

San Diego State University

Program in Educational Leadership Dissertation Defense Announcement

Student Name: Bonifacio Sanchez

Committee Chair: James M. Marshall, Department of Educational Leadership

Committee Member: Douglas Fisher, Department of Educational Leadership

Committee Member: Michelle Shin, Department of Educational Leadership

Title of Dissertation: Using the PLC+ Framework and Improvement Science to Address Academic Gaps for African American and Latino Students in Elementary: A Program Evaluation

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Abstract

African American and Latino students have historically experienced persistent academic gaps in the American education system. Although schools and educators have the responsibility of closing these gaps, the gaps remain a challenge. This program evaluation examined the experience of two elementary teams of teachers, along with administration and support staff, as they implemented improvement science principles and tools within the PLC+ framework to address an identified academic gap in vocabulary for African American and Latino students. This program evaluation employed a mixed-methods formative design and was carried out at a school in a large urban school district in the San Joaquin Valley of California with third- and fifth-grade PLC teams. Data sources included multiple student assessment data sets, observations of PLC meetings, professional learning, planning days, classroom instruction, PLC

artifacts, and teacher and support staff interviews. Both PLC teams implemented the primary components of improvement science by identifying a problem of practice, engaging in root cause analysis, implementing a change idea, and monitoring it through successive PDSA cycles. Student assessment data demonstrated positive gains in vocabulary outcomes overall. African American students demonstrated the greatest gains across assessment measures. Latino students also demonstrated a consistent pattern of positive growth across nearly all measures. Multiple evidence sources and interview data converged and identified intentional collaborative structures as a key system-level condition that facilitated improvement science implementation. Leadership supports included side-by-side professional learning, instructional modeling and coaching, and opportunities for peer observation followed by debrief and feedback. An emergent finding highlighted the benefits of intentionally including SDC teachers alongside their general education peers. Collectively, the combined student outcome and adult practice findings suggest that early implementation of improvement science using the PLC+ framework coincided with generally positive changes in vocabulary performance for both African American and Latino students. The findings also suggest that embedding improvement science into existing organizational structures and providing capacity-building opportunities facilitated implementation within the PLC+ framework. This program evaluation provides a foundation for future evaluations of improvement science on a larger scale and across educational settings with the goal of improving outcomes for historically marginalized student groups.