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Consistency and Change: Becoming a Literacy Leader in an Urban School

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ABSTRACT

An effective urban literacy teacher is one who can weather the storm of change. Remaining committed to one's students despite the challenges that an urban environment brings is a key element in facilitating student literacy improvement. In this article we present a case study of one teacher who participated in our three year professional development initiative to improve literacy practices in urban schools. We discuss the qualities that she possessed that helped her to persist through the pains of change to impact student learning, and how these qualities should be fostered in urban school teachers to improve achievement.

Change, as anyone who has tried it knows, is not easy. Like a new exercise routine, change moves us in ways we may not be used to, and until we adjust, it can be painful, arduous, and unpleasant. The period of adjustment to change, once persisted through, leads to immense payoff. Teaching is a profession that requires consistent change to remain grounded in essential theories of teaching and learning, yet open to new research in these areas. Though teachers ground themselves in the consistent nature of their school's vision and mission it is imperative that they continually change and improve their classroom practices to keep a "laser lens" on student learning.

Change, however, is also characteristically inconsistent, and requires a willingness to "give it a go", "take a leap of faith", "jump in with both feet" and often "take the lead" to embrace the new realities it brings. In teaching, as in exercise, the payoff of change can be significant for both students and teachers. Viewing change as a process rather than an event is a critical component to successful sustainability (Rohlfing & Spelman, 2014).

In this article, we will discuss how we developed a three year professional development initiative for first, second, and third grade teachers in one urban elementary school focused on changing literacy practices. We illustrate how change developed within the three grade levels by highlighting the experience of one second grade teacher (Jen) who persisted through the challenges to change her instructional practices. We will discuss the major themes that emerged from our work with Jen in this urban school, and use examples from Jen's classroom to demonstrate effective impact. The central thesis of our work through this professional development experience is that change is a constant presence in teaching, particularly in urban environments. When change is expected and embraced, the positive effects upon teaching and learning can be immense and impactful for any classroom.

Theoretical Perspectives

Approximately 7 million students are currently attending school in urban districts. Teaching this urban student population are over 433,851 urban teachers (Council of the Great City Schools [CGCS], 2012) who often face distinct challenges for their specific urban context (Boutte, 2012; Waddell, 2010). Comparing urban and suburban schools, Gehrke (2005) identified characteristics of urban poor schools that include fewer educational resources, overcrowding, higher turnover of faculty, economic differences in salaries, and a higher percentage of students at risk for academic failure.

How do we provide effective professional development opportunities to support teachers who are committed to urban students faced with these challenges? One challenge facing the urban schools is obtaining and retaining highly effective teachers (Ingersoll, 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Waddell, 2010). Urban districts often struggle with teacher shortages that thus force hiring teachers who are less than fully qualified (Ingersoll, 2011). While districts struggle to hire and retain certified teachers, they are also faced with serving an increasingly high need population. Sixty-four percent of today's urban students are eligible for free or reduced lunch indicating that their household income is at or below the federal income poverty line. Sixty percent of the nation's middle school students did not obtain a proficient score in reading achievement. More specifically for urban districts, only 20% of 8th grade students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch read at a proficient level, in comparison to over 48% of more affluent children (Adolescent Literacy, 2014).

Though urban contexts are constantly challenged by factors such as student poverty, teacher turnover, student mobility, administrative movement, and bombardment of new initiatives, research demonstrates inherent factors that consistently undergird successful learning contexts (Williams,

2012). Haberman (1995) has identified characteristics or “dimensions” of successful urban teachers, which illustrate perspectives and stances that a successful urban teacher takes to successfully help all students (especially those in an urban context) learn.

We suggest that high quality professional development (Dagen & Bean, 2014) focused upon changing classroom practices to center upon best-practice instruction (Morrow, Gambrell & Duke, 2011) while developing teacher leadership skills can systemically impact teacher effectiveness and consequently educational settings. Fisher (2001) offers one example of a positive influence of professional development initiatives on one urban high school. Teachers were immersed in professional development on the use of seven different instructional reading strategies. The overall reading scores of students who were taught these strategies increased over 12% on the annual standardized achievement test. In a meta-analysis examining the impact of professional development on content area teachers’ strategies for literacy instruction, Reed (2009) reports that when professional development responds to teachers’ needs literacy instruction in general and students’ reading skills in particular are impacted in beneficial ways.

The central goal of professional development is the enhancement of students’ learning and academic achievement. However, participating in professional development does not directly lead to increased student achievement (Carlisle and Berebitsky, 2011; Reed, 2009). In as many as 1,300 studies, only 9 offered evidence of acceptable standards as determined by *What Works Clearinghouse* (Reed, 2009). This data illustrates the need for continued inquiry into what constitutes successful literacy professional development. Though extensive and longitudinal data exists documenting the issues and problems that might exist in urban schools, little exists documenting effective professional development that support teachers in implementing literacy based best practices and increasing student achievement and carrying forth a successful, healthy disposition that supports retention of high effective educators.

Our story though small in physical size illustrates a model that could be used by others to support change and to empower urban teachers to lead the way for their students and their colleagues.

Description of the Context

Our professional development initiative was situated in a medium-sized urban elementary school (approximately 450 students) in the Midwest. The school was a PK-8 school building identified as a “neighborhood school,” designating a variety of community-based initiatives to support the school and improve outcomes for students. According to the state report card, 100% of the school population was identified as economically disadvantaged. In addition, the State had awarded the school a School Improvement Grant for a three-year period, which provided numerous financial resources for the school to utilize to accelerate achievement. This grant required a rigorous commitment to intervention, implementation of resources, and accelerating achievement, and was closely monitored by the State. Through this School Improvement Grant, the school partnered with local

universities to provide professional development support in the areas of math and literacy. Our university was asked to provide embedded professional development (Mraz & Kissel, 2014) literacy support over the three-year period to the teachers in first through third grades.

Forest Hill School had experienced a long history of low scores on the State Report Card, placing it in an “academic emergency” situation as designated by state rankings. Due to this ranking, the pressure on the school to raise student achievement was enormous. Teacher and administrator turnover, implementation of new initiatives each year, and the complex backgrounds the students brought with them to school combined to create a challenging environment in which to foster achievement. The participants who comprised our core group changed over the three years of our professional development initiative, illustrating the high degree of teacher turnover in the school.

Jen, who is the focus of this case study, is a mid-career teacher, filling the same role throughout her teaching career as a second grade teacher at the school. Jen was passionate about her role as an urban teacher, and possessed many of the dimensions identified by Haberman (1995) as being critical to successful urban teaching. Our visits to her classroom identified a wit and a compassion for the students in her class that helped them feel as if they were part of a caring, supportive, yet rigorous, learning environment. Jen displayed a commitment not only to her students and to her classroom, but also to her own professional development. This consistency was a rare element to an ever-changing urban school context.

Structure of the Professional Development

Without strong leaders, achieving change is challenging. Within our professional development initiative, we built a structure that would allow the teacher participants to take on leadership roles in the area of literacy in their buildings. The first year of our initiative was focused on whole-group meetings in which teachers were given substitute teachers for their classrooms, allowing them to meet as a group during the school day. We used this time to build community within the group, develop a common language surrounding best practice literacy instruction, using Morrow, Gambrell, and Duke’s (2011) research as an anchor, and orient ourselves toward the goals of the group. These goals during this first year originated in meeting district mandates, and included implementing guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), flexible groups (Opitz & Ford, 2001; Guastello & Lenz, 2005), and assessment to inform instruction. Based on these goals, we developed professional development sessions to facilitate teachers’ developing knowledge and application of these methods, using core readings, field trips, video examples, and modeling of best practices related to these goals. The second year of our initiative included time for whole-group meetings, as well as time for clinical rounds (Del Prete, 1997, 2006; Thompson & Cooner, 2001) in which we observed in teacher’s classrooms, documented effective practices and provided feedback on the implementation of guided reading, flexible groups, and assessment, in keeping with the shared goals of the group. This first level of clinical rounds identified teachers who had implemented the practices we discussed

during the whole group professional development sessions with a high degree of depth and breadth in their classrooms. An important component of each level of the rounds process included the debriefing discussions we had with each teacher regarding what was observed and documented in the emerging model classrooms, and how it could be adapted to meet the needs of other classrooms within the school.

The third year of our initiative intentionally shifted the focus of the work again, focusing now on supporting teachers within their classrooms. We took on the role of participant observer in the classrooms by visiting the teachers' classrooms during their instructional time, observing their use of the best practices we had been discussing over the past two years, and participating in instruction when appropriate by working one-to-one with students, facilitating small groups, or engaging in on-the-spot professional development as teachers asked for feedback and reflected on the implementation of these practices in their classrooms.

Methodology

Over the course of the three-years of this professional development initiative, data were collected and analyzed to determine the predominant themes of change in literacy instructional practices. Data sources included written reflections following professional development sessions, interview transcripts, and classroom observation protocols. Data were collected on an on-going basis throughout the three years, and were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). Emerging themes and patterns were identified and maintained in a code book, which evolved and changed as the data were collected and analyzed. Jen was purposefully selected as the focus of the analysis of our case study as a result of her being the only consistent participant throughout the three years. Jen also demonstrated qualities of the "literacy leader" our work aimed to develop, and embraced the support provided in the final year through the "push-in" focus of our work. The following sections will describe the predominant themes that emerged from analysis of the data.

Three Years of Changing Practices

From our first day at the school, the goal to implement best practice instruction (Morrow, Gambrell, & Duke, 2011) with fidelity and commitment in all classrooms was made clear. For literacy instruction in the primary classrooms, this was defined as the use of guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), flexible groups (Ford & Opitz, 2001; Guastello & Lenz, 2005), and assessment practices to inform instruction. Teachers were accustomed to a variety of different initiatives being presented to them, so their initial reaction to our presentation of "best practices" was tepid. Teachers commented during our first meetings with them that they felt our work would be another one of these initiatives which would come and go quickly without any administrative follow through. It was not until we came back, week after week and year after year that we were able to demonstrate commitment to the implementation of best practice literacy instruction through the embedded professional development model we utilized.

The First Year

As the professional development sessions unfolded over the first few months of our work in the school, teacher "buy-in" and commitment to the implementation of best practice as identified in our work varied. In Jen's example, she was not immune from this initial trepidation towards yet "another new program". She came to each session, despite uncertainty, with new ideas, questions, and goals. In time, she was willing to return to her classroom and give the practices discussed a try. In a reflection at the end of the first year, Jen identified the ways in which her classroom had transformed in that time. (Fig. 1) Within the first year of the initiative, Jen had persevered through the uncertainty present within the group towards this "new program", implemented key changes to her practices, and designed goals to continue to move her practice forward. Her willingness to listen, apply, and reflect on the content presented in the sessions surrounding best practice literacy instruction enabled her to witness the potential these practices had for her instruction and envision ways she could continue to incorporate them in her classroom.

Figure 1
Jen's End of the Year Reflection

	Classroom Changes
Then	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disorganized centers • Centers were time consuming • Children were not focused • Children were not leveled • Centers were not timed correctly
Now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized center rotation • Students are leveled by ability • Children are focused • Centers are timed correctly
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment • Ways to improve comprehension • Align materials to Standards

The Second Year

In the second year of the initiative, the membership of the group changed slightly as teachers moved grade levels and buildings. Jen remained in her second grade position and returned with a renewed enthusiasm to continue to infuse best practice instruction into her classroom. As the general attitude towards the return of our work continued to vary, Jen consistently arrived at the whole group sessions with the disposition of a professional. She kept the goals she had for her instruction at the center, and utilized the professional development time purposefully and strategically to help her achieve them. On one occasion, the substitute teacher for Jen's classroom was the only one available, so none of the other teachers were able to attend the whole group meeting. Jen

came to the meeting room, prepared with specific questions related to assessment, guided reading, and centers about which she wished to receive support.

One of the themes we built our work around was the importance of building a strong community in the classroom. Jen brought this as a preconceived understanding to the group, as she had already held this as an important component to her classroom environment. However, throughout the year, observational data demonstrated that Jen made the building of a strong classroom community through engaging students, committing to them as learners, and utilizing their feedback to drive instruction a central goal. She was observed stating to the students, “You can learn along with us,” (November 14, 2012), and “Why are we doing these phonics sheets?” (March 20, 2013). These were good examples of a strong commitment to working with students as partners in the learning process within a supportive classroom community.

The theme of assessment became a primary goal of our work during the second year, and we spent several whole group sessions discussing methods of classroom assessment practices teachers could use to inform best practice instructional practices. As the imperative to utilize guided reading and small group instruction was advanced in the district, the teachers identified the need to know more about their students’ abilities as readers in order to apply these methods effectively. The Benchmark Literacy Assessment (Fountas & Pinnell, 2007), was utilized as a primary assessment, and time was devoted within our sessions to learning and applying this assessment tool in the classroom.

Assessment was another area in which Jen emerged as a leader. She was highly motivated by the desire to get to know her students as individual readers and writers in a deeper way. With this goal, Jen led the way in implementing literacy assessment practices in her classroom. In the first year, the group visited another school that had been identified as implementing the best practices we discussed. In that school, Jen observed a method for organizing student data, sharing it with students, and celebrating student progress in the classroom. Jen adapted this method for use in her classroom and used it with consistency and fidelity to monitor student growth.

Jen’s emerging role as a literacy leader in the building was further cemented at the end of the second year of our work when she was interviewed by a local television news station, along with the Reading Specialist in the building, regarding the implementation of best practice literacy instruction in support of the Common Core State Standards. The impact of the changes she had made in her instruction became a model for others, both within the school building and beyond, to follow.

The Third Year

The third year of the initiative, focused upon “handing over” the responsibility for implementing and monitoring best practice instructional practices to the school. During the clinical rounds of the second year, we had begun to spend more time in Jen’s room, providing support, guidance, and feedback as she worked to develop the model practices that others could learn from. In the third year, Jen presented a greater sense of confidence in the decisions she was making

regarding her instructional practices. She remained in second grade and was assigned to teach English Language Arts to all of the second graders in the school. We visited her classroom less frequently than we had during the second year, and our visits became more collegial and conversational than instructive as Jen possessed a level of expertise and depth of knowledge that gave us a new purpose in her classroom.

Inspired by the success she had experienced in implementing the best practices, Jen enrolled in a local university’s Reading Endorsement program. Coupled with the grounding she had from her participation in the professional development initiative, enrolling in this program gave her the “hook” she needed to develop a personal theory of best practice literacy instruction. Jen also valued the collegial conversations that had been a part of the professional development sessions, and enthusiastically pursued a partnership with the former Reading Specialist, who had moved into the role of Literacy Coach during this third year. Both of these individuals had a shared vision for the potential of best practice literacy instruction across the school. They formed a partnership around the ideas begun in the professional development meetings that provided support for infusing the initiatives in their own practices and throughout the school.

Discussion

As Jen transformed her instruction through the application of literacy based best practices, her commitment to student learning was clear. Within this urban district, there was an expected emphasis on raising student achievement. Jen pushed beyond the “panic” to strategically focus her curriculum on highly effective strategies and engaging material. In this way, Jen demonstrated the importance of grounded meaningful instruction with authentic materials. This expectation is critical for our urban students who are most in need of highly effective teachers to impact and advance their learning.

However, the reality exists that urban teachers must overcome challenge after challenge. They often work through bureaucratic requirements, changing leadership, and more importantly wrestle to support students with deep and diverse physical, social and emotional needs. This article illustrates one story of our work in urban schools and the factors that can impact and facilitate high quality professional development for urban teachers. After working with Jen for three years, watching her transformation and analyzing the data the following three themes illustrate Jen’s transformative process: independent decision making, personal and professional boundaries and knowledge of best practices.

Independent Decision Making

Jen grew in her ability to determine which bureaucratic elements required her attention and which ones did not. Through her time working with us she moved from a professional stance in which she felt she “had to do it as she was told” to a place in which she was able to identify and select requirements that kept her students as a focus. She became adept at massaging requirements to benefit her students following Haberman’s (1995) understanding that high quality effective practitioners know how to protect

learners and learning above all else and how to “care and feed the bureaucracy” only when necessary. The data from our work with Jen illustrates the critical nature of these dispositions to place student learning above all else when making instructional decisions for successful teachers in urban contexts.

Building on this claim, Fishman, Marx, Best, and Tal (2003) acknowledged the importance of linking professional development with student learning, despite the challenges inherent in attempting to make these elusive connections. They identify two components of student feedback teachers use to evaluate their own effectiveness. Student feedback can be measured from an affective lens, as in students’ engagement and motivation for lessons. Teachers can also measure feedback cognitively, using test scores and knowledge of concepts taught. Though learning and feedback are different measures of teaching effectiveness, this research demonstrates how teachers can use feedback from students to shape beliefs about student progress and the effectiveness of their own instructional decisions. Jen consistently used both affective and cognitive student feedback to judge the effectiveness of her teaching. When she was able to see evidence of her effectiveness reflected in her students through these means, she became further engaged in the professional development we offered. This engagement led to her ability to make decisions about her instruction for the benefit of her students, rather than for the benefit of the bureaucracy.

Personal and Professional Boundaries

Throughout the three years, Jen demonstrated her growing ability to prioritize student learning while maintaining a healthy personal balance. In our first year, Jen struggled to complete all the required paperwork, data analysis, and planning within any reasonable framework of time. As she developed in her ability to identify what bureaucratic elements were essential, she was also able to maintain a personal and professional balance (Haberman, 1996) to engage in her work. In this way we were able to observe her develop a commitment to keeping her emotional and physical stamina while holding fast to her persistence to impact student learning (Haberman, 1995). As Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer (2011) report, the sources of teacher stress in urban environments are wide and varied. Jen’s experience supported this research, which noted the critical need for urban teachers to maintain personal and professional boundaries in the face of the stress of their classroom environments. Urban teachers who do not maintain these boundaries tend to resort to “on-the-job retirement”, in which they stop referring students for support services, participating in professional development, or maintaining basic paperwork and support services for students.

Knowledge of Best Practices

Finally Jen grew in her ability to understand and utilize best practices (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011) and demonstrated her new understandings of the importance of being a lifelong learner. In our first year, Jen expressed her desire to “be told what to do.” We resisted these requests, knowing that teacher autonomy and ownership over the themes discussed in the

professional development sessions were critical (Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003). Jen pushed in her desire and commitment to read and reflect connecting the theory to her practice. At the end of our three years together she had begun her work on a reading endorsement on her teaching license. In addition, the partnership she formed with the literacy specialist in the building helped her to articulate her evolving theories of effective literacy instruction. She also engaged us on each visit in a discussion regarding her theory to practice connections. This illustrates the work of Bean and Morewood (2011) that identified the features of effective professional development that embeds the experiences in teaching so that teachers can make theory to practice connections with the support of colleagues and facilitators.

Implications

It is of utmost importance that we continue to study and support teachers committed to student learning in urban contexts. Our research documents ways in which we were able to support and facilitate Jen as she grew in her abilities to overcome and embrace the environment of her urban context. Future research needs to continue to explore the dimensions of effective urban teachers, specifically the dispositions they possess that allow them to be successful in these challenging environments. The work of the current study confirms this body of knowledge and can impact the ways in which we prepare future urban teachers to meet and exceed the expectations of their contexts. ■

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