematics leaders' perceptions.

Methods

Sample and Context

Two SFUSD district mathematics leaders participated in the study. During the study they facilitated four professional learning meetings with SFUSD middle school mathematics teacher leaders.

Data Collection

The primary sources of data for this project were interviews with the district mathematics leaders; audio recordings, transcripts, and artifacts of the district mathematics leaders' planning and debriefing sessions for each of the four professional learning meetings; fieldnotes of the four professional learning meetings; and teacher leaders' responses to the collaborative professional learning measure, administered at the end of each professional learning meeting.

We conducted two 60-minute interviews with each district mathematics leader. The interview at the beginning of the school year focused on coaches' goals and their plans for using collaborative professional learning measure. The end-of-year interview asked about their reflections on professional learning, and the usefulness of the collaborative professional learning measure in relation to their goals. Each interview was audio recorded on zoom and transcribed.

The collaborative professional learning measure, which includes 10 multiple choice items and takes approximately 5 minutes to complete, addresses the teacher leaders' experiences in the professional learning session and planned changes to their practices. It was administered at the end of each professional learning meeting. Participants' responses were collected anonymously through Google forms. The district mathematics leaders analyzed the aggregated results from the measure during their debriefing sessions and used the results to inform planning for the next professional learning meeting.

Initial Findings

Data analysis is ongoing. Here we share initial findings, based primarily on the interviews with the district mathematics leaders and fieldnotes from their planning and debriefing sessions.

Creating Norms to Support Teacher Leader Learning

The district mathematics leaders were interested in creating norms that supported teacher leaders to participate in the professional learning meetings. They used the collaborative professional learning measure to better understand teacher leaders' perceptions of whether they had a voice at the meetings. The following ideas that Jessie and Kris shared in their interviews and discussed during the planning and debriefing sessions illustrate this finding. (Jessie and Kris are pseudonyms. Quotes are edited for readability.)

In their initial interview Kris explained, "I think that having the same questions each time will be informative. We can see how people's responses changed. In terms of the idea of voice –why do teachers speak up or not speak up in the small group and the whole group –we're hoping to get more information about that." Reflecting on several of the items that addressed teachers' comfort in sharing ideas, Kris noted, "My perception of these is that, generally people do feel pretty free to do that, but it's good to have these questions because my perceptions could be different from their experiences as teacher leaders in the group." They also commented, "In fact, we changed our norms for this group to reflect these questions, more so at the beginning, when we launched with our norms." For example, they added a norm about sharing one's wonderings and unfinished thinking.

During a planning session for the first professional learning meeting, Kris highlighted that their goal was to help teachers think about how they can impact learning and sense of belonging of African American students. Kris wanted to invite the teacher leaders to "take up a version of this [goal], and their site learning question as well" so that teachers could "adjust it based on a population that your school is really thinking deeply about." They noted that although the district mathematics leaders "believe that by focusing on our black students, we will better educate our whole student population" they didn't want teachers to "accept this blindly" but to "consider it and think about it" and to share their thoughts. Jessie added that their teachers may be "scared to go against it...because it makes you sound racist." The district mathematics leaders seemed to agree that it is important to acknowledge that teachers may be in different places and that they need to allow for continued discussion and support teachers to share their wonderings and unfinished thinking around this goal.

Selecting Items on the Measure to Reflect the Norms They Wanted to Promote

The district mathematics leaders decided not to use all the items on the collaborative professional learning measure but instead selected items that reflected the norms they wanted to promote in

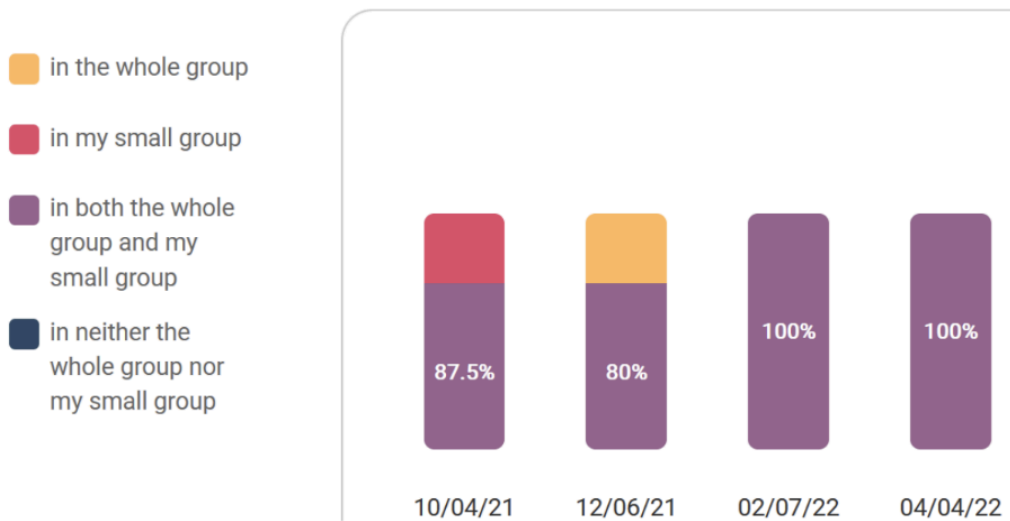
their professional learning meetings. They used this set of items, listed below, at each administration.

- I feel like I can share an idea about teacher leadership I am unsure about... (in the whole group, in my small group, in neither the whole group or my small group)
- I feel like I can push back on an idea... (in the whole group, in my small group, in neither the whole group or my small group)
- In today's session, I felt like I could share something I'm wondering about my own teacher leadership (examples: a question, a dilemma, a challenge)... (yes/no)
 - If no, why not?
- In today's session, I felt like my ideas were valued... (in the whole group, in my small group, in neither the whole group or my small group)
- Today's session was relevant to my work as a teacher leader... (yes/no)
 - If yes, what did you find relevant?

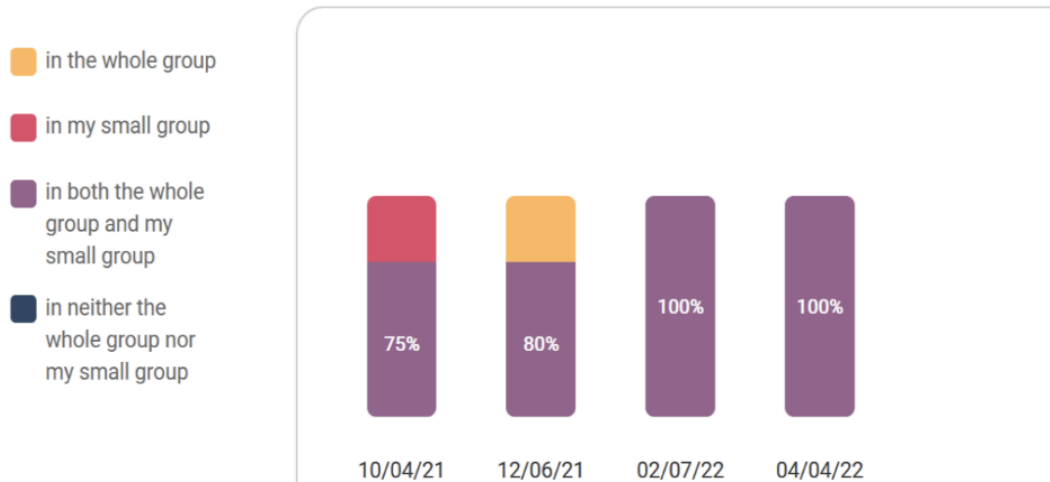
Using Responses on the Collaborative Professional Learning Measure

The district mathematics leaders used the feedback from the teacher leader responses to reflect on how they supported participation in the meeting and to plan for future meetings. Below is an example of the teacher leaders' responses to two of the items after each professional learning meeting. These responses suggest that teacher leaders perceived that their ideas were valued and that they could share ideas about teacher leadership they were uncertain about.

In today's session, I felt like my ideas were valued... (Select all that apply.)



I feel like I can share an idea about teacher leadership I am unsure about... (Select all that apply.)



In their final interview, Jessie considered what responses to these two items suggested about the teacher leaders' comfort sharing ideas they were uncertain about, and how they might use this information in future professional learning opportunities: "I'm trying to think about how to capture this idea that I'm going to call productive uncomfortableness. I don't want people to mistake being uncomfortable and challenge as not being valued. So, for me that would be a

question for me to ponder. The idea of feeling valued in small groups and large groups is an important norm and value that we have for our teachers. So, I could see us using that as part of our feedback.” Jessie indicated that they “liked the idea of going through the questions first so it kind of seeds in your mind, because those questions express a value. So in fact in our mind when we’re planning and facilitating it in some ways helps us with that.” In addition to helping the district mathematics leaders to signal value to the teacher leaders, it also helped them to connect with other data and “help deepen the feedback and the reflection.”

Implications

After using the collaborative professional learning measure with this small group of teacher leaders and finding the feedback valuable, Kris and Jessie thought it also would be valuable to administer when working with a larger and more diverse group of teacher leaders. Kris shared in their final interview:

The larger group of teachers is a much more diverse group of teachers. Some teachers are very aligned with our vision, and some are not. It's a diverse community and not everybody necessarily would feel like they can push back on an idea in our larger group. So, I could definitely see using it. Also it's a bigger group, and in some ways that makes it easier.

The district mathematics leaders were interested in knowing how individual teacher leaders responded. At the same time, they expressed concern that the teacher leaders might not respond honestly if responses were not anonymous. In their final interview, Jessie reflected on the pros and cons of having non-anonymous survey responses in the future: “I think the idea of being anonymous is sort of a double-edged sword. There is something nice about...if we knew which teacher felt, how it could help us think about things more deeply. Yet there's a danger in that, right, because it's kind of labeling somebody or something.” In their work with teachers, the district leaders focus on the importance of a strengths-based mindset toward students, and on considering how to bring out the strengths of each student. Jessie saw a parallel in their work with teacher leaders and related it back to the question of anonymity: “To me that's the limit of being anonymous that we can't...because we don't know who, we can't access a particular strength. I understand what the worries are around not being anonymous.”

For the research team, findings from this study provide knowledge that is generalizable to other educators interested in using this measure to improve the quality of professional learning experiences they provide for teachers. (For more information about this measure, see <https://www.pmr2.org/>).