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Charting a New Course: Professional Development Strategies for Improving Literacy Education Across the Curriculum

Vikki K. Collins, Dawn Upshaw, and H. Marguerite Yates

Together with the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and the present climate of educational reform and accountability, the professional development of teachers has taken on new significance. Throughout the nation, reform efforts are dramatically raising expectations for student achievement and for teacher effectiveness. To meet current expectations, teachers must necessarily deepen their content knowledge and improve teaching practice. Without the professional development of teachers, change in teaching practice is not likely to occur (Sparks & Richardson, 1997). Guskey (2000) maintains, “At the core of each and every successful educational improvement is a thoughtfully conceived, well-designed, and well-supported professional development component” (p. 4).

This paper reviews the effects of a program of professional development for literacy teachers in an urban, southeastern elementary school. During academic year 2002-2003, only 67% of fourth grade students met or exceeded state standards for achievement in reading as measured by the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), and only 77% of fourth grade students met or exceeded state standards for achievement in English/language arts as measured by the CRCT (Georgia Department of Education, 2005).

Following strategies for action research (Mertler, 2006), a Safety Team was organized to secure and enhance student achievement in literacy education, including reading and English/language arts. The team was composed of the principal, assistant principal, school counselor, educational psychologist, language arts/reading department head, and grade-level representative from the fourth grade. The Safety Team collected and organized data regarding fourth grade literacy education. After examining the data for maximum information, the team explored professional development strategies to answer the following research question: What is the nature of the relationship between a program of professional development for teachers and student achievement in literacy education?

Review of Related Literature

Teachers’ work in the classroom has become a matter of national interest. For years, efforts and resources have been directed mostly into curriculum innovation, assessment, and standardized testing. However, research indicates that the work of teachers in the classroom is central to student achievement and success. Teachers’ certainty about their practice is directly linked to determining student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Rosenholtz, 1989). Freebody’s (2005) findings indicate that an effective teacher has a large repertoire of teaching strategies and creates a positive learning climate where student participation is valued. When an effective teacher engages in pedagogy, not only must the teacher deliver content, he or she must also consider sequencing of learning components and be able to demonstrate how the new knowledge is meaningful and transferable to different situations. Thus, effective literacy teaching requires teachers who are deeply knowledgeable about literacy learning, can concurrently coordinate a variety of classroom activities and differentiate instruction, can support and scaffold learners at word and text levels, and can manage a positive classroom climate characterized by mutual respect (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Freebody, 2005).

Realizing that innovations in teachers’ practice needed to be fostered by learning opportunities that lasted longer than a day, teachers in the urban, southeastern elementary school participated in sustained, on-site seminars, presentations, and workshops that addressed effective teaching methods for reading and language arts instruction. Collaborative, collegial relationships were formed...
through frequent grade-level meetings, observations, and discussions. Understanding that on-going assessment is critical to planning for student success (McAfee & Leong, 2002), teachers were provided training in formal and informal assessment strategies for literacy education. Therefore, a professional development program concentrating on collaborative efforts, ongoing assessment strategies, and effective instructional methods was implemented.

**Implementation of the Program**

Using Marzano’s book, *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* (2003) as a guide, fourth-grade teachers met as a team during pre-planning to designate essential reading and language arts content and to schedule its delivery during the school year. This type of collaboration allowed for flexibility in decision making as teachers discussed the best time of the year to teach specific units and their integration across the curriculum. Once the essential content was determined, the teachers turned to their students’ CRCT reading scores to investigate student strengths and weaknesses in each reading domain. Based on the domains in which students performed the poorest, the fourth-grade teachers reviewed the objectives with their students. Weekly assignments given on the same day across the grade level were created to strengthen students’ understanding of concepts and practice of specific skills.

Because of the high stakes standardized assessments, students’ test anxieties became a concern for the faculty. In *Test Anxiety & What You Can Do About It*, Casbarro (2003) suggests administering teacher-made and textbook derived pre-tests and post-tests regularly to assist in differentiation of instruction and to make testing a common event. Thus, frequently administered literacy education pre- and post-tests were coupled with sample quarterly CRCT sample tests. This testing strategy helped to alleviate students’ test anxiety and to assess student progress throughout the year.

The data from tests and other student work samples were filed in individual folders so that assessment information was easily accessible to fourth-grade teachers. The Safety Team worked with the teachers to offer proven instructional strategies before students required referrals to the Student Support Team. At the end of each grading period, the Safety Team met to discuss each student’s progress. Teachers were asked to bring individual student folders to the team meeting as resources so that strategies and suggestions could be made, noted, and implemented.

In addition to the Safety Team meetings that proposed effective teaching strategies across the curriculum, a two-hour, uninterrupted instructional block for language arts and reading was incorporated into the daily schedule for fourth grade. A total of 100 minutes of weekly planning time was scheduled for the fourth grade; flexible scheduling of art, music and classroom guidance allowed for teachers to meet during the school day. All staff development workshops, seminars and presentations for the school were focused on the faculty’s goal to improve school-wide CRCT reading and language arts scores.

**Findings and Discussion**

Informal data collection indicated that the program of professional development for literacy teachers was effective. Informal data gained from observing and listening to students in the classrooms and from reviewing their individual folders illustrated an increase in students’ understanding and enjoyment of literacy activities.

Formal assessment data were compiled from the CRCT scores that measured skills and knowledge required by the state’s content standards for reading and language arts. At the close of academic year 2002-2003, only 67% of fourth-grade students met or exceeded state standards for achievement in reading, and only 77% of fourth grade students met or exceeded state standards for achievement in English/language arts. Therefore, 33% of fourth grade students did not meet academic standards for reading, and 23% of fourth grade students did not

Following the first year of implementation of the professional development program for literacy teachers in academic year 2003-2004, 78% of the fourth grade students met or exceeded academic standards for reading; 85% of fourth grade students met or exceeded academic standards for English/language arts. A total of 21% of fourth grade students did not meet academic standards for reading, and 15% of fourth grade students did not meet academic standards for English/language arts during 2003-2004.

At the close of the second year of implementation of the professional development program for literacy teachers in academic year 2004-2005, 96% of the fourth grade students met or exceeded academic standards for reading; 88% of fourth grade students met or exceeded academic standards for English/language arts. A total of 4% of the fourth grade students did not meet the standards for reading, and 12% of fourth grade students did not meet the standards for English/language arts during 2004-2005.

Therefore during a two-year period from 2002-2003 to 2004-2005, there was an increase of 29% in the number of fourth-grade students who met or exceeded academic standards for reading as measured by the CRCT. There was also an increase of 11% in the number of fourth grade students who met or exceeded academic standards for English/language arts as measured by the CRCT during the two-year period from 2002-2003 to 2004-2005. (Georgia Department of Education, 2005). (See Figures 1 and 2.)

These findings indicate that there was a positive relationship between a program of professional development for teachers and student achievement in literacy education across the curriculum. A sustained program of professional development for literacy education teachers seemed to assist in raising student achievement as measured by both informal and formal assessment measures. The sustained professional development program addressed collaborative efforts among teachers, ongoing formal and informal assessment strategies,
and implementation of successful instructional methods acquired from on-site seminars, presentations, and workshops.

The findings also support the role of teachers as participants in an effective professional development program. Teachers bought into the idea that they could raise student achievement because student data and teacher input guided the professional development plan. The importance of supportive leadership and a positive school culture for implementing positive school change was also noted. Since systemic support is critical for changes over time (Dean, Galvin & Parsley, 2005), the professional development plan for the teachers was intentional and sustained.

There are also implications for pre-service and in-service teacher preparation programs for literacy education. Such programs must focus on the development of effective teaching practice because teachers’ knowledge and practice have been shown to positively impact student learning. Active engagement and support for improved practice in ongoing assessment, collaborative efforts, and successful instructional strategies are needed (James & Pedder, 2006).

In the current climate of accountability, more information is needed on the topic of professional development for literacy teachers. Even though teachers are expected to increase knowledge in their academic areas and effective professional development is a documented route to improving student achievement (Sparks, 2005), there is a need for further empirical research centered on the use of data and assessment measures to inform and implement classroom instruction in elementary literacy education. Further research will also be needed to delineate effective professional development programs conducive to maintaining student achievement in elementary literacy education.

References


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