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Literacy Initiatives in the Urban Setting That Promote Higher Level Thinking

Karen C. Waters

As a fledgling teacher in 1973 earning a mere US\$8,745 annually, I had intended to stay in the inner city just long enough to acquire some experience—then I was planning to head straight for the suburbs. Thirty-one years later, I realized that I spent my entire career in the same district characterized by the usual urban demographics—over-crowded classrooms in 100-year-old buildings where resources and materials were scarce, and where low student achievement prevailed. Like most of my colleagues, I regularly used part of my salary to purchase pencils, notebooks, cookies, crayons, markers, art supplies, and socks for the students. Most of our students came from single-parent families living in tenements, whose everyday lives were filled with disillusionment and unfulfilled dreams brought on by extreme poverty and unstable lifestyles. Those were the days before controversial legislation focused on ushering students to the forefront of literacy instruction, before federal programs enabled inner-city schools to implement breakfast and lunch programs, and before we realized that teaching higher level thinking with standards-based lessons meant that curriculum reform applied to those of us in the urban setting, too.

I was named the director of literacy for the district. Led by a new superintendent whose vision included a three-year district partnership with a nationally recognized university with expertise in working with urban districts, the administration was expected to collaborate with teachers on the problems that constituted their daily work. In a district that had traditionally allowed the Reading Department to shoulder the three-part burden of reading curriculum, instruction, and assessment, the issue of literacy instruction now became a hierarchical responsibility to be shared and divided among district constituents:

central office administration, school principals, reading specialists, and classroom teachers. This break with tradition was reinforced through monthly six-hour professional development training sessions that required both principals and reading personnel to attend—and then *deliver* to classroom teachers. What followed was a pedagogical overhaul of traditional practices that ultimately led to a revised curriculum embedded with activities emphasizing higher level thinking, data-driven decision making, learning walks focusing on rigorous thinking within standards-based lessons, and a heightened sense of community awareness of the interdisciplinary nature of literacy as a critical entity whose tributaries extended beyond the classroom—all of which were initially accompanied with a certain level of push-back.

I had assumed that the superintendent's well-articulated plan would naturally entice eager participation by principals and teachers alike, because now literacy would be thrust to the top of the priority list of district initiatives and would automatically result in overall enhanced academic achievement. I secretly felt vindicated for the many years that I had implemented instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1993) as a format for helping students to think at deeper levels of comprehension when the concept of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999) was introduced as both a district mandate and a legitimate strategy for text-based classroom discussion. I anticipated that a collaborative commitment to improved literacy achievement would naturally result in a more literate district.

I had a lot to learn.

This chapter will describe some of the challenges I encountered as a newly appointed literacy director in the context of a culturally diverse urban community whose traditional views of professional development, curriculum, and literacy instruction would be transformed under the leadership of a new superintendent with a vision of collaboration, cohesiveness, and common language among high-ranking district administrators at the central office and principals and teachers at the school sites. I will discuss how we faced the obstacles, and summarize the lessons learned from persevering together in spite of unpredictable administrative changes, stringent legislation, and curriculum reform.

Drawing strength from the superintendent's position on staff development, curriculum, literacy instruction, and research-proven strategies, I ultimately viewed my role in the district as an intermediary in translating the principles of modern-day theorists into relevant and functional classroom practices that would be embraced by the teachers. I was fortunate to be able to work with a dedicated and committed staff of curriculum consultants and literacy coaches

to create a sustainable and coherent professional development plan in literacy. Our plan involved an analysis of formative and summative district data in the context of the most current research in literacy. A philosophical merge between mentor texts and the principles of learning (Resnick, 1999) completed a comprehensive roadmap that governed our work in addressing the standards through revision in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The principles of learning (Resnick, 1999), ostensibly reminiscent of the teachings of the constructivist theorists Vygotsky (1978), Dewey (1933), and Bruner (1960), were implemented within a scaffolded and social context emphasizing structured and deliberate guidance that gradually waned as students began to assume responsibility for their own learning.

First, we distributed a teacher-efficacy survey to a representative sample of approximately 200 teachers who were asked to rate their comfort level on a scale from 1 to 7 in the instructional delivery of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and assessments (see Figure 10.1). Results showed that although between 84 and 91% of the respondents rated themselves at a 5 or better in teaching the five pillars of literacy instruction, there was a significant gap between student achievement and teachers' perceptions about their teaching abilities. Additionally, 34% of the teachers did not feel comfortable teaching fluency, and 44% of the teachers were not confident in assessing their students' reading achievement.

Thus, teachers generally tended to rate themselves higher than the results of student achievement data indicated. When presented with the results of the survey as contrasted with the data, teachers were astounded, humbly acknowledging that they needed to deepen their knowledge in the teaching of reading by adopting an approach that effectively balanced the components of modeled, shared, guided, and independent reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). In visiting most of the classrooms during my first year on the job, I realized that teachers wanted to be effective in their instructional practices, but appeared to lack the necessary tools.

During the next couple of years we immersed ourselves in the language of literacy as we began to assimilate a common lexicon among the teachers for the components of the literacy block. At that time mentor texts and documents included the work of Fountas and Pinnell (1996, 2000), Keene and Zimmermann (1997), and Taberski (2000). The Connecticut English Language Arts Curriculum Framework (Connecticut State Department of Education 2003), Harvey and Goudvis (2000), and *Put Reading First* (National Institute of Child

Figure 10.1. Teacher Efficacy Survey

Level of Use	Please rate your comfort level in teaching each component of a comprehensive literacy program.	Phonological awareness (Phonics	Vocabulary	Fluency	Comprehension	Explicit Small Group Instruction	Assessment
<p>0 Isolation I use the strategies that I know and am comfortable doing!</p>	<p>I presently do not use/model effective strategies in this component. I do what I have always done because I am comfortable with traditional modes of instruction. I know my students and I have success in the modes of instruction that I use during the instructional day.</p>							
<p>1 Foundation That looks interesting!</p>	<p>I am building a foundation of new knowledge and am learning about a variety of new strategies. It seems overwhelming, but interesting. I'm still not sure about how to proceed.</p>							
<p>2 Emergent I'll use that strategy and let's see what happens.</p>	<p>I have tried out a strategy or two and am still not sure of the implementation procedure, but I am willing to keep learning and trying.</p>							
<p>3 Procedural Application There is an awful lot to remember!</p>	<p>I am using/modeling effective strategies on a regular basis in this component. I find that it takes a lot of time and effort because I am not yet comfortable and flexible with the strategies. I know how to interpret data from assessments but may not be skilled in how to differentiate instruction.</p>							

Figure 10.1. Teacher Efficacy Survey (continued)

Level of Use	Please rate your comfort level in teaching each component of a comprehensive literacy program.	Phonological awareness (Phonics	Vocabulary	Fluency	Comprehension	Explicit Small Group Instruction	Assessment
4 Automation It's getting a little easier...	I am becoming comfortable with implementing strategies in this component because I have had opportunities to practice and acquire experience in these areas. I am beginning to integrate them into the daily and weekly literacy routines in the classroom. I know how to interpret data from assessments and use this data to inform instruction in the classroom to address the needs of my students.							
5 Advancement Wow! Using the data really helps to impact instruction.	I am very comfortable with the effective strategies in this component and have found ways to modify them to increase their effectiveness with students. I differentiate instruction and analyze the impact of that instruction on student performance in my classroom.							
6 Assimilation I think I've got it!	I have learned to integrate the strategies with other disciplines such as science, math, and social studies. I am an expert on using data to differentiate instruction to improve the performance of all students.							
7 Regeneration And I can also do it this way!	I can invent new strategies to improve the overall approach to early literacy in my school							

Health and Human Development, 2003) initially provided procedural guidance for curriculum revision and corresponding pacing guides in Kindergarten through grade 6. We pondered the three tiers of vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) in providing explicit teaching of vocabulary with struggling readers and English-language learners at the elementary levels. We read about instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1993) to acquire depth and context for the principle of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999), which we used in tandem with research-based instructional strategies (Marzano, 2003), and we used data to drive instruction (Reeves, 2004). Grant funds allowed us to purchase several books for study groups that included school principals and literacy coaches so they could hone their skills in content and process as they undertook their roles as staff developers and evaluators, respectively, in the implementation and evaluation of literacy in the classroom (Booth & Rowsell, 2002).

Fortified with a foundation of current research, we prepared ourselves to meet the many challenges, including the need to revise a 10-year-old curriculum that was the last vestige of a previous regime, among fragmented editions of assorted basal reading programs that were even older. Understandably, poor test scores spoke to an irrelevant and amorphous staff development plan that was understaffed as it was ill-planned, and certainly not used in conjunction with student data. Additionally, there were approximately 1,000 teachers in kindergarten through grade 6 whose perceptions of literacy instruction were as varied as the texts they used. A new curriculum would require the delineation of the characteristics of effective reading instruction while embedding the concept of higher level thinking for all grades.

The cycle of the district and school improvement plans had changed little over the years: Plans were resurrected from the previous year's file in the opening months of the school year, only to be recrafted and reshelved after the documents were resubmitted to central office where they would gather dust until the following September. Back then, an erroneous perception of accountability implied that the school action plan was developed by a few, signed by all, and submitted on time so that the business of daily instruction could proceed without further interruption. The concept of holistic or student-centered accountability (Reeves, 2004), a system of supports ensuring that best practices in curriculum, teaching, and leadership advanced individual, rather than group, achievement would be introduced later on.

Reading Specialist as Literacy Coach

For years, like many of their counterparts across the country, district Reading Specialists practiced the “pull-out” model in working with small groups of students to increase reading achievement. As literacy coaches working under a revised job description they were required to provide assistance to teachers and principals in a whole-school reform model that placed literacy at the forefront. Thus, their daily work consisted of conducting in-classroom demonstration lessons, presiding over the collaborative assessment or standards-based protocols for looking at student work, designing and providing staff development, lending expertise to school administration in the development of the school action plan, ordering program materials, training paraprofessionals, overseeing intervention programs, and running family literacy workshops at the school site after the end of the instructional day.

Providing the 55 literacy coaches with the knowledge and skills of the trade was a priority. We contracted with a group of national and local experts to work with our staff on the integration of content of literacy and the process of coaching. One day each month was set aside to discuss their practices in the context of research-based literacy strategies, analyze videotapes, participate in coaching conversations, reflect on their coaching styles, and network. The coaches talked about the scenarios that immediately impacted student learning and aired their concerns about working with veteran teachers who were reluctant to grant them access to their classrooms. They considered adult learning theory in their work with the teaching staff, and acquired strategies that would encourage teachers to try out new techniques in risk-free environments that respected all learners. The coaches debated the finer points of guided reading and presented arguments for the implementation of a program in writing instruction for all district teachers.

During this time our state had begun to implement two-day literacy modules including explicit, small-group instruction of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary to be “rolled out” to literacy coaches in the 17 priority districts across our state, with the understanding that the literacy coaches from each district would then impart the content of the training to teachers in their districts. The problem was that the number of literacy coaches identified to participate in training was limited to 30 per district. As stated previously, our district had 55 literacy coaches.

Through state funding targeted for early literacy, we paid for all literacy coaches to acquire the training so that everyone would receive the same content

and materials. The expectation was clear: All coaches would deliver the content of the training at several levels of staff development—through districtwide and schoolwide professional development, at grade level meetings at each coach’s school, and through in-classroom modeling that involved modeling, co-teaching, observation, feedback, and reflection for both the teacher and the literacy coach at every phase of the lesson. A three-tiered approach to staff development would enable district teachers to be recipients of the training several times before being expected to assimilate new practices into their instructional repertoire. Please note, all students quoted in this chapter represent composites of actual classroom dialogue. These are not students’ actual names, nor direct quotes.

The Problem With Accountable Talk

Accountable talk (Resnick, 1999), is a principle of learning involving a format for text-based classroom conversation that requires the student to actively listen to his or her peers while garnering evidence from more than one source to support a claim.

Initially, while teachers endeavored to implement the principle of accountable talk, they simply did not know how to raise the level of student involvement in linking one student’s ideas with another in making the transition to authentic conversation. Reliance on the use of an artificial construct of statement stems seemed to inhibit, rather than elicit, authentic student response. Using cookie-cutter starters to conversation such as the statements “I agree with _____; This reminds me of _____; I am confused about _____; It surprised me when _____; or I agree/disagree with _____” almost resulted in a misinterpretation of a worthwhile concept—at first. The politeness of scripted conversation did not give way to a burgeoning of ideas—at first. During the initial stages of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999), teachers did not have the tools to weave students’ ideas into the intricacies of rich community discourse.

It occurred to me that the first step in the reading process is to summarize the content; the literacy process must precede the literary experience. Focused discussion presumed initial understanding, a necessary precondition for discourse to occur. After all, the goal of discussion is not merely to summarize an author’s main ideas; it is to cultivate one’s own (Calkins, 2001; Nichols, 2006). I would eventually come to the realization that discourse was neither an end product nor a concrete goal; rather it is a nonlinear procedural and interactive forum that begins with a logical stopping point in the text. The teacher’s

subsequent query—So, what do you think?—or directive—Turn and talk to your partner!—are the first steps in the community building of ideas.

Over time we observed the evolution of classroom conversation from rudimentary stilted conversation through refinement that eventually resulted in authentic dialogue. As the speaker took responsibility for building on what had been previously stated through explicit references to textual evidence, tentative talk eventually gave way to dialogic conversation in rigorous text-based lessons at deep levels of comprehension.

We noted distinct teacher moves, actions that extended and linked students' ideas during the course of classroom conversation that determined the success of the procedure or the level of rigor of the lesson. Examples of this kind of talk included, "Can anyone add on to what _____ said? Say more about that. Do you agree with _____?" (Wolf, Crosson, & Resnick, 2005, p. 8). Over the course of two years we noted the subtleties in the level of sophistication of classroom conversation and realized that a high degree of expertise was required for the teacher to be able to connect, build, and extend ideas from one student to another (Chinn & Anderson, 1998).

Thus, accountable talk (Resnick, 1999) became the principle around which text-based discussion was sanctioned; accountability to accurate knowledge (Resnick, 1999) demanded reader retrieval of factual information in citing evidence from the text to support a claim, a skill that was justifiably reinforced because it was measured directly on state and national assessments. Intuitively, we realized that in requiring students to prove theories or opinions, they were being prepared for high-stakes assessments. Still, the principle of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999) itself was as elusive as it was critical, and our teachers begged for procedural structures in the implementation of this worthy concept.

Promoting the Concept of Higher Level Thinking at All Grade Levels

To promote higher level thinking embedded with the principle of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999), we offered training on the use of Junior Great Books (Great Books Foundation, 2002) at the local Holiday Inn to teachers in grades 1–8, with the understanding that they would receive classroom materials if they chose to participate. Teachers willingly relinquished their Saturday with the promise of new materials—and stipends—to compensate them for their time. Providing breakfast and lunch in a comfortable setting was a small price to pay

to send the message that teachers' work was valued and they were respected as professionals. In providing the teachers with the necessary tools to get the job done, we succeeded in enhancing their performance so that they could, in turn, raise the level of achievement of their students.

The shared inquiry approach as delineated in the Junior Great Books program (Great Books Foundation, 2002) provided a procedure with which to facilitate classroom discussion that would ensure student understanding at deep levels of comprehension. As with other forms of dialogic conversation, the teacher's pivotal role as discussion manager is best described as establishing the foundation from which positions are clarified and arguments are built. This creates an environment that is conducive to social interaction and community learning because as the students gain independence in verbalizing their arguments, the teacher's role is simultaneously diminished, transitioning from facilitator to participant, and then from participant to observer.

The shared inquiry procedure encouraged students to negotiate meaning while rehearsing new vocabulary, building a reservoir of ideas, and persisting in a line of inquiry about just one idea. It allowed the English-language learner who was grappling with vocabulary acquisition and adjusting to life in a new country to have multiple authentic opportunities to interact with his peers *and* his teacher, and to practice oral language in a supportive environment that encouraged risk-taking, allowed for mistakes in syntax, and increased understanding of semantics. It pushed students' thinking in cultivating one's own ideas, interpreting characters' actions, and engaging in self-reflection of personal ideals and beliefs, rather than merely summarizing or reporting on an author's main points at the literal level. In general, teachers realized that talk was the medium by which students became better comprehenders.

Students learned to listen to one another, generate ideas, explore one idea, challenge one another, build upon one another's thoughts, and apply hermeneutics in acknowledging another's point of view on a continuum of inquiry. The teachers learned to link, merge, and extend students' ideas to build understanding of overarching concepts. As an observer in the classroom, I was captivated by the teachers whose influence intentionally faded in the process of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999) as they adapted their position from interrogator to moderator.

After giving time for the principles of shared inquiry to take hold in the classroom, teachers reported that the procedures were generalized into the disciplines of science and social studies and used with text other than the program materials. Finally, embedded within the approach are procedural and tactful

strategies for handling both the reluctant participant and over-zealous enthusiast who always has to be the first respondent.

A re-creation of a third-grade conversation follows, as an experienced teacher guides students in a discussion of *The Empty Pot* (Demi, 1990), the story of the aging Chinese emperor who searches among the kingdom's children for a successor to the throne and the young boy named Ping who is sure that his unsuccessful attempts to grow a beautiful flower will cause him to be disgraced. In the story the Emperor gives seeds to all the children of the kingdom with the directive that they will return in a year's time with evidence of their best efforts. After repotting the seeds several times during the year, Ping, ashamed, brings back an empty pot to show the emperor his best effort, while the other children produce big beautiful flowers as evidence of their superior gardening skills.

As the students are sitting in seminar configuration, the teacher begins:

Teacher: Before we read the story of *The Empty Pot*, we discussed the concept of integrity. What is integrity?

Arthur: It's honesty. When you tell the truth. Like, honesty is the best policy.

Hector: It's being truthful and honorable. If you tell the truth it is better. Otherwise you have to remember all the times you lied.

Teacher : [jotting down names of the students who have responded] Exactly. And, how does the word *integrity* connect with the story of *The Empty Pot*?

There is silence for about five seconds as the teacher gives wait time.

Isabel: Well, [deliberating] Ping had integrity because when he couldn't grow a beautiful flower he kept trying. He put the seeds into a bigger pot with better soil. He waited. He could have done what the other children did.

Nadine: Yeah. The other children just went out and bought big beautiful flowers to give to the emperor because they wanted to be the next emperor.

Marshall: And they probably didn't water them [the flowers] all year either. That's not right. The children did not have integrity....

Teacher: Because...

- Marshall : [interrupting] Because they were dishonest! They didn't grow the flowers that they brought for the emperor. They wanted the emperor to think that they spent *all year* growing the flowers.
- Teacher: What was the emperor looking for?
- Jose: He was looking for an empty pot because he knew that the person with an empty pot was being honest. So when he saw Ping with his empty pot....
- Nadine: He knew that Ping had integrity!
- Jose: But what I don't understand is...I don't think the emperor had integrity....
- Teacher: Why not?
- Jose: Well...didn't he lie to the children when he didn't tell them he was giving them cooked seeds? He knew that the seeds wouldn't grow. I don't think that the emperor had integrity.

There is a tenuous quality in the perception of classroom discourse that makes good discourse difficult to attain. Like a piece of delicate porcelain, discourse that is mishandled will succumb under pressure, and the only remedy is to start the process of construction all over again. In a millisecond an innocent remark that is misconstrued can truncate response, diminish enthusiasm, compromise self-esteem, and marginalize a participant. Lastly, discourse and fragile porcelain alike must be handled with care, lest they break. Therefore, the process of discourse, through which democratic, respectful, and lively conversations occur, requires the expertise of a facilitator (teacher) who has had the benefit of specialized training. Implementation of discourse necessitates professional development at the outset so that the teacher learns how to intuit when and how to respond, revoice a student's response, link to other students' ideas, challenge a student's thinking, dignify a reluctant participant's response, or say nothing at all.

Evidence of several important discussion principles was demonstrated during this conversation. First of all, in the initiation of the discussion following the reading of the text, the teacher reviewed the concept of *integrity*, which was not a vocabulary word within the text itself, but nevertheless represented the theme. Second, it is interesting to note that the teacher paused for a full five seconds so that the students could think about the question, "How does the concept of integrity connect to the story of *The Empty Pot*?"

So often, I have observed teachers react to an unexpected silence by immediately rephrasing or restating a question because it is assumed that students require further clarification. Having the time to process the teacher's question allowed the students the luxury of thinking about how the idea fit into their understanding of the theme as they formulated their responses. Though silences of this nature can be uncomfortable, the teacher intuited correctly about when to pause, which gave the students ample time to think through their answers before responding orally. It is interesting to note that the teacher actually spoke very little during each of the four times that she participated in the conversation. Rather, the questions that she posed were designed to solicit student assumptions and interpretations about the events of the story and how they related to the theme. In doing so, Jose took a risk in stating that the emperor did not have integrity. Jose went beyond the text, which, in turn, gave everyone else (including the teacher) something new to think about!

Ultimately, more talk led to more writing. Questions posed during class discussion were extended into writing prompts that used the tools of holistic scoring, using both student-friendly and official state rubrics for open-ended response to literature, and incorporating both formative and summative evaluation for the integration of reading and writing instruction. The next day students were asked to respond to the prompt, "Who do you know who has integrity?"

One female student wrote,

Someone in my life that has integrity is my mom. She is special to me because once we went to the mall and my mom bought herself a shirt and me a shirt. In that store the cash register lady gave us \$30 back. That was too much money. So my mom gave the money back because she didn't want to feel bad. Then she taught me how to act just like her, or should I say she taught me how to have integrity. I really enjoyed learning from my mom.

A male student wrote:

I have a friend who has integrity and his name is Greg. He is special because he shows me he can be good. When he forgets his homework he always tells the truth. He doesn't lie so he doesn't get into trouble.

And another male student wrote:

A person I know who has integrity is my friend Rocco. Even when he did it he took the punishment and when he got a lot of money he went back and gave some money back. That's how he has honesty and integrity inside his heart.

The Benefits of Classroom Conversation

During classroom conversation students were nudged into thinking critically about the theme through questions for which there was no one correct answer. Responses were amplified and connected through instructional scaffolding that wove student talk into “connected discourse” (Goldenberg, 1993, p. 319). Goldenberg (1993) asserts that discussion is the precursor for any writing activity. Calkins (2001) reaffirms the notion that students need to talk to write; however student writing should not be a replication of a book talk discussion. The activities that followed the discussion of the story of *The Empty Pot* (Demi, 1990) confirmed the link between classroom conversation, reading comprehension, and student writing, which was an intentional byproduct of student discourse.

When a struggling district is immersed in initiatives from the top down and bottom up, it is difficult to analyze which ones have had the most impact, unless of course, each one has been evaluated through a deliberate empirical design. However, a fusion of purpose and process that acknowledged the recursive nature of change helped to imbue intuition within the district about how best to improve student learning. In the section that follows, I discuss the influences that forever changed the way we regarded professional development, curriculum reform, student achievement, and our roles as educational leaders in the community.

A Confluence of Purpose: Learning Walks, Curriculum Revision, a New Writing Program, and Online Assessments

Learning Walks

Teams consisting of teachers, literacy coaches, administrators, and teachers’ union officials were created to conduct weekly “walk-throughs” in schools on a rotating basis to offer constructive feedback to principals, teachers, and coaches about the types of higher level thinking that occurred in the classrooms. Following criteria for what constituted rigorous lessons, we observed teachers’ actions that encouraged students to elaborate on their ideas by citing evidence for their reasoning—and deep thinking. It was during these learning walks that we began to observe classroom discourse as a constructivist tool for meaning-making, metacognitive reflection, and community building.

The Transformation From Outdated Curriculum to Comprehensive Literacy Plan

Over time, accountable talk (Resnick, 1999) became commonplace within the district, even though some teachers were more adept at facilitating authentic discussion than others. We had made the transition from teacher awareness to action around talk in the classroom and thus laid the groundwork for curriculum revision that considered classroom dialogue a necessary condition for student learning.

We solicited teachers, administrators, and parents to form a curriculum team to develop a comprehensive literacy plan as a roadmap for staff development, make explicit connections to the standards, and provide clear expectations for student performance. Pedagogical procedures, schedules, strategies, assessments, pacing guides, and portfolio requirements were delineated. The school board approved a one-year plan for rolling out the curriculum to district teachers in Kindergarten through grade 8, which was put into place via the literacy coaches and a standardized training package that included modeling, lesson plans, and videos for classroom literacy instruction. The curriculum included research-based strategies, pacing guides, a scope and sequence of skills, and differentiated instruction through assured experiences for all students.

The district comprehensive literacy plan became a resource for teachers in the implementation of classroom literacy instruction, a manual for principals in monitoring and in evaluating the literacy program at each school, a guide for the small percentage of parents who opted to home-school their children, and a document that partners and outside consultants could reference when they came to work with us in the district.

No One Uniform Method to Teach Writing in the Classroom

About a year after we implemented the district comprehensive literacy plan, we asked our teachers what else they needed to increase student achievement. Their voices reverberated from each school in the district: We need a uniform writing program—everyone teaches writing differently! Our test scores reflected the myriad writing programs that had come and gone over the years. We contracted with experts in the field who embedded this writing into the teaching reading. The consultants worked with us to create a four-year implementation plan that would provide training in writing instruction to teachers in Kindergarten

through grade 8. For the first time in many years the teachers in the district began to feel comfortable with teaching students the art of expressive writing.

The writing program not only empowered the teachers in giving them a common language for teaching writing in a variety of genres, but also fortified student acquisition of expressive writing even at the Kindergarten level where the methodology proceeded with interactive writing. More important, as a district whose turnover for new teachers hovered at approximately 50% for many years, the program would be accessible for new teachers regardless of when they entered the district. Methodology for implementation mirrored state test requirements for the direct assessment of writing, which students were able to generalize in the other disciplines.

Here again, teachers learned that discussion, brainstorming, and idea gathering were essential antecedents for good writing to occur, and assimilated procedures of the program for helping students to craft quality pieces of original writing. In the middle and upper grades teachers learned how to assist students in developing thesis and antithesis statements, a cumulative process that helped students think more deeply. As a result of an incremental plan which provided training to teachers at all levels, including the seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teachers, the number of students achieving proficiency on state writing assessments rose by 10% the first year and 20% the second year. Several years later, scores continue to rise and are maintained because the district adopted a common approach to writing instruction.

Online Assessments That Mirrored the State Assessment

As with many districts across the state and nation during the first few years of the new millennium, our district attempted to make sense of imposing legislation while preparing for the eventuality that all students would be assessed from grade 3–8. The inception of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 meant that we could no longer view the annual state assessment as simply a practical measure for shaping professional development or customizing instruction. Results of the assessments were not published in a timely fashion, nor could the data from a summative assessment be used to create sensible intervention plans that might advance the achievement of individual students. We needed a formative assessment system that would evaluate student reading achievement efficiently and accurately and provide the teachers and district administrators with imme-

mediate feedback so there would be ample time for progress monitoring of discrete skills or strands that required reinforcement.

Thus began the pilot of a quarterly online assessment system and gradual participation of schools and grades within the district through a carefully designed phase-in process. Grant funding provided for an additional district reading consultant to create assessments that would target the skill strands of the high-stakes assessments, in a continuum that became increasingly more complex as the year progressed. The new assessment system triggered the need to provide additional literacy training in the strategies that addressed the skills of the strands. Achieving the delicate balance between test preparation and skill instruction an integrated approach that supported the learner had to be negotiated judiciously.

Stringent federal and state mandates have subsequently created the need to institute an ad hoc curriculum—test preparation for high-stakes assessments that has greatly influenced classroom reading instruction (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006). With an emphasis on test taking, students can be deprived of rich learning experiences that result in the internalization of the skills and knowledge needed for future course work and in life (Langer, 2002). Farstrup (2006) states, “teaching to the test has become a driving factor, effectively constricting the curriculum” (p. 22), forcing teachers to acquiesce to instructional constraints because they fear the consequences of poor test scores. Further, the difference between teaching a content strand or skill and providing students with the tools necessary to construct their own knowledge is a set of tasks to guide and engage students in active learning (Langer, 2002).

I felt that if students were fortified with content knowledge rather than test-preparation skills, they might be better served if they actually knew the difference between amphibians and crustaceans (for example), as measured by a multiple-choice question on a state assessment. If given structured opportunities in the classroom to compare and contrast the phylum of animals through discussion, would this not constitute the background knowledge to which the reading experts and test makers refer? Once again, the Reading Department, in partnership with the Educational Technology Department, provided training for teachers in grades 3–8 in the strategies to teach the skills that the assessments measured.

We began to look at student data as a set of possibilities. Once an annual grim reality in the district, we began to realize that the concept of data might be within our control. With the help of a state-funded accountability initiative

in partnership with the Center for Performance Assessment (Reeves, 2002) to assist the priority districts in using data to drive instruction, schools were challenged to form site-based data teams that would function in a leadership capacity in developing common assessments for the progress monitoring of skills that had been identified as deficiencies on school action plans.

It Didn't Take a Village (Just an Entire District)

When I left the district in 2006 to take a full-time position at a local university, more changes had occurred in the last seven years than in the previous twenty-five! Through the vision of many hard-working people including superintendents, assistant superintendents, grant coordinators, principals, department supervisors, curriculum specialists, classroom teachers, parents, and representatives from the state department of education, the district rose from obscurity within the state to national recognition, with a nomination in two consecutive years for the Broad Prize for Urban Education. (The Broad Foundation honors urban districts that demonstrate greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among ethnic groups and between high- and low- income students.)

Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor (n.d.) describes my feelings eloquently with her statement, "We don't accomplish anything in this world alone...and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something" (n.p.). Since my departure from the district I have kept in touch with colleagues who report that the district is still in a state of upward transition because of the work of many who have continued the commitment to a cycle of ongoing reflective professional development that has been successful in making student learning a priority. Multilevel supports between the central office and the schools have promoted and expanded literacy initiatives that are no longer considered to be "new-think," and are as self-sustaining as they are evolving in a district whose mission is to arm its high school students with the tools to be college ready.

Members of this educational community ascribe to a creed that acknowledges incremental successes, celebrates mightily, but briefly, and then goes back to work.

ACTION PLAN

When teachers participate in shared self-reflection and collaborative problem-solving, student achievement increases (Dearman & Alber, 2005; DuFour, 2004; Graham, 2007; LeFever-Davis, 2002; Servage, 2008; Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006; Wood, 2007). There were a number of structured protocols that were used within the district to engender reflective conversation with the focus on student achievement, including the Collaborative Assessment Conference (developed by Harvard's Project Zero), the Standards in Practice, and the Tuning Protocol (Allen & McDonald, 2003).

A comprehensive action plan for systemic change would require much more space than is allocated for this section. Instead, what follows is a list of online resources for reflective practice.

- National School Reform Faculty (www.nsrffharmony.org/protocol/doc/cac.pdf) offers a variety of common protocols, definitions and implementation procedures for the most common structures for school and district collaborative work.
- Coalition of Essential Schools CES National Web (www.essentialschools.org) offers free access to resources
- Looking at Student Work (<http://www.lasw.org>) offers a many resources related to the Chicago Learning Collaborative (est. 1998) whose mission is to relate analysis of student work to increased teacher learning and student achievement.
- Education World (www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr246.shtml) provides links to the most popular organizations for looking at student work including the Annenberg Institute, Coalition of Essential Schools, and Harvard's Project Zero.
- Facilitating Use of Protocols (www.dodea.edu/instruction/support/profdev/studentwork/lsw.doc) presents a generic step-by-step implementation plan for looking at student work.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION

According to the author, the institution of accountable talk (Resnick, 1999) became a foothold for changing instruction within the district. In this chapter the author demonstrated how classroom conversation enabled a student to discern that the theme of a text precluded the main character from having integrity. If the teacher had not nudged the students into thinking critically about the content of the story, that student may not have come to the conclusion that the emperor's position did not absolve him from telling the truth.

1. How can your study team collaborate with other school resource personnel (the school psychologist, media specialist, literacy coach) to identify other texts whose themes have the potential to spark meaty classroom discussions, allow students to explore multiple themes within a text, and acknowledge that “readers and authors are influenced by individual, social, cultural, and historical contexts” (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2006, p. 5). Finally, how does classroom discourse lead to social change?
2. Professional development is no longer the singular burden of administrators and directors at the central office. Rather, the transformative definition of staff development has come to mean rich opportunities for principals and teachers to build communities of practice and discuss how best to meet the instructional challenges that govern their daily work. How does your school make time to study student assessment data and design intervention plans that will meet the needs of diverse students?
3. How does the classroom teacher use data to inform daily practice and how can a focus on student learning result in increased student achievement? Do teachers at your school have regular opportunities to work collaboratively to solve problems of practice? What role does the literacy coach play in supporting the whole-school reading program, including teachers' efforts to improve instructional delivery?

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