

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Mathematics and Statistics Faculty
Publications and Presentations

Fariborz Maseeh Department of Mathematics
and Statistics

2016

The Language of Professional Development Leaders

Andrew Riffel

Portland State University

Kathleen Mary Melhuish

Texas State University - San Marcos

Eva Thanheiser

Portland State University, evat@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/mth_fac



Part of the [Science and Mathematics Education Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Riffel, A., Melhuish, K., Thanheiser, E. (2016). The language of professional development leaders. In M. B. Wood, E. E. Turner, M. Civil, & J. A. Eli (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 38th annual meeting of the North American Chapter of the International Group for the Psychology of Mathematics Education* (pp. 391-394).

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mathematics and Statistics Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

THE LANGUAGE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEADERS

Andrew Riffel

Portland State University
riffle@pdx.edu

Kathleen Melhuish

Teachers Development Group
kmelhuish@teachersdg.org

Eva Thanheiser

Portland State University
evat@pdx.edu

Leaders in professional development (PD) initiatives (such as facilitators, principals, coaches) hold a great deal of power in their language, carrying the ability to manage meaning and frame experiences. Rather than working from interview data, this report addresses a gap in leadership research by examining the words used by leaders in their on-the-job interactions. We present an initial framework for capturing leadership language qualities at the macro level (framing the PD's purpose) and micro level (rhetorical crafting in terms of metaphor usage, pronoun choice, and other language selections). Our data come from a larger project evaluating the efficacy of a large-scale sustained PD. Through developing a lens for analyzing leadership, we hope to build a tool to eventually connect leadership with other related PD measures including teacher buy-in, fidelity of implementation, and ultimately outcomes in schools.

Keywords: Teacher Education-Inservice/Professional Development, Affect, Emotion, Beliefs, and Attitudes

Leaders in professional development (PD) initiatives (such as facilitators, principals, and coaches) hold a great deal of power in their language. Their words carry the ability to inspire participants to buy into initiatives, establish themselves as credible leaders, and build positive learning communities. Communication is more than the transmission of information, as language acts to bring meaning to ideas and frame experiences.

In this report, we share a preliminary analysis of leader interactions with careful attention to rhetoric and framing choices of leaders within schools and the PD program. Our data comes from a quasi-experimental study evaluating the efficacy of a mathematics PD program in a midsized, urban school district. We use detailed field notes and video-taped PD sessions to compare language across various leaders. Despite a well coordinated PD, we found consistent differences in framing and rhetoric across leaders at various sites.

On Framing and Language

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) describe “reality [as] a social construct, and language is its primary vehicle” (p. 19). They go on to explain that leaders’ discourse can serve to build frames to explain purposes of innovation, gain interest, to inspire, and to promote a sense of community. Individuals’ experiences are shaped by the discursive choices of those around them. We use the lens of *framing* and *rhetorical crafting* to analyze the language of leaders. We use these constructs in a way consistent with Conger (1991) where framing is the defining of major concepts and purpose, and rhetorical crafting is at a finer-grained level. Conger defines framing as “the process of defining the purpose of an organization in a meaningful way” (Conger, 1991, p. 32). We generalized this construct to capture framing of major ideas including, but not limited to, the purpose of our PD. Conger discusses rhetorical crafting as using symbolic language, focusing on emotional power in his writing, to package a message. He goes on to use the analogy of a gift’s wrapping paper being “as impactful as the gift itself” (p. 32). For our analysis, we adapt this notion to analyze language choices across leadership interactions.

Leaders in PD

Leadership is essential for positive change in schools (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). The role of several types of leaders has been explored within PD including principals (e.g. Youngs & King, 2002), PD facilitators (e.g. Linder, 2011), and teacher leaders (e.g. Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster, & Cobb, 1995). Leadership literature varies from describing types of effective leaders (often relying heavily on interview data), to leadership roles, and leadership actions. We aim to build on leadership work by addressing *leadership interactions* directly. That is, our primary source of data are videos and notes from PD sessions where various leaders interact with participants.

Methods

Context of the Study

We are currently conducting a large quasi-experimental study evaluating the efficacy of a studio model PD in a mid-sized urban school district. We have all grades 3-5 teachers at 25 elementary schools participating in either (a) 3-day summer sessions only or (b) 3-day summer sessions and five 2-day cycles of PD (studio model) throughout the year. The PD focuses on creating mathematically productive classrooms through Best Practices in teaching that promote students developing mathematical habits such as justifying and generalizing (Foreman, 2013). For the schools participating in the studio model, the two-day cycle is split into a leadership coaching day and studio day. During the studio day, one teacher at each school (the studio teacher) opens his or her classroom for a commonly planned and subsequently observed lesson. All teachers at the school work together to plan, refine, and debrief the lessons. This day is preceded by a day of leadership coaching with the principal and math coach, as well as planning with the studio teacher. The PD facilitators work with the principal and coach at each school to (a) help the principal understand the goals of the PD, (b) plan the principal introduction for the next day during which the principal frames the PD, (c) observe in the grades 3-5 math classrooms and connect these observations to teacher implementation of the PD, and (d) plan on how to increase buy-in and sustain the PD between cycles.

Data Collection and Analyzing Leadership

We collected data on two case study schools, School 1 (year 1, 2, and 3 data; 603 students in 2012-2013 with 83.5% receiving free/reduced lunch, 53.3% of 5th graders meeting standards in math) and School 2 (year 1 data only; 358 students in 2012-2013 with 38.5% receiving free/reduced lunch, 75% of 5th graders meeting standards in math). For each PD session, both days were video-recorded and at least one member of the research team took detailed field notes. The field notes were first processed by identifying instances of *leadership interactions*. We used leadership interactions to capture any interaction between participants where (a) one of the participants was in a leadership role; and (b) the communication was substantive. We then analyzed the leadership interactions across three midyear sessions each of which had a different PD facilitator and principal. Initially, we open-coded the leadership interactions to look for trends across discourse. After this initial exploration, we developed categories of rhetorical crafting and identified instances of framing related to the PD. We then returned to the video to assure our categories accurately reflected the conversations.

Preliminary Results

Through our initial analysis, we found that leaders varied in how they framed important aspects of our work and in their discourse choices in a variety of ways such as pronoun choice and usage of metaphors.

Framing

We analyzed leadership interactions based on the framing of the purpose and nature of the PD, the roles and expectations around teachers, and the nature of mathematical classrooms. Consider the following contrasting principal framing of the PD work from their opening statements to teachers.

Principal S: Some of those, what that looks like is short answers to a question, it could be restating facts or statements, showing procedures, and we got to be getting out of that and instead challenging our students more, bumping up the rigor. A big piece of our work this year is aligning our actions and being really purposeful about this is what we want to see: we want students to be making sense, we want students to be justifying, we want students to be generalizing, making connections to the work, making representations of the work.

Principal A: The group is also flexible, so that when it comes to our homework assignments and that type of thing, I think we can make them more genuinely confirming for the work we're going to be building. Yesterday when we were walking around, I saw a couple, well more than a couple of great things and I want to encourage you guys to keep trying to do these things. They're new and learning to do anything new is the hardest part. I think we're over a big hump in terms of effort and the work in terms of conferences. The hard part's done, we just have to focus in on the gift of the work.

Principal S frames the PD work in terms that are a.) consistent with the focus of the PD such as having students justify and generalize, and b.) as purposeful for benefiting students. In contrast, Principal A frames the PD work in terms that are a.) not specific to any of the PD's focus, and b.) pleasing an external source, "the group", through completion of "homework". The choice of the word "homework" alludes to the PD work being prescribed and perhaps undesirably necessary.

Rhetoric

We also found a number of differences in leaders' rhetorical crafting. We present two example differences: pronoun choice and imagery. Table 1 includes additional categories of rhetoric themes.

Table 1: Sample Themes in Leadership Rhetoric

Sample Rhetorical Crafting Category	Description
Inclusiveness of language	Pronoun choice such as <i>I</i> and <i>you/they</i> vs. <i>we</i>
Orientation towards school/participants	Strengths-based or deficit-based language
Level of specificity	Specific examples or broad statements
Level of personalization	Personalized or generic messages
Use of imagery	Figures of speech (i.e. metaphor) in language

Within our first theme, inclusiveness of language, we present excerpts from two leaders with contrasting crafting. The first tended to favor "I" and "you" statements such as, "The survey is a gift you give yourself. I know how busy you are and how fast you are running." In contrast, the second leader used "we" statements such as, "We're going to work hard to see what we can do so students are engaging with these." This may situate leaders as either part of the group of teachers or external to them.

Leaders also use imagery to manage meaning. In one episode the leader begins the day by saying, "We're going to put on roller skates this morning." This conjures up an image of the leader and

attention, compared the struggle to "herding cats". This image brings a sense of chaos to the situation where the leader is separate from the participants, trying to manage them.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our examination of leaders' use of framing and rhetorical crafting revealed patterns and themes in their language choice, which could reveal how they establish themselves as leaders, create buy-in amongst their teachers, and develop a positive learning community. This is true both in global framing of ideas and in subtle language choices. For instance, Fiol, Harris, and House (1999) found that charismatic leaders more frequently used inclusive referents such as "we" rather than "I" and "you". Similarly, the use of metaphor has been associated with leadership rhetorical selections where images can either help bring positive meaning to ideas or potentially confuse or skew a message (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Through analyzing the language of PD leaders, we are beginning to unravel some potential causes for differences in buy-in and enactment of this initiative (Thanheiser, Melhuish, Shaughnessy, & Foreman, 2015). A leader's language choices can serve as a motivating factor, but could also serve to exclude or alienate participants. Our initial framework provides a tool for analyzing rhetoric and future analysis will test the generalizability of the work. Furthermore, we look to connect leadership language with other constructs such as fidelity of implementation and outcome changes such as teaching quality and student achievement.

Acknowledgments

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant Number DRL-1223074. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the National Science Foundation.

References

- Fairhurst, G., & Sarr, Robert A. (1996). *The art of framing: Managing the language of leadership* (1st ed., Jossey-Bass business & management series). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fiol, C. M., Harris, D., & House, R. (1999). Charismatic leadership: Strategies for effecting social change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10(3), 449-482.
- Conger, J. A. (1991). Inspiring others: The language of leadership. *The Executive*, 5(1), 31-45
- Darling-Hammond, L., Bullmaster, M. L., & Cobb, V. L. (1995). Rethinking teacher leadership through professional development schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96(1), 87-106.
- Foreman, L. C. (2013). *Best practices in teaching mathematics: How math teaching matters*. West Linn, OR: Teachers Development Group.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 28(1), 27-42.
- Linder, S. M. (2011). The facilitator's role in elementary mathematics professional development. *Mathematics Teacher Education and Development*, 13(2), 44-66.
- Thanheiser, E., Melhuish, K., Shaughnessy, M., & Foreman, L. (2015, April). Teacher "buy-in" and its relation to professional development. Presented at the meeting of NCSM's 45th Annual Conference, Boston, MA.
- Youngs, P., & King, M. B. (2002). Principal leadership for professional development to build school capacity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 38(5), 643-670.