

Implementing a Schoolwide Literacy Framework: Improving Achievement in an Urban Elementary School

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A literacy framework implemented schoolwide can provide teachers with an opportunity to focus their teaching rather than script it, resulting in students who read, write, and think at impressive levels.

As a profession, in the United States we have learned a great deal about quality literacy instruction. We have learned from expert teachers (e.g., Allington & Johnston, 2002; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001) and from strategies that work (e.g., Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). We have learned to differentiate instruction (e.g., Tomlinson, 1999) and plan backward with diverse learners in mind (e.g., Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) focused our attention on the components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—and the RAND study on reading comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002) reminded us of the goals for teaching reading.

Yes, we are flush with information about teaching students to read and write well. The challenge, it seems, is putting all of this information into practice at the whole-school level. While there are exceptional and highly skilled teachers at every school, we are less sure about what it takes to ensure that all teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to ensure that their students develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of literacy.

In other words, our profession seems stuck with the age-old problem of going to scale. Innovations are

everywhere, but few are implemented consistently across grades and teachers. The risk in making this comment is that someone will attempt to legislate, mandate, or prescribe curriculum and instruction in an attempt to ensure that evidence-based instructional practices reach every classroom. But, as Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) noted, we do not need more prescriptive, scripted curriculum or instruction. Instead, we need precision in our teaching. This precision comes when teachers have an extensive knowledge base and make expert decisions, based on data, about the instructional needs of their students. The question is, how to ensure this happens.

This article profiles an underperforming school that beat the odds. Over several years, the teachers at this school clarified their understandings of, and core beliefs about, literacy. They developed an instructional framework from which to teach students to read and write, and they focused their professional development, via learning communities, to ensure that together they had a deep understanding of literacy teaching and learning.

Rosa Parks Community School

In the midcity area of San Diego, California, Rosa Parks Elementary School educates between 1,450–1,500 students per year. All of these children (100%) qualify for free lunch. During the 2005–2006 school year, 78% of the students were Hispanic, 11% were Asian-Pacific Islander, 8% were African American, and 3% were white or other. Rosa Parks is situated in a community that is recognized as the highest crime area of San Diego, the poorest, and the area most in need of health and social services.

Table 1
Changes in Academic Performance Index (API) Achievement in Elementary Schools

School	1999	2005	Growth
Adams Elementary	543	688	+145
Central Elementary	611	686	+75
Edison Elementary	489	672	+183
Euclid Elementary	496	681	+185
Franklin Elementary	643	749	+106
Hamilton Elementary	529	696	+167
Rosa Parks Elementary	455	746	+291

Note. From the California Department of Education (www.cde.ca.gov). These seven schools are in the same geographic area of San Diego.

In 1999, the California Department of Education calculated an Academic Performance Index (API) for each school in the state. The API is a scale score of 200 to 1,000 that annually measures the academic performance and progress of individual schools. The state has set 800 as the API score that schools should strive to meet. As noted in Table 1, Rosa Parks was the lowest performing school in the area. The schools listed in Table 1 are in the same geographic area and constitute a feeder pattern for the same high school. While every school in this geographic area of San Diego made progress, Rosa Parks’s change was exceptional and noteworthy. While educating nearly 1,500 students, 72% of whom were English-language learners, Rosa Parks climbed within reach of the state target of 800 and posted an impressive 291-point gain. What was most important was that Rosa Parks exceeded the state API growth targets for each subgroup and the whole school each year between 1999 and 2005.

Table 2 contains a listing of the percentage of students who scored proficient or advanced on the English language arts California Standards Test in 2000 compared with 2005. The third-grade scores were depressed across the region, which may have to do with specific test items or a need within the school. Regardless, the achievement changes at Rosa Parks Elementary School are worth noting. At Rosa Parks, the teachers’ discussions about their core beliefs about literacy, the literacy instructional framework developed with and for the teachers, and the professional development provided to all members of the learning community have played a critical role in continued growth.

Core Beliefs About Literacy

When the 1999 API scores were released, the Rosa Parks principal challenged the school to respond. She asked the governance committee (an elected site-based management team) to allocate funds so that a task force could create a multiyear schoolwide literacy plan. The governance committee supported this recommendation and charged the literacy task force with “developing a plan that can be implemented across grades, program types, and philosophical ideologies.” During the first meetings, the elected literacy task force clarified their beliefs about literacy instruction. Over several meetings that started in the spring and lasted through the summer of 2000, the group of teachers, parents, and administrators agreed on the following:

- *Learning is social.* As one of the teachers noted, “Learning takes place when humans interact with one another. That means kids with kids, kids with teachers, teachers with teachers, teachers with parents, parents with kids—everything related to learning is social.” The task force easily agreed with this foundational belief and engaged in discussions about the implications this had on literacy learning, including the recognition of culture and family experiences on learning. The group also noted that learning occurs through participation in a group and as such our classrooms needed to provide significant amounts of time for students to meet in groups with their peers. As Driscoll (2000) noted, learning is “a persisting change in human performance or performance potential...[that] must come about as a result of the learner’s experience and interaction with the world” (p. 11).

Table 2
Percentage of Students Proficient or Advanced
on the California Standards Test

Grade	2000	2005	Growth
2	9%	32%	+23%
3	12%	18%	+6%
4	15%	36%	+21%
5	10%	36%	+26%

Note. From the California Department of Education (www.cde.ca.gov).

- *Conversations are critical for learning.* Consistent with the core belief that learning is social, the committee focused on the role that conversations play in learning. At the most basic level, it acknowledged that teaching can be seen as an extended conversation between children and their teacher. As one member said, “If we aren’t in conversations all day long, they’ll never learn to read or write. The oral language of conversation builds their understanding and need for print.” The task force also noted that consideration of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1962/1986) in peer talk was an effective instructional element, in part, because of the conversations the “more knowledgeable other” has with the learner. Therefore, this school with so many English-language learners would commit to prioritizing opportunities for peer talk across language proficiencies, academic knowledge, and even grade level. Beyond that, the discussion focused on the conversations that children have with one another as part of their social interactions. With instruction and practice, students should develop more sophisticated conversations and question the world around them. The idea of creating conversations is consistent with the ideas of accountable talk (e.g., www.instituteforlearning.org/develop.html) and critical literacy (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), both of which were important considerations for the task force. As a peer coach noted, “It’s not just talk about anything, it’s talk that is focused and based on an agreed upon purpose. We have to help our students understand that.”
- *Reading, writing, and oral language instruction must be integrated.* The third core belief agreed upon by the task force focused on the need to integrate the language arts. As one of the team members commented, “Enough already. Reading, writing, speak-

ing, listening—they’re all connected. We teach them like they’re separate and then wonder why our kids aren’t learning. You have to wonder why we would have a readers’ workshop with no writing.” The research on the relationship between reading and writing suggests that these two processes are complementary but that each has unique qualities (e.g., Eisterhold, 1990; Shanahan, 1984). As the discussion on this core belief continued, one of the task force members commented, “Our kids need more than [reading]. Our English learners especially need oral language. And writing is the power to share your voice with the world. We have to make sure that we focus on all three.”

- *Learners require a gradual increase in responsibility.* “I’m sick to death of all of the ‘independent work’ that’s really just a pile of worksheets. Kids don’t learn from that. We need to really teach them through modeling and scaffolding.” These comments from an administrator resulted in several hours of debate about teaching and learning and the best ways to accomplish it. The issue of modeling and scaffolding could not be resolved, and the task force agreed to meet for a day and focus on this topic alone. As a follow-up to the conversation, a copy of an article on a gradual release of responsibility model for teaching comprehension (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) was provided to each committee member. The gradual release of responsibility model posits that the teacher moves from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task...to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211).

Developing an Instructional Framework

In addition to identifying core beliefs, the literacy task force decided to develop an instructional framework that could guide teachers’ instructional decisions. As a peer coach noted, “It’s all about strategies here. Teachers go to conferences or staff development sessions and come back with another strategy to add to their list. There isn’t a cohesive plan for literacy development.” A literacy resource teacher explained that it was like going to a buffet: “Your plate’s already full, but you get another plate and pile more stuff on. There’s no organization or system, just a bunch of strategies. That makes conversations between teachers hard as they

don't have a common language." The development of the instructional framework found in Table 3 required three years of work and included extensive teacher input to the task force as well as professional development for the entire faculty. A summary of the development process of the literacy framework is presented here.

The literacy task force decided to focus first on teacher modeling. They knew that teachers needed to provide systematic, purposeful, and direct instruction in skills and strategies if students were to make progress. As noted by Pearson (2002),

Strategy instruction was another casualty [of whole language].... Direct advice from teachers about how to summarize what one has read, how to use text structure to infer relations among ideas, how to distinguish fact from opinion, how to determine the central thread of a story...were virtually nonexistent in the [whole language/literature-based] basals. (p. 455)

The task force recognized that many teachers were already doing read-alouds and agreed that this could be expanded to include think-alouds, shared reading, and writing instruction (Davey, 1983; Fearn & Farnan, 2001; Holdaway, 1979). Consistent with the gradual release of responsibility, the task force identified specific instructional strategies that allowed the teacher to model and provide direct instruction in writing as well. These strategies included Language Experience Approach, interactive writing, and write-alouds (Dixon & Nessel, 1983; McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). Given the number of English-language learners at the school, the task force also added an instructional focus on oral language and provided teachers with information about storytelling, think-pair-share, and language charts such as K-W-L (Dillingham, 2005; Ogle, 1986; Palmer, Harshbarger, & Koch, 2001).

The discussion of teacher modeling led to a discussion of content: What should be taught? The task force struggled with this and debated a developmental approach versus a skills-based approach versus a standards-based approach. Over numerous hours and meetings, the task force agreed that grade-level content standards should guide teachers' curricular decisions. While this may seem obvious in 2007, it was not common in 2000 when these conversations first began. These discussions were powerful for task force members who were parents. One parent later remarked, "At first I was confused about what standards

really meant. After a while, we figured that if we found it confusing, so did other [parents]. I started working with the parent center to do workshops for families on standards."

Focusing on grade-level content standards as the de facto curriculum did several things. First, it changed expectations. The task force had essentially decided that every student should, and could, meet grade-level expectations. Second, it allowed teachers to focus on more than reading instruction. The content standards include writing and oral language development. Unfortunately, in many places these other language arts are neglected in an effort to increase reading scores. Third, it allowed for common assessment measures to be created. If every teacher at a specific grade level were focused on specific content standards, then students could be assessed and interventions could be developed. And, finally, a focus on grade-level standards allowed for the related services staff (e.g., speech language therapist), literacy resource teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and the parent volunteers to gain an understanding of the curriculum and expectations for students.

The second area that the task force members focused on was independent learning. They noted that teacher modeling needed to transfer to students' independent reading, writing, speaking, and listening. As such, the task force members identified a number of instructional approaches and classroom structures that would facilitate students' independent learning, such as silent sustained reading, independent reading, journal writing, note-taking, public speaking, and so on (Ivey, 2002; Laframboise & Klesius, 1993; Pilgreen, 2000). However, they recognized that independent learning was also insufficient to dramatically change student achievement.

The task force then set out to close the gap between teacher modeling and independent learning. The most obvious place to start was small-group guided instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). There is a significant body of evidence suggesting that whole-class reading instruction is insufficient and that students need to participate in small, needs-based groups (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1985; Foorman

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Table 3
Literacy Framework

	Reading	Writing	Oral language
Components and instructional categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonemic awareness • Phonics • Cueing systems (graphophonic, semantic, syntactic, pragmatic) • Concepts about print • Fluency • Reading vocabulary • Text structure (fiction and nonfiction) • Comprehension • Metacognitive strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing processes • Genres • Conventions • Craft • Sentencing • Paragraphing • Spelling • Fluency • Writing vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking vocabulary • Accountable talk (e.g., questioning, elaborating, extending) • Language registers • Habits of talk (speaking and listening) • Prosody
Direct instruction/ modeling (focus lessons)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared reading • Read-alouds • Think-alouds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared writing • Language Experience Approach • Write-alouds • Interactive writing • Power writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling • Think-pair-share • K-W-L charts • Language charts
Guided instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided reading • Responding to text • Comprehension strategy instruction • Conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided writing • Generative writing • Writing models • Conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language modeling • Presentation skills (i.e., formal oral language) • Discussion groups • Oral cloze
Collaborative learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature circles • Book clubs • Reciprocal teaching • Partner reading • Collaborative strategic reading • Word study center • Content reading center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressive writing • Paired writing • Group composition • Peer response to writing • Author's chair • Content writing center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion webs • ReQuest • Table topics • Listening stations • Oral composition • Group retellings • Cooperative learning • Readers Theatre
Independent practice with conferring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading for pleasure and lifelong learning • Independent reading • Sustained silent reading • Note-making • Participating in reading conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily writing (e.g., journals, essays, short stories, poetry) • RAFT writing • Participating in writing conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following directions • Extemporaneous and prepared speeches • Note-taking
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal reading inventories • Phonemic awareness • Letter identification • Sight word lists • Running records • Vocabulary • Attitude measures • Comprehension measures • Cloze procedure • Timed reading • Metacognitive strategy index • Self-assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubrics (holistic, analytic, diagnostic) • Spelling inventories • Attitude measures • Dictation measures • Fluency graphs • Self-assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher listening and monitoring • Student oral language observation matrix (SOLOM) • Speaking checklists • Interviews • Retelling • Self-assessments

& Torgesen, 2001; Tyner, 2004). The combination of small-group and effective classroom instruction results in higher levels of achievement for students who struggle with literacy (Mathes et al., 2005). However, the task force was concerned that permanent ability grouping would harm students' self-esteem and lower their motivation to read (Allington, 1980; Flood, Lapp, Flood, & Nagel, 1992; Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum, 2001). As Paratore and Indrisano (2003) noted, "students placed in low-achieving [small] groups often experience low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward reading and learning" (p. 566). Pressley et al. (2001) explained,

[Exemplary first-grade] teachers did not report using grouping by achievement.... Likewise, these teachers did not report relying on whole-class basal reader lessons but, instead, reported using a mixture of large- and small-group instructional plans as well as side-by-side reading and writing opportunities.... Instead of round-robin reading...these teachers reported flexible use of grouping and variety in the kinds of reading done by students." (p. 39)

This resonated with some parent task force members as well, who recounted past experiences with their own children who were in the "low" reading group year after year. As one parent said, "My boy talks always about him not being able to read. He says he is in low group, but he never gets better at his reading."

As a result, the task force focused on flexible grouping patterns and recommended that students work in mixed-ability groups when they were not with the teacher in guided instruction. The Center Activity Rotation System (Lapp, Flood, & Goss, 2000) is one example of flexible grouping. With this approach, heterogeneously grouped learners worked together in literacy centers while the teacher called four or five children from different centers to participate in homogeneously grouped teacher-directed instruction. This allowed teachers to implement the task force's recommendation that guided reading and writing groups be based on student need, noting that individual students may have needs consistent with more than one group. This modification to the most traditional implementation of guided reading ensures that students see themselves as developing readers and writers and that the teacher has several opportunities to provide "just right" instruction based on identified needs.

The final component of the literacy framework centered on what to do with the students while they

were not with the teacher for guided instruction. In most classrooms at Rosa Parks in 1999, students were engaged in independent work while the teacher met with small groups. The committee was well aware of the work of Rosenshine (1983) who reviewed the evidence on independent work and concluded that the larger the proportion of time students spend working alone, the less they learn. While some independent work is necessary and helpful in the gradual release of responsibility model, students were spending too much time working alone. In addition to the potentially harmful effects noted by Rosenshine, this was inconsistent with one of the core beliefs agreed to by the school—namely, that learning is social. In response, the task force began work on a component of the literacy framework called "collaborative learning." This started with literacy learning centers (Diller, 2003) and was soon expanded to include a number of interactive classroom structures such as reciprocal teaching, literature circles, peer-response groups, partner reading, Readers Theatre, and discussion groups (Bomer & Laman, 2004; Daniels, 2001; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Paratore & McCormack, 1997; Roser & Martinez, 1995).

Going to Scale: A Whole-School Commitment

While the schoolwide literacy plan evolved over several years, equal attention was paid to gaining support among the staff and providing responsive professional development that would move beyond the practices of individual teachers. Elected task force members from each grade level were responsible for keeping their colleagues informed of progress and frequently sought feedback from them regarding aspects of literacy instruction. This feedback loop promoted buy-in among the staff as the plan was being developed.

As we have noted, professional development was designed and delivered to ensure that every teacher in the school understood the core beliefs about literacy and the instructional framework. Again, the goal was precision teaching rather than prescriptive curriculum and instruction. The principal made an interesting comment about expectations during a school walk-through. She said,

If the teacher is up front and all of the students are in a large group, I expect to see one of the instructional strategies from the framework being used—shared read-

ing, interactive writing, Language Experience Approach, storytelling, or one of those. If I walk in during guided instruction, I expect to see guided reading or writing—a small group with the teacher—and the other students in the class in group work collaborating with one another on literacy tasks such as book clubs, centers, and such. If I don't see that, I ask to see the teacher in my office so we can discuss what was happening. I don't need all of the teachers to be "on the same page," but I do expect that they'll implement the framework as we have agreed upon it.

In addition to this level of administrative support for the literacy framework, Rosa Parks teachers have had access to quality professional development. Unlike some professional development experiences known in San Diego as "seagull consulting" (they fly in, drop something off, and fly away), teachers at Rosa Parks were engaged in focused professional development, learning communities, and peer coaching.

Focused Professional Development

In many schools, professional development is episodic, uncoordinated, and lacks focus. Teachers in these schools often do not know what to expect from a professional development session and do know that little will be expected of them as a result of the inservice. This is counter to the evidence on the important link between professional development and student achievement (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

At Rosa Parks, there is a professional development committee that plans the professional development experiences for the school a year in advance. Members draft a plan that includes specific dates and topics. In their presentation of the plan to the school governance committee (site-based leadership), they discuss the ways in which the plan for the upcoming school year aligns with the literacy beliefs and framework. Each year, as the framework is updated, re-

vised, and completed, the professional development plan addresses those areas. The professional development committee provides whole-school seminars on specific aspects of the literacy framework (e.g., modeling comprehension, small-group phonics lessons, using book clubs), grade-level sessions in which teachers examine student work, and small-group sessions in which teachers share examples of their instruction aligned with the framework with their peers. This framework for professional development is applied to other initiatives as well. For example, a successful multiyear mathematics plan was developed and implemented in a similar fashion. It is important to note that math achievement also rose significantly during this same time period (see Table 4). The schoolwide focus on literacy did not detract from math achievement. In a similar manner, science, social studies, and schoolwide plans for English-language learners have been created at Rosa Parks.

The important points here are that the professional development plan is carefully linked—purposefully—with the literacy framework; that teachers design, develop, and implement the professional development plan; and that the plan is a public document developed a year in advance of implementation. Together, this means that teachers create and own their learning. As a result, more and more people implement what they learn in professional development sessions.

Learning Communities

As a significant component of the professional development plan, the staff development committee allocates two sessions per month to learning communities. For a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) and the responses from Rosa Parks, see Table 5. The learning communities at Rosa Parks were based on professional learning communities (e.g., DeFour & Eaker, 1998; DeFour, Eaker, & DeFour, 2005) and communities of practice (e.g., Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). At Rosa Parks, teachers identify topics from the literacy framework and form their learning communities. The communities set an agenda, identify professional readings, meet to discuss the readings and their instructional practices, share student work, and plan for change. They also invite one another into their classrooms to observe instruction and students' responses to changes in instruction.

Table 4
Changes in Math Achievement All Grades 2–5

School year	Percentage proficient/advanced
2001–2002	25.8%
2002–2003	31.8%
2003–2004	43.1%
2004–2005	56.3%

Table 5
Frequently Asked Questions on Learning Communities

1. What is a learning community?

Learning communities are groups of people who meet together to discuss their own professional development and focus on improving teaching and learning in their classrooms. It is rare to have formal presentations during learning community meetings, although members are encouraged to share what they're doing in their classrooms. At Rosa Parks, teachers will select the learning community they wish to join and will cocreate the agenda for the learning community. It is important to note that the learning community time is not grade-level time—several Mondays are reserved for grade-level meetings. A wise grade level will have its members attend different learning communities and then share what they're learning during grade-level time.

2. Who's in charge of a learning community?

In learning communities, members of the group are responsible for their own learning. Having said that, most learning communities also have facilitators. For the Rosa Parks learning communities, consistent with the City Heights Educational Collaborative, the groups will be cofacilitated by someone from San Diego State University/City Heights Collaborative and a teacher from the school.

3. How do the groups get started?

During the first learning community meeting, the group will agree on the professional readings they will do during the term and how they will use their time. This plan must be submitted to the principal no later than the Friday of the first meeting.

4. When are the learning communities meeting?

The first meeting is September 24, 1:30–3:30 p.m. After that, the meetings will occur on October 8 (1:30–3:30 p.m.), November 5 (1:30–3:30 p.m.), November 10 (1:00–3:00 p.m.), November 19 (1:30–3:30 p.m.), and December 3 (1:30–3:30 p.m.). After winter break, new learning communities will be formed and dates scheduled.

5. What is the accountability for learning communities?

Overall, group members will hold themselves accountable for their own learning. In terms of administrative accountability, there will be attendance sheets submitted for each learning community meeting. In addition, the cofacilitators will summarize the session by the Friday following the meeting and submit the notes to all members of the learning community and the principal. The final meeting for the term also serves as an accountability measure of sorts. During this final meeting, each learning community will present a synopsis of their learnings to the entire faculty.

Peer Coaching

The final component of the professional development plan at Rosa Parks is peer coaching. Rosa Parks employs five full-time peer coach/literacy resource teachers. As has been described elsewhere (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003), they supervise student teachers, provide induction support to new teachers, peer-coach veteran teachers, and facilitate professional development sessions. Consistent with the role described by Bean (2004), these five professionals ensure that teachers have the information, resources, and knowledge they need to be successful with students. At Rosa Parks, this role includes organizing literacy volunteers, parent literacy nights, and intersession and after-school reading interventions.

Lessons Learned From Implementing a Schoolwide Literacy Framework

Between 1999 and 2006, a number of changes occurred at Rosa Parks elementary school. It is clear that students read better than ever before. The faculty and administration at this school established that students living in poverty and learning English can achieve at increasingly proficient levels. They also demonstrated that focused professional development, aligned with a literacy framework, raises student achievement, even in the absence of a scripted reading program. The question remains, why did this work?

We held a small focus-group meeting, or member check, with four teachers, a peer coach, and the administrator to discuss the reasons for the significant improvements in literacy experienced at Rosa Parks. We wanted to know if there were lessons learned that might be used by other schools to improve their students' performance. From the beginning it was clear that the literacy framework changed teachers. As the principal said, "We can have conversations now because we have a common language. We know what we're talking about when we say interactive writing or reciprocal teaching. These conversations allow teachers to share ideas and materials with one another." The peer coach added,

It's like our teachers have internalized an instructional framework. They don't just get up there and do strategies. They know why they're doing something and how it fits into their overall goals for instruction. They understand what their students know and don't know and how to close that gap.

A fifth-grade teacher added,

It's about purpose. I understand my purpose more than I ever have before. I also know that my students know the purpose for everything we do. I model something in whole class, and we apply it throughout the day or week. My purpose is clear, and I share that purpose with my students.

In addition to the focus on the literacy framework, three themes emerged from the conversation. The group explained the changes in achievement, in part, as the result of increased instructional time or time on task. They also noted the change in students' literacy habits as a result of common language being used both horizontally (across the grades) and vertically (K-5). Finally, they attributed part of the achievement to the investment in their professional learning and the trust the administration gave them in "doing right by kids" and not forcing a "one-size-fits-all reading program on them."

Increased Instructional Time/Time on Task

It should not come as a surprise that teachers would notice that increased instructional time and time on task are related to high achievement. This has been documented time and again (Castle, Deniz, & Tortora, 2005; Gest & Gest, 2005). The interesting point made during the member-check conversation focused on

the role that the literacy framework played in increasing instructional time and time on task. As one of the teachers noted,

I think we see more instruction because of the framework. Teachers have a much better sense of how to use instructional time and get to it. Students know what is expected and don't waste time in transitions, wondering what's going to happen, or what they need to do to be successful.

The peer coach added,

We've talked a lot about the framework and how teachers internalized it. But I think that it's so important, I'll talk about it again. Having an internalized framework ensures that instructional moves are purposeful—that the focus lessons are linked to guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning. As a result, students spend more time actually engaged in literacy learning. And we know that getting students actively engaged changes their performance.

Schoolwide Implementation Results in Student Habits

A second theme to emerge from the member-check conversation centered on the habits that students develop after years of experience with instruction based on a framework. One teacher said,

I can walk in classrooms at the beginning of the year and tell which students are new to us based on the way that they act during the literacy block. If they're not quite sure what's happening or what to do during collaborative learning, they're new.

A third-grade teacher added,

My students have a bunch of habits, and we share a common language. When I say "interactive writing" or "listening stations," they know what to do. That's procedural knowledge. They also have content knowledge. When I talk about visualizing or making connections or summarizing, they know what I'm talking about. I have a head start because I know something about the experiences my students have had in previous years of schooling at Rosa Parks.

Professional Learning

Finally, the group of teachers in the member check noted the importance of focused professional development and teacher-led workshops and learning communities. They commented on their past experiences and the differences in the current professional development model at Rosa Parks. As one of them noted,

I used to go to a bunch of “sit-and-get” trainings, and I’d take things to do because I knew that I wasn’t going to use the information. I had my way, and it worked for me. Here [at Rosa Parks] the professional development is focused on our plans to improve reading and writing, and it’s done by other teachers at the school. I’ve done some seminars, too. It’s real here, and I can use the stuff we do.

The group also noted that they didn’t change course throughout the years and instead remained focused on the implementation of their literacy framework. One member said,

I know people at other schools, and they tell me about their inservices. They’re always changing their topics—what they’re doing in staff development. We don’t do that. We update the framework, but we focus on that to get better and better every year. I’m embarrassed to see the framework we first developed, but it was a start and nobody else had one. Our framework is our best thinking today, but I’m sure it will change as we learn more and more. You see, the framework and the professional development efforts have to be linking—one to the other. When we change the framework, we have to provide teachers with professional development. When we learn things in professional development, we have to update the framework.

In addition, the group was well aware of the risk that the administration took in investing in a literacy task force, core beliefs, and a literacy framework. As a kindergarten teacher commented,

I knew we were taking a risk not going with the [scripted reading] program. We were trusted as professionals. We were treated like professionals. And we were expected to perform as such. There’s not a person at the school who didn’t know that our students’ achievement was directly linked to our freedom to operate the way we wanted. The trade was to implement a schoolwide framework. The alternative was a cookie-cutter program for everyone. I, for one, really appreciate our principal taking the risk and letting us try.

Final Thoughts

The development of a literacy framework, with its common set of vocabulary, and a schoolwide plan for implementation, with its common set of values, has served Rosa Parks Elementary School well. It is important to note that these results cannot be simply transplanted from one school to another without the hard work that went into the development and implementation of the plan. These approaches may not perfectly

fit the context and experiences of students, teachers, and families at another school. For example, this school chose to use a guided reading approach (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). In a comparative study of philosophically different small-group reading instruction approaches, Mathes et al. (2005) found positive results for both. What made a difference was well-developed, small-group instruction coupled with effective, whole-group literacy teaching. We believe that Rosa Parks’s results stem from the schoolwide agreements, the willingness of the faculty to continually revisit and refine practices, and the link to professional development that included learning communities and peer coaching. In addition, the support and participation of families in the school community strengthened home–school connections. The participatory nature of the planning, implementation, and refinement of this school’s multiyear approach to schoolwide literacy practices takes time, lots of meetings, many disagreements, and the shared epiphanies that come from working shoulder to shoulder. That’s where the buy-in comes from as well. As school leaders know, shared agreements don’t simply happen. They must be built, often incrementally, across months and years.

The experiences at Rosa Parks Elementary School add to the evidence presented by Fullan et al. (2006), namely the “overriding importance of just three factors in explaining student achievement: (1) motivation to learn and high expectations, (2) time on task and opportunity to learn, and focused teaching” (p. 32).

The literacy framework and professional development plan resulted in higher expectations for students and increased time on task for both teachers and students, which in turn resulted in improved opportunities to learn. The literacy framework provided teachers with an opportunity to focus their teaching rather than script their teaching. The final result is a group of students who read, write, and think at impressive levels.

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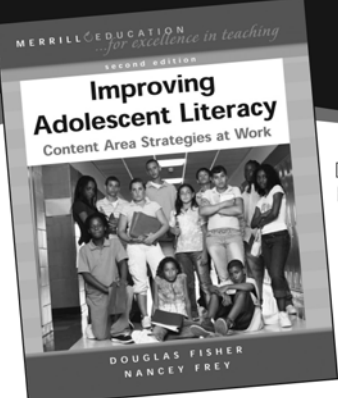
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