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International Journal of Self-Directed Learning

Volume 21, Number 1, Spring 2024

CONTENTS

Teachers' Initial Perceptions of Self-Directed Learning Within a Teacher-Directed Professional Learning Program

Rachel Nelson, Holly Weaver, Erin West, Sherry Thomas-Paddie, 1
Heather Childress, Katherine Chesnutt, and James Beeler

TEACHERS' INITIAL PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING WITHIN A TEACHER-DIRECTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM

Rachel Nelson, Holly Weaver, Erin West, Sherry Thomas-Paddie, Heather Childress, Katherine Chesnutt, and James Beeler

This study explored teachers' perceptions of their experiences participating in self-directed learning (Knowles, 1970, 1975). The teacher participants ($n = 127$) were guided through a self-directed learning framework for professional learning and reflected on their experiences. Findings indicate teachers reporting increased autonomy and personalization compared with traditional professional learning opportunities.

Keywords: self-directed learning, teacher-directed professional learning, goal setting, professional development, teacher agency

This study explored teachers' perceptions of self-directed learning (SDL) following their initial introduction to a program focusing on teacher professionalization and teacher-led SDL. With teacher shortages at an all-time high (DiNapoli, 2021; Yarrell, 2022) and the shifting expectations placed on teachers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Lynch, 2021), adequately preparing and retaining high quality educators in the field is of paramount importance. One way to retain quality educators is to provide them with meaningful professional learning opportunities. Professional development that incorporates an SDL model may serve as a way to promote professionalism, engage teachers in their learning, and potentially increase teacher retention rates (Bakhshi, 2019; Tooley & Hood, 2021). This study's application of SDL can be specifically categorized as teacher-directed professional learning (TDPL). TDPL provides teachers with autonomy and encourages them to seek out learning opportunities related to their interests (Artman et al., 2020). While we recognize the interconnectedness between SDL and TDPL, in this research we utilize SDL in reference to the *SDL process* and TDPL when discussing *teachers' professional learning*.

Purpose

Traditional professional development models for teacher professional learning rarely create meaningful change in classroom instruction (Artman et al., 2020; Joyce & Showers, 1983; Sykes, 1996), and this stagnation in practice has led to decades of calls

to reimagine teacher professional development and training (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1998; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Milner-Bolotin, 2018). Exposing teachers to SDL opportunities and allowing them to experience learner-centered andragogy may lead to a shift in instruction toward a model of SDL in their own classrooms (Karataş et al., 2021). By examining teachers' perceptions of SDL, specifically focused on individualized goal setting, this exploratory study aimed to better understand their initial perceptions of an SDL framework to identify ways in which these emerging themes might inform policy and change in professional learning opportunities that support quality teaching and learning.

Theoretical Framework

Our study drew on the foundational work of Knowles (1970, 1975) who created a five-step model for integrating SDL in the context of education, which includes diagnosing learning needs, establishing learning goals, finding and selecting necessary resources for learning, applying suitable learning strategies, and assessing learning outcomes. Our study's SDL framework established an individualized professional learning environment in which teachers began with a "three-step self-diagnostic process" (Mezirow, 1985, p. 26) to better understand one's learning needs. First, teachers examined essential competencies for effective teaching. Then, teachers assessed their current level of proficiency according to these competencies. Finally, teachers considered the gaps between their current level of performance and their desired behavior or understanding (Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1985). To engage in this self-diagnostic process, each teacher took a needs assessment and then used the results to establish their own individualized learning goals. This reflection process allows learners to engage in a learner-centered environment that incorporates freedom, autonomy, independence, and reflection (Mezirow, 1985). Participants were provided with a framework for individualized learning opportunities along with the autonomy to choose which would work best for their needs. This study also encouraged participants to collaborate and discuss their individualized learning goals with peers. The opportunity for collaboration recognizes that working with peers allows for increased motivation within our SDL framework (Garrison, 1997).

Our analysis of these data was guided by the work of critical theory that encourages researchers to engage with and connect to society so they may "be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists" (Giroux, 1982, p. 20; Horkheimer, 1993). Our analysis centered on the voices (i.e., perceptions) of the teachers and attempted to learn from experiences in order to advocate for their increased professionalism. This work also recognized that the teaching profession is currently highly politicized and often blamed (Kumashiro, 2012, 2020) for whatever "ails the nation" (Taubman & Savona, 2009, p. 138). Through local school board decisions, including the adoption of scripted curriculum and mandated professional development, teachers may also be experiencing de-professionalization (de Saxe et al., 2020). Our research team's passion for teacher

advocacy is in direct alignment with our study's focus on TDPL and will be felt throughout the data analysis.

While there is a plethora of research examining both teacher instructional practices (Brophy & Good, 1986; Downer et al., 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Pressley et al., 2003) and the processes involved in SDL (Artman et al., 2020; Caffarella, 1993; Cross, 1981; Knowles 1975; Mezirow, 1985), less is known about teachers' perceptions of SDL as a key component of professional development opportunities.

The process of SDL is vital not only to modern-day teachers' success but potentially also to students' postsecondary success. With increased globalization and rapidly advancing technology, today's workforce requires individuals to adapt to changing environments and feel empowered to learn new skills (Brandt, 2020; Morris & Rohs, 2023). Seeking to understand teachers' perceptions of the SDL process may provide insight into future research regarding how classroom instruction may impact students as self-directed, adaptable, and empowered learners. Additionally, exploring teacher perceptions of their initial experiences with SDL, more specifically TDPL, as a form of professional learning may provide insight into how to increase teacher agency in professional learning experiences. To this end, this exploratory study sought to examine the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of SDL as it pertains to individualized goal setting?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the ways in which SDL impacts their professional practice?

Study Context

The initial data in this study are part of a longitudinal study exploring teacher perceptions of SDL learning opportunities presented to them through the use of microcredentials. In the context of our study, microcredentials are online, competency-based portfolios. Participating teachers implement a selected strategy and reflect upon how that strategy impacts student learning. Participants teach grades 6–8 in rural, high-needs middle schools in western North Carolina (United States). To maintain our project's alignment with the work of Knowles (1970) regarding SDL, we employed the use of a needs assessment that allowed participants to self-assess their strengths and areas for improvement. Upon the completion of their self-assessment, participants are given individualized results that are utilized to create their professional learning goals for the school year. The individualized results and, in turn, goal creation help create a more meaningful experience for those engaged in the SDL process (Mezirow, 1985).

Our first research question focused on the teachers' perceptions of SDL. Traditionally, the teachers participating in our study are mandated by the state of North Carolina to establish professional learning goals. In some cases, teachers' individualized goals are selected for them by their school districts and administrators. Depending on their school, teachers are not given guidance on how to develop their learning goals for the year other than to align them to North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2016). Alternatively,

engaging in self-reflection and having the agency to establish professional learning goals based on self-reflection directly aligns with the process of SDL.

Our second research question explored teachers' experiences with SDL and their perceptions of how their experiences may impact their teaching. When given the opportunity to establish individualized goals, we sought to better understand how this process may impact their professional practice and, in turn, student learning.

Literature Review

An integral process of SDL and, in turn, TDPL is personal goal setting. There is an inherent value in self-created goals (Ponton & Carr, 2000) because generally people perceive there will be a positive outcome in achieving their goal (e.g., they have found a solution to a relevant issue or challenge). Therefore, people are more likely to invest their time and energy in achieving the goals they set out for themselves (Knowles, 1980). Moreover, goal-setting is one of the most effective ways for teachers to improve their teaching because it is directive, allowing the teacher to focus on improving a specific skill (Camp, 2017; Locke & Latham, 2002).

Goal setting also unveils the metacognitive processes of SDL for teachers. As teachers engage in the process of self-evaluating, goal setting, and monitoring, they are better equipped to help their students engage in the same processes (Balta & Eryilmaz, 2019; Karataş & Zeybek, 2020). While traditional courses are prescriptive in what students learn, an SDL classroom is student-focused, providing students with the autonomy to assess their needs, set personal goals for their learning, and monitor their progress. The skills of SDL span across dimensions that contribute to the success of an individual, fostering motivation, personal responsibility, and autonomy (Brandt, 2020; Ponton & Carr, 2000; Reinders, 2010). The skills built through SDL are vital to the success of K–12 students who are preparing for an ever-evolving workforce with rapid technological changes (Brandt, 2020).

While traditional models of teacher professional learning are prescriptive and impersonal, TDPL is a form of SDL where the teacher is an active participant in assessing their needs, setting goals, seeking out opportunities for professional growth, and measuring their progress (Adam et al., 2022; Artman et al., 2020; Bakhshi, 2019). TDPL occurs outside the conventional school setting and may be carried out through peer-to-peer learning, online resources, and social media. At the core of TDPL is learner autonomy and freedom (Artman et al., 2020).

The process of TDPL is increasingly relevant to teachers' needs for adjusting and meeting the demands of rapid technological and subject matter advancements. Through goal setting, teachers can pinpoint which issues they need to troubleshoot to meet their students' unique learning needs. TDPL allows teachers to find relevant and authentic solutions to the challenges they face in their teaching and learning contexts (Bakhshi, 2019; Riddle, 2018). TDPL is appealing to teachers because they are developing skills that extend far beyond helping them meet their initial goal; they are gaining lifelong learning skills that help them stay abreast of effective uses of ever-evolving instructional technology and new research in their subject matter (Karataş et al., 2021, Louws et al., 2017; Morris, 2019a). Those who engage in SDL demonstrate

characteristics of lifelong learners (Brandt, 2020; Tekkol & Demirel, 2018) and workplace skills such as creativity, communication, and collaboration (Toh & Kirschner, 2020). Morris (2019b) also noted that SDL has become an essential skill needed for adults as they navigate a rapidly changing modern world.

The flexibility of TDPL expands teachers' access to professional learning materials beyond the confines of a school building. Through online professional learning networks, teachers have access to a wealth of information and increased opportunities for collaboration (Colwell & Hutchison, 2018). With TDPL, teachers are neither limited to the professional learning opportunities that their school or district provides nor required to learn and apply their knowledge within the confines of a particular time and space. Therefore, teachers can learn at their own pace (Artman et al., 2020).

Having the autonomy to establish professional learning goals gives teachers increased ownership over their professional learning, bolstering their sense of self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Tooley & Hood, 2021). As teachers learn and grow, they see themselves as agents capable of directing their own professional learning (Bandura, 1989; Beach et al., 2022). This increased sense of capability can motivate teachers to be more innovative in their approaches to teaching. When teachers are trusted to identify and assess their professional learning needs, there is a sense of trust, dignity, and respect that may lead to improved morale and professionalization (Adam et al., 2022).

Data Collection and Analysis

Once institutional review board approval was obtained for this study, participants were recruited from 12 surrounding school districts. Among the teacher participants, 18% ($n = 23$) were men and 82% ($n = 104$) were women. The majority ($P = 97.8\%$) identified as White. All names presented herein are pseudonyms. Participants ranged from a first-year teacher to veteran teachers with over 30 years of experience: 27% ($n = 34$) participants had 5 years of experience or less, 15% ($n = 19$) had 6–10 years, 34% ($n = 43$) had 11–19 years, and 24% ($n = 31$) had 20 years or more.

The data collected for this study were analyzed directly from the participants' individualized learning plans ($n = 127$) submitted to our online learning management system that we use to facilitate our participants' SDL opportunities. Individual responses were collected, sorted by research question, and compiled into a list containing all responses. Our team of researchers utilized a constant comparative analysis to allow for proper thematic categorization (Glaser, 1965). Constant comparative analysis can especially be helpful in "early stages of a research project to identify patterns in the data and to organize large amounts of data so as to abstract categories" (Fram, 2013, p. 20). Taking time to review individual responses and group them thematically provided ample reflection and discussion surrounding the importance of the participants' experiences with SDL.

Three separate teams of researchers consisting of three to four team members each reviewed all of the submitted responses to our proposed research questions and began coding the data (Saldaña, 2012). The individual teams then shared their themes

with the whole group and categorized data together. The results were collaboratively debated and recategorized until a consensus was reached on the major themes emerging from the data. This process of constant comparative analysis allowed for robust discussion regarding the responses submitted by our participants and how their responses aligned with current research regarding teacher professional learning.

Findings

After analyzing teachers' responses to the reflection questions posed to them after completing their needs assessment and self-reflection, our team identified four themes occurring within teachers' perceptions of SDL: (a) increased autonomy, (b) personalization, (c) meaningfulness, and (d) potential impact on student learning.

Overall, teachers reported feeling increased ownership of their professional learning goals because they were directly aligned with their needs assessment results and personal interests. Additionally, teachers noted being able to tailor their professional learning goals based on the needs of their students and classrooms. Therefore, they anticipated their SDL plan would lead to increased student achievement. The perceived classroom relevance and alignment with personalized professional learning needs made the process of TDPL and individualized goal setting a meaningful and significant experience for teachers.

Autonomy

It is important to highlight the feelings of autonomy related to individualized goal setting because without utilizing this TDPL framework, many teachers had lost the ability to create their own goals. Teachers shared how this experience with individualized goal setting within a TDPL framework gave them increased autonomy regarding their ability to choose their goals:

These are goals that I can see and am really making for myself. In the past the school or district selected one goal for me and I was able to look at one for myself. I never thought about really trying to complete the goal set for me or growing much at all. (Amelia)

Previously, goals have been set at the school level ... [through this process] I liked being able to select what types of professional development I personally need instead of being told what to set for my goals. (Dorris)

First off, our school admin would require us to put in our professional development plan something they wanted ... with this process I can pick and choose what I want to look into. I like the fact that it is my decision. (Brent)

In the past, I have basically set my goals based on the school goals ... working through this process allowed me to look at professional development opportunities that interest me and build a plan around that opportunity. (Kent)

Some teachers also noted the increased autonomy made these goals more effective. Because they wrote their own goals, they felt more capable of achieving their goals:

In the past I have set up professional growth goals based on what the district asks us to do more than anything else. I typically incorporate whatever “new and flashy” theme they have into writing my goal ... my goals had not been incorporated into my classroom effectively [in the past]. (Gerdy)

Historically, a professional growth plan is something that must be done and there is no true purpose in creating a personalized plan. Administrators use this to have a start-up discussion about the current year’s plan. On the other hand, this learning plan is a promise with both partners to make sure I am learning and producing artifacts that meet the contract. I believe this will be more beneficial as it will keep me engaged and accountable. (Helen)

Personalization

Teachers also shared how the TDPL framework provided them with the opportunity to choose what they were interested in learning about throughout the year. They noted how utilizing the results of their needs assessment yielded quality, customized goals:

This is the first time I have completed a needs assessment before completing my professional learning plan. Looking at my strengths and weaknesses in combination with my own professional goals is helpful in creating a plan that feels like it will be working for me – instead of simply checking it off the “to-do” list. (Francis)

The individualized survey results help to determine possible strengths and possible areas for improvement. This is a more individualized approach to setting goals for the school year. This will allow me to have a personalized focus on my professional growth. (Tina)

Having the survey results, which lead to the data, was an excellent way of seeing my strengths and weaknesses. It has created a more individualized process of creating goals based on my personal reflection. (Becky)

In creating my goals, I felt more focused and was able to easily identify areas of growth. In the past I feel like I randomly pulled a goal/action item which resulted in minimal investment and true goal-setting/achievement. Now I will be spending time on a goal that I selected, based on areas where I feel invested. (Janice)

Teachers also highlighted the ways that the TDPL framework allowed them to focus on themselves and their needs as professionals:

These goals are specific to my needs. Because this learning contract is focused on individuals rather than the stereotypical needs of large groups of teachers, the outcomes are likely to yield success in student learning. (Erin)

For the first time I feel like I am being heard and that my needs are being addressed, and that I can be honest with my responses/feedback. (Laura)

This [goal creation] process was more personal. I really thought about my strengths and weaknesses. I reflected on how I wanted to improve those weaknesses and I was given concrete options to choose from that are beneficial to me. (Paul)

[Through this process] I was able to assess myself first to then pick a task to work on a goal. I think this plan will help with my professional development because I am able to directly address my weaknesses. (Susan)

Meaningfulness

Many teacher responses indicated that they felt that the reflection process and creation of individualized learning goals were meaningful to them. As outlined in other responses, the process of goal creation had become stagnant and disconnected from their practice. However, by utilizing the TDPL framework provided to them, teachers reported increased meaningfulness with a potential for increased buy-in:

I believe this process is more comprehensive and thorough than the traditional PDP method we complete at the beginning of the school year. It encourages me to take more ownership in the process and to think a little more critically and reflectively about the professional development I am involved in ... by looking at my personal survey report I can see very quickly the elements on which I need to work. (Roxanne)

I have set goals quickly in the fall before for my PDP. It is always such a busy time and hard to focus on what I need ... this process will make my goals more meaningful to me. (Todd)

This process has allowed me to see my strengths and weaknesses. I feel like all of my co-workers could benefit from this tool to create a more meaningful PDP. In the past it was more about checking a box and less about truly creating a goal that will have an impact on me as a professional and one that helps my students and program to grow. (Valerie)

This process has left me feeling that I have bettered myself. I have never put much stock in my evaluations or the data driven concept of teaching. I think

this process will help me be more accountable to following through on goals.
(Wanda)

Potential Impact on Student Learning

The final emergent theme encapsulates the teachers' responses regarding how their experience with the TDPL framework will impact their students and their teaching. Many teachers made the direct connection between their TDPL experiences and their classroom by predicting that personal goal setting will positively impact instruction and thus student learning:

I am excited about this process. It will be beneficial to have professional development opportunities that will help me better prepare myself and students with the knowledge they need for 21st century skills. (Abby)

This is a much more timely and relevant process. I believe that by working through this process I will be able to make timely adjustments to my instruction that will positively impact student learning. I also feel that it will prove me an opportunity to take an active role in my professional development. (Darlene)

This process helped me reflect more on what I need to focus on myself to be a better teacher to my students. I hope that this will impact my practice as a professional this year by making me a better teacher and helping my students become more successful learners. (Saylor)

This learning plan put the focus on me and what I need to improve on to help my students gain a better understanding of the materials being taught. (Tim)

I truly like that this process allowed me to reflect on my own teaching ... I predict my learning contract and goals will impact my practice as a professional this year by giving me space to reflect and act on areas I need to grow in as well as enhance the areas I am doing well in. (Becky)

Discussion

Our findings support the literature that outlines the numerous benefits of personal goal setting within the professional context (Butler, 2007, 2012; Camp, 2017; Retelsdorf et al., 2010). However, while the North Carolina evaluation system for educators requires teachers to establish their own professional development goals at the start of the year, it was clear from the responses above that the teachers participating in our study are sometimes asked to construct goals based on their districts' or administrators' direction. Amelia wrote, "in the past the school or district selected one goal for me ... I never thought about really trying to complete the goal set for me or growing much at all." Adopting a goal set by another person or institution takes away teacher agency, making professional development plans impersonal and inauthentic. Therefore,

teachers may feel less motivated to achieve that goal. Garrison's (1997) theoretical framework explored the cognitive and motivational dimensions of SDL noting, "self-direction that is simply focused on task control neglects the critical issues of setting goals that are relevant and meaningful" (p. 21). Alternatively, true self-direction gives teachers the independence to create goals that address their specific needs and challenges, creating a more authentic learning experience. As Erin noted, "because this learning contract is focused on individuals rather than the stereotypical needs of large groups of teachers, the outcomes are likely to yield success in student learning." Our teachers felt empowered when they were given freedom to create professional learning goals based on their specific needs.

As teachers remarked on the autonomy, personalization, and meaningfulness of the goal-setting process, a notable commonality was teachers' perceptions of how TDPL increased professionalization through teacher agency. Mandated professional development goals take away teachers' ability to direct their learning, and scripted curriculum denies teachers' choices on how and when to deliver instruction in a way that works best for their students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). This lack of agency can result in decreased job satisfaction because teachers see themselves as part of a larger system with no sense of what makes them human: "subjectivity, deliberative self-guidance, and reflective self-guidance" (Bandura, 2001, p. 314). Bandura (2001) posited the main difference between humans and machines is agentic action, stating "without a phenomenal and functional consciousness people are essentially higher-level automatons undergoing actions devoid of any subjectivity or conscious control" (p. 314). A few participants in this study indicated that conscious control was not the norm in their teaching setting. As Gerdy wrote, "in the past I have set up professional growth goals based on what the district asks us to do ... I typically incorporate whatever 'new and flashy' theme they have." Prioritizing district goals takes away teachers' opportunities to reflect and deliberate upon their practice. This top-down approach is de-professionalizing, denying teachers of voice and choice. Alternatively, TDPL centers the voice of the teacher. As Laura noted regarding the TDPL process, "for the first time I feel like I am being heard and that my needs are being addressed, and that I can be honest with my responses/feedback." The process of TDPL fostered a sense of agency with the teachers participating in our study, resulting in increased professionalization and more authentic, meaningful professional learning goals.

Our findings also indicate teachers are becoming increasingly aware of how SDL can benefit students. One participating teacher remarked how the goal-setting process "better prepare[s] ... students with the knowledge they need for 21st century skills" while another teacher noted that through the TDPL process, they "will be able to make timely adjustments to [their] instruction that will positively impact student learning." As teachers participating in our study become more aware of the benefits of SDL in a rapidly shifting educational landscape, they may be more inclined to explicitly teach these skills to students, including having students self-evaluate, set personal goals, and self-monitor their learning. It is possible that through SDL, students will feel increased autonomy and thus engagement with their learning. Reinders (2010) noted the following: "Autonomy develops gradually and is a mind set [*sic*] that calls for certain skills, not the other way around. The overall classroom atmosphere needs to

value and encourage reflection and the students' own views and roles in the learning process" (p. 51). Giving students the opportunity to practice assessing their needs and setting goals for their learning will prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

By engaging in a TDPL framework, the teachers participating in this study saw themselves as agents of their own learning, fostering a sense of autonomy, personalization, and meaningfulness. Teachers felt trusted to create goals that addressed challenges that were relevant to their specific needs. While there is an abundance of research to support the positive impact of goal setting for teachers (Butler, 2007, 2012; Camp, 2017; Retelsdorf et al., 2010), we found that teachers were rarely given enough time and support in creating their own learning goals. Rather, teachers were used to a top-down approach where they were provided a goal from the district or state. Additionally, teachers felt the reflection process allowed them to personalize their goals for the year. Engaging with their results from the needs assessment gave teachers the time and space to consider their professional strengths and weaknesses, and many teachers remarked on how this made the goal-setting process more personal. As Francis, for example, noted, "looking at my strengths and weaknesses in combination with my own professional goals is helpful in creating a plan that feels like it will be working for me – instead of simply checking it off the 'to-do' list." Because this process was more authentic and personal, we noticed that engaging in the goal-setting process turned what had become an arbitrary task into meaningful work.

Teachers recognize how TDPL will positively impact their professional practice. Many teachers indicated that because they can specifically address their learning needs, they feel they will be able to better help their students. As Abby noted, "it will be beneficial to have professional development opportunities that will help me better prepare myself and students with the knowledge they need for 21st century skills." However, it is unclear if teachers (a) see TDPL as helpful because they can acquire new knowledge and understanding of their subject matter and technology or (b) see the *process* of TDPL as beneficial because they can transfer the metacognitive skills of SDL to their students.

As we continue our research, we aim to better understand how the impact of engaging teachers in the process of TDPL may impact students as self-directed learners. The benefits of an SDL classroom are profound (Balta & Eryilmaz, 2019). Karataş and Zeybek (2020) noted "that teachers can guide students on how to move on to the next level of a particular skill so that students can demonstrate skills such as teamwork, collaboration, and managing their own learning" (pp. 35–36). As teachers recognize the benefits of TDPL in their professional practice, we hope to see them recognize the benefits of SDL on student achievement.

Ultimately, our findings indicate there is a need to better understand how states, districts, and schools might adopt professional development programs that allow for SDL in the form of TDPL. As teachers take control of their own learning, it empowers them to integrate their gained knowledge into their daily practice and the facilitation of

student learning. Furthermore, additional research is needed on how TDPL can lead to improved student outcomes as teachers collaborate and grow as professionals (Bond, 2022; Williams et al., 2014). While this study focused on individualized goal setting, these SDL opportunities do not occur in isolation. TDPL can be enhanced through collaborative opportunities, and we aim to better understand the benefits of teachers working alongside a peer as they engage in the TDPL framework.

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