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Facilitating Change in School Literacy: From State Initiatives to District Implementation

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Facilitating change in school literacy: From state initiatives to district implementation

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■ More than ever before, the stage is set for reading and language arts curricula to undergo a revolution of major proportions. In particular, the emergence of a whole language philosophy and its unprecedented grass roots popularity have caused educators at all levels to rethink their fundamental perceptions of literacy and how it might be achieved more meaningfully and universally.

In this article, we recount briefly the history of one U.S. state's attempts to invoke large scale changes in language-related instructional curricula. Here we draw primarily upon our experience as cochairs of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Reading Assessment Advisory Committee, positions we have held for the past 4 years. In this capacity, we have observed, participated in, and facilitated the implementation of two related, state-driven literacy initiatives, one dealing with whole language and the other ultimately with strategic reading.

Our unique perspective, however, derives from subsequent consulting with numerous school districts across the state. We have witnessed firsthand a wide array of approaches to implementing the state's initiatives on a local level. From this vantage point, we have attempted to discern patterns among school districts in terms of literacy instruction as well as in factors that seem to be associated with successful change processes. By sharing these perceptions, we hope to assist other educators who are interested in initiating literacy change.

The new literacy and change

Unlike previous periods in which notions resembling whole language were entertained, today a compelling knowledge base exists which is grounded in research conducted over the past 20 years (Winograd & Paris, 1988-89). This knowledge base provides many fresh insights into how students learn language, how they

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use language to learn, and what schools can do to facilitate and enhance those processes across the grades.

As a result, many traditional ways of thinking about what schools should do to raise levels of literacy are being challenged outright (Monson & Pahl, 1991). Specifically, critical attention is being directed at how students are taught to read and write and at how all teachers from preschool through secondary schools and beyond can use reading and writing to accomplish their instructional goals while simultaneously producing truly literate world citizens.

Our knowledge base suggests, for instance, that it is no longer productive to think of reading and writing as separate, isolated activities which are to be taught and practiced as a series of discrete skills that students must master (Gerhard, 1987; Pearson, 1985). Nor can the responsibility for the development and use of reading and writing be relegated just to language arts classes where they are taught as ends in themselves.

Instead, reading and writing must be viewed as complementary, holistic processes both of which actively involve students in using their prior knowledge to construct meaning from text (Lytle & Botel, 1988). Essentially, reading and writing are powerful tools for learning and these processes need to be taught and developed in authentic learning contexts which are both relevant and interesting to students.

This contemporary orientation toward language learning represents a significant departure from past belief systems (Monson & Pahl, 1991). In fact, it requires a radical paradigm shift from a teacher-centered transmission model to a student-centered transactional one. The latter involves a multidimensional context in which learning is concept-based and active and where problem solving is emphasized. With a shift this dramatic in our theory, change at the classroom level tends to be enormously difficult to accomplish.

As Creamer and Creamer (1988) suggest, major innovations require that the individuals involved perceive the change as both necessary and useful and that the changes be compatible with other programs and goals. Moreover, for change to occur, these authors conclude that: (a) adequate personnel and resources must be provided and sustained throughout all planning and implementation phases, (b) top-level leadership must exhibit a firm commitment to the project, (c) project leaders must emerge to champion the cause, and (d) the outcomes of the project must be apparent.

Collectively, these requirements have posed a formidable obstacle to changing the literacy curricula in

Pennsylvania, however intuitively appealing and desirable the changes may be. In the spring of 1988, however, two events occurred within the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) which set the stage for surmounting this obstacle to change.

Developing a state framework and assessment tool

First, PDE's Bureau of Curriculum and Instruction officially endorsed a new framework for curriculum construction entitled *Reading, Writing, and Talking Across the Curriculum* (Lytle & Botel, 1988). This document is an updated version of an older Pennsylvania Comprehensive Reading Plan (PCRP) and thus the newer plan came to be referred to as PCRP II. It was created to provide educators with a synthesis of research findings on language, literacy, and learning and to recommend that teachers provide certain critical reading, writing, speaking, and listening experiences for all students, in all classes, at all grade levels. Essentially, PCRP II promotes the tenets of whole language instruction.

Initially, the PDE held awareness level meetings at various locations around the state for administrators, supervisors, and teachers to inform them about the direction of the PCRP II initiative. A *second phase* involved setting up networks of communication and commitment through centralized facilities known as intermediate units, each of which serves several school districts. In the *third phase*, open school visitations were encouraged and, in a *fourth phase*, follow-up awareness/implementation sessions were held for specific groups of educators such as Chapter 1 teachers and librarians. In addition, teachers from a variety of disciplines were trained to serve as consultants to assist school districts who were implementing PCRP II principles in their instructional program.

Shortly after PCRP II began to be disseminated to the state's educators, it became obvious to PDE's Reading Assessment Advisory Committee that school districts could not easily embrace the recommendations of that framework given the nature of the state's mandatory testing program for Grades 3, 5, and 8.

Whereas PCRP II espoused progressive ideas about language teaching and learning, the state's Testing for Essential Learning and Literacy Skills (TELLS) program assessed students' mastery of highly specific reading skills. Understandably, teachers in the state felt compelled to do what was necessary to prepare students to pass the TELLs test, and therefore, reading instruction tended to be skill-driven and fragmented.

Recognizing the strong influence that the TELLs

test exerted on local reading instruction and following the lead of pioneer states like Michigan (Wixson, Peters, Weber, & Roeber, 1987) and Illinois (ISBE, 1988), the Reading Assessment Advisory Committee decided to replace the skills-based test. In its stead, a new version was created to determine if students could read meaningful, connected text with understanding.

Instead of containing short, decontextualized passages, the new test includes full-length, authentic narrative and expository selections that resemble the types of materials students are likely to encounter in normal reading situations. The test items require higher level thinking processes and are framed around key structural elements and ideas in the texts. In addition, prior knowledge questions are asked before each selection is read and a series of reading strategy items follow each selection. A final part of the assessment asks students about their school- and home-based reading habits and attitudes.

To inform the state's teachers about the changes in the test, the PDE released news items and mailed brochures to all teachers. A *Reading Assessment Handbook* (Miller, 1989) containing a detailed description of the new test format was distributed to all schools in the state. Ramifications of the new test for teachers were addressed in *The Reading Instructional Handbook* (Moore et al., 1989). This document described the rationale for the test and its relationship to the PCRIP II framework, and provided detailed descriptions of instructional procedures and techniques for teachers to use in their classrooms. All school districts in the state received copies of the handbook.

Ongoing support

Workshops were offered by Reading Assessment Advisory Committee members to educate teachers in how to use the recommended procedures and techniques. The workshops focused on direct instruction, metacognitive reading strategies, and text structure. They also focused on using authentic reading materials in order to establish continuity across the content areas. Most districts in the state arranged for these workshops to be conducted for their staff.

At present, the Department of Education remains active in attempting to enhance and refine PCRIP II and TELLS initiatives through workshops, consultant directories, school visitation opportunities, electronic communication networks, and the dissemination of working papers. Pennsylvania is also moving toward adopting outcomes-based education in all areas of the curriculum. This will undoubtedly expand and accelerate literacy instructional changes.

The result of this ongoing commitment is that real changes have occurred in the way reading is viewed and taught across the state. For example, most of Pennsylvania's school districts seem to have adopted to some extent the fundamental tenets of whole language not only by modifying their basic curricula accordingly, but also by instituting innovative organizational models at elementary through senior high school levels (e.g., peer teaching, reading and writing workshops, and thematic content area instruction).

In the area of teacher training, numerous inservice, professional development, and continuing education courses and workshops now focus on whole language, strategic reading, and a host of related topics including cooperative learning, process writing, parent involvement, and children's and adolescents' literature. Likewise, both undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs have begun to reflect the newer literacy orientation expressed in PCRIP II. Perhaps equally telling, whole language sessions have dominated the program at the annual state reading conference.

The lesson we have learned is that instruction can be driven by establishing a functional match between a well supported pedagogical framework and an accompanying statewide assessment instrument. At the same time, we must report that there is not universal acceptance of the recommended curricular changes.

There are many reasons why districts, schools, and teachers balk at various aspects of whole language instruction. Legitimate questions arise frequently about instructional activities, flexible grouping procedures, skill accountability, assessment, and grading. In this sense, our state must contend with the same concerns, fears, and misunderstandings that impede any significant instructional change.

Patterns among districts, schools, and teachers

From working with many school districts, our sense is that they appear to vary widely in terms of their awareness, commitment, and level of implementation. District patterns are difficult to discern because each district has approached changing its literacy curriculum in its own way. Some districts are still only talking about making small changes while others are intent on becoming extremely whole language oriented.

Interestingly, even schools within the same district may be operating under very different philosophies and approaches. Likewise, teachers within the same schools and in the same grade levels can also be widely disparate in their posture toward literacy instruction, a finding which is reported by Ridley (1990)

and Nelson, Pryor, and Church (1990). Obviously, a major concern in these situations is for the student who receives mixed signals in moving from one teacher, grade, school, or level to the next.

Most districts seem to have adopted a relatively moderate position and are proceeding cautiously with their change efforts. They seem to prefer finding ways to reconcile the apparent mismatch between principles of whole language instruction and their existing traditional curriculum. These districts seek to establish viable compromises between the newer instructional themes and existing materials, approaches, and organizational schemes.

Although this model is more conservative, it does allow district personnel to grow into their new roles gradually and more comfortably. Not surprisingly, many of these districts are gravitating to basal reader systems that embrace more of the principles of whole language instruction and to content area textbooks that provide guidance in strategic reading and studying behaviors.

Even among the districts that seek these compromise positions, however, the variation in awareness, commitment, and implementation is still considerable.

Factors in successful literacy change

Our experience shows that there are a number of common denominators among the districts that have effectively planned and implemented instructional change in reading and language arts programs. The factors that contribute to literacy change include:

A districtwide commitment to the initiative. This means that agreement exists among teachers and administrators of all grade levels, preschool through senior high, on the goals of the literacy curriculum. Some districts have addressed the changes somewhat superficially and have not truly committed themselves. In the most successful districts, elementary and secondary teachers and administrators jointly discuss and plan the content, format, sequence, and timeline for literacy change.

Administrative support. Central administration must be fully committed to the project and must allocate ample resources for staff development including released time, reimbursement for attending conferences, and the establishment of local workshops and inservice programs. Staff development is a major way to effect change in our schools, and it is at the heart of the various attempts to improve all aspects in education today (Joyce, 1990). One inservice program for the entire district seems, from our perspective, to accomplish very little. Also, beginning and veteran teachers should be encouraged and sustained in pur-

suing relevant graduate coursework.

In short, curricular change tends to be expensive, and districts whose philosophical and fiscal support falls short of the mark will not realize truly progressive programming.

Observation opportunities and support systems. Hearing about changes in an inservice program is only the first step for educators. In successful staff development, teachers and administrators have the opportunity to observe successful lessons.

To facilitate observation, curriculum coordinators, principals, and supervisors should consider developing a library of model lessons on videotape for viewing. They can identify existing model lessons that are available commercially, ask to videotape lessons conducted in whole language classrooms from other districts, or record local teachers within the school district who have a demonstrated facility with this brand of instruction.

Similarly, staff should be given freedom to visit functional program sites to observe classrooms firsthand both within and beyond their school district and to speak directly with teachers and administrators who have effectively made the transition to a whole language curriculum. After observing demonstration lessons, peer coaching is the logical next step (Showers, 1985).

In fact, the use of peer support teams, mentor and lead teacher models, on-site and off-site consultant resources, and telephone hotlines are extremely useful provisions. However, we have seen very few districts that have reached this level in their staff development in implementing the state's initiatives.

Reasonable time frames. Change cannot be merely mandated. Teachers must have sufficient time to consider the new philosophy, to understand it, and to reconcile it against the backdrop of their own experience. Moreover, implementation of such a markedly different approach requires substantial lead time for planning and organizing instruction and assessment.

Establishment of a professional library. Professional books, research reports, methods texts, monographs, journals, and other informational materials in the area of literacy should be available for staff to examine. These works should address the philosophy, techniques, and management of whole language instruction. Once again, curriculum coordinators, principals, and supervisors can take an active role in assembling these materials. Although establishing such a library is not difficult, only a handful of districts appear to have done so.

Abundant instructional resources. Even highly trained staff cannot create a functional, literate environment without a plentiful supply of appropriate in-

structional resources. Teachers must be given latitude to assemble all kinds of authentic reading and writing materials not only before a whole language program gets underway but also on a continuing basis. Tradebooks, magazines, computer software, functional and survival text, and resource books all have a place in a whole language classroom.

School librarians can play a critical role in identifying and assembling children's and adolescents' literature for teachers or in helping teachers find the materials themselves. Librarians' role will become increasingly valuable as instruction becomes more thematic both in elementary and secondary schools.

A realistic number of simultaneous initiatives. Successful districts seem to limit the number of ongoing curriculum projects at any one time. Teachers are often hardpressed to keep pace with their regular regimen let alone being expected to juggle several new initiatives. New trends of one kind or another literally abound in education and districts must be selective about which ones to implement.

Parent communication. Parents can often be the hardest group of people to convince that educational change is appropriate. Districts must apprise parents of the changes in the philosophy of instruction, in the curriculum, in the organizational structure of the school, and in the grade reporting system. For example, some of the districts we have been working with have been examining the way they evaluate students' progress and the way that they report it to parents. In some instances, they are completely revising their report card format.

All of these changes will need to be communicated to parents before they are implemented. Newsletters, flyers, and brochures can be sent home with students and arrangements should be made for announcements and articles to appear in local newspapers.

To reach all members of the community, especially those parents who are functionally illiterate or illiterate, a few districts are conducting open meetings and local radio and television forums.

A final word

School districts that have been most successful in implementing change in literacy curricula are marked not only by the above-mentioned factors but also by honesty and teamwork. We have found that legitimate curriculum change requires extensive cooperation and communication among teachers, principals, supervisors, coordinators, and central office personnel. In particular, teacher input must be genuinely sought, valued, and considered both before and during actual implementation if curricular initiatives are to be worth-

while and enduring. In districts where teachers are treated as professionals and where their knowledge of learning and children is respected and integrated into the curriculum plan, meaningful change can and will happen.

Like Pajak and Glickman (1989), we have come to believe that academic achievement is tied directly to an ongoing dialogue about improving the quality of instruction, a viable infrastructure of supervisory support, and the emergence of key change agents within the district. Whether the primary change agents are central office supervisors, lead teachers, department and grade-level heads, principals, or teams of teachers, the key ingredients for change in literacy curricula are awareness, leadership, support, and commitment.

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