The Smart Cookie Project

Kerry Cormier
Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, USA, and
Trudi Figueroa
Cherry Hill Public Schools, Cherry Hill, New Jersey, USA

Abstract

Purpose – This practitioner-focused article highlights a collaborative, school-wide project at a PDS that showcased elementary students' strengths and talents. Based on the children's book, The Smart Cookie (John, 2021), teachers and the university professor-in-residence developed professional learning communities, which inspired the creation of a space for all students to demonstrate ways in which they were "smart cookies" that aligned with our comprehensive mission of promoting inclusive practices.

Design/methodology/approach – Rooted in professional learning communities, teachers at our PDS spent the first half of the school year learning about chosen topics of social–emotional learning, stamina and neurodiversity. The Smart Cookie Project was created to demonstrate the connections between these topics. Students at the PDS were given the opportunity to create an original project that showcased their creativity, interests and talents. Projects were then displayed during a schoolwide showcase.

Findings – The impact of the project and the showcase demonstrated the importance of creating opportunities for both teacher and student innovation. The project brought the community together, allowed students to be viewed through strengths-based perspectives, helped teachers see how their own learning can positively impact their practice and emphasized the need for honoring student choice in the classroom.

Originality/value – The project discussed here can lend itself to fellow PDSs looking to adopt innovative instructional approaches, honor inclusive practices and situate students in places of strength.

Keywords Inclusion, Professional development, Strengths-based pedagogy

Paper type Practitioner paper

It was the beginning of March, and we found ourselves sitting together, reflecting on our slow progress on our PDS initiatives. We – Kerry, the university professor-in-residence (PIR) and Trudi, the school-based PDS liaison – have tried to increase our staff buy-in for four years now. But our PDS and our teachers faced so many uphill battles – navigating two years of pandemic teaching, attacks on public education in the media, facing numerous district and university barriers and most recently losing a member of the school community. All of these struggles added to the daily stress of teaching and led to our teachers being hesitant to engage in working on the nine essentials of PDS, particularly our focus on reflection and innovative practice. We felt an innovative practice might reinvigorate our community at a time when we all needed it most. We sat together, absorbing and processing all the burdens our teachers carried and brainstormed how to move our PDS work forward.

Our PDS context

Our PDS, an elementary school, has partnered with the university for five years. The K-5 school has roughly 250 students enrolled, with 30 teachers. Additionally, there are six self-contained support classrooms for students with autism. Kerry and Trudi work as partners in

boundary-spanning roles (essential 8), with Kerry as the professor-in-residence and Trudi as the school-based PDS liaison. Our comprehensive mission (essential 1) involves advancing equity, antiracism, social justice and inclusion. When we started as a PDS, the teachers wanted to focus on increasing students' stamina as our overarching goal. The teachers were concerned with what they felt was students giving up too easily on work and wanted to see them increase their stamina by working for longer periods of time on assignments without giving up (see Table 1 for an explanation of terms). However, when considering the six self-contained classrooms and the idea that often students' motivation is impacted by curricular barriers, we shifted to focusing on creating more inclusive practices. The premise was that if instruction and materials were more accessible to a wider range of learning needs, students' stamina might increase. During our early years as a PDS, there continued to be tension between two areas of wider focus: building students' stamina and inclusive practices. This led to teachers' hesitancy to engage in PDS work.

To work toward this mission of increasing inclusive practices, we spent the year working on essentials 3 and 4, centering teacher learning and reflective, innovative practice (NAPDS, 2021). Our hope was that through reflection, teachers' might be open to new innovative practices that foster students' stamina through inclusive pedagogies. In exploring teacher learning and innovation, Waters (2017) discussed how PDSs may fail to be places of innovation, often because there are systemic barriers that prevent teacher learning. Waters (2017) called for more collaborative, teacher-led learning communities, along with creating opportunities for students to take greater ownership of their learning. Through professional learning communities (PLC), teachers engaged in continuous learning and participating in collaborative inquiry cycles are well suited to increasing student learning (Eaker & Marzano, 2020). PLCs done poorly can limit teachers' innovation, so to help educators shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, we need to ground our PLCs by helping teachers consider the bigger picture of education (Eaker & Marzano, 2020; Poultney & Fox, 2020). By helping teachers at our PDS consider the wider umbrella of inclusion and what it entails, we hoped that designing democratic and collaborative PLCs might provide a place for teachers' concerns to be addressed while fostering a shift in mindset (Poultney & Fox, 2020).

In response to this call and the needs of our teachers, we began the year by sharing an interest survey with teachers and used the results to create three professional learning communities in the following focus areas: (1) student stamina and engagement, (2) social–emotional learning (SEL) and (3) neurodiversity. Each PLC met twice a week to read articles and/or watch videos curated by [author 1] and discuss their learning during a district mandated 25-min PLC block before the start of school. Typically, this block is taken up by mandated meetings, but we wanted to bring PLC back to its original intent of teacher learning communities. The goal was for each PLC group to determine an innovative practice to try based on their learning and measure its impact. Eventually, the PLC groups studying neurodiversity and SEL elected to purchase books they had come across in their exploration

Key terms discussed in our PLCs
1. Neurodiversity: to the natural biological brain variation among all people (Walker, 2014)
2. Neurodivergence: to people who fall outside of the traditional notion of "normal" minds, while neurotypical refers to individuals who fall within the notion of a "normal" mind (Walker, 2014)
3. Positive niche construction: presented by Armstrong (2012), involves creating spaces and practices for students, especially neurodivergent students, to be seen from a strengths-based perspective
4. Stamina (as referenced in our PDS community): to students' ability to work on a task without giving up. Often in our collective conversation, we emphasized the need to consider any curricular or instructional barriers that may impede a student's stamina

Source(s): Table created by authors

of articles on their topics. The SEL group had two teachers read their book and report on it in their meetings, while the neurodiversity PLC purchased copies for each member and then divided up the chapters among the group members.

However, as useful as the books and articles were, due to the difficult demands currently placed on teachers (i.e. post-pandemic, district mandates and polarizing politics), the PLCs struggled to determine practices that did not add to their already overwhelming responsibilities. Our experience is echoed in the literature in that some teachers working in PLCs focus on finding a quick fix rather than engaging in a more prolonged, deeper inquiry that can have a greater impact on student outcomes (Poultney & Fox, 2020). We knew that innovative practices would help reinvigorate both students and teachers and we wanted to leverage our collaboration to help teachers see how to turn their learning into practice.

"So I've got an idea," Kerry said. "It's out there, but I just bought my daughter the children's book *The Smart Cookie*. What if we try to do the project in the book - you know, have every kid make something completely original?" Nodding along, Trudi grabbed the book from the school's library, and we read through it. The main character, a cookie, does not feel smart because they are not successful at school in the traditional sense of getting good grades and answering questions quickly. The cookie's teacher, Ms Biscotti, challenges the class to make something original for homework. It is then that the cookie realizes that all their classmates are smart cookies – each learner is talented and smart in their own way (John, 2021). After we finished reading, Trudi was all in – "Let's do it!"

In this context, the Smart Cookie Project emerged.

Research synthesis
Several key ideas emerged from our PLCs that, along with educational scholarship, supported our Smart Cookie Project. These ideas allowed us to fuse aspects of inclusive education, social–emotional learning, neurodiversity and student stamina into a foundation that supports inclusivity and creativity.

In our work, we recognize inclusion as an intersectional, multicultural appreciation and acceptance of human diversity and complex identities (Baglieri, 2016; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). While oftentimes inclusion is just seen as pertaining to the physical inclusion of students with disabilities (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011), we acknowledge that it is a pedagogical approach that embraces the myriad identity markers and experiences of all students in our classrooms. The majority of our PDS work is to help teachers work toward this full acceptance of all students' diverse ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.

The goal of situating students from a strengths-based perspective directly lends itself to inclusive teaching practices. Collins and Ferri (2016) emphasized the need for teachers to reject deficit thinking and recognize the harmful impact that informal labels like "struggling" can have on a student. Instead, they encouraged teachers to "develop particular habits of mind that promote being with and working with each learner" (p. 4), and the Smart Cookie Project provided the space for teachers to take up this mindset.

The children's picture book, *The Smart Cookie* (John, 2021), emphasizes the need for children to find a way to show their strengths in school so that all students feel confident in their abilities. We connected these ideas to SEL in that students need to develop an awareness of their interests and a sense of self-efficacy, which can be assisted through both classroom practices and school-wide culture (CASEL, 2023). Related to this, when discussing trauma-informed practices, Bashant (2020) recommended providing students with opportunities to showcase their strengths and talents as a means of promoting social-emotional growth.

This need to celebrate students' strengths also supports neurodiverse learners, as Armstrong (2012) argued that educators should engage in positive niche construction for neurodivergent students, which involves determining and fostering their strengths and

taking a strengths-based approach to instruction. Finally, to increase students' engagement and stamina, Ostroff (2016) argued that we should foster students' curiosity as a means of empowering them to embrace both learning experiences and creative processes. This requires providing students with opportunities to engage in divergent thinking and explore areas and topics they are interested in meaningful ways.

Supported by research literature, the Smart Cookie Project allowed our teachers to foster students' SEL growth and development, honor neurodivergent students' needs and promote greater stamina and engagement. Each of these goals aligns with inclusive pedagogy in that we collectively created a school context that: (1) encouraged multiple ways to engage with and express learning, (2) enabled deeper, strengths-based relationships, (3) required a student-centered approach that honored student voice and (4) utilized PDS structures of learning and innovation to promote inclusive practices (Elder, 2020; Li & Ruppar, 2021; Miller *et al.*, 2020).

Our methods: setting up the project

Given the teachers' fragile state and feelings of being overwhelmed after the pandemic, we took a cautious approach to launching the project. We drew from Carrington and Robinson's (2004) acknowledgment that inclusive schools foster collaborative school communities and democratic planning and used this as a guide for the project. Inspired by the picture book, we decided to implement the Smart Cookie Project, where we would ask each student in the school to create an entirely unique and original project. We imagined projects that could be art-based, written, performance-based or any other creations the students felt inspired to make. Just like in the story, each student would be asked to create something that spoke to their individual strengths and talents.

To begin, we outlined the scope and sequence of the project as follows: (1) introduce the book to teachers and make connections to their PLC; (2) share the project with teachers; (3) host a school-wide read-aloud and discussion of the book during a whole school assembly; (4) plan the logistics of the project as a collective group; (5) launch the project in classrooms, allowing a full week to complete; (6) host a school-wide Smart Cookie Showcase to share students' projects and (7) debrief with teachers and discuss next steps.

During the initial meeting with teachers, Trudi read the book aloud. She paused throughout the reading to consider how this book aligns with teachers' learning in PLCs. As a whole group, we noted ideas like the open-endedness of the project, showing multiple attempts before success and the affirmation that the cookie received. The discussion led to the teachers considering the project as something we might try to put our learning into practice. We also asked teachers to complete a short Google form to get their input on the project. Many of the teachers expressed interest but remained skeptical of how it would work out or how students would respond. Once it was clear the teachers were generally on board, another meeting was scheduled to clarify and plan for the implementation of the Smart Cookie Project. As a collective group, we made decisions about how to introduce the project to the students, how to share supplies, the duration of work time and displaying the students' work.

We then held a school-wide assembly to read the story with the entire student body. Trudi read the book using slides and the Novel Effect application, which adds interactive sounds and music to read aloud. Students were highly engaged. Afterward, she asked the question, "Would you like to be a Smart Cookie?" When met with a resounding yes, she proceeded to present the project – make something entirely original – and asked students for suggestions on project ideas, which teachers recorded on chart paper around the room. She also elicited answers to what would not be a project that could be done at school, like cooking. Students and teachers returned to their classrooms and continued the conversation about their projects. There was palpable excitement as they left the All-Purpose Room (APR).

Project results

The Smart Cookie Project proved to be an overwhelming success. We ordered art and craft supplies using district-provided PDS funds. Students worked on their projects for a full week, with each teacher allocating up to an hour each day to work on them. In our planning discussions, we encouraged teachers to find a time and a way to work on the project that made sense for their class and teachers approached it in various ways. Two different grade levels elected to pair their classes, with older students offering support to younger students. Several classrooms invited families to support the project by working on aspects at home. One grade level infused the project into the curriculum, connecting it to their current content, while one teacher took a Shark Tank approach, inviting students to create an invention that they would then pitch during the showcase.

Students created a wide array of projects that included writing, art, musical performances, games and inventions, athletic skills demonstrations and STEM projects (see Figure 1 for a breakdown of projects). All physical projects – i.e. art, written stories and poster boards – were put on display by class and grade level in the APR. Students created so many projects that we ran out of table space and resorted to putting projects on the small stage in the APR. Some examples of the physical projects included: (1) poster boards made by fifth graders tying their creativity to their unit of study in science; (2) original poetry written by a first grader who previously did not produce writing in class; (3) roller coasters made out of paper strips created by kindergarteners; (4) an expansive map of all four Pokemon regions created by a group of second graders and (5) original sunset paintings by a fourth grader. Additionally, we invited students who created performance-based projects to upload videos of their performances on a school-wide Flipgrid, which ended up being over ninety minutes in length once all submissions were shared. A mobile smartboard was brought into the APR to play Flipgrid while the school community visited the display. Some of the performances included: (1) a student showing off their bike riding skills with their family; (2) a student playing songs on their flute; (3) a student performing magic tricks and (4) a student reading and performing an original story they wrote.

Each grade level was called down at timed intervals to walk through the Smart Cookie Showcase. We saw students not only beaming with pride when viewing their own work but also eagerly sought out their friends' and siblings' projects as well. It was clear to us that the students deeply enjoyed the Smart Cookie Project and Showcase.
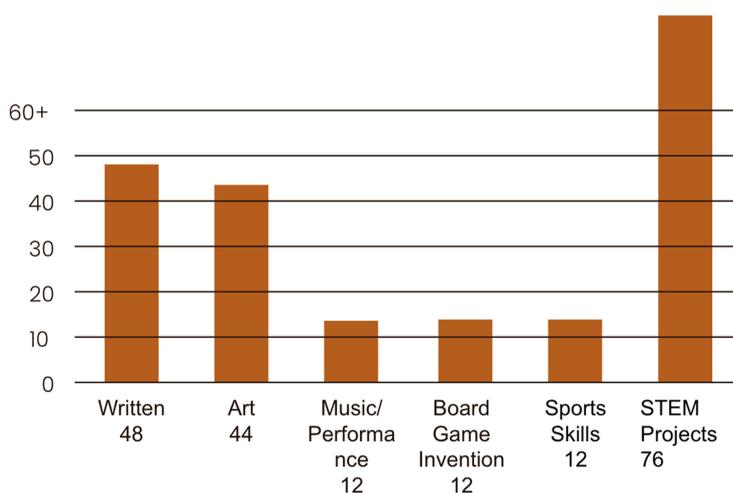
Source(s): Figure created by authors

Similarly, we noticed teachers walking through the room, amazed at the variety and creativity of all the projects. Several expressed that they learned so much more about their students through this project – discovering interests, talents and skills that they had not noticed before. Several shared that they felt proud of how students stepped up as leaders and the responsibility all students showed when working on their projects, noting how having a choice in their work impacted students' commitment to it. Many commented on how diligently the students worked, and it was noted that there were few, if any, students off task during the time they worked on their projects. The biggest sentiment teachers shared with us was how impressed they were by the level of creativity shown throughout the Smart Cookie Project and Showcase.

Afterward, many of the teachers wanted to do this schoolwide project again and found natural tie-ins to our PDS initiatives of developing and implementing more innovative inclusive practices. While there was hesitancy at the start of the project, after the showcase, the teachers overwhelmingly loved the Smart Cookie Project. The only concerns shared with Trudi referenced the impact on instructional time and finding natural connections to the curriculum, particularly in lower grades. But all of the teachers found ways that the project connected to and supported their learning in their PLCs.

Recommendations & next steps

The success of the Smart Cookie Project showed us the power of honoring student choice and voice in enacting inclusive, strengths-based practices. It also gave us the space to work around systemic barriers that place pressure on teachers and help them see the power of innovative practice (Waters, 2017). What began as an outside-the-box idea turned into an event that brought the school community together in a positive, affirming space.

Impact on student outcomes

Despite initial and understandable hesitancy, the project turned out not to be an additional burden added to teachers' already full plates. The Smart Cookie Project also afforded teachers the opportunity to see all students, regardless of labels like "struggling" or "smart," from a strengths-based perspective. Every student was able to contribute to the showcase in a way that was meaningful and engaging for them. This in turn provided teachers the opportunity to learn more about their students' various identities and interests, which can enable them to understand how to be with and work with students (Collins & Ferri, 2016) in ways that honor students' individuality. Furthermore, neurodivergent students were able to show both their teachers and the school community their strengths and talents, which can then be positively incorporated into classroom instruction. The showcase became a schoolwide positive niche construction (Armstrong, 2012). The Smart Cookie Project aligned with Kluth and Schwarz's (2008) many suggestions for working to include students with autism, mainly encouraging risk-taking and showcasing talents. Given our six classrooms for students with autism, both teachers and students from the wider community benefited from seeing the interests and strengths of our autistic students, which was particularly powerful.

Additionally, the Smart Cookie Project also promoted students' SEL growth and development while also emphasizing the importance of student choice in increasing stamina. By offering students the time to explore their interests along with making connections to their peers' interests, students were further able to develop their self-awareness, contributing to their SEL. Additionally, working on their projects in small groups or independently enabled them to develop a sense of self-efficacy (Bashnat, 2020). This sense of self-efficacy also ties into students' stamina in that it promotes students' curiosity, divergent thinking and exploration of creative processes (Ostroff, 2016). The showcase was a place for students and

teachers to foster connections and build relationships, which can be brought back into the classroom on a smaller scale through regular class meetings and mini-showcases of strength (Causton & Macleod, 2020).

Impact of PLCs on teacher engagement in PDS work
Each of the topics teachers explored in their PLCs was connected to the project, which provided teachers with a tangible way to see their learning put into practice. The project allowed us, as a PDS, to move one step closer to our mission to enact inclusive practices. One teacher commented on how her second-grade students who were collaboratively working on their Pokémon map were students who never liked working in a group and were often disruptive. Yet when working on their project, they were very collaborative and cooperative, which showed the teacher the power of choice and incorporating students' interests to increase engagement. In a similar instance, a first-grade teacher was amazed that one of her students, who rarely produced any writing in class despite frequent check-ins and support, submitted two pieces of original poetry that were well done for a first-grade student. This moment not only showed the teacher the power of choice but also the importance of positive niche construction. The student showed a strength and talent that her teacher used to engage the student and she also shifted from labeling the student as a struggling writer to that of a poet. Several other teachers commented on how the showcase allowed students who struggled in various areas to demonstrate their strengths to a wider audience. Perhaps the most talked-about observation from teachers was that there were virtually no complaints from students throughout the school when they worked on their projects.

While in the past we had discussed the power of offering choice in the classroom as a means to increase students' stamina, honor neurodiversity and promote SEL, the teachers were hesitant to incorporate choice into their practice. But in all three PLC groups, choice was emphasized, and then creating the Smart Cookie Project allowed teachers to see the power of choice in action. The showcase became a tangible moment for making their learning actionable, creating one of our most inclusive moments as a community.

The teachers were reinvigorated to learn more after seeing how to take their learning off the page and put it into practice. In her book Unearthing Joy, Muhammed (2023) called for educators to participate in professional learning in a more joyful way by renaming it intellectual feasts. Muhammed (2023) notes how such learning can help teachers feel more engaged in their work and feel as though they have a greater impact if, after flexible feasts and meetings, teachers work to create a social action project that contributes to their community. For us, our experience with learning in our PLCs and the implementation of the Smart Cookie Project demonstrated how, as Muhammed (2023) stated, joy was brought back into the classroom.

The PLCs and project also allowed PDS work to become less abstract and more tangible with teachers. While the district had mandated PLC time every day, the time was usually spent in prescribed ways (i.e. team meetings and sharing district mandates). But with permission to use two days of PLCs for PDS work, Kerry and Trudi wanted to bring the focus of the time back to professional learning. Moving forward, we considered adopting a "Teacher Genius Hour" as an innovative way to develop PLCs, similar to Andrews *et al.*'s (2017) work, where teachers have the time to explore topics of their individual choosing and then share how they can turn-key this knowledge into their practice. This may allow teachers to see how the PDS essentials of innovative and reflective practice can be implemented in ways that work for their own unique needs. It will be essential to consider options for teachers to engage in this activity so as not to cause them to feel overwhelmed, as we saw with our initial PLCs. Additionally, while Kerry and Trudi developed the Smart Cookie Project as a way to tie together the ideas from each of our three PLC groups, moving forward, it will be more meaningful for the teachers to come up with their own innovative practice in future

cycles of inquiry. With the example of the Smart Cookie Project, teachers can consider how they can increase avenues for students' creative expression in regular instruction and classroom routines. As a place to help teachers begin a new cycle, Poultney and Fox (2020) provided several guiding questions for PLCs to consider, while Muhammed (2023) invited teachers engaged in professional learning to consider unlearning deficits and traditional instructional methods, along with rethinking notions of "genius." In reflection on the project and their PLC discussions, many of the teachers were able to articulate more practices that they can try in their classrooms, which they might consider alongside new ideas uncovered in future PLC groups. Overall, the positive impact of the showcase continued to linger, improving both student and teacher morale. The momentum generated by the project even carried over into the following school year, with the community repeating the project by using the picture book *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Spires (2013). The hope is for this inclusive practice to continue to bring the community together.

Moving learning & innovation forward

As a result of this project, we encourage fellow PDSs to implement open-ended projects that allow students to showcase their interests and creativity as a way to honor diversity while increasing engagement, intrinsic motivation and self-esteem. School-wide events, like the Smart Cookie Project, can foster a sense of community and affirm spaces on a broad level. However, individual grades or classrooms can also adopt common practices like project-based learning that can create a similar space that encourages SEL growth, neurodiversity-affirming pedagogies and increased student engagement.

PDSs may consider exploring project-based learning practices that will enable grade levels and teachers to bring the positivity and momentum similar to the Smart Cookie Project into regular classroom routines. It may also be beneficial for PDSs focusing on teacher learning and innovation to engage in Muhammed's (2023) idea of intellectual feasts or Andrew *et al.*'s (2017) genius hour for teachers, with the goal of either of these approaches to be to implement practices that empower all students to showcase their strengths and foster inclusivity. If focusing on inclusive practices, such groups can explore practitioner-focused books like Armstrong's (2012) work, young adult literature that features neurodivergent and/or other marginalized characters or watching documentaries related to inclusion, like Habib's (2008) Including Samuel. University partners can work closely with educators to brainstorm ways to make their learning actionable, so we can increase our impact on student outcomes. Our hope is that a focus on professional learning and innovation will help teachers feel reinvigorated and engage more deeply in the work of school–university partnerships. Through these means we can better work toward our mission of advancing equity, antiracism, social justice and inclusion for all students and school communities.

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Corresponding author
Kerry Cormier can be contacted at: cormierk@rowan.edu