Personalized learning, student agency, & the stakes of education

Anindya Kundu
Sociologist of education & postdoctoral research scholar, New York University

We are privileged to live at a time with many resources and technologies that exist to aide educators, but sometimes these advancements can carry an ironic cost: They can be distracting to the basic aims of education. As districts debate over which learning management systems (LMS) are best for their classrooms, the basics behind how learning actually happens can get lost from the forefront of cost-benefit discussions. Promoting student agency, the amount of influence students have over their own life, including their ability to navigate challenges and locate resources for themselves, should remain a focus within the changing trends of education.

Recently I visited some school districts to discuss the growing buzz around the concept of “personalized learning.” This approach wishes to cater to each student’s strengths by creating programs for students to advance at their own pace as they pick up new competencies. But even these conversations can skew the fundamentals of what it takes for a student to have a personalized learning experience.

Primarily, a student needs to be challenged thoroughly and routinely but not overbearingly. Technology offers resources to create tailor-made tools to help children pick up where they left off and track their progress. But that’s not enough. Students need to feel that their developing interests are recognized and attended to. This is nurture and it is only possible through the attention of another human—a teacher or a mentor.

Balancing the resulting implicit technology versus teacher debate is realizing that they are not mutually exclusive. When teachers and teaching resources work in harmony, students are the greatest beneficiary. Their agency grows. They take steps toward learning how to be their best selves.

I tell the story of “J-Stud” to professionals who want to learn about promoting student agency. A Black student from Jamaica Queens, J-Stud (an alias from his rapping days) had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) up into high school. He got used to sitting in the back of his classes and scribbling away in his notebook without looking up. One day, his English teacher took notice and asked to see what he was writing.

She saw pages upon pages filled with rap lyrics that showed giftedness and literacy. She seized the opportunity to offer him a deal. From our interview, he told me:

One stipulation was, “You have to go to class, J-Stud. You have to literally go to class in order for me to continue to work with you.” She gave me the opportunity to go into an actual recording studio and put my music on a CD. I got to perform in front of a bunch of students in a music class. I got a standing ovation. Having that mentor who is still very near and dear to me helped put me on the right track.

That “standing ovation” and his teacher noticing his hidden strengths remains one of the most important experiences of J-Stud’s life. He eventually became an intern at that same recording studio and through meeting adults there, he realized that he was interested in accounting and finance. His studio mentors put him in touch with professionals in banks. He worked at those banks while completing his associate and bachelor’s degrees.

Today J-Stud is a vice president at...
Improvement Science in Action

Tests of change lead to meaningful student engagement in mathematics

Joe Dostilio
IFL mathematics fellow

There is no shortage of professional development (PD) available to teachers, but PD alone is rarely enough to result in a change of practice. When PD is paired with improvement science processes, teachers are afforded the time and support to test and refine instructional practices learned in PD in their own classroom.

In partnership with the Institute for Learning (IFL) this year, the teachers from Chartiers Valley Middle School engaged in a combination of PD and improvement science work with the goals of increasing student engagement and providing more opportunities for student-to-student interactions that are academically productive. Specifically, the teachers wanted students to take greater control of their own learning, collaborate more productively with their peers, and be willing to challenge each other’s ideas.

The teachers recognized that to achieve their goals, they themselves would need to learn more. They asked the IFL for a PD session focused on cooperative learning and strategies for getting students to productively interact with one another. Based on the learning that came out of the session, teachers decided they wanted to establish roles and responsibilities for students working in small groups: Story Teller, Manipulative/Diagram Manager, Discussion Director, and Checker.

Because the PD session also included improvement science approaches, before leaving the session, the teachers identified a small change to try in their classroom to get students engaging more productively while working in small groups. The teachers agreed that they would collect evidence of student talk during small group and code the talk to determine if the small change was effective. This work kicked off their first improvement science cycle, which was followed by additional cycles as teachers adapted their small tests of change based on evidence.

The diagram shows not only the first improvement science cycle, which was effective because students engaging more productively while working in small groups. The changes are intentionally small, and therefore doable, and are designed to be built on and refined over time.

In reflecting across the tests of change, teachers identified the following insights:

• PD was needed to first learn about collaborative learning strategies, but it was not enough. Collaboration with another one and seeking more information from the IFL fellow was necessary to keep the work going.
• It took a series of small tests of change to figure out the types of experiences that were most effective for students to truly understand and adopt their roles and responsibilities in small groups.
• The third small test of change was effective because students were provided opportunities to think about the roles they were to play in their small groups and given questions specific to their role to scaffold their engagement.

Through the use of improvement science, the math teachers at the middle school gained insight into effective ways of engaging students in cooperative learning and identified ways of monitoring student engagement.
COACHING CORNER

Student and teacher agency: One district’s reflection on taking action

Cheryl Sandora
IFL ELA fellow

Learning Forward and the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future conducted interviews with teachers and school administrators to understand the disconnect between professional learning that teachers need and want and what they actually experience. One idea that surfaced from the interviews was teacher agency. (Learning Forward) Many districts recognize the important role agency plays in the classroom, both for teachers and students, but are unsure of how to make it happen or how it would play out in the classroom.

Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, and Friedlander define agency as “the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative—the opposite of helplessness.” (p. 1) Three years ago, Chartiers Valley School District’s decision to improve both teacher and student agency has resulted in a more challenging and engaging curriculum and allowed students to have a greater stake in their learning. Kelly Natale, ELA curriculum leader and literacy coach for Grades K–5, shares her thoughts on the process and the changes in the learning environment as a result of their decision.

After 22 years as an educator, Kelly echoes the findings from the interviews mentioned above. She commented that in talking to her colleagues from other districts and other educators, in general, the disconnect is that teachers are “given” professional development that may be grounded in research but has little influence on their own classrooms. “I hear teachers saying, ‘How does this connect to my classroom? How is this practical? Is this what I need at this moment for the students I am instructing?’” Too often, the decision comes down to what district administrators feel is needed rather than what teachers know is needed. These decisions are frequently based on the needs seen in assessments rather than the instructional needs of the classroom which directly impact assessment.

Kelly sees Chartiers Valley as a district whose goal was to move away from the top-down model where administrators make decisions on professional development toward a model that allows for more teacher agency.

Kelly felt it was important to talk with teachers to determine their needs. She met regularly with teachers and talked about what they felt they needed as teachers to best impact student growth. This allowed teachers to avoid the helpless feeling described by Ferguson. This type of discourse is meaningful and respectful and enables teachers to see the immediate impact. According to Kelly, the process almost became cyclical, as the district collaborated with the Institute for Learning (IFL) to provide the professional development they needed, and the district saw an immediate impact. Since teachers were advocating for themselves, they were able to fill those needs, and with the successes they were having, they were more responsive to expressing their needs, learning more, and engaging in additional professional development.

Kelly emphasized that one of the aspects of the district’s collaboration with the IFL that allowed teachers to express agency were the Bridge to Practice pieces. Teachers attended sessions and shared artifacts from the implementation of the instructional approaches. Sharing these artifacts allowed teachers to see the immediate impact of those practices and to make decisions on which lessons and tasks should be added to their toolbox. In addition, they were less reluctant to join in a professional learning community where they received feedback from their colleagues. This way, they didn’t feel as if they were on their own; rather, they felt they were working together as a community to impact student learning and recognized that their actions and ideas played an important role in making that happen. According to Kelly, the process “actually promoted advocacy for the teachers and they asked for more opportunities for professional development and more opportunities to meet around Bridges to Practice. It allowed them to advocate for what they needed.”

Kelly concluded our conversation by stating, “I can’t emphasize enough the impact our collaboration with IFL has had on our district, especially in terms of teacher and student agency. Looking toward the future, we want to continue to provide opportunities for students to develop agency and provide opportunities for teachers to become more involved in professional learning communities that meet their changing needs.”

References

https://learningforward.org/publications/teacher-agency

Agency and voice: a push for greater equity and what it looks like in math

Laurie Speranzo  
IFL mathematics fellow

Asale Harris  
Supervisor of mathematics (Grades 1 to 6), New Brunswick Public Schools

Jamie Gulotta  
Supervisor of mathematics (Grades 6 to 12), New Brunswick Public Schools

JoAnna Castellano  
Mathematics specialist, New Brunswick Middle School

In her article “Framing Equity: Helping Students ‘Play the Game’ and ‘Change the Game’” (2009), Rochelle Gutiérrez lays out the four key dimensions of equity: Access, Achievement, Identity, and Power, which sit on two axes. Access and Achievement create the dominant axis, and Identity and Power create the critical axis.

Many of our partners in education have been working to secure access to high-quality education for every student to ensure that each of them can achieve. Their efforts often focus on the dominant axis to ensure that students have access so that they can move towards achievement. While work in this area is necessary, the critical axis allows students to see themselves as mathematicians and changers of the world around them. Honoring and leveraging the identity of each and every student, and transferring power to students in classrooms must also be considered to truly address equity. Gutiérrez writes that attention to identity includes that “students’ frames of reference and resources are acknowledged in ways that help build critical citizens.” Power is not just about who owns the airtime in class: “While teachers in interviews may say they ‘want to empower students,’ they almost always mean it only as it relates to achievement, not with respect to helping students reach personal goals of excellence that may intersect with the doing of mathematics.” However, if students are to be empowered to excel outside of school, opportunities need to be provided in school.

One partner district, New Brunswick Public Schools, has taken on equity, with a focus on providing students greater agency and voice. If one definition of voice is students having choice, control, challenge, and opportunities to collaborate, how are district teachers and leaders building voice? Asale Harris and Jamie Gulotta, the district supervisors of mathematics, name that it all starts with access to high-level tasks:

Students try different pathways and strategies and then discuss these with peers. By making discussion the norm in the classroom, students are empowered to share thoughts and ideas without the fear of being different or wrong. During instruction, teachers place value on student ideas and discussion, which then, in turn, increases student voice.

The mathematics specialist at New Brunswick Middle School (NBMS), JoAnna Castellano, who supports teachers in use of high-level tasks and facilitating productive discussions, adds this:

Our students at NBMS are utilizing their voice and agency by taking ownership of their work. The students at the middle school have committed to persevering through high-cognitive tasks. Teachers are intentionally making moves that are making students focus on three components when working on a high-cognitive task, emphasizing the student’s mathematical explanation with a visual model, while focusing on the precision of their work. Students are taking a more direct role in their work.

The New Brunswick district’s vision is “to create lifelong learners and leaders.” This takes into account agency being defined as the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative (Ferguson, Phillips, et al., October 2015). Agency starts in the classroom, with the ultimate goal that students use their agency to navigate and impact the world around them. Students build voice and agency through the opportunities provided to them.

New Brunswick teachers have been working at making classrooms places where there are opportunities for students to develop voice and agency. Castellano talks about what she sees. “With focusing on student voice and agency, students are always asked to justify their work. As educators, we try to create a ‘safe place’ for errors, even when the students can reason how they came up with their solution.”

The district supervisors share that “Throughout [our] math classrooms, students are more willing to dive into solving tasks and rely on the discussion around strategies to persevere through solving them. By creating opportunities to talk through strategies for tasks, students are given the stage to express their thinking and reasoning about how they see the math. The more opportunities we create for students to discuss with each other, the more empowered students will feel to do so.” And with the district goal of creating lifelong learners and leaders, students will be better equipped to leverage their voice outside the classroom as well.

Transitioning from traditional classrooms to ones that support student struggle and the opportunities for student voice and agency also requires supporting teachers. Harris and Gulotta share how teacher voice is fostered and heard:

In New Brunswick, we consistently attempt to create opportunities for our educators to form communities that invite different points of view and reach solutions that not only reflect the views of all but also ultimately positively reach and affect our children. Teacher voice plays a commanding role in our steering committees, during our common planning time sessions with specialists, vetting our district-wide assessments and rubrics, and continues on page 7
Focusing on the instructional approach nurtures agency

Kristin Klingensmith  
IFL mathematics fellow

Sara DeMartino  
IFL ELA fellow

Many educators name student agency as something they want to work to develop within their schools and classrooms. But what is student agency? And, more importantly, what can we as educators do to foster student agency?

To start, we should work from a common definition of agency. The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University defines agency as “the capacity and propensity to take purposeful initiative [...]”. In their work they frame agency as being on a continuum from having a sense of agency to expressing agency.

If we keep their definition of agency in mind, then we have to acknowledge that agency is not something that is given, but rather is something that can be nurtured in others. And because students spend most of the school day participating in learning activities in classrooms, we have to consider what agency looks like during the learning process and the impact teachers have on students’ development of agency.

To foster agency in the classroom, students should have opportunities to be active participants in their learning and be asked to think deeply about content. Students are the meaning makers in the room, and the teacher provides support through feedback and scaffolding that allows students to do the heavy lifting.

To better understand student agency and the impact teachers can have on its development, let’s compare two scenarios from second grade classrooms. The students in both classrooms are working to solve the Doubles Task. As you read, look for instances where you believe students are expressing agency.

**Scenario A**

Mrs. Miller begins when everyone is sitting silently with the task and a pencil. She tells the students to watch what she does so they can learn how to solve addition equations with double-digit numbers quickly.

Mrs. Miller says, “I know that there are 49 cookies in each box, and there are 2 boxes, so I have to add 49 + 49.” She writes 49 + 49 = ___ on the board.

Then she says, “I add the tens together and then add the ones together. Then I will put the tens and ones together. 4 tens + 4 tens is 8 tens—80.” Then she says, “9 ones + 9 ones is 18.” She continues, “I know the total amount of tens, 80, and the total amount of ones, 18, so now I put the tens and ones together.” Mrs. Miller says to the students, “Write the amount we get when we add the tens and ones.”

She sees some students write 80 + 18 = 98. Other students shout out their answers: I got 98. There are a lot of cookies. Wait, I got 88. No, it is 80 and 18, so it has to be 98, don’t you know?

She is disappointed that they shouted out and did not wait to be called on. Mrs. Miller says, “I wish you would follow the directions. But two of you shouted out the right answer, so good job.” Mrs. Miller writes the final step on the board: 80 + 18 = 98.

Mrs. Miller then turns to the class to check their understanding. She asks, “Why did we add 80 + 18 to get 98?” The students look at her and then at one another. One student says, “Because you told us to.”

**Scenario B**

Ms. Franklin tells the students to get ready for math and posts the Doubles Task on the board. As students move into their math groups, they begin to work on the task in groups. Ms. Franklin walks around the room, listening to their conversations and providing support as needed. She notes that some of the students have made diagrams of base ten blocks while others are using manipulatives. Some students are working more abstractly without the use of visual models.

As she approaches one of the groups, she hears a student say, “I added 50 + 48.” Another student says, “I think we made a mistake. We have to add 49 + 49.” Another student says, “It’s okay because it’s 98 either way. It is just easier to add 48 + 50.” Ms. Franklin asks where the 48 + 50 came from, and a student answers, “We moved 1 from this 49 to this 49.” Then Ms. Franklin asks, “Are you allowed to move some from one addend to another? Why or why not?” The students pause and then start to talk as a group. Ms. Franklin hears several students say that both 49 + 49 and 48 + 50 equal 98. One student says that moving 1 from 49 over to the other 49 does not change the answer because they are moving 1 not adding 1. Ms. Franklin says, “Get your reasoning on paper. Be ready to explain to the class why changing 49 + 49 into 48 + 50 does not change the answer.”

Ms. Franklin continues to circulate among the group listening for their mathematical reasoning and asking questions to stretch their thinking.

You probably noticed instances of student agency in both classrooms, but recognized that there were more instances where student agency was being expressed in Ms. Franklin’s class than in Mrs. Miller’s class. Though Mrs. Miller’s students were willing to share their answers and be heard (without waiting for her to call on them), Ms. Franklin’s students expressed agency more consistently and in more ways.

The evidence of student agency in these scenarios is directly related to the instructional decisions that Ms. Franklin and Mrs. Miller made.

continues on page 6
An invaluable partnership

Anne Keene
Guilford Public Schools

In the following article, contributing author Anne Keene shares a tribute to the decade-long partnership between the Institute for Learning (IFL) and Guilford Public Schools. In June, Dr. Keene will retire after 20 years of service as associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Guilford Public Schools.

Simon Sinek (2009) reminds us to start with why. Why should we change? Why do some classrooms work better than others? Why would teachers follow us? And my favorite, why are we doing what we are doing? There are a variety of responses to these questions, but the relationship with the IFL has continuously helped Guilford Public Schools answer them. Guilford Public Schools in Guilford, CT, first linked arms with the IFL in 2006 as part of the Instructional Leadership Program. Because the suburban district was smaller than most IFL member districts, we had the advantage of involving all principals and district office personnel at the onset. The Principles of Learning provided a common language for all K-12 teachers, and the practice of Learning Walks held us accountable to one another and truly supported learning on the diagonal, incorporating content knowledge with habits of learning. Having this vertical coherence gave the district a clear focus for professional learning and became a part of its mission.

IFL continued to grow as its member districts grew in their understanding. Moving to Content Focused Coaching® in 2010 and providing cognitively demanding units of study for students which were aligned to more rigorous standards, Guilford teachers began to see clear examples of student learning. This happened as a result of a laser-like focus on thinking across subjects and across grade levels, with the district always building on the previous year’s work. Language and arts and mathematics fellows provided professional learning modules, virtual and on-site support, leadership learning opportunities, and tools to help us understand the research behind the practice and to reflect on our growth as educators.

The annual spring conference has become a launching pad for Guilford work for the following year. We always take away a task, like deeply studying a few high-leverage practices; or a model, like Alan Schoenfeld’s Teaching for Robust Understanding (TRU) Framework; or knowledge from presenters, like Liz City or Sugata Mitra, to deepen our learning in the district. We start with the administrative team and collaboratively design processes for sharing our new learning with all teachers. As Michael Fullan (2009) would suggest, “The skinny is about finding the smallest number of high-leverage actions that unleash stunningly powerful consequence.” And I would add, staying focused, minimizing all distractors.

As an assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 30 years (20 of those in Guilford), I can attest to the positive impact of the IFL partnership. Because of IFL, we study relevant research articles, we write our own units of study, we video classroom practices and discuss them collaboratively, we are willing to take risks and conduct action research, we value and support instructional coaching, we collaborate with other educators and researchers, and we feel responsible for contributing to the field of education. Vygotsky is quoted as saying, “Through others we become ourselves.” I have become the administrator that I am through all my colleagues at IFL, especially Dena Zook-Howell and Steve Miller, our long-term fellows who have guided me along the way. Why? IFL is committed to quality practices, to educator and student learning, and to the districts they serve.

References

Content Focused Coaching is a registered trademark of the University of Pittsburgh

Content Matters
continued from page 5

that worked to either “boost” or “dampen” student agency. Both Ms. Franklin and Mrs. Miller start by selecting a task that is of high cognitive demand and that allows for multiple student solution paths, which provides students something worthwhile to talk about and figure out. This instructional decision serves to boost agency. Unfortunately, after the selection of the task, Mrs. Miller works in a way that dampens student agency because opportunities for students to think, reason, and even interact are taken away. In contrast, Ms. Franklin continues to boost student agency. She creates an additional challenge when she asks a small group of students, “Are you allowed to move some from one addend to another? Why or why not?” which leads students to think more rigorously by working to understand why moving an amount between addends does not change the whole, rather than simply report the steps they used to arrive at the answer. The challenge works to captivate the attention of the students and requires them to engage in meaningful discussion of the mathematics. Based on their interactions, it is likely that students in Ms. Franklin’s class regularly participate in meaningful classroom discussions.

If student agency is to remain a goal, then looking at what is happening in the classroom must be the focus. We have to recognize that students from every background deserve and have the right to experience classroom environments designed to foster agency. We have to believe that students are the most valuable resources in the classroom and come to us as thinkers whose contributions have merit. We have to ask if the materials we put in front of students are worthy of serious thought and cognitive effort. And we have to consider how instructional practices subtly, or not so subtly as in the case of Mrs. Miller, convey beliefs about students and work to boost or dampen their agency.
Honoring the past and looking to the future

Courtney Francis
IFL director of online learning and product development

The LRDC community gathered in late March to honor IFL founder and former director, Lauren Resnick, and current IFL co-director, Lindsay Clare Matsumura, longtime collaborators and leaders in learning.

With thoughtful words and a casual ceremony, LRDC Director Charles Perfetti honored Lauren Resnick for her appointment as distinguished university professor emeritus of psychology and cognitive science in the Kenneth P. Dietrich school of Arts & Sciences. On behalf of the University of Pittsburgh, the Chancellor, and the Board of Trustees, Perfetti recognized Resnick’s 31 years of influential service to the LRDC and her critical contributions to teaching, research, and public service.

As a gift from LRDC, Resnick’s photograph now shares the wall with Bob Glaser’s photograph in the Glaser Auditorium, thus christening the room as the Director’s Auditorium.

Following the gracious introduction by learning scholar and collaborator Jenn Russell, Lindsay Clare Matsumura offered a retrospective of her scholarship into quality writing instruction, student tasks, and feedback. Matsumura’s research in assessing and improving writing and teacher professional development has made her a leader in the field, and the event honored her recent appointment to senior scientist at the LRDC.

Russell offered appreciation for Lindsay’s generosity with collaborative opportunities as well as her unwavering support for her collaborators and colleagues.

As Russell explained, Matsumura has made critical contributions to LRDC research during her tenure with the organization. Her early work included assessing students’ text-based writing skills based on grading criteria, tasks, and feedback, leading to the development of unique measures that enabled researchers to capture the kinds of teaching behaviors that would lead to the best student outcomes. Essays were assessed along dimensions that evaluate students’ ability to analyze and use evidence, as well as their organization, use of voice, and writing mechanics.

Lindsay Clare Matsumura

Lindsay explained that she was reflecting on this work specifically because writing feedback and instruction research brought her to the LRDC years previous. She later developed an Automated Essay Scoring system that assesses students’ use of text-evidence, not simply a general writing score. The scores are associated with other measures of student achievement and teacher quality, providing useful and actionable measures for teachers.

With the support of the LRDC, Matsumura’s research on the measurement of instructional quality was able to evolve and lead advances in tech-based coaching that can give underserved populations increased access to quality writing instruction.

Personalized learning

one of the country’s largest financial institutions. The last time I spoke with him, he was still living in Jamaica to set an example that the kids from his neighborhood are not used to seeing. J-Stud and his English teacher personify that agency is driven by genuine relationships. It can be contagious and generate more agency for others.

For our diverse learners we should work to see strength in that diversity. The goal then becomes to create scaffolded lessons to get students from where they are to where they need to be. Attention to students’ origins and who they are as a person helps them develop goals that make education relevant to their lives.

I always say that schools and districts cannot do this work alone because they have too much on their plates. Moreover, relationship building at the systems level can lead to large-scale, generational impact. Recently in Memphis, I learned about the new River City Partnership between their Shelby County School District and the University of Memphis. The program is recruiting passionate high school students who are interested in urban education to become college “scholars” who will be trained (through courses in education and local history) and certified to go back and teach in their own inner city. This grassroots program also provides scholarships to the cohorts to ensure that debt will not extinguish their passion.

When we broaden our concepts of schooling and think towards a P-16 or a P-20 approach, we better cater to the ideas of lifelong learning and positive social change. As an academic, I can tell you that we are incredibly guilty of furthering isolations. There are conferences, papers, and professor titles (higher education versus urban education) that separate us from each other. Yet our aims largely appear to be the same, and we should look for more ways to collaborate.

In the end, true success is not just getting our students into college; it’s making sure that once they’re there, they have the tools to keep climbing and working towards fulfillment. At every level, we have to make sure our students know how to leverage resources, locate mentors, and establish their own networks. This currently goes unspoken with more privileged schools building it into their hidden curriculum. But for everyone else, these tangibles are free to relatively inexpensive to incorporate and must be explicitly stated as desired outcomes.

Isolation is the enemy of agency. Students need to know they are supported from all over to remain motivated to contribute back to society. Given the almost weekly scandals in education, it seems that these are turbulent times in education, but that’s nothing new either. While we wait for the rest of our country to catch up and learn to value education as a necessary social good for all, we can keep fighting to keep our communities cohesive.

Fostering agency can help ensure we will have the type of educated citizenry we need to tackle the challenges of the future. The goal of education is to allow students to flourish by helping them find their voice, discover their strengths, and ideally, to contribute back in some meaningful way. That to me seems like the power of “personalized learning.” When accomplished, education becomes the most important function of our society.
NSI celebrates first-year learning in Dallas ISD

On May 16, the Institute for Learning gathered at the Dallas Arboretum with Dallas Independent School District, Pitt’s Center for Urban Education, and LRDC researchers to celebrate the progress made thus far on the Networks for School Improvement project. The project, funded by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, seeks to improve literacy for low-income students. Teams from all 14 participating schools attended, along with principals and executive directors. Many central office staff also attended, including superintendent Michael Hinojosa, chief academic officer Ivonne Durant, and deputy chief of school leadership Jolee Healy.

After an introduction and welcome from Hinojosa, Maurice Swinney, chief equity officer of Chicago Public Schools, spoke about using improvement science to drive equity. His inspiring words served as a poignant start to an evening full of inquiry, learning, and growth.

Following Swinney’s speech was a panel discussion with six of the school team members who carefully, yet passionately, explained what they accomplished with their small tests of change. They focused on the learning their students experienced, highlighting how they worked in new ways. In particular, students worked with challenging comprehension questions that asked them to reach across whole texts for big ideas, they used quick writes as vehicles for writing to learn what is on their minds, and benefitted from student-centered teaching approaches. Diana Nuñez from Adamson High School summarized that team’s work on attendance, including the empathy interviews with chronically absent students, and their selection of 25 of those students for mentoring as a test of change before the end of the year. They’ll use their results to determine if they’ll proceed with mentoring on a larger scale.

Another panel discussion convened to discuss empathy interviews and benefited from the vulnerability of the tests of change panel. They spoke openly about coherent messages (or themes) that emerged from their interviews with students and from teaching about their writing successes and frustrations. Students, they said, want to write, and want to write about things they care about and research, but are frustrated by the drills with nothing but those 26-line essays in preparation for the state tests. Teachers, too, they said, based on their thematic analyses of their empathy interviews, are frustrated by the need for more support to teach “authentic writing” and maintaining students’ abilities to pass the state tests.

We are grateful for the executive directors and principals who attended and heard their teachers’ voices and the students’ voices through the teachers.

We’re looking forward to seeing what these NSI teams can do.

New online PD offerings coming soon

We are pleased to announce an upcoming new series of online professional development offerings for educators. The IFL’s online professional development is flexible and collaborative, offering 8-week workshop experiences. Workshops are rich and interactive with engaging video examples, IFL expert facilitators, and active discussion forums.

Workshop participants will engage in impactful, research-based learning routines. You will see models, get to apply new learning in your own classroom, and receive feedback from peers and your IFL facilitator. After participating in the workshop, you can expect to see and experience observable changes in instruction and student participation.

Content-Focused Coaching in Mathematics® online workshop will be available September 2019. Visit ifl.pitt.edu to learn more!