College Readiness for All: Assessing the Impact of English Professional Development on Teaching Practice and Student Learning

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Abstract

This article examines the effects of a statewide effort to reduce college remediation rates by training high school teachers and providing them with an expository reading and writing curriculum. The authors rely on mixed methods, including observations, teacher and student surveys, and test data from urban high schools. Findings suggest that the program, now used in over 250 schools in California, improved student motivation and reading and writing skills and teacher confidence and skills. Findings suggest the benefits of a systematic K-16 partnership to empower urban high school literacy offerings to reduce college remediation rates.

Keywords*:* Teacher Development, College Readiness, Literacy, Student Learning

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Preparing all students for college and career readiness is a relatively new focus for some high schools. In the past, schools have focused on having students meet college eligibility requirements (including Carnegie unit requirements) and helping students with the college admissions process (Besvinick, 1961; Chaney, Burgdorf & Atash, 1997). However, educational leaders and policy-makers are recognizing that large numbers of incoming college students are not "college ready" in literacy or math, despite their meeting course-based eligibility requirements (Conley, 2010; Conley, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Schiller & Muller, 2003). This reality has been a particular problem for schools that serve working class and poor students of color. For example, in a large longitudinal study of course taking records in an urban district, Saunders, Silver and Zarate (2008) found that only 24% of all students on free and reduced lunch graduated with sufficient completion of courses required for entry into California's public university system. In the state of California, while approximately 33% of high school seniors are eligible to enter the California State University (CSU), more than 50% of entering freshmen need remediation in English or writing (http://www.calstate.edu/eap/). Students must pass English and Math Placement tests or can waive out if they meet SAT or AP minimum standards. Reducing the need for remediation has been a California State University (CSU) priority since 1997, and this past year, the Chancellor announced a plan, requiring all students to fulfill remediation before formal matriculation to any California State campus.

Recognizing that waiting until students come to college for remediation is a reactive measure, the CSU designed a major reform effort aimed at increasing students' literacy and math skills before they finish high school. The CSU Early Assessment Program (EAP) is a major collaborative effort by three California agencies, the California State University (CSU), the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California State Board of Education. Its main goals are to increase readiness of California's high school graduates and to strengthen instruction in reading and writing to enable teachers to teach their students the literacy skills they will need in college. To do so, the CSU in partnership with the statewide English task force developed a systemic approach

(The Early Assessment Program) that integrates professional development, curriculum, and teacher-student-text interaction.

The Early Assessment Program (EAP) professional development effort began in 2003 and has led to the training of over 6,000 teachers statewide. This effort has proven to be very successful, according to previous evaluation reports (Hafner and Joseph, 2009, Hafner and Slovacek, 2006). The two professional development programs are Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP), and the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC). Both programs focus on helping teachers develop a stronger understanding of effective strategies to prepare students for college level reading and writing. Typically high school English curricula focus on narrative approaches and do not include expository reading and writing approaches that students need to thrive in college (Conley, 2010). A 10-day effort that is available to any high school teacher, RIAP focuses on research-based teaching strategies and reading and writing across the curriculum. The ERWC professional development is a 5-day program and is a college preparatory course for English teachers using the ERWC curricular materials.

Both programs introduce teachers to the curricular component of the intervention, called ERWC. CSU English faculty and high school teachers and administrators developed the Expository Reading and Writing course, which is a rhetoric-based college preparatory course that emphasizes an in-depth study of expository, analytical, and argumentative writing. The course has been adopted by over 250 schools in California, and is used by most urban districts including Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified, Long Beach Unified, Montebello, Pomona, Salinas and Riverside.

The curriculum is aligned with state standards for 11th and 12th grades in English language arts and is structured around an assignment template that addresses several stages of reading and writing. It engages students in a study of rhetoric and composition, and teaches them strategies to work with any text. The goal of the course is to prepare college bound seniors for the literacy demands of higher education. The students develop

proficiency in expository, analytical and argumentative reading and writing. By the end of the course, students are expected to be able to use rhetorical and analytical strategies independently when reading unfamiliar text and writing in response to them. ERWC has a binder for each semester that includes various modules or units, most of which are non-fiction or op-ed pieces, although two nonfiction books are also included. The topics of the texts, such as fast food, the value of life, and racial profiling engage students. In each module, the binder includes a series of pre-reading, reading, post-reading, pre-writing, and writing activities teachers can use.

All of these materials focus on providing students with rhetorical strategies to help students analyze texts, skills that are critical to their success in college. They help students learn to annotate text, differentiate a first and second reading, recognize the arguments an author makes, and identify the kinds of evidence and appeals that were used. These strategies are especially important for urban youth, who do not always receive the most qualified English teachers in inner city schools. Many of these urban youth enter college needing remediation in reading and writing.

The EAP approach is a model for current federal and national efforts to prepare more students for college and work. In 2009, the federal government announced a plan to link Title I monies to college readiness. In 2009, the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) announced college and career ready standards, which embed EAP beliefs, and in the spring of 2010, they released for public comment core their standards for K-12 English and Mathematics.[1] The English standards highlight the need to prepare students for expository reading and writing (http://www.corestandards.org/).

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of a state-wide English professional development and curriculum effort on teaching practice and on student learning.

[1] This consortium includes 48 states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

The questions this article addresses are:

1. What changes are seen in participating teachers' instructional practices, strategies and knowledge?
2. What are students' beliefs and attitudes regarding the ERWC class and its impact?
3. What evidence of student learning is seen?

Theoretical Framework

Although fourth grade reading achievement on the NAEP has increased from 1971 to 2004 to the highest achievement in 37 years, and Black and Hispanic fourth graders made large gains between 1999 and 2004 on NAEP, the data on 13 and 17 year olds show a stable trend over the last 33 years (Rampey, Dion & Donahue, 2009). National reading data from the 12th grade NAEP over time show that twelfth graders in 2005 scored lower than those in 1992 (from 292 to 286) and declines were seen at all levels of performance since 1992 (US Department of Education, 2005). The percent of 12th graders performing at or above the "proficient" level declined from 40% in 1992 to 35% in 2005. Thus 65% of 12th graders can be considered to be reading below grade level (Loomis & Bourque, 2001). In addition, gaps between white and minority high school students (often 20 points difference or more) remained unchanged over the 1992-2005 timeframe. Gewertz (2009) found that less than one quarter of last school year's seniors who took the ACT scored at the "college ready" level in all four subject areas.

As educators struggle with the concept of college ready versus college eligible, it becomes apparent that there needs to be a stronger alignment between what high schools are teaching and what skills and knowledge universities expect entering students to have (Dounay, 2006, Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Instructors believe there is a mismatch between what students can do at the end of high school and what is expected of them in college. In the past, the high school English curriculum was driven by literature and grammar. Yet, traditional literature classes have not been successful in providing students with skills to enable them to read expository college texts. One educator explains: "high school

English teachers…view themselves as outside the teaching of reading, because the assumption has been that students come to them knowing how to read" (Ericson, 2001, p. 1).

There is a national need for comprehensive policies and organizational structures to foster curricular coordination between high schools and postsecondary institutions (Venezia, Callan, Finny, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005). Recently, a panel of educational researchers drew up a set of recommendations of how best to meet the needs of struggling readers (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The panel recommended the need for direct explicit instruction, motivation and self-directed learning, text-based collaborative learning, diverse texts, intensive writing, ongoing formative assessment, long-term professional development for teachers, the use of teacher teams, and a comprehensive literacy program.

In the area of curriculum reform, recent research points to the fact that site and district administrators are crucial to effective curriculum reform. Elmore (2005) points out that large-scale improvement is a "property of organizations." Elmore's research also suggests that there are only three ways to increase student learning and performance: a) increase the knowledge and skills of teachers; b) change the content of the curriculum and c) alter the relationship of the student to the teacher and the content (Elmore, 2007). This paper will explore major changes in teaching and learning as identified by teachers who have participated in the professional development and now use the ERWC curricular materials.

Methods

Study Design

For the evaluation of the effectiveness of the English professional development initiative, a mixed method design was used. The process and outcome data were collected using a variety of methods, including surveys from teacher/participants and students, teacher observations and interviews, as well as analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

Sample

Evaluators visited five schools in three urban districts that use the ERWC modules in college preparatory courses. The districts, as well as the schools, were chosen based on their ongoing commitment to reform, resulting in a purposive sample. Four out of the five schools used the 12th grade course for seniors and one school used the modules throughout all four grade levels. All schools taught diverse student populations with most serving large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. The sample was made up of twenty-three teachers. 90% of the participating teachers had been through the ERWC training, and some had taken the RIAP training or other professional development. Teachers were observed in the classroom and interviewed. Students of twenty one out of twenty three teachers responded to a short survey, resulting in a collection of 446 surveys.

Measures

Measures included a teacher web survey, a short student survey, an observation rubric, and a teacher interview protocol. Only results from the web survey, student survey, and observation rubric are presented in this paper.

Data Analysis

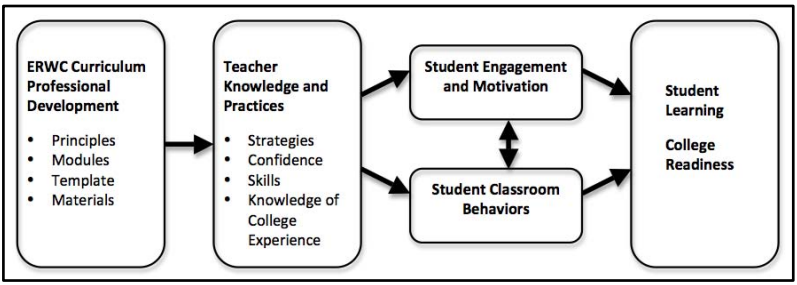
After collecting the data, the interview tapes were transcribed, as were the field and observation notes. The open-ended survey questions were analyzed using coding as well as qualitative software. The teacher web survey was sent to approximately 2,000 participants in a statewide participant database. Two hundred eighty teachers answered the survey, a 14% response rate. The teachers who responded to the statewide survey were those that had taught the ERWC class. All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS.

Results

Only responses from teachers who reported they had

participated in the ERWC training were included in these results. The teacher questionnaire contained six questions with open-ended responses. An analysis of the teacher responses to these survey questions revealed an underlying structure of the effect of the ERWC professional development on teaching practices, student engagement and behavior and student learning, illustrated in the logic model in Figure 1.

Figure 1. LOGIC MODEL: Impact of English Professional Development on Teaching Practices, Student Learning, and College Readiness



The first part of the logic he first part of the logic model includes the curriculum's principles, modules, template and materials. The second part of the logic model includes the impact of the curriculum on teaching practices, strategies, confidence and skills (including skills in using materials). Teachers were asked to describe whether they made any changes (e.g., materials, pedagogical approaches, use of texts, and approach to assessment) as a result of attending the professional development program. Teachers' comments focused on three ways in which the ERWC professional development changed their teaching: using strategies, using ERWC materials (skills gained), and improved self-confidence.

Teachers indicated that the ERWC training had an influence on their teaching of English, especially the strategies for teaching introduced by the workshop. Teachers were very appreciative of the strategies they gained from the workshop, especially the scaffolding technique.

One of the largest group of comments concerned changes in the teaching of reading, mentioned by more than one of every four teachers (26%). Another large group of comments (31.7%) concerned teachers' use of ERWC strategies, either in general or by reference to specific strategies. These comments indicate that the goals and objectives of the ERWC professional development training are being realized.

A sizeable proportion of the teachers (32.9%) mentioned using materials provided by ERWC, including the modules, the template, and non-fiction readings in general. Teachers were asked about their use of the curricular material. A majority (55%) reported just using "a few modules," 17% reported they did not use materials at all or just used the template, and 28% reported high use: at least one semester (or more) of modules used.

Not only were many changes made in their teaching, but also nearly all the changes were stated positively with descriptive words such as "*improved*," "*better*," and "*more*." Teachers expressed confidence and feelings that they had learned new methods and better strategies for teaching as well as how to structure learning. They also appreciated having the ability to provide clear expectations for learning and to hold students accountable for learning. Many of the comments expressed a new appreciation for what students need to succeed in college. One teacher noted: *"I have a clear picture of what students need in order to succeed beyond high school."*

The next part of the logic model addresses the twin aspects of student engagement and motivation and student classroom behavior. It appears that these are two intermediary influences between teaching practices and student learning: a change in student attitudes and a concomitant change in student behavior.

It is rare in the world of research on classroom teaching to encounter such terms as "passion," "excitement," "motivation," "enjoyment," or "engagement" when describing the impacts on students of a professional development program for teachers. When asked what benefits the ERWC course had on their students' reading and writing skills and on their enjoyment of

English, the teacher respondents described common student responses to the ERWC experience as "liking" or "loving" the course. Teachers report that students displayed high interest in the subject matter of the course and had close connections to the subject matter in the ERWC class. Teachers attributed some of the greater student engagement to the greater amount of student buy-into the course.

Teachers who responded to the survey who had participated in the ERWC professional development training reported that students used class time much more efficiently. This was attributed on the one hand to better preparation on the part of students and on the other hand to more participation in higher-level class discussions. Students seemed to be more focused on developing their conversational skills, and in paying more attention to the classroom discussion. Teachers also reported that students spent more time on task, practiced the knowledge and skills more, and as a result were more likely to overcome identified weaknesses. Students also developed their ability to apply concepts and skills to tasks outside the classroom.

The last part of the logic model is student learning and college readiness. It is not often that teachers' comments are filled with qualifiers such as "improved," "better," "higher," and "deeper." However, the teachers who participated in the ERWC professional development training overwhelmingly used such comments on this question concerning their students' learning in general. Teachers also praised their students as being more "college ready," more able to "pass tests," and more able to "meet standards." Other teachers' comments include "More students are passing placement tests," "I think they are better writers, thinkers and conversationalists," and "Benefits include a keener eye for analyzing texts."

Teachers were asked whether they noticed any improvement in their students' reading and writing skills since they started using the materials. Overall, 85% reported improvements. Teachers also noted that their students exhibited improvements in specific skills such as reading, writing, and critical thinking. In particular, students developed better skills at note-taking and synthesis.

Students in ERWC classes had greater understanding of the text and of the author and also exhibited greater rhetorical and analytical skills. The teachers also felt that students became better at writing essays and improved in their usage of grammar and vocabulary. Students were more likely to derive meaning from their texts, to express their own opinions or to make and defend arguments about assigned readings. Teachers reported believing that the curriculum helps students learn specific skills to use with any academic text in college. As one teacher cited: "Understanding argument and annotation and charting, all the techniques that are used in this kind of work…are much more cross-applicable to all of their courses."

Observation Findings

An observational rubric was used to assess the evidence that the eight ERWC principles were present in teachers' classroom teaching. The rubric rating scale ranged from 1= almost never present, 2= evident less than 50% of the time, 3=evident more than 50% of the time and 4 = notably evident. See Table 1 below for principles and mean ratings. The average overall rating was 3.11, which signifies a principle was evident more than 50% of the time. The highest rated criteria included "alignment with English language arts standards, and "integration of reading and writing processes." The lowest rated criterion was "research-based methodologies." Findings indicate that a majority of teachers observed showed fidelity of implementation according to the ERWC principles. A multiple analysis of variance was run on the eight scale scores by school. Schools were found to differ significantly. Criteria that showed the largest significant differences were rhetorical approach, classroom management and flexibility. Two schools showed a lower degree of fidelity of implementation, with mean ratings of 2.65 and 2.23. Interviews with teachers at the schools helped to show a linkage between training, amount of time in continued professional development around literacy, collaboration, and effective implementation of the literacy strategies embedded in the curriculum.

Table 1
ERWC Principles and Average Observation Ratings.

	Principle	Scale	Mean
1.	The integration of interactive reading and writing processes	Integrate	3.21
2.	A rhetorical approach to text fosters critical thinking (template)	Rhetoric	3.08
3.	Materials and themes engage student interest	Engagement	3.04
4.	Classroom activities designed to model and foster successful practices of readers and writers	Activities	3.12
5.	Research-based methodologies with a consistent relationship between theory and practice	Research	2.96
6.	Structure that ensure alignment with English language arts standards	ELA	3.38
7.	Flexibility to allow teacher to respond to students' needs	Flexibility	3.04
8.	Teachers keep students engaged and show classroom management	Management	3.08
	Overall mean		3.11

Student Survey Findings

A total of 446 students responded, for a response rate of 91%. Survey findings show positive improvement as self-reported by the ERWC students. 85% of surveyed students agreed that the course prepared them for college-level work. The course material was reported as being not very challenging by 17.2% of surveyed students, as being somewhat challenging by 59.7% and the other 23% felt very challenged by the course material.

Additionally, students' rated their self confidence in their reading and writing skills favorably; 36% reported improved confidence in reading and 46% reported feeling more self-assured of their writing skills. 65% of students reported learning new

strategies that can be applied in other classes. The most commonly reported strategies learned were better writing strategies, annotation, rhetorical précis, and better reading skills.

School Test Score Findings

Test data from the five participating schools were compiled and analyzed and compared with state-level statistics. Outcome data included school APIs in 2004 and 2008, CST –English language arts (CST-ELA) 11th grade scale mean and percent proficient and above in 2004 and 2008, percent proficient on the English Placement Test (EPT) 2004 and 2008, and graduation rate 2008. The study schools significantly outperformed the state level on the graduation rate (mean of 90% vs. state 80%), on the API gain (mean of 69 point gain vs. 31 point gain by the state), and on the CST-ELA gain in percent proficient (7 percentage point gain vs. 4% gain by the state).

Discussion and Implications

Results of this professional development evaluation are promising and suggest that the program is effective in better preparing students for college literacy. Initial findings show that results come from a sustained and intensive effort to help high schools make the shift from narrative reading and writing to expository reading and writing. Multiple changes were seen in participating teachers' instructional practices, strategies, and knowledge. Both teachers and students report beneficial results for students, and test results also confirm this. Site visit findings confirm that a majority of teachers observed showed fidelity of implementation and a continued investment in the ERWC principles.

The study has some limitations. The first is a low response rate to the teacher web survey of 14%. However, a similar survey has been given statewide to teachers for the past several years, and results in other years were very similar. Another limitation is the fact that the study used purposive sampling of districts and

schools, and thus the results may be more positive than if a random sample of districts and schools had been used.

These professional development findings align with Elmore's three methods of increasing student learning and performance (Elmore, 2007). First, broad evidence has been seen of increased knowledge and skills for teachers in terms of techniques and strategies to increase students' ability to read, analyze, and write expository prose. Second, the English curriculum is a demonstrated improvement over traditional approaches to expository reading and writing, as it is an intentional approach that scaffolds specific ways to analyze expository text through very high interest, current pieces of short expository text. Third, the curriculum changes students' relationship to text and to learning via increased motivation, engagement with text, increased discussion, and preparation in class and deep critical thinking. These findings suggest the benefits of a systematic K-16 partnership to empower urban high school literacy offerings to reduce college remediation rates.

The ongoing challenge is to work with urban, inner-city high schools to ensure that everyone leaving high school is ready for college or career. Because of budget constraints, in California fewer long-term professional development sessions are now being offered. Findings suggest that using these materials as part of the work of English departments can strengthen the outcomes for teachers and students. In addition, empowering teachers and students to better understand what skills colleges expect will enhance access and equity for all students. As the federal government and other national efforts move towards embedding college and career ready English standards in high school, the California model is certainly a model to investigate further. Tracking the benefits of the curriculum and professional development into the college experiences of the high school students is also highly desired.

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