It is Not Just About Content: Preparing Content Area Teachers to be Literacy Leaders

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Media releases about adolescent literacy are rarely optimistic these days. National reports concur; both the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1999) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA, 2004) found that students' reading skills decrease from elementary to secondary school and that voluntary reading among adolescents also declines. Those who work with adolescents in secondary classrooms recognize that adolescent literacy is in crisis. *Reading Today*, a publication of the International Reading Association, reports that adolescent literacy has been rated by teachers over two years (2006-7) as the "hottest topic" requiring educators' attention.

Despite this concern, few secondary schools have adopted a comprehensive approach to literacy learning across the curriculum. Those secondary teachers who do wish to integrate reading into their instruction struggle to do so. They are ill-prepared to teach literacy strategies that are necessary for students' understanding of content-specific text (RAND, 2002). They lack confidence in their ability to make decisions to facilitate the growth and development of their students as readers (NCTE, 1999).

In the last decade, research on reading (Pearson & Stephens, 1992), staff development (Borko & Putnam, 1998), and teacher change (Richardson & Placier, 2004) has caused reading educators to rethink staff development and to focus on long-term efforts that prioritize the enhancement of teachers' knowledge about reading through critical inquiry into theory and practice. Literacy coaching is one such effort. It has been touted as a "popular and promising solution" and a vehicle for providing "high-quality, ongoing professional development" (Kamil, 2003, p. 27).

Project RAISSE

Project RAISSE, which stands for Reading Assistance Initiative for Secondary School Educators, focuses on site-based content area study groups led by a content area teacher trained as a coach/literacy leader with some roles and responsibilities commensurate with a literacy coach. The goal of Project RAISSE is to enhance students' reading achievement and instruction in high schools, to facilitate teachers' understanding of the reading process as it relates to content area reading, and to help them develop the knowledge base necessary for making informed, effective curricular and instructional decisions about reading in their classrooms. To date, two South Carolina high schools contending with poor student performance have participated in Project RAISSE. Both are located in rural settings with similarly low socio-economic environments.

Framework

Project RAISSE is currently funded by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation. Designed to reach 48 teachers over two years (2006-8) at a total cost of $150,000, the project 's activities include three modules: Literacy Graduate Study, Collegial Study Groups, and Teacher Professional Development.

- Literacy Graduate Study includes 6 hours of graduate study in year one for 8 classroom teacher-leaders. This graduate study is provided by faculty in the Language and Literacy Program at the University of South Carolina (USC). The goal is for the teacher-leaders to build strong foundational knowledge in the teaching of reading and writing. The curriculum, engagements, and projects are negotiated with teacher-leader participants, consistent with the dynamics of a study group.
- Collegial Study Groups established during year two involve having the teacher-leaders facilitate school-based, content area study groups at their school, sharing their literacy learning with colleagues. Teacher-participants receive graduate credit for participating in a content area literacy study group via an annual distance education course facilitated by faculty from the Language and Literacy Program at USC.

- Teacher Professional Development occurs over both years one and two and includes ongoing opportunities for teacher-leaders to attend literacy conferences and best practice seminars. In addition, school-wide professional development in literacy is offered. These opportunities enhance the knowledge base of all teachers and simultaneously provide teacher-leaders with the opportunity to share their literacy learning with colleagues at the local, state, and national levels.

This framework enhances high school culture and provides possibilities for teachers' ongoing collaborative professional learning. As Hargreaves and Fullan (1996) and Louis and Marks (1996) found, professional learning communities and interdisciplinary teams have not been characteristic of high school culture, a culture commonly described as compartmentalized and isolationist. As a tool for growing literacy in high schools, Project RAISSE challenges static views of high school culture and meets the professional needs of content area teachers. The theoretical framework for Project RAISSE is grounded in constructivist and adult learning principles. Project RAISSE was designed to facilitate teachers' understanding of content area reading and to help them to expand their knowledge about adolescent literacy through inquiry into the theory and practice of teaching reading in a secondary context.

What we have Learned: Project Implementation

Project RAISSE just completed its second year of implementation. In addition to research on the participants (Styslinger, Oglan, & Clary, in process), much has been learned about project implementation and teacher change. The project has provided new understandings about implementing long-term, site-based, professional development. The following concepts are the key learnings to come out of the work of Project RAISSE:

The necessity of partnerships between the high school, district, and the university or college that provides teacher preparation

From the beginning, the successful implementation of Project RAISSE depended on effective partnerships between the local high school, the school district, and the state university. The school district benefitted from professional development funded by the project. The university offered the graduate study class but also structured and funded a seminar series that involved university faculty engaged with teacher-leaders.

The importance of cooperation and leadership of the school principal in instilling a vision for literacy

The degree of leadership and enthusiasm engendered by the two participating school principals about the project's possibilities was noticeably inconsistent in the first year. However, the appointment of a new principal to one of the high schools in the second year provided necessary direction for the school's teacher-leaders and brought enhanced commitment to the project.

The necessity of intersecting theory with practice, deconstructing it, and living it to enable teachers to provide explicit instruction and enhance student understanding across content areas

Teachers explicitly stated that they did not like theory but wanted a "showbag" of strategies. One teacher-leader lamented, "Theory isn't what teachers need – teachers need practical ideas." To address their needs, with the understanding that it is ultimately theories that shape teaching practices, experiences were designed in which teacher-leaders engaged in metacognitive strategic reading instruction. This helped them better understand their own strategic processes, and as a consequence, have more insight into the processes used by their students. For example, teacher-leaders completed and administered a Burke Reading Interview (1987) to their students. They also completed a Literacy Profile amended from the SCRI-K-5 (2004) and the Metacognitive Awareness Strategy Inventory (Bennet, 2003).

The application of adult learning principles that allow teachers to learn and support each other's learning

Teacher learning is no different from student learning; both learn from their peers and crave time for talk about possibilities in a supportive environment, followed by opportunities to freely experiment on their own turf. Teacher-leaders, therefore, designed and taught integrated units supported by literacy strategies that linked to their in-class curriculum. During class meetings, teacher-leaders offered strategies they tried with each other, shared their learning from professional development activities, and engaged in personal and professional writing such as a literacy memoir. Several classroom projects intersected literacy theory with classroom

practice including: a reader's profile that described and documented the world of two struggling adolescent readers, a unit plan taught and supported by the creation of a text set, and a working teachers' portfolio submitted at the mid-point and end-point of the course. All of this was designed to position the teacher-leaders to showcase their learning at local conferences and lead study groups in the second year of Project RAISSE.

Accommodation of teachers' schedules

Project RAISSE began with the assumption that teacher-leaders would be time-poor, and this was the case. Therefore, opportunities for reading and reflection were offered during graduate class meeting times. These opportunities and planned in-class engagements allowed teacher-leaders to better understand their students as readers. As one teacher commented, "What has been helpful…is the opportunity for reflection: making me think about what I am doing….My students aren't as bad readers as I thought."

What Have We Learned: Teacher Change

Project RAISSE was grounded in a contemporary understanding of educational change that takes cognizance of both the personal and professional needs of teachers (Hargreaves, 1994). It also draws on practices of self-reflection and self-assessment that afford teacher change and growth in a supportive, collegial setting. Some of the findings from that foundational year cluster around issues identified in the teacher change research.

High school culture and infrastructure

Project RAISSE has provided deeper understanding of high school culture and infrastructure that can help to promote teacher professionalism and facilitate collaboration focused on school-wide literacy as a means of improving student achievement. As Biancarosa and Snow (2004) suggest, what is needed for school change is a combination of instructional and infrastructure improvements that develop a "synergistic relationship" to assist adolescent learners (p. 12).

Teacher investment and motivation

The literature on teacher change shows that mandates and coercion do not work (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1996). Providing teacher-leaders with books and free tuition was not sufficient motivation. Project RAISSE has helped to reveal that teacher-leaders need to find their own rationale for investing in an initiative. Throughout the project, teacher-leaders more often chose to invest when they had time to digest the essence of Project RAISSE and what it could offer them and their school. Involving teacher-leaders in negotiating the class meeting agenda, venue, and engagements played a critical role in gaining their trust and commitment. When teachers take responsibility for their professional development, their engagement and commitment is much stronger (Rosenholtz, 1991; Louis & Miles, 1990).

Teachers' preparedness to implement new ideas and strategies

Despite their best intentions, the teacher-leaders did not always implement what was taught them. More often, they made changes in their classroom practices when they were able to make connections between personal experiences and their classroom practices. They appreciated engagements that linked closely to the classroom curricula and content area standards.

One teacher explained that originally the biggest challenge was "teaching all of my standards in an interesting way." By the end of the first year, she resolved to "work in" the standards through inquiry when "given the opportunity." She believed that an inquiry approach positioned her students well for "the test": "(they were) the most prepared they have ever been for testing."

Teachers' understanding of themselves as change agents, committed and prepared to share new learning with faculty in their home school

Most of the teachers had little understanding of the power and autonomy they could exert in teaching and learning in their classrooms. Several weeks into the graduate study, a young math teacher realized the importance of literacy instruction in her content area as she boldly made changes in her classroom. As she began to reflect on the potential for integrating literacy across content areas, she thought deeply about what it meant to be a literacy leader in her school and was willing to accept the responsibility associated with the role.

Sensitivity to an individual school's needs and building school community

One of the significant outcomes of Project RAISSE has been the building of community among teachers during and beyond the graduate class meetings. Some teachers

shared that they started to visit each other's classes. Others observed that the graduate class engagements became a source of professional conversations focused on common issues about practice.

Midway through the foundational year, for example, three teacher-leaders representative of multiple disciplines in one high school had bonded closely together. These teachers were not acquainted in either a personal or professional capacity prior to the project. One member of this group noted, "We are more connected to one another as a result of RAISSE." He added that Project RAISSE "didn't force us to do anything. It's allowed us or encouraged us, provoked us to collaborate." The collective enthusiasm of these three teachers caught the attention of their principal who recognized their collective leadership potential and assigned them to coordinate the school's upcoming professional development activities designed around the Collegial Study Groups. The principal decided that the entire faculty would participate in the Collegial Study Groups and supplemented grant funds to make it financially possible. To prepare for the second year, these three teachers organized their school study groups under the guidance of a university facilitator, drawing heavily on their new learning as well as learning scaffolded in their foundational year.

The need for structures to sustain the professional development program at the school and district level

The project has involved liaisoning with key people at the school and district level and keeping these stakeholders apprised of developments in Project RAISSE. We expended Project funds to support district professional development that meshed with both school and district priorities pertaining to literacy. Project RAISSE funded the Teachers as Professional Leaders Program which provided the teacher-leaders with opportunities to showcase their new learning at state forums and attend best practice seminars.

Conclusion: Hope and Possibility

Over the course of two years, the teacher-leaders grew their knowledge base about reading and shifted their thinking about their responsibilities toward literacy instruction in their classrooms. As one teacher illuminates, "I always thought it was not my job to teach reading and if a student came to me without the ability to read then it was not my fault and not my concern and certainly not my duty to change… It is indeed my job to teach reading. It is all our jobs." These teacher-leaders have since discovered their potential for literacy leadership in their own classrooms and school-wide through the Collegial Study Groups. In part, their transformation has been individually motivated. However, it is also the result of a conscious decision by these teacher-leaders to reflect on their instructional practice and connect to previous curriculum and literacy experiences and their willingness to embrace and apply new knowledge and research-based practices that will help them successfully teach content literacy.

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