Front Porch Series: A Framework for Planning Professional Development in Emergent Literacy

Gail Joseph: Well, hello. It is the fourth Monday of the month, and this means it is time to welcome all of you to the Front Porch series. I'm Gail Joseph. I'm the co-director of the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. And for those of you who are joining us for the first time, I just want to say a little bit about what our Front Porch series is.

Our Front Porch series is a collection of broadcast conference calls that take place on the fourth Monday of every month, unless there's a holiday, and we gather around to hear a national expert or experts on a topic related to the quality of teaching and learning of young children. And so, on behalf of my colleagues and I at NCQTL, I'd like to welcome all of you to our broadcast call today.

So, today we're going to focus on a topic that I think a lot of us have some great interest in, which is teacher professional development, and specifically, teacher professional development to support growth in early literacy for our young learners in Head Start. And we have two incredible experts with us today, and I'm just going to tell you a little bit about their bios, before I turn it over to them.

So, first is Tweety Yates. And Tweety is a member of the faculty for the Head Start National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning -- we are so excited and privileged to have her with us -- and a research assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She's primarily focused her work on parent/child interaction, social-emotional development, early literacy, and professional development. You all might know her from work with the Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. She's worked in the field of early childhood for over 30 years, and she's served on a variety of state and national committees related to early childhood and, in fact is one of the past presidents of the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children.

With her today is Jeanette McCollum, who is a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Jeanette received her doctorate in early childhood special education from UT Austin; so, I think we say: "Hook 'em Horns" is what we say there. She is -- she was a faculty member at University of Illinois. She continues to be heavily involved, even though she has retired. She developed and coordinated the master's program there in early childhood special education, expanding the program to include early intervention birth to 3, which is probably one of the first people to do that in such important work, and thinking about early childhood special education from birth to 3, as well as, 3 to 5.

With colleagues, she developed the PIWI parent/child model of early intervention. Some of you might know that work from CSEFEL as well. Based on -- that work was based on fostering parents' understanding of their children's development. And more recently she served as a principal investigator of the DELL-D project, which is an Early Reading First project in Danville, Illinois, which, in that work, it focused on improving emergent literacy in preschoolers from low-income families, which is probably where some of the work we're going to hear about, today, stems from.

So, incredible experts on a really important topic today. And so, before I turn it over to our esteemed speakers, I just want to give you a quick logistic, like we always do, and that is that throughout the call today, please type in questions in the question bar. And if we have time at the end -- sometimes we go a little bit long with the content, which is always great; but if we have some time at the end, I'll facilitate some questions with Dr. Yates and McCollum in the last few minutes of the broadcast. Also, if they don't get to the questions, we'll make sure to send them the written questions. They will respond in writing, and we'll post that with the archived broadcast today. And so now, without further ado, I'm turning the screen over to Dr. McCollum and the mike over to Dr. Tweety Yates. Tweety.

Tweety Yates: Hey. Okay, thanks. Welcome, everybody, and thanks for joining us. What we would like to do today is share a framework that we use with teachers to really support their growth and development around their early literacy teaching skills. So, the purpose of what we'd like to accomplish for this webinar is to provide an overview for you of what that framework was and why we did it, as well as how we applied that to professional development and how that professional development changed over time as teachers and classrooms changed. So, just to give you a little bit of context here and for setting the stage, it was part of an Early Reading First project that we had. We had ten classrooms, and a combination across, as you can see, public school, child care, and Head Start. And within those classes, we had a large population of children who were at risk, which was part of the Early Reading First project piece as well as children with disabilities. And we did this project over a four-year process.

So, the approach that we used to professional development was really this very sort of complex multiple linked components that we had and we really used that process as guiding principles for ourselves as we thought about professional development. So, it was intensive; it was linked; it was ongoing, and we wanted to make sure that it was responsive to what was happening in each of the classrooms.

So, let me tell you a little bit about what happened during the first year, so how we got started with this. So, we had five, ten-hour teacher institutes, and teachers would come in on a Friday night, and we would do a couple hours on Friday night and then all day Saturday. And during that time, we did -- kind of covered just all those areas around emergent literacy. So, for example, we did building and expanding children's vocabulary. But at the same time as we did content, we also talked about what kind of supports do you have in place that really help you in figuring out what to teach around emergent literacy? So, how do you set up your environment to support that? How is your assessment and data supporting what's going on in the classroom? We also had coaches, and they went in weekly. And all of these classrooms were either morning sessions or afternoon sessions; so, as coaches went in, they would spend the entire time in a classroom, so 2 1/2 hours. So they would be able to see the beginning, the middle, and the end of what was happening.

So, if we looked at what happened during that first year; initially people were really excited. And, boy, we saw lots of growth right off the bat and lots of strategies being embedded in classrooms. But as it got towards the end of the school year, really leveled off and lost momentum. People just did not seem as excited as they were in the beginning. And so, that kind of made us step back and really think about the fact that maybe the institutes and the coaching, it just wasn't enough to meet the needs of all the classrooms. And I want to emphasize there, to meet the needs of all the classrooms.

So, some classrooms were doing really well, others were kind of in the middle, and others were struggling more. And, you know, if you think about just the different programs that we all work with, it makes sense, because when you think about public schools, child care, and Head Start, those have very different programmatic contexts. And the fact that we had a wide range of knowledge, understanding, and skills across teachers. Very few of the teachers had ever been involved in a process where they did much self-reflection of their own practices in the classroom, so that was another area, as well as the fact that even though we did really intensive training with our coaches, as you all know, you -- each coach is going to bring their own individual style of coaching, their own experiences. So, it was really different across coaches with what was happening with teachers. So, basically taking all that into consideration, we knew that we had to do something new, before we started year two of the project.

Jeanette McCollum: So, in between years one and two, we just sat down and thought about all of the things we had learned and decided we needed to modify our professional development. So, what we did was decrease the number of teacher institutes to three times a year and then added on monthly small group meetings that were approximately monthly, but there were eight of those. And if you add those two things together, the actual hours of professional development remained the same but divided into those two components.

And then for coaching, that stayed weekly, until teachers reached a certain level, which I will describe in just a minute, and then became biweekly. Kind of the major framework for how we went about organizing all of those aspects of professional development were what we called the CRIS, and that was our foundation and our framework. So, the CRIS stood for classroom recognition and improvement system. We developed this fairly structured framework in between years one and two, and then started using it in the second year. So used it years two, three, and four, and it continued to evolve as the classrooms progressed. But we were really careful about choosing the name for this, because we wanted it to convey both recognition of classroom growth but also the need to keep getting better and to provide a clear path for improvement.

So, what we came up with was a tiered system that had different components in it and pulled in data that were based on various things. So, these were -- our primary data came from environmental observations on an instrument that's called the ELLCO, which is really similar to the EKRs that you might be more familiar with, but it's focused directly on emergent literacy. And that instrument was actually required by our funders for the grant. The second component was fidelity to the curriculum. We all had -- all of the projects had to choose a particular emergent literacy curriculum, and we chose one called the TROPHIES, primarily because it was already in place in the district. And so, all of the programs agreed to go with that particular curriculum. And through looking at fidelity, we were trying to help the classrooms use the curriculum as it was intended to be used.

Another place that we got data from was the completion of specific activities. For example, doing extra book readings or embedding emergent literacy strategies across the day. And then we also got data from a variety of different observation checklists that looked at teaching strategies that might occur in centers or might occur during book reading or other components of the day. So, what we were hoping for the CRIS was that we would be able to recognize and celebrate classroom improvement on a very regular basis and provide incentive to keep the teachers excited and moving.

We were hoping it would organize and link the content from all of our professional development, so across the institutes, the small groups, and the coaching. We wanted to be able to account for individual differences among the classrooms. We wanted to have a very direct and very intentional link between the data and professional development. And we also wanted to provide a more common structure across the coaches.

So the way the CRIS works is there are three levels, a bronze, a silver, and a gold, and then gradually increasing requirements as you go across those three levels. Within each level, there are very specific criteria that you have to meet or a classroom would have to meet to move to the next level, and specific steps to accomplish within the level to move you forward, and then, recognition for steps within areas and areas within levels and then achievement of new levels. So, we wanted to be sure that we had not only small steps but large steps, and that we would recognize people for small steps as well as large ones. So frequent recognition for moving forward. This is the chart that we used.

So this is our CRIS chart. And these will be up as a handout for you at the end, this and the other chart that I'll show you in just a little bit. But just to show you how it works, the big components were the sections of the ELLCO -- so looking at the left side. The sections of the ELLCO, fidelity to the curriculum, and then teaching interactions. And then within each of those, you can see various subcomponents. And then if you look across the chart, you'll see the bronze, the silver, and the gold. And basically, we came up with a point system, so that teachers would develop points based on what was observed and what they had demonstrated in the classroom.

And then starting at the top with what we thought about as the foundation, which would be the general classroom environment, which is in the ELLCO, and then the language and literacy environment. We started with the foundations, then added fidelity, and then added teaching interactions. So, we felt it was really important to get those foundations in place first, to get the curriculum being implemented with fidelity, and then we could begin to work on more teacher/child interactions. And so that's how it worked. And just some examples, so you can see just a little more specifically, how the criteria changed across the levels. For the ELLCO score, at bronze, you had to have -- all of the items had to be at a three or above. At silver, the majority of items had to be at four or above. And then at gold, at least 40 percent of the items had to be at five. And same at curriculum fidelity; you had to have -- have fidelity for three themes in a row, and then at silver, for two units in a row, and that's equal to 10 themes. And then, at gold, you had to maintain that with regular checks. And so forth. So, for each one, you're really adding on additional requirements, but building the foundation with bronze first across all of the areas before moving to the next section.

Okay, so moving through the framework we used for setting goals and tracking progress, both within the column -- so foundation first and then teaching interactions -- and then moving to the next column. So, the goals were actually based on what each classroom needed to accomplish in order to move forward. And for each classroom, these were directly tracked on a chart that we had for each classroom. So, what the CRIS did for professional development, we felt, was made the expectations very explicit and transparent.

The teachers knew what they needed to work on in what order. It made coaching goals directly related to what classrooms needed to work on and at what level. It provided teachers an incentive to work hard, because of the regular tracking and thinking about what they needed to do and also about what they already knew. It provided a way to summarize accomplishments and needs across all of the classrooms, some of the classrooms, and individual classrooms.

So, when we put all of the CRIS charts together, we could see what small groups of teachers might need and provide that or what everyone needed -- to review something or something that we might be able to do in an institute for all of the teachers. So, it provided a really solid foundation for planning professional development. And it also provided more consistency across coaches and made it easier for coaches also to share what they were doing when they were focused on particular outcomes. So, Tweety?

Tweety: Okay, yeah. So, you might be wondering at this point, because it comes up a lot, as we have shared this information with people, is people will ask, you know, "How did teachers respond when you first introduced the CRIS to them as a structure?" As well as, "Did it create competition between classrooms, and was that a good thing or was that a bad thing?" So, you know, I think as far as introducing CRIS to the teachers, it was kind of that same response as any time we introduce something new, because it was almost like that deer in headlights: "What's happening now?" Because emergent literacy is really big; there are lots of pieces of it; so, you know, they're trying to still put all this together, and here we are introducing CRIS to them.

So, as soon as they got started, they really loved CRIS. And I think part of that was because it had -- it provided some structure for them; it gave them some steps where they knew what they were supposed to do, and it gave them also targets to reach for and try to accomplish. So, as far as did it create competition; it did create some competition. But what was interesting about it, it was really a good thing, because they really helped each other out. So, if someone was doing really well and other programs were struggling, they really supported each other and would share things they were doing in classrooms as well as getting – visiting each other in classrooms. And what we saw happening --and that was not just within programs. It was across programs that they were helping each other.

So, we saw more relationship development at this point when we introduced CRIS and they actually started implementing these pieces. So that was a really nice thing to see, because it really did pull people together more and more sharing of how they were accomplishing certain parts of CRIS.

So, what we want to do next is talk a little bit about how we got from data to actually planning professional development. And we're going to start with talking about sort of that big overall professional development plan for the year, and then in the second part, we'll relate that more to coaching on an individual basis, what happened. So, as far as where the data came from, when we're saying how we use data to get to professional development, that was data from the CRIS. So we had those ELLCO results from each classroom that Jeanette was talking about. We also had the primary source of information, which was what's happening with CRIS and additional information from coaches' observations of what was happening in the classroom. And we haven't talked much about child data, but we also used child data so we could really look at not only what was happening with CRIS but what was happening with children in classrooms. Were they making progress, and across what areas were they making progress?

So, to give you an idea of what CRIS looked like as far as the teachers at the beginning of year two; so this is the very beginning, so it makes sense that all teachers were working on bronze at that point, because we had just introduced it. And if you look at then, the beginning of year three, then we've got about half and half. We have about half of the teachers who have reached gold, but we have the other half of the teachers who, some of them are making progress, some of them are still really working on those basic pieces.

So, we knew that we had this very wide spread of what was happening in classrooms and really needed to think about that as we thought about what that professional development plan might be. So, as we looked a little bit closer at the data -- and you know, this is sort of typical of, especially around school readiness of what we're all looking at, of having those fall, winter, and spring scores and being able to compare what's going on. But one thing I want to point out, if you notice where it says "area," all the different assessment tools and pieces, it looks like there are a lot of things -- and there were -- that we were looking at.

So, Early Reading First required receptive vocabulary, capital letters, but we also wanted to add more information that would really help us figure out what was happening in classrooms, what was happening with teachers, and where we needed to target professional development. So, if you look at the kindergarten entry targets, I also want to point out these did not come from kindergarten teachers or kindergarten programs. These were -- with the requirements from Early Reading First, they set kindergarten entry targets, and for the rest of the pieces that we were using, we either used the PALS or IGDIs to set those targets.

So, they weren't at the highest end; they weren't at the lowest end; they were sort of more in the middle piece there. And if you just glance at the data, you'll notice that listening comprehension is the one that jumps out at you, if you look at the end of the year kindergarten entry target, which was 14, and yet we're still at 11. So, that became a primary focus for us where we felt like, wow, we really need to do more. We've done things already on listening comprehension, but we really need to do more around this area.

We also kind of looked at those areas that they were doing pretty good in them, but we still wanted to make sure that they got more information, more content, more practice so it would strengthen those areas also. So, those became the possibilities for the professional development plan. So, with this change in thinking then around taking our data and really helping that guide our professional development plans, we had three institutes, again with all the teachers, really focusing on listening comprehension, but also focusing on some of those other areas that weren't as strong.

But we also added a new piece in there if you look at that third little bullet under institutes. We were hearing a lot from teachers that they wanted more information about how do you individualize for certain children; so that piece of content was embedded in across all the institutes and the training that was going on around listening comprehension. We also had small groups that met monthly, and for this the teachers were grouped based on where they were at on the CRIS, so we could also individualize for teachers more.

So, those -- the content of the group meetings, the small group meetings, really were based on skills that we had introduced in the institutes, so it gave an opportunity then to build on those skills more, any areas that were identified on the CRIS or that the coaches were seeing that they felt like needed a little bit more information. And all of those small group meetings had a lot of practice opportunities where people could really take that information, based on what was going on in their classroom and really practice those, before they embedded them into teaching.

We also had the coaching continued, and that says weekly or biweekly, because for the bronze and silver teachers, they still continued to receive weekly coaching, but once you hit gold status, we gave teachers the option of if they wanted weekly coaching or if they wanted to switch to biweekly coaching.

Jeanette: Okay, so that kind of -- Tweety went over how we use the data for developing our sort of broad overall plan for the year. And I'm going to talk a little bit more about how we use very similar kinds of data, the same kind of data, to help the teachers decide and the coaches decide what would happen in coaching.

So, for coaching, we had the CRIS data from each one of the classrooms and then, again, the child data from each one of the classrooms. So, on CRIS we had very regular updates where the teachers were tracked on each of the coaching forms, and individualized coaching goals could be identified right off of the CRIS. And then again, the child data tended to be used in a more supplemental way for purposes of coaching, so looking across their areas, identifying where they may not be getting quite enough instruction or instruction needs to change in some way. And then, again, looking at results and patterns for individual children; so, not just the average score across the areas, but where there were particular children who were not learning in particular areas, and coaching might want to focus on strategies for that.

So what I'm going to do is show you an example for a bronze classroom and then for a gold classroom; so, you can see kind of how the data came together for each of those two types of classrooms and focused their coaching goals as well. So, this is a bronze classroom at the end of year two. And so, when we're planning for the beginning of year three, what we see is they have completed everything in bronze and they have completed or reached the criterion for the general classroom environment under silver. So, what we would do for coaching there is start working on the language and literacy environment and upping the ante a little bit for the fidelity to the curriculum and then upping the ante for teaching interactions.

So, our coaching goals would come then out of the blank cells under silver but beginning toward the top and moving toward the bottom. In this same classroom, the bronze classroom, so this is an average of all the children. And generally their outcomes are looking pretty good. Again, the listening comprehension pops up. So, what we decided to do based on -- this was showing up in a lot of classrooms, so we not only took it back to the large group institutes and even some small groups, but we also made this a major focus of coaching.

So, coaching goals for this particular classroom or places we might start. Improving the literacy environment, maintaining fidelity to the curriculum -- so trying to increase the fidelity -- integrating an extra book reading into the schedule, which is on the CRIS, and then trying to integrate listening comprehension into learning more about shared book-reading strategies.

So, there we were combining a CRIS area and a child area, which fit together really nicely in that case. Okay, here is a gold classroom, and this gives you a really different picture. So, what happened at the end of year two is we actually had -- half of our classrooms had achieved gold by the end of year two. So, that gave us a little bit of a dilemma for where we were going to go in years three and four as far as helping them improve.

So what we had to do between years two and three is actually expand on the CRIS, and we focused a little bit more on individualizing for groups of kids and individual kids and then working on higher level teaching strategies. And the way we did that was by adding a column on the right, which we called solid gold, which meant that with regular checks, they had to maintain what they had achieved at gold level. But then down at the bottom, you'll see that we also gave them responsibility for the RTI that was already going on in their classroom.

So just a little bit more about the project was that we did have RTI throughout, but it was implemented by tutors, not by the teachers. So once teachers reached gold and started working on solid gold, then we transitioned some of the responsibility for RTI to those teachers. We also added a platinum level. We were thinking of them, the teachers who were at gold and were maintaining gold, as becoming leadership classrooms that other teachers in their district could go to to learn about some of these things, and we were also thinking about transitioning to after the project, where these teachers would be available to help other teachers.

So, within this context, we focused in on intentional teaching skills and the RTI. So, again transitioning even more of the responsibility for RTI. But this is also where we began to look at CLASS scores, as a place from which to set goals. So, we had teachers videotape, then we looked at their scores and helped them look at their videotapes, and then from that began to work on bringing up their score. We were especially interested in instructional support. This pattern, if you look at this year and the pre-scores and the post-scores, they were doing fairly well -- real well -- in emotional support and classroom organization, but like most classrooms around the country, instructional support was lagging behind.

So, even though these classrooms were at gold and were doing really well, their instructional support still wasn't as high as we wanted. So we began to integrate instructional support into their coaching goals. And here is the outcome from that same gold classroom, and you can see that even in this classroom, listening comprehension needed some more work. So, again, we're going to be trying to integrate that into coaching.

So, the coaching goals for that classroom, for the gold classroom, came directly from the CRIS, as well as from the listening comprehension for children. So it's implement strategies to support listening comprehension during the large group and shared reading, so very similar to the bronze classroom on that one. Then plan and implement an extra small group based on assessment, and that was the RTI. So this is going beyond the gold. And then implementing targeted instructional strategies, based on the instructional profile on the CLASS instruments. So, both of those latter two are really going beyond what we had originally envisioned for gold, because the teachers achieved gold so quickly.

Okay, so if you look across this, you can see that across the years two to four, the teachers gradually moved from bronze to being 100 percent gold by the end of year four. So, this just shows that by the end of year two, where the teachers -- what they had achieved. So, 50 percent had achieved gold; seventy percent had achieved silver, and 80 percent had achieved at least bronze. And then looking across the years, so each year, a few more bronze went to silver and a few more silver went to gold. And then by the end of the year of year four, all the teachers were actually at gold. And that happened right at the very end of year four. We were very grateful.

Tweety: Okay, and I think one thing that is significant about that, and, you know, we didn't -- there were -- that shows great results with teachers, but there were also great results for children. And we didn't have control classrooms within this project, but we found larger percentages of children at benchmark at the end than the beginning of the year. And also follow-up was done as children entered kindergarten and completed that year, and the children who were part of this project were outperforming all of the other children. And that's pretty significant, taking into consideration that this group had large percentages of children who were at risk as well as children with disabilities, and they were all included in that data. So, very positive outcomes for teachers as well as children. And it was really exciting to see the changes in practice, from being in the classrooms observing as we started the project and then what you observed happening in classrooms towards the end of the project. So lots of change in practices.

So, if we look at kind of summarizing what happened, I think that professional development planning really was based on that framework of the CRIS and what was happening with teachers, and because we had that framework, it really helped us to be able to individualize for groups of teachers across the bronze, silver, gold, as well as individual teachers.

And, you know, as we talked about, we sort of took that information, as well as what was happening with child data; so how were the children doing in each of these classrooms and what supports did we need to put in place, so they had chances to be more successful. We also had that range of professional development where we had those large group trainings but we also had those small group opportunities that allowed for lots of flexibility as well as individualizing, and we had the one-on-one coaching.

I think the other thing about those small groups is it allowed lots of opportunities for people to actually practice implementing those skills. That even though we did some of those things in the large group training, that allowed more of that practice time mastering those skills as well as people sharing with each other what they were doing in classrooms.

So the other piece that I think was significant, as you saw as we sort of quickly talked about what happened across the four years, is that professional development really changed across those four years based on the data and what was happening. So, we really constantly were having to look at what was working and what wasn't, how we could increase those supports. And then, last of all, content was integrated across all the formats. So, every time we changed those professional development formats, we also were trying to make sure that we were integrating content across every format so teachers had lots of opportunities to get that information and put that into practice as well as receive feedback on that.

Gail: So, I can't believe we're already to the end today. We want to thank you both, Jeanette and Tweety, for spending time with us. An incredible amount of information, amazing, really promising results, I would say, from your studies, which are great. So, thank you again, Tweety and Jeanette.

Tweety: Thank you all.

Jeanette: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Gail: All right, we'll see you next month on the Front Porch.

Tweety: Bye, everybody.

Jeanette: Bye.