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Tailoring Professional Development to Improve Literacy Instruction in Urban Schools

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To address the need for improving instructional practice in literacy, this paper examines whole school, teacher uptake of a professional development initiative over a four-year project. The study takes place in an urban, PK-6 school in a predominantly Mexican-American community. Measuring and analyzing teacher enactment of a professional development innovation during coaching sessions was the basis for making informed decisions about tailored professional development direction and support. Using an observation instrument to analyze teachers' appropriation levels can reveal teacher learning transitions that provide opportunities to address barriers of understanding development. This study emphasizes the role that individualized and differentiated professional development plays within a community of learners, impacting both in the direction and uptake of whole-school initiatives.

Keywords: professional development, question answer response, instructional practice

Literacy has taken center stage and captured the attention of policy makers and the American public. Given that more than 8 million U.S. students in grades 4-12 struggle to read, write and comprehend adequately (NAEP, 2007), schools are scrambling to improve student learning (Elmore & Rothman, 2000). Despite the last two decades of research in reading, its impact on classroom practice remains largely absent – particularly in diverse, urban settings (Au, 2002; Peterson, 2003). Professional development that capitalizes on research and models of teacher-knowledge development has the capacity to rebuild instructional practice, student learning, and at-risk schools (Bean & Morewood, 2007).

Purpose of the Research

This study examines the professional-development experience of one urban, Latino school community that made a focused commitment to a four-year, professional-development program in comprehension instruction. To explore the impact of extended and tailored professional development on instruction, this research analyzes teacher enactment of the initiative over the span of the project. This paper examines how this data analysis informed decisions about professional development modes and supported 100% of the teaching staff to appropriate the initiative into instructional practice.

Theoretical Framework

Ideas about the nature of learning and cognition overwhelmingly accept that knowledge is under constant construction (Bruner, 1986) and results from a process of social interactions and mediations with groups of people over time (Vygotsky, 1986). In the refinement of established ideas, individuals cycle in quadrants of the Vygotsky Space model—a sequence of interactions and settings (Harré, 1984; Vygotsky, 1986).

Teacher knowledge is a complex process of growth and construction over time. We know that teachers' theoretical knowledge doesn't necessarily correlate with classroom behavior (Richardson, 2003), and solely providing teachers with information about new instructional strategies does not impact their instructional behaviors (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Professional development can support teacher knowledge refinement and improvement of instructional practice when it: (a) offers opportunities for active and authentic learning, (b) is embedded in classroom practice, and (c) fosters collegiality and ongoing support (Gusky, 2000; Borko, 2004). Unfortunately, this shared vision of professional development by key stakeholders is radically different from practice at the school level in many urban districts (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Typical professional development efforts are often reduced to the delivery of district directives, single event workshops and not rigorous enough to have any effect in school reform (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Sparks & Hirsh 2000).

Methodology

Using a sociocultural lens, this case study examines the professional development activities, coaching interactions and instructional uptake data of teachers in the project.

The study took place in a Pre K–6th-grade Chicago Public School on the northwest side of Chicago, where the researcher was the external provider of professional development. In response to a district initiative, Plato School (pseudonym) began a long-term commitment to

professional development and use of Question Answer Relationship (QAR) as a comprehension strategy (Raphael, 1984). As the external professional-development provider/researcher, I used teacher enactment to inform decisions about multi-modal professional development in 7 workshops, 13 literacy coaching sessions per teacher, 2 round table discussions, and 4 peer-modeling classroom opportunities.

QAR was designed to provide a common language and way of thinking about sources of information for answering questions. Teachers and students explore the two primary information sources in QAR language—"In the Book" and "In my Head." In the Book QARs are those questions that use the text as the source of information for answering the question. In My Head QARs are questions whose answer source is primarily the reader's prior experience, knowledge, and understanding.

After establishing the distinction between the two primary sources of information, students move deeper into QAR and learn the differences between the four types of core questions: "Right There," "Think and Search," "Author and You," and "On my Own." Figure 1 below identifies and categorizes each type of question by the information source. The category In the Book contains Right There and Think and Search questions, while the category In My Head includes Author and You and On My Own questions.

Armed with the QAR vocabulary and the understanding of question demands students identify types of questions to help them locate the source of information used to answer the question correctly, and they also become the creator of questions.

First defined by Taffy Raphael (1982) as a reading comprehension strategy, QAR has been established as an effective way to increase student reading comprehension performance (Raphael, 1984; 1986). It can be taught quickly and then used throughout the curriculum and across grade levels in ways that enhance rather than replace planned curriculum. More recently, Raphael and Au (2005) have suggested that QAR can be used as a framework to organize comprehension instruction, rather than simply as a student strategy.

Figure 1: QAR Core Questions

Right There:

GO! The answer is in the text, usually easy to find. The words used to make the question and the answers are found “RIGHT THERE” in the same sentence.

Think and Search:

SLOW DOWN! The answer is in the story, but you need to put together different parts to find it. Words for the answer come from different parts of the text (list, sequence, examples)



Author and

You: STOP! The answer is NOT in the story. You need to think about what you already know and mix it with what you’ve just read. Think like the author or one of the characters.

On My Own:

The answer is not in the story. You can even answer the question without reading the story. You need to use your own experience to answer the question.

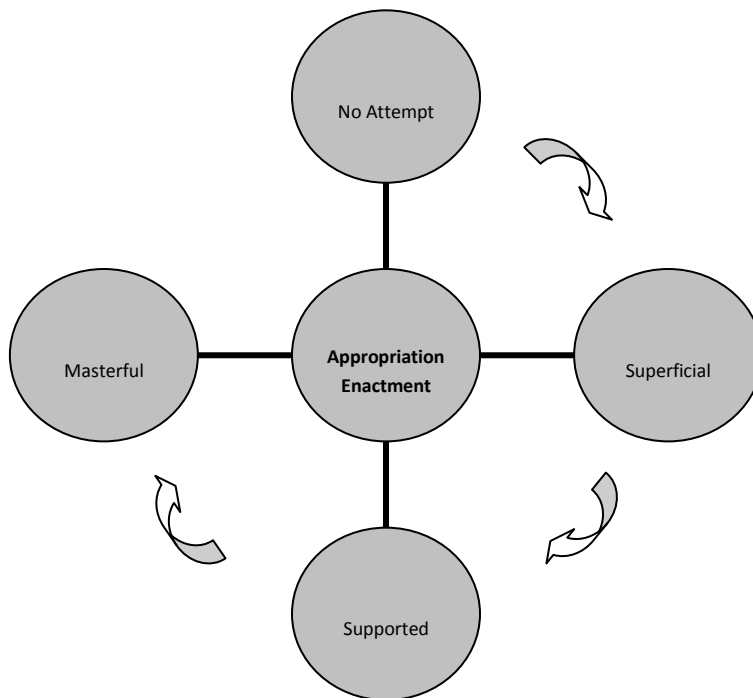
Data Sources

Data were collected in various formats to represent professional development activities, instructional practice, and teacher thinking. Agendas, reflections, observation records, field notes, lesson plans, and audiotapes were collected to represent Plato staff learning experiences and instructional practice. Data documenting teacher understanding were derived from teachers’ journal entries, written communication between teachers and literacy coach, and audiotapes of study group sessions, teacher interviews, and collective teacher meetings.

After chronologically organizing the professional development activities on a timeline chart, observation logs and notes were examined to determine the degree of appropriation enactment demonstrated by teachers within individual coaching sessions. Within the public-social quadrant of appropriation, varying degree patterns were demonstrated by practitioners. These patterns were identified, analyzed, and assigned an ascending point value (1–4), increasing with

movement toward Masterful Appropriation. Figure 2 represents the Teacher Appropriation Enactment Continuum I created to analyze the levels of appropriation demonstrated by Plato teachers. On the continuum, the twelve o'clock position is No Attempt (1 point); representing a lack of observable QAR demonstrated. The three o'clock position is Superficial Appropriation (2 points); representing an inability to appropriate QAR into authentic practice. The six o'clock position is Supported Appropriation (3 points), representing authentic use of QAR with varying degrees of support from the literacy coach. Finally, the nine o'clock position is Masterful Appropriation (4 points), representing independent and authentic use of the initiative.

Figure 2: Appropriation Enactment Continuum



Using the assigned scores for each of the 173 coaching sessions over the first three years, I tallied totals and determined the average teacher-enactment-level score for each day of coaching. The whole staff enactment levels for each coaching date were organized and represented in bar graph format on a timeline chart.

Results

To better understand the nature of teachers' experiences as they worked toward appropriating a new initiative, I looked specifically at the range of behaviors and conversations I had documented during this period. Analyzing all 173 individual coaching sessions, I noted seven sessions during which the teachers made no attempt to use QAR in their classroom practice. I noted 14 coaching sessions during which teachers used QAR superficially, such as reproducing language terms and question patterns we had used in workshops. I noted 20 coaching sessions where teachers appropriated QAR language with a variety of materials in their teaching, but still

required different levels of support from me. I also noted 132 coaching sessions in which teachers independently and authentically appropriated QAR into instructional practice across the curriculum.

Using this appropriation analysis of coaching-session enactment, I created a graph that conveyed the proportion of teachers who were at the “No Attempt,” “Superficial” or “Supported” stages of appropriating QAR to those that were able to independently and masterfully appropriate QAR. Analyzing the graphed data on three years of coaching sessions, I identified the following transitions: (1) when the number of teachers appropriating QAR surpassed the number of teachers who were not; (2) when the ratio of teachers appropriating QAR hit a plateau; and (3) when the proportion of teachers appropriating QAR reached 100%, marking the end of the plateau. I examined the data to understand what had led to each of these key transition points in terms of the kinds of interactive sessions that had occurred.

Transition One

As expected, I observed many teachers who experienced struggles during the first few weeks of coaching sessions. In coaching sessions with struggling teachers, I typically asked teachers to describe how they were using QAR, and if possible, to identify the area(s) that were posing challenges. I characteristically clarified specific questions between question types, offered suggestions, and/or shared planning steps for the next QAR lesson to move them beyond the present obstacle. By the fourth coaching session, the percentage of teachers appropriating QAR had surpassed the percentage of teachers who struggled. This achievement was identified as Transition One.

Transition Two

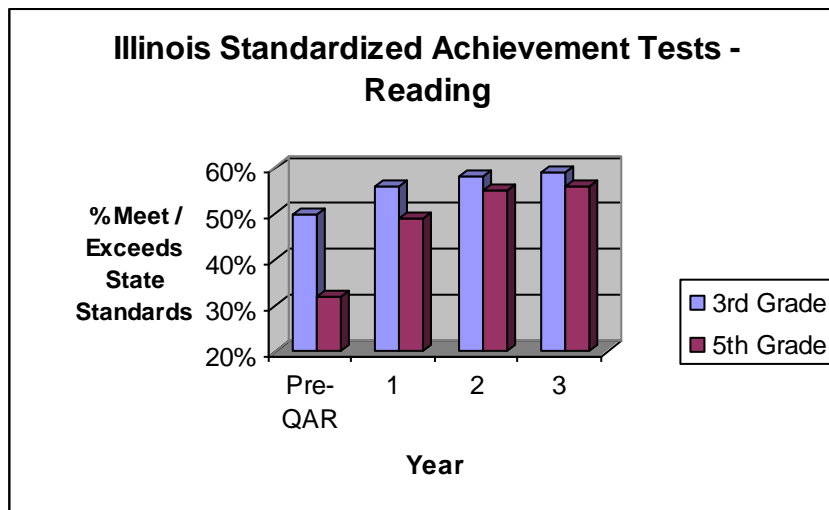
is marked by a plateau of teacher QAR enactment between Coaching Sessions 9 in the first year, and 23 in the third year of the project. To analyze potential causes for the extended halt in progress, I examined the professional-development focus directly preceding this transition. Immediately prior to Transition Two, there was a sharp turn of focus in professional development to accommodate a new district initiative – Extended Response in Reading. Although the principal had advised teachers to continue using QAR to support students’ comprehension in all areas, teacher enactment remained focused on Extended Response activities with students. I frequently recorded “nothing new to report” in most of my observations, also noting that none were experimenting or exploring new ways of implementation. The introduction of new, and often competing, instructional initiatives is not uncommon. This ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ approach to professional development may also contribute to teachers’ reluctance to readily appropriate new practices (Sparks & Hirsh, 2000).

Transition Three

emerged in the fall of Year Three, when purposefully planned professional development constructed a deliberate connection between QAR and the new initiative. Armed with QAR vocabulary and processes, Plato teachers and I analyzed the newer initiative’s activities and recognized similarities between the two initiatives. Effects were immediate—teacher enactment revitalized—leading to the third transition with 100% of the teachers at Plato masterfully appropriating QAR. Similarly, student reading achievement in state standardized measures rose

steadily. Prior to the introduction of the QAR initiative at Plato School, only 32% of the fifth graders were meeting or exceeding state standards in Reading, while 50% of third graders met or exceeded standards. By the end of Year Three, fifth grade achievement had risen to 56% and third grade student achievement reached 59%. Figure 3 below represents the Reading scores on the Illinois Standardized Achievement Tests; pre-QAR through Year Three of the project.

Figure 3: Standardized Achievement Scores: Pre-Project Through Year Three



Scholarly Significance of the Study

This study proposes insights for those responsible for designing and engaging in school professional development and improvement. Drawing on findings has implications for (a) using an observational instrument to inform professional development, (b) fostering coherence and connections in professional development, and (c) supporting teacher development with instructional coaching.

Observational Instrument – Appropriation Enactment Continuum

This work reveals the importance of examining teachers’ enactment levels to determine the most appropriate scaffolds of support and differentiated professional development experiences. In analyzing the teacher enactment demonstrated in classrooms throughout the four-year project, four different levels of appropriation emerged. These levels of appropriation are defined by the degree to which teachers attempted to use the initiative. Level 1 reflects no attempt at all, Level 2 reflects superficial use, Level 3 reflects authentic, but supported use, and Level 4 reflects authentic and independent mastery over the intervention. At various points throughout the project, some teachers demonstrated every level of QAR appropriation enactment.

Using the Appropriation Enactment Continuum as an observation instrument to identify the varying levels of appropriation informed the design of multi-modal professional development for teachers. The use of appropriation-level information from instructional observations to inform professional development supported, strengthened, and pushed teacher practice into the

next level. This is, of course, similar to the commonly embraced practice of differentiated instruction - identify and design customized instruction to meet individual students' needs.

By using information obtained from analyses of appropriation enactment, professional developers and literacy coaches can more effectively tailor professional development to meet the demands of school reform. Such an approach increases the likelihood that teachers will gain a deeper understanding about research-based instruction at each professional-development experience, and student achievement will improve.

Coherence and Connections

Learning theory suggests that new learning must be internalized solidly before something new can be introduced (Bruner, 1986; Schön, 1983). Conventional wisdom suggests that the ability to sustain the implementation of new concepts is fragile until the concepts become part of ongoing practice. If other initiatives are introduced before a concept has been internalized, it is at risk of disappearing in favor of the newer initiatives. Nevertheless, professional-development practices in schools throughout the nation regularly ignore this basic notion of sustainability of critical concepts in favor of introducing the next initiative.

This study provided a window into the negative impact of emphasizing a new initiative before understanding of QAR and its potential to affect classroom practices had been internalized. When teachers do not have sufficient time for new ways of thinking to take hold, they cannot sustain their efforts, and that drastically reduces the chance for the initiative to impact classroom instruction.

In this study, QAR uptake was interrupted when a new, unrelated initiative was introduced. After a connection between QAR and the new initiative had been established, the uptake and enactment resumed in earnest. Deliberately scaffolding unavoidable professional-development interruptions into the ongoing professional development can build coherence instead of creating disruptions.

Instructional Coaching

Findings from the Plato professional-development study indicate extending time for instructional coaching is critical to teacher professional-development uptake in classroom practice. In the project, several teachers began to demonstrate Masterful Appropriation of the QAR within several weeks; however the transformation of QAR as a school-wide coherent language to guide instruction did not begin to emerge until the 26th coaching session in Year Three. Extended instructional coaching was the vehicle by teachers had time and opportunity to receive feedback and reflect on their understanding and uptake development. These conclusions related to instructional coaching provide evidence supporting the use of the coaching design in professional development.

Questions about professional development and instructional coaching are of a critical and timely nature. Student achievement would benefit greatly by increased research-based instructional practice, which is easily accessible by teachers with supportive professional development and instructional coaching. Academic and leadership communities must make greater efforts to foster

teachers' deep understanding of effective instructional practices in ways that are beneficial to both students and teachers.

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