Leveraging Diversity and Inclusivity in Japanese Teacher Community in an American High School District

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1. We Teach Who We Are

In *Courage to Teach*, renowned educator and author, Parker Palmer (1998) states: "Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together." For a teacher as a technician, teaching requires subject knowledge and techniques to teach the content and skills. In addition, good teaching commands us to show up fully as who we are; our authentic selves. Finding our authentic selves depends on our will and courage to look inwardly. The condition of the community in which such a treacherous journey takes place matters to the development of a teacher. It is understood that in order for us to show up fully first we must create a community where each member feels safe to express, attends to listening to truly understand others, and seeks common ground. How is our Japanese language teaching community practicing inclusivity? How can we move forward not in spite of but because of diversity? In this section, I am going to share my perspectives on diversity and inclusion from the viewpoint of a secondary school Japanese-language teacher, address the need for building an inclusive professional teacher-learner community, and finally offer elements to consider when establishing such a group. First, in order to establish the context, I will describe the Japanese Language Professional Learning Community (PLC) in Salinas. Then, I will share the key elements for building a successful PLC with diversity. Lastly, I will end this section with how such a practice impacted teachers' beliefs and attitudes.

1.1. A Case Study of Japanese Programs at Salinas Union High School District

1.1.1. Brief background

Salinas Union High School District is located in Salinas, California, an agriculture-rich area just one-hour drive South from Silicon Valley. The district includes five comprehensive high schools, three alternative high schools, one vocational school, and three middle schools. All five comprehensive high schools offer thriving Japanese programs with eight full time teachers catering to over 1000 students yearly in a predominantly Hispanic and low-income community. Japanese language instruction in the district has grown from one program to five programs between 1999 and 2019. The Japanese teachers organize numerous cultural events together throughout the year as an extension of students' learning and the events are well attended by community members. It is seen as a model program in the district.

Demographics of the teachers are the following:

- Total number of Japanese teachers in Salinas Union High School District: 8
- Female: 5; Male: 3
- Non-native Japanese speaking teachers: 4; native Japanese speaking teachers: 4

Among eight teachers, seven teachers speak with Standard Japanese, and one teacher speaks with a Kansai dialect.

Experiences and professional development of the teachers are the following:

- Teaching experience: less than 5 years: 4; between 6–10 years: 2; more than 20 years: 2
- Two teachers currently serve as department chairs at their schools.
- All teachers spent more than 50 hours in professional development in 2019–2020.
- Five teachers have presented at state and national conferences and are also leaders of state organizations such as the California Language Teachers Association and the California Association of Japanese Language Teachers (CAJLT).
- Three teachers are team leaders of Monterey Bay World Language Project, a local professional organization that provides professional development opportunities for world language teachers in Monterey County.

In summary, while the eight teachers come from diverse backgrounds, they share the common understanding and value of proficiency and performance-based instruction. The development of such "common language" in the diverse group grounded in a strong foundation while advancing teaching practices with new instructional foci. As a result, the group is recognized as a strong cohesive team that is constantly adapting and evolving.

1.1.2. Instructional foci as common ground

One of the important reasons for a strong PLC is the district's provision for weekly collaboration time. All teachers are provided time to collaborate once a week on a topic the PLC selects as a focus throughout a semester or year. This teacher-driven approach encourages teacher autonomy and sets the tone of the meetings. In our case, we Japanese teachers first analyze various data points to identify our strengths and areas for improvement in our instruction as our focus areas for the year. The key element here is that the team makes the link between their actions and outcomes explicitly. Setting goals that are evidence-driven, instructionally sound, relevant to our community, and attainable is a crucial first step in establishing a culture of teacher learners. As this process of establishing learning foci by the teachers begins by merely "noticing" strengths of the current instructional practices and areas for growth, we were able to see elements more objectively rather than emotionally or with the potential for personal bias. This had an effect of promoting the team's curiosity. As a result, the desire to explore possible remedies emerged. For example, in 2017 the Salinas Japanese Teachers PLC decided on exploring a Social Justice theme in the curriculum in an effort to address the current social environment and meet our students' needs closely. As these are not areas traditional textbooks cover, the team's desire to bring learning opportunities for students to explore the topics on equity, fairness, and diversity through the lens of Japanese society prompted the group to revise the existing curriculum. This illustrates that in order for us to bring inclusion in our lessons, we must practice inclusion in our professional learning communities.

1.2. Professional Learning Community: Beyond the Safe Zone—Establishing an Active PLC

How we run a PLC becomes very crucial in its effectiveness and productivity. How can we ensure members' voices are accurately heard? What are some of the possible obstacles faced by our team members as we

ask them to "show up as who they are"? What can we do to promote equity of voice during the meetings? Mindful facilitation is essential for creating not only a safe zone but also a "brave zone" where all participants can express their diverse opinions in a respectful manner. Our team adapted the Collaborative Norms known as the "Seven P's" in addition to a facilitation format developed by Adaptive Schools (see Thinking Collaborative website).

Seven Norms of Collaboration

(1) Pausing
Pausing before responding or asking a question allows time for thinking and enhances dialogue, discussion, and decision-making.

(2) Paraphrasing
Using a paraphrase starter that is comfortable for you—"So…," "As you are…," or "You're thinking…."—and following the starter with an efficient paraphrase assists members of the group in hearing and understanding one another as they converse and make decisions.

(3) Posing Questions
Two intentions of posing questions are to explore and to specify thinking. Questions may be posed to explore perceptions, assumptions, and interpretations, and to invite others to inquire into their thinking. For example, "What might be some conjectures you are exploring?" Use focusing questions such as, "Which students, specifically?" or "What might be an example of that?" to increase the clarity and precision of group members' thinking. Inquire into others' ideas before advocating one's own.

(4) Putting Ideas on the Table
Ideas are the heart of meaningful dialogue and discussion. Label the intention of your comments. For example, "Here is one idea…," "One thought I have is…," "Here is a possible approach…," or "Another consideration might be…."

(5) Providing Data
Providing data, both qualitative and quantitative, in a variety of forms supports group members in constructing shared understanding from their work. Data have no meaning beyond that which we make of them; shared meaning develops from collaboratively exploring, analyzing, and interpreting data.

(6) Paying Attention to Self and Others
Meaningful dialogue and discussion are facilitated when each group member is conscious of self and of others and is aware of what (s)he is saying and how it is said as well as how others are responding. This

includes paying attention to learning styles when planning, facilitating, and participating in group meetings and conversations.

(7) Presuming Positive Intentions
Assuming that others' intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and discussion and prevents unintentional put-downs. Using positive intentions in speech is one manifestation of this norm.

The norms help all members to pay attention to their own feelings as well as to others. In addition, they become more metacognitive about their own way of being as they engage in group dialogues. Without all members developing the same understanding and value of such norms and committing to their practice in group discussions, we are not able to practice true inclusion—resulting in a high chance of failure in seeking diverse ideas. For this reason, a Japanese teacher community at any level must establish a PLC that promotes inclusivity and diverse ideas by establishing clear common goals and providing opportunities and tools to communicate with one another. A high functioning PLC builds efficacy among all team members; collective efficacy.

2. Self and Collective Efficacy

What contributes to a group's effectiveness and confidence to improve? A renowned psychologist on human motivation, Albert Bandura defines collective efficacy as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (1997:477). In a strong PLC, each member demonstrates deep listening skills, the ability to suspend his or her own belief to create space for other perspectives and presume positive intentions in others. As a teacher with high self-efficacy is a valuable asset in the classroom, collective efficacy in a PLC yields more results and creates a synergetic collaborative environment. John Hattie and Klaus Zierer's Visible Learning research on more than 1,500 meta-analyses further confirms collective teacher efficacy as the most predictable indicator of student achievement by far (2017:26). As we may not have control over certain conditions such as creating more diverse or less diverse communities or equal representations of various types of cultures, we do have control over how we can bring diverse perspectives and experiences together in a community with common goals with mindful facilitation. The example used in this section is a small one at a given school district. However, this model suggests important key elements as we build Japanese language

teacher communities that leverage our diversity at local, state, and national levels.

3. From Who We Are to Who We Aspire to Be

I'm certain that our vision for "who we aspire to be" in the future can only emerge from PLCs whose aims are to promote deep dialogues and experiences which lead to collective efficacy of the community. Teacher leadership trainings must address the needs for developing skills to facilitate effective meetings, promote equity in voice, welcome diverse viewpoints, suspend our own disbeliefs to allow possibility, communicate meaningful realistic outcomes, reflect on our own thinking and ways to interact in groups, and seek common ground among the team. Establishment of effective PLCs is the foundation for creative solutions we desperately need to address the challenges faced by our complex learning and teaching environments in the modern world. Aside from developing as more skillful teachers, the most valuable outcome from the PLC has been development of the disposition to approach our learning, ways to relate to others, and finally the ability to build self and collective efficacy among individuals with diverse views. The German philosopher and poet, Goethe famously wrote, "What you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it" (1867:14). In this fast-paced world, it becomes challenging to carve out time for collaboration. However, if we are to elevate ourselves to the next level, we must remind ourselves of the power and magic of effective collaboration.

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