

**Nurturing Joy and Belonging:  
Practices for Rehumanizing Professional Learning**

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Abstract: In this article the authors describe a professional learning initiative focused on joyful teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the techniques that were used to foster a culture of belonging. The authors utilize an integrative framework for understanding, cultivating, and assessing belongingness to suggest implications for school-university partnerships. Finally, the authors pose questions for school-university partnerships to reflect upon to build an intersectional approach to professional learning in a post-pandemic educational landscape.

**KEYWORDS:** Professional Development Schools, Joy, Belonging, Professional Learning

**NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

Essential 3: Professional Learning and Leading: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

As the early days of the pandemic gave way to prolonged uncertainty, many teachers found themselves struggling with how to maintain a sense of joy and purpose in their work. While the world's attention was on ubiquitous health and safety concerns, joy was understandably not high on the list of priorities for many teachers. Yet, this is precisely the innovative focus that a group of teachers and leaders in a Professional Development School (PDS) decided to prioritize for professional learning in the spring of 2020 weeks after the initial lockdown from COVID-19.

In the midst of personal and collective loss, the steep learning curve of remote teaching, and a national reckoning with racial injustice, a school district with a PDS approached Katie about designing virtual professional learning focused on joyful literacy teaching and learning. From the start, the professional learning sessions considered the emotion of joy from relational perspectives. In this way, teachers were positioned as socio-conscious beings whose unique joys and struggles could be shared to help each other navigate the challenging circumstances they were teaching in. Teachers' responses to this professional learning reveal that in addition to practical suggestions and strategies for centering joy in their literacy instruction, they gained something less definable, but perhaps more important—a sense of belonging.

In this article, we describe this professional learning initiative and the techniques that were used to foster a culture of belonging. We then consider the larger implications for how we can move forward in our school-university partnerships to intentionally create a culture of belonging. We conclude with questions to consider as you rehumanize professional learning in your own settings.

### **What's Joy Got to Do with It?**

In our experiences as teacher educators and as facilitators of professional learning, we have witnessed the ways in which joyful teaching and learning has become increasingly at risk. In the schools we partner with, teachers were called upon before the pandemic to navigate ever-growing demands, standardization, and a lack of resources. This can diminish teachers' sense of personal fulfillment and can inhibit creativity and decrease inspiration (Sherman, 2021). We have found that professional learning must acknowledge the challenges teachers are facing and provide an antidote to rhetoric that promotes toxic positivity in schools (France, 2021). We understand that joy is personal and subjective. As such, it can often be taken for granted in the context of teaching and learning. Poetter (2006) offers a vision for how we might define joy in teaching and learning by reconsidering the joy of teaching itself:

Joy resides in us, and comes out as a result of our interactions with others. It would be inaccurate to say that teaching merely makes us and/or others joyful. It would be more accurate to say that teaching is joy, that our predispositions to engage in it are themselves manifestations of the joy of teaching (p. 276).

In designing professional learning focused on joyful literacy teaching and learning, Katie drew upon research that describes the conditions for effective professional learning. Educators believe that high quality professional learning grounds participants in both pedagogy and content, offers opportunities for contextualized practice, is sustained over time, and offers a community to provide feedback and support (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Elmore, 2002; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). PDS partnerships offer opportunities for contextualized professional learning and have been shown to reduce the isolation of teachers, provide varied opportunities for faculty development, encourage teachers to assume the role of learner, and establish an environment of professional trust and rapport that encourages problem-posing and problem-solving (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). It is in this context of the PDS partnership that Katie designed and facilitated

professional learning for teachers guided by the intense and immediate needs that developed during the early days of the pandemic. Kindling and sustaining joy for ourselves and our students gave us a reason for gathering. With joyful teaching and learning at the center, emotion, pedagogy, and content knowledge became intertwined.

### **Belonging Matters**

Teachers enter the profession with hopes, aspirations, and various capacities. They have personal interests, identities, and life experiences that shape their beliefs and practices. Yet, we have found in our work that it can be rare for teachers to be recognized as complete human beings when they walk through their school's doors. This lack of recognition can diminish the joy teachers find in teaching and learning and erode a sense of belonging among teachers. Additionally, demands of standardization and accountability can also distract teachers from prioritizing joy in their classrooms or kindling their own sense of belonging with their colleagues. It can be easier to shut your door, plan your lessons, and simply survive day-to-day than to take the emotional risks that belonging requires.

Belonging, much like joy, may be more easily experienced than described. We know it when we feel it, but belonging can be difficult to quantify or measure. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) seminal research suggests that the need to belong is innate and has an evolutionary basis found to some degree in all humans, in all cultures even when taking into consideration individual or group variations in strength and intensity in how the need is expressed. They explain that this evolutionary need for belonging permeates our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. As a result of their research, Baumeister and Leary proposed the *belongingness hypothesis* premised on the human drive to "form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). To satisfy this drive, the belongingness hypothesis is predicated upon two criteria: 1) consistent, positive interactions with a "few other people" and, 2) within a context of an enduring and secure framework of concern for each other's well-being (p. 497). Baumeister and Leary further suggest that the need to belong is as "compelling a need as food" and that "human culture is significantly conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness" (p. 498). In this way, belonging is similar to oxygen—all around us yet can go unrecognized until it's missing for us.

Powell and Menandian (2022) characterize belonging as "essential to the human experience—a core need—but it is not as tangible or easily comprehensible as shelter, nutrition, and rest." The specific core needs they discuss that are predicated on belonging include agency, connection, identity, and our sense of security. They explain how belonging can be expressed explicitly through representation or by signaling that members of a particular group are welcome in a particular space, institution, or community. Belonging can also be expressed implicitly when special accommodations are made. Powell and Menandian further explain that belonging requires agency from existing stakeholders to reshape and redesign the institution, otherwise, inclusion can occur without everyone experiencing a sense of belonging.

Ruckika Tulshyan (2022) posits that we need an intersectional approach to creating cultures of belonging which can only be achieved by recognizing that inclusion does not just happen. Rather, inclusion requires awareness, intention, and regular practice. In our partnerships with PDSs, we have witnessed the ways in which inclusion sometimes occurs without full belonging by all teachers based on their years of experience, cultural or linguistic backgrounds, or tendencies towards introversion or extroversion.

While there is general agreement in the literature that belonging is a fundamental need that most humans seek to satisfy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Maslow, 1954), there is less agreement on how it can be measured and what humans can do to satisfy the need for belonging or how to create a culture of belonging. Allen and colleagues (2021) created an integrative framework for understanding, cultivating, and assessing belongingness focused on four interrelated components:

- 1) Competencies for belonging (abilities and skills)
- 2) Opportunities to belonging (reduction of barriers/removal, facilitator)
- 3) Motivations to belong (intrinsic drive); and
- 4) Perceptions of belonging (attributions and feedback mechanisms-positive or negative experiences) (p. 87)

Their framework offers a possibility for how to create an intersectional approach to intentionally foster a culture of belonging with teachers as a part of school-university partnerships.

While there has been significant research on the need for belonging in students (Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Allen et al., 2018), there is limited research on what creates a sense of belonging for teachers. In the next section, we share teachers' responses to scaffolded prompts as a part of professional learning during a period of prolonged crisis. We then use their responses to consider implications for how to support competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions of belonging in professional learning moving forward.

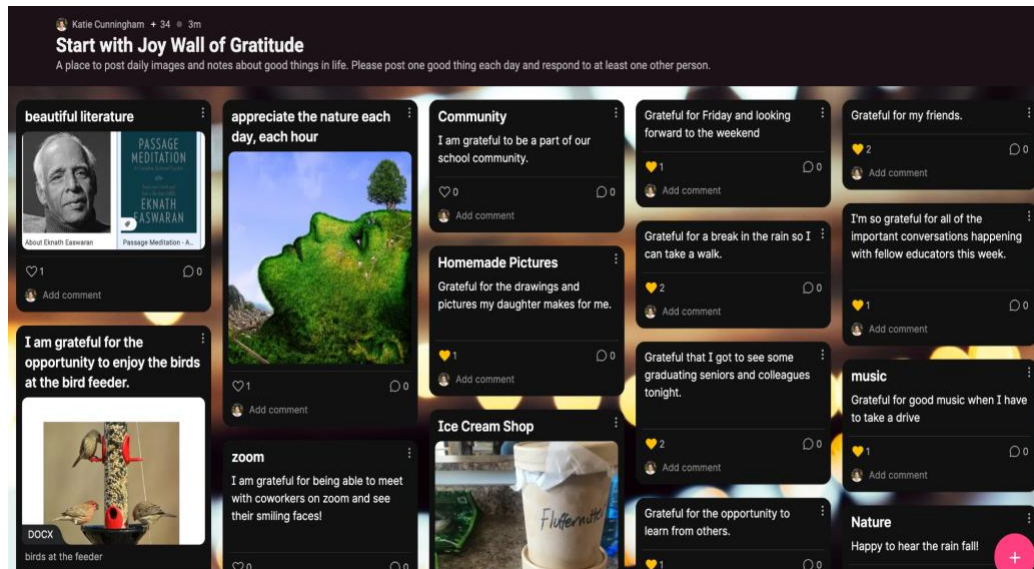
### **Coming to Know One Another**

This professional learning experience focused on joyful teaching and learning took place virtually once a month for three months on Saturdays over Zoom. Two dozen teachers self-selected to participate and could use the professional learning hours towards their salary steps. As the facilitator of these sessions, Katie was compensated by the district through their staff development learning center. The district included an elementary school that was a longstanding PDS partner as a part of the Changing Suburbs Institute® (CSI) network.

In each synchronous session, teachers were intentionally positioned to reflect on their emotional state, identify moments of gratitude, and gain new knowledge about literacy practices they could apply to their own teaching contexts. At the start of the sessions, teachers were invited to respond to simple prompts in the chat such as “What are two words that describe how you’re feeling?”; “I am grateful for \_\_\_\_”; and “What do you want to remember about today?” Teachers used this time to transition from their morning routine at home into a space of learning. These simple prompts were used to honor whatever head space and heart space the teachers had at the moment and invited them to set their own purposes for gathering.

In addition to using features of Zoom like the chat or Break Out Rooms, two other virtual platforms were used that helped facilitate a sense of belonging. The first was a virtual Padlet that served as a digital “Wall of Gratitude.” In between synchronous sessions, teachers posted, some as often as once a day, something they were grateful for (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Virtual Wall of Gratitude*



This virtual “Wall of Gratitude” was an invitation rather than a requirement. Posts included things like “I am grateful for a break in the rain so I can take a walk.”; “I am so grateful for all of the important conversations happening with fellow educators this week.”; and “I’m grateful for the extra family time we have been given during the pandemic.” Teachers posted photographs of things like a pint of their favorite ice cream, book covers, birds nibbling at feeders, children playing at the beach, a waffle cooking in a waffle maker, a marigold in bloom, their morning view, and a socially distant picnic with loved ones. In a few short weeks, hundreds of posts were created that facilitated collective joy and a sense of belonging. As a virtual platform, Padlet made the act of posting simple and easy from a phone, tablet, or computer, and it facilitated dialogue among the teachers through the comments feature. Analysis of their posts show that gratitude came from simple, seemingly small things in life including time in nature, time with family and friends, and time spent alone doing things they loved. The frequency of their posts demonstrated a shared commitment to this collaborative gratitude practice which nurtured a sense of belonging.

The other virtual platform used to help facilitate the professional learning sessions was Jamboard. Jamboard is an interactive white board that allows participants to post responses using text, images, or multimedia simultaneously and anonymously. In particular, Jamboard was used to honor the dual emotions of joy and sorrow that teachers were experiencing by responding to the following prompts adopted from educator Sara Ahmed (2021):

- What do you value most in your life right now?
- In what ways has your identity grown or evolved this year?
- What have you lost? What’s missing in your life? (see Figure 2)

Teachers responded to what they value most in life with statements like “Home, nature, colleagues, friends, occasionally getting a home recipe right” and “Health, mental energy. Which is not to say I have a lot of either. It’s just that I value them.” They responded to how their identity has grown or evolved with statements like “Professional and scholarly growth”; “I have grown to be more patient” and “Learned ways to cope and find peace.” Finally, their responses to things they had lost or were missing included things like “A lack of guilt for not accomplishing more.”; “Trust”; “Friends”; and “My mother.”

**Figure 2**  
*Prompts to Honor the Multiplicity of Emotions*



These kinds of responses led us to consider the human need for belonging as a part of teaching. In the following section, we offer implications for how university-school partnerships

can rehumanize professional learning by intentionally creating a sense of belonging among teachers using an integrative framework.

### **Implications**

The integrative framework offered by Allen et.al (2021) provides a concrete and clear structure for those of us leading and collaboratively learning in PDS contexts. This framework helps to ensure that we intentionally pay attention to the ways in which we design professional learning to build participants' competencies for belonging, provide multiple opportunities for each participant to belong, enhance participants' motivations to belong (and foster belonging in others), and build perceptions of belonging across our work.

### **Professional Learning which Develops Competencies for Belonging**

Our research has continued to show the power and impact of intentionally planning for and designing professional learning that builds relationships, trust, and joy in classroom and school communities (Cunningham, 2019; Cunningham & Rainville, 2018). No matter what the content focus may be, facilitators can, and should, design ways to build a sense of belonging and mutual trust amongst the participants. Charles Feltman (2021) defines trust as, “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions” (p. 9). Because of this, we begin to build trust in several ways, even in short professional learning experiences. First, we come to a mutual agreement about confidentiality. What is shared together in that room (online or in person) is confidential and can and should not be shared unless permission is granted from the participants (for example, participants, including the facilitator, cannot go back and share or raise concern with the school administrator about someone’s challenging situation).

Further, psychological safety flows from trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and is the shared belief that it is safe to take a risk in the presence of others (Edmonson, 1999). Risk-taking behavior, especially in PDS communities, includes asking for help, admitting an error or a gap in one’s practice, or challenging the prevailing wisdom of the group. Risks can include looking ignorant or incompetent to others and it is only in spaces where psychological safety has been built that participants are willing to share their vulnerabilities. A psychologically safe community, that is built on trust, and develops a sense of belonging is essential for deep learning to occur.

The anonymity provided by the platforms Katie used during the professional learning allowed teachers to take risks by posting about their experiences without direct judgment of others. Every time a teacher posted on the Padlet or responded in Jamboard, trust was being built. This fostered feelings of safety and security that were necessary for teachers to share when anonymity wasn’t possible such as by using the chat feature or when engaged in Break Out Rooms. In our facilitation of professional learning, both virtual and in-person, we have found that intentionally planning for how trust will be built allows for greater participation and allows competencies in belonging to be developed among all the participants. We have found this to be most critical when partnering with communities of teachers that have negative associations with professional learning based on past experiences. When we intentionally plan for trust, we facilitate belonging.

### **Professional Learning that Creates Multiple Opportunities to Belong**

PDS communities must create pathways and opportunities for all members to participate, engage and feel a shared sense of belonging. The use of inclusive language is an intentional choice to craft a sense of belonging to the wider community of practice. We all want to belong in the group. We never want any member of the group to feel marginalized or that they cannot bring their true whole selves to the group. We all have a common purpose for coming together and a shared

responsibility to each other. Therefore, we use shared and inclusive language when talking about the group and individuals within it. This enhances the shared power that exists and that we are all colleagues and equal within the group. Facilitators must take care to model culturally responsive and sustaining practices in all elements of leading and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Educators who take a risk, need to be able to do so in a safe, supportive environment.

In facilitating the professional learning sessions, Katie intentionally used person-first language to discuss the literacy profiles of children. Katie avoided phrases like “struggling reader” which is language that is deficit-based, can create cynicism, and erode hope. She strove to use asset-based language that defines people by their assets and aspirations before noting challenges. In this way, she sought to support the teachers in the professional learning sessions to define themselves by their assets and aspirations by using “I am” statements and by meeting in small Break Out Room groups to discuss their instructional goals by starting with what was going well followed with what were the challenges they were facing. The virtual platforms of Padlet and Jamboard also provided multiple pathways for the teachers to interact not only as professionals but as colleagues and friends. There was more than a single pathway for teachers to participate in ways that felt comfortable to them.

### **Motivations to Belong**

Teaching has historically been seen as an isolated profession (Lortie, 1975), with limited time for collaboration as compared to other professions. Teaching became increasingly more isolating during the pandemic- with limitations set on teachers physically, socially, and emotionally. A desire to connect with others to discuss students, problem solve around teaching in new ways, and collaborate on ways to improve instruction with the given constraints emerged and schools that capitalized and responded to these emerging needs with a sense of urgency and intention saw much success even during what some would argue the most challenging times we have faced in schools.

The power of collective efficacy can impact one's experience with belonging or lack thereof often characterized by marginalization or disillusion. Built upon Bandura's (1993, 1997) concept of self-efficacy, it is impactful when an individual instructor's believes that changing their practice will improve student learning. The collective belief of a group of teachers that they can improve their practice has a stronger, positive effect on student learning, even more so than fixed qualities such as student social or economic status (Goodard, 2001; Goodard et al., 2015). Researcher John Hattie, in his meta-analysis of the most influential factors in improving student learning, consistently ranks collective efficacy in the top three. In 2015, he estimated the effect size at 1.57, meaning that a group of instructors with a strong belief that they can influence student achievement showed gains in student learning of more than 1.5 standard deviations (Hattie, 2015). This collective self-efficacy, we would argue, is built through a deep investment in belonging.

The fact that during an incredibly stressful time, a time when the teaching landscape was shifting and the immediate future was unknown, that twenty-two teachers dedicated their Saturday mornings, time outside of their work week, time away from their families, to invest in their learning shows an unwavering commitment to the social, emotional, and academic success of their students. It also shows deep commitment by the PDS leaders that they value their educators by investing in their knowledge and skill building by creating an opportunity to focus on joyful teaching and learning while also gaining knowledge and skills central to the literacy development of their students.



### Perceptions of Belonging

Our past experiences shape how we interact and engage in professional learning experiences. By prompting participants to reflect on their past, their multiple identities, their challenges, successes, joys, and fears, Katie invited them to build on their past experiences to shape and inform their current realities. Who we are and what we bring influences how we come to understand new information. For example, Katie intentionally invited the teachers to not only share their values and the ways they'd grown as a result of the pandemic, but they were also invited to share what they had lost. This allowed the realities of individual and collective loss to enter the Zoom space. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the vulnerabilities of what it means to be human and the ways in which injustices and inequities deepen vulnerability. In guiding the teachers to share what was joyful alongside what was painful, Katie fostered both witnessing and testimony to take place (Dutro, 2019) with the recognition that to be human is to be vulnerable. We posit that knowing one's emotions and how to express them, particularly as we process trauma, are life skills, but they are also essential literacy skills. Additionally, recognizing the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others, including viewpoints and life experiences different from one's own, are central to building a more equitable and just society. The prompts Katie selected were designed to allow "our deepest sorrows, raw moments, the jagged edges, and the tender spots" (Dutro, 2019, p. 8) to become part of the professional learning.

In addition to collecting information about the impact of professional learning on knowledge and skills development, PDSs offer opportunities to gather information about the perceptions and experiences of faculty and staff members to inform policies and practices towards more inclusive workplaces for teachers.

### Final Thoughts

Our research shows that high quality professional learning in PDSs can meet mutually beneficial goals of creating a sense of belonging in addition to providing participants support and knowledge in both pedagogy and content, particularly when sustained over time in a community that encourages feedback and support. After years of teaching in uncertain and exhausting conditions as a result of the pandemic, we hope that joy and a sense of belonging drive university-school partnerships in the coming years. Teachers have the responsibility to motivate and support students in becoming deeply engaged humans. But that is difficult to do when they are struggling themselves. Applegate and Applegate (2004) used the term *the Peter Effect* to describe a dilemma drawn from the New Testament story of a beggar who approaches St. Peter and asks him for money. Peter responds that he "cannot give what he does not have" (Acts 3:5). While Applegate and Applegate were referring to the reading lives of pre-service teachers, we believe the same concern applies to the joy and sense of belonging teachers find in their work. If they do not experience teaching as inherently joyful and are not supported in a community that intentionally creates a sense of belonging, they cannot give those experiences to students. Our hope is that this article contributes to the growing conversation about how to humanize our schools and university-school partnerships, so that all teachers can give the best of themselves to their students.

As you take stock of how to humanize the partnerships you have and the school communities you create, we offer the following questions as points of reflection:

- In what ways do you support a culture of inclusion and belonging by supporting all stakeholders to share the joys and challenges they may be experiencing in their classrooms and beyond?

- In what ways do you regularly collect anonymous data that supports teachers to share what they value in life, how they are growing, and what they may have lost?
- What is your shared vision of what joyful teaching and learning looks like?
- Whose stories seem to be centered? Whose seem to be on the margins?
- How do you invite teachers to be themselves? Who are your approaches working for? What are you doing to intentionally include more voices, identities, and perspectives in your partnerships?

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