

Unboxed Article
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Intro

As the education world just began to attempt to mend the tremendous losses it suffered post-pandemic, new teachers experienced a level of uncertainty far deeper than imaginable. Joining a teacher program, you never know what to expect. You get there and you stumble upon a group of people who share the same goals, are experiencing similar struggles, and see inequities in their classrooms too. You start to realize that a teaching program is not there to give you all the solutions to the problems you are seeing in the classroom or the deeper issues of the education system. So...you join forces with those fellow first-year teachers in hopes that you'll make it through your first year. You begin to think, "can I really do this?" and "who put me in charge of 25+ students?". Yes, there are days where you feel the imposter syndrome more than others but, there are many days where you think "wow, I'm really doing this". Then you have a realization: suffering in silence is far too easy to do when you are not only trying to convince yourself of success and progress, but those around you as well. As teacher retention remains at an all time low and student assessment data shows far more gaps than before, new and veteran teachers alike are left to bear the heavy burden of mending the wound that they themselves did not create.

Brief Explanation of Lesson Study & PDSA's

You might be wondering, "what is lesson study and what does PDSA stand for?" Well, we had similar thoughts at the beginning of this program. Lesson study creates "a time and space for close, careful observation of student thinking and learning" (Hurd, 2011). We were put in a

group of grade-alike teachers and began our first lesson study. At the beginning, we were reading many articles. PDSA stands for “plan-do-study-act cycle...a continuous improvement process [that develops] a theory, tests that theory, and then revises that theory based on the results of those tests” (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These things seemed so foreign to us in the beginning. It is meant to be done in community and with the purpose of continuous growth over the years in your career as an educator. Yes we are first year teachers AND we were ready to test this process in hopes that we would better our teaching and explore the activities that work best for our particular groups of students. This is our story.

Our PDSA Story

As our classrooms attempt to mend post-pandemic, our research team noticed a pattern of lack of participation and public speaking in students. After collecting data from focal students in our classrooms through empathy interviews and student-work samples, our research team was able to analyze this data and come to understand the need for student support in whole-group discussions. Focal students claimed to not like speaking up in class, participating in discussions, and preferred partner shares or independent work rather than group work. As educators, who value project based learning, student centered learning, and social justice teaching, we saw this as a critical moment to step in and support student discourse learning. We began to ask ourselves, “how we can simultaneously incorporate project based learning and social justice teaching while providing students the support they need to regain skills that may have been lost during the pandemic?” While driving our research lesson with the use of student data, we agreed as a group to keep the following idea from Safir & Dugan in mind as a north star to guide our practice.

“If we don’t seize this moment to transform our fundamental approaches to teaching and learning, we will navel-gaze and boomerang ourselves into the same played out approaches and results: a pedagogy of compliance for children at the margins and “success” for the privileged.”

Through our exploration of the UDL framework, social justice teaching, and effective discussion practices in the classroom, we devised a plan to implement PDSA cycles into our 4th grade classrooms.

Student dialogue is a key part of classroom culture, however we knew that students discussing and teachers facilitating may not provide the sort of student-centered learning that we were looking for. We began to reflect upon the workings of Paulo Friere and the idea of the banking concept of education where we arrived at the understanding that students are not empty vessels in which educators need to fill with content, in fact educators have much to learn from students and have a responsibility to not further oppress or marginalize the student. Friere quotes on page 81 of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, “The students-no longer docile listeners- are now critical co investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (Friere, 1972). With student-centeredness in mind, and the ideas to reconsider our roles and opinions on content by listening to our students, our research team set out to try to design a research lesson that would encompass student-centered learning, support students in whole-group discourse, and implement UDL practices as a social justice teaching effort to create access for all students.

PDSA Cycle 1

Cycle one consisted of a peer-led student discussion where students would act as active participants while the teacher would play a passive role. Our goal was to create a low-stakes student-led discussion using assigned jobs and posing a fun and relevant topic...I mean what better way to get students to talk to each other than about a fun and intriguing topic? Rather than creating norms for the students, 2 students would be given the jobs of facilitator and timekeeper to create the most effective and student-centered discussion. These students were chosen at random. Due to the fact that the goal of our PDSA cycle 1 was to support students in their self-efficacy in regards to whole-group discussions, we elected to implement a low stakes discussion question in hopes of building to discussing higher stakes issues. Our PDSA cycle 1 planning can be found in the tables below:

PDSA Cycle 1

Equity Theme: We will provide students access to student-led discussions through multiple modalities of learning using the UDL Framework and social justice teaching to allow students to engage in higher order thinking skills.	Describe the change idea (the practice to test) Low stakes student-led discussion using assigned jobs about a fun and relevant topic to the group of students. Topic: Would you rather be invisible or be able to fly? 2 jobs: - Facilitator (pick popsicle sticks – random and fair) - Time keeper - 10-15 minutes for discussion
What is your plan for conducting the test? When will you implement it? Slideshow Exit Ticket Norms around discussions - How to ask questions in a responsible way - 2 jobs (discuss what these jobs include): - Pick using a popsicle stick - Facilitator (rules) - Time keeper (rules) *note to self: what are some words you want to hear from the facilitator when	Questions: What do you want to learn from this cycle? (ground in the students) Are students actually having a productive conversation? Are they just sharing just to share? Is the discussion having an impact on our focal students? Are students building off one another's ideas? Or are they sharing their thoughts and moving on?

doing their job? Triads of trust/pair share etc. UDL framework connection: - Foster collaboration and community - Minimizing threats and distraction - Optimize individual choice and autonomy - Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity	Are students making meaning from the discussion/gaining meaningful insight from each other? Will students fulfill their jobs and how much will they lean on their teachers?
Data: What data will you collect to answer your questions? How will it be measured? When will it be measured? -Which students are speaking -Student body language- are they leaning in? -Creating a discussion web -Using this as a reflection piece to display with students -Exit ticket building on the discussion to see if students were able to change their own perspectives Exit Ticket Questions: - Did you share today? - How did it feel to share? - What is something that you heard that surprised you or stood out to you? Made you interested? – we can change wording	Predictions: What are you predicting the outcome to be? - they are all going to talk over each other - complete chaos ensues - same people share - focal students stay quiet

PDSA Cycle 2

After reflecting and analyzing data from PDSA cycle 1, we were able to see the successful points and the challenges of our lesson plan. After collecting data from student responses, and tracking

the student discussion using a conversation web, we noticed that our focal students were still needing support with whole-group discussions. From this PDSA cycle and further research, we understood that additional scaffolds and UDL practices were necessary for our focal students to feel more comfortable discussing in a whole-group setting. We decided to implement a turn and talk (pair share) prior to students sharing their responses aloud in front of their peers as an additional scaffold for students to rehearse their thoughts. In addition, we noticed that many of the same high status students were sharing more than three times and taking a lot of space in the 15-minute time frame. We adjusted our lesson by adding a third student job “the counter” who was responsible for being sure that no student shared more than three times. This aimed to provide additional space in the discussion for students who may not normally participate. Instead of implementing a low stakes question, we implemented a “medium” stakes question which was “if you could change a rule in the school, what would it be and why?”. This question was intentionally related to school to provide access and relativity for all students but not so socially challenging that it would cause students to lose access. See our PDSA Cycle 2 notes below:

<p>PDSA Cycle 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - turn & talk beforehand - - add extra job: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facilitator - timekeeper - Counter (try their best to keep track of how many times a student speaks – 3 times max) - - keep norms the same → ANCHOR CHART (use throughout the lesson study) - - talking stick of some sort - Beginning introduce as a real school issue so it's more serious (hopefully) - Meaningful topic: If you could change a rule in the school, what would it be and why? <p>Social Justice Questions</p>	<p>Data collection (PDSA Cycle 2):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion web - Exit Ticket: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Same as before - Did you share? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes - No - How did it feel to share <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I didn't share - great - Good - Okay - What stood out to you? - What would you change to make the discussion better? <p>Resources: PDSA Cycle 2 Slides Exit Ticket</p>
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While reading a study by Sasson et al.(2020), we came across a UDL practice that had not crossed our mind previously. Sasson et al. emphasizes past research which claims that co-teaching not only has an impact on classroom management but also aids in developing a classroom community including the increased personal attention to students (2020). Their study found a significant correlation between innovative learning spaces and co-teaching which proved the benefits of both UDL practices used simultaneously (Sasson et al. 2020). These findings significantly impacted us as educators and researchers as we began to plan our research lesson. PBL provides more opportunities for co-teaching than most as projects are typically planned and taught at grade level as a team. So we thought, “why not co-teach during our research lesson next?” We hoped we would be able to analyze the benefits of co-teaching along with the UDL practices as we designed instruction centering around student-led discussion and innovative learning spaces. We look forward to analyzing the data that these pedagogical practices provide and utilizing the findings in our own practice as an Elementary educator.

Outro

After an entire year dedicated to lesson study where we were provided the spaciousness and opportunity to explore the areas of need in our classrooms, we realized a few important things about teaching. Teaching is a process meaning that I don't think you'll ever fully feel prepared for the classroom you will have. Our fourth grade classrooms are all vastly different yet through our differences, we found commonalities. Those commonalities brought us together and made us better as a lesson study group because we were able to adjust and adapt the lessons accordingly. Teaching is always changing, and the pandemic and post-pandemic world has made the education world challenging. There are always things that we could do better or differently for

our students. The inequities that are coming up from the pandemic is not the sole responsibility of the educators. We don't know everything, nor will we ever know everything there is to teaching. And if we can be there for our students and try our best to support them by meeting them where they are and creating spaces where students feel loved and cared for, then that's a good starting point. Lastly, we believe that teaching is not meant to be done alone. Find those teammates that support, love you and even on those hard days, they remind you why you're doing this. Invite your students to teach and be the leaders...they'll surprise you and maybe just maybe we'll get through this time of education together. As first year teachers, we haven't figured it all out yet and we don't think we ever will and that is completely okay.

References

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