Observations, Conversations, and Negotiations: Administrator Support of Literacy Practice

High Performance Learning Communities Project
Community School District #2, New York City

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In our previous report, "Content-driven Instructional Reform in Community School District #2" (June 8, 1998), we described the Balanced Literacy program District #2 developed and supports; the variation in the implementation of that program across nine different classrooms in three schools; and some of the underlying causes of that variation, most of which related to teacher capacity. In this paper we shift our perspective from teachers who are the day-to-day implementors of Balanced Literacy to the administrators, both district leaders and principals, who must support teachers' instructional efforts. We argue that the on-going definition and specification of the Balanced Literacy program itself is the fulcrum of administrators' support of teacher's instructional efforts.

Introduction

Over the past decade there have been broad-based and deep changes in recommendations regarding what students should know and be able to do. The demands of the information age, coupled with discouraging reports of U.S. students' standing relative to that of other nations, has led to concern about the knowledge and skills that today's students need in order to be successful. These concerns have led to many proposals regarding the form of instruction which could best meet our students' future needs. Many of the most nationally recognized proposals (e.g., IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996; NCTM's Curriculum & Evaluation Standards, 1989; AAAS's Benchmarks for Science Literacy, 1993), share an emphasis on the creation of student-centered, inquiry-based learning environments. Such environments stress the need to tailor instruction based upon the knowledge that students bring to the learning task and the crucial role that expert facilitation plays in moving students toward the development of key disciplinary ideas. Learning activities are typically experiential in nature so as to encourage children to build their own understandings through meaningful interpretations, investigations, and explanations.

Such instruction places great demands upon the teachers attempting to implement it. For most teachers, it means shifting from a practice grounded in routine demonstrations of decontextualized, often low-level skills to a practice that more closely resembles improvisation, a moment-by-moment unfolding of interactive teaching moves within a loosely structured overall plan. Such improvisational forms of instruction cannot be scripted by a set of teacher-proofed materials, but rather depend on teachers' deep understanding of their own students and the disciplinary ideas that students must develop. Moreover, it has been suggested changing to this type of practice is not possible without an accompanying shift in teachers' epistemological beliefs regarding knowledge and how it is constructed. The teacher learning involved in this shift has been called *transformative* to highlight the radical restructuring of knowledge, beliefs, and norms of practice that is required; it is contrasted with *additive* learning which denotes the assimilation of new skills into teachers' existing repertoires (Thompson & Zeuli, in press). Over the past several years, research has suggested that most teachers have a great deal of difficulty in making such transformations (e.g., Peterson, 1990; Stein, Grover, & Henningson, 1996).

Although some teachers have attempted to transform their practice individually, most have found that doing so within a community of like-minded colleagues is more enabling. Sometimes, circumstances necessitate the formation of long distance colleagueships, but increasingly teachers and principals have come to value the face-to-face interactions offered by school-based groups of teachers working together. Proponents of school-based reforms site a variety of motivations for moving beyond a single classroom including the development of shared norms, the critical support that teacher colleagues provide to each other, and the cumulative impact on student learning that multiple-grade implementations foster. Policymakers also see value in reform activities based on larger groups of teachers due to recent pressures to carry out wide scale changes at all levels of the education system.

Recent work has begun to investigate the role that school and district administrators can play in supporting groups of teachers through the difficult process of transformation. This work begins with the assumption that today's reforms demand a qualitatively different form of support than did earlier forms of instruction. When teaching tasks, classrooms, and student learning were viewed in a more standardized fashion, bureaucratic forms of organization and administration sufficed to ensure that whole buildings of teachers were effectively carrying out their roles (Nelson, Davidson, & Sassi, 1998). By contrast, the present models of teaching and learning defy bureaucratic forms of oversight. It is now commonly agreed that administrators will also need to undergo radical shifts (i.e., transformations) in how they conceive of their roles in developing, supporting, and evaluating what gets taught and how.

The present paper joins this growing body of work by analyzing the ways in which school administration can support reforms that aim to develop students' capabilities to think, reason, and understand ideas deeply. In this paper, we examine New York City's Community School District #2's efforts to ensure that all students become enthusiastic, skilled, lifelong readers. In doing so, we will be examining the roles of both District #2 leaders and principals in supporting the design and implementation of a district-wide effort to implement an ambitious, demanding program of literacy instruction.

In our analysis we pay special attention to the way in which "high-level instructional practice" is packaged, discussed, and assessed by administrators in District #2. Our attention to this aspect of administrator practice is framed by the contention that ambitious reforms frequently suffer from either too much or too little specification. Over-specification is perhaps more familiar, as codified materials, routines, and teaching strategies can result in teacher compliance with superficial features of the reform while missing the underlying intent. From a supervisory perspective, over-specification is often associated with a perceived (or real) inflexibility that leaves little room for adjusting to the needs of individual classrooms or for the exercise of teachers' professional skills and judgments. Under-specification can also be problematic, however. Moving from principled understandings of a given program to the enactment of that program in the active confusion of a real-time classroom is difficult in the best of circumstances. Too often, attention to principles becomes overwhelmed by other forces such as the need to cover material or keep students engaged. Under-specification also makes it difficult for supervisors to know when and where they are seeing successful enactments of the principles, to communicate effectively about their expectations, and to make judgments regarding the direction and rate of progress of their reform efforts.[1]

We propose that all administrators aspiring to the widespread implementation of high-quality instructional programs must contend with this issue of program specification. In District #2, they've chosen to specify their intentions surrounding literacy through a set of instructional practices collectively referred to as the Balanced Literacy program. We suggest that the Balanced Literacy program serves several functions for teachers and administrators alike. First, by providing a label for certain features of practice, the Balanced Literacy program serves as a language of practice that enables conversations which reference shared understandings and common sets of assumptions. Second, it marks the territory of salient features that comprise effective practice, thereby making it easier for teachers, principals, and District #2 leaders to

[1] Many of our ideas about specification have been influenced by David Cohen's and Deborah Ball's work on the relations between policy and cognition (Cohen, 1996).

differentiate strong instruction from weak instruction. Finally, it outlines the full range of practices that one should see in a comprehensive program of literacy, thereby permitting easier identification of possible gaps in opportunities provided to teachers and students. In this paper we argue that the observations, conversations and negotiations in which administrators engage around program definition and specification are a crucial part of the support they provide teachers enacting instructional reform.

Methods

The arguments and conclusions in this paper are based on observations of classroom instruction, teacher meetings, and professional development sessions, as well as both formal interviews and informal conversations with teachers, principals, professional developers and District #2 leaders. Much of the data was collected in three schools chosen to be the focus of study during the 1997-98 school year. Each of these schools had been designated a Focus Literacy school by District #2 leadership. Focus Literacy is a designation given to schools with historically low achievement scores in literacy, high-poverty levels in the student population, and a significant proportion of students at-risk of failure in literacy. One of the three schools studied had been designated School Under Review by the State of New York and at the time of the study was a locus of particularly focused improvement efforts.

Observations of classroom instruction in literacy were made in four classrooms in each of the three schools. The observations occurred in two cycles, one in the winter (late January or early February of 1998) and one in the spring (May, 1998). Each cycle consisted of three sequential observations which started from the time students entered the classroom at the beginning of the day until the morning literacy block was over or the students were dismissed for lunch, whichever came first. Observers taking field notes were accompanied by a videographer who recorded the morning session. Field notes were written up into a narrative describing the morning instruction. Shortly after the observations were completed, the observers conducted post-observation interviews with the teacher observed. These interviews were used to probe the teacher about the representativeness of the lessons observed, the purpose of the instruction seen and the teacher's understanding of particular components of the Balanced Literacy program. The resulting classroom observation data (72 narratives of morning instruction and 24 post-observation interviews) were then reviewed and coded for the relationship between the instruction seen and the tenants of the Balanced Literacy program.

During spring 1998, a variety of school- and district-based meetings and professional development sessions were observed. These involved grade-level teacher meetings (5), school-based

professional development meetings or workshops (2), classroom visitations and debriefing sessions with professional developers (6), district-sponsored professional development activities (6), cluster-based professional development activities (activities held for 2-3 schools) (2), support meetings for principals (2), and a planning meeting for district professional developers (1). Narrative field notes were taken of all observed meetings and professional development activities.

In March of 1998, interviews were conducted with 23 teachers, 7 staff developers, all three principles and 1 member of the district leadership on broad issues associated with District #2's Literacy Initiative, its Standards Initiative and their intersection. The principals were also interviewed about the history and concerns of their school as well as their personal definitions of good teaching.

Interviews and observations of professional development were reviewed in order to identify themes of administrator practice. These emerging classroom and administrator findings were then reviewed with the District Superintendent (Acting) and the Director of Professional Development. Based on their comments and questions, critical areas of the work of District #2 administrators were identified. These areas form our emerging framework of administrator practice that supports ambitious, student-centered forms of instruction.

The Balanced Literacy program of Community School District #2: A Case of Implementing Challenging Instruction

The Balanced Literacy program is the result of a ten-year literacy initiative in District #2. Shortly after Anthony Alvarado took over as superintendent in 1986, District #2 leadership set a goal to improve literacy instruction and achievement within *all* classrooms. From the start, district leaders were not interested in developing a few boutique programs that only a few classrooms or schools could implement well. Instead, they wished to develop an improvement strategy that reached into the classroom of each and every teacher and raised the competencies of all students. To use Richard Elmore's words, the plan was to move the entire "herd" of teachers and students in the same general "northwest" direction (Elmore, personal communication, August 1997).

They began their efforts in this direction by creating study groups comprised of District #2 leaders, principals, teachers and outside experts who examined what was known about how children learn to read. They were strongly influenced by Cambourne's Conditions of Learning (Cambourne, 1995) as well as by models of instruction developed in New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996), and those emanating from the Early Literacy project at Ohio State University (Fountas & Pinnell, 1995). District #2 has a significant number of at-risk readers within its

student population and thus found the instructional strategies from Reading Recovery (Clay, 1987; Pinnell, 1989), an early intervention program recognized nationally for its success at improving literacy achievement among at-risk students, particularly pertinent.

From these resources and others, the District #2 community developed a commitment to creating a Balanced Literacy program—one in which students interact with texts at varying levels of challenge in a variety of settings with different levels of support from the teacher. The final goal is for students to become proficient and independent readers.[2] On the way to meeting that goal, some challenging texts which are beyond the students' current reading capacities are read *to* the students with the teacher demonstrating vocal inflection, strategies for comprehending a text and a joy for reading. Other, much simpler texts are read *by* students alone as they practice the vocabulary and reading strategies they have already gained. Those texts which are just beyond the students' ability to tackle by themselves, the teacher reads *with* them, providing support, guidance and direct instruction in new reading strategies. The need for students to have *to*, *with*, and *by* reading experiences each day, working towards a time when they will be self-sufficient readers, can be considered the central principle of District #2's literacy program. A corollary to this principle is that students' reading abilities and needs must be constantly assessed so that appropriate texts and teaching points can be selected for them. A second principle is that students' early reading experiences should include quality, engaging children's literature, without which they will never develop a love of literature or reading. A third principle is that all at-risk readers need to receive direct, individualized reading instruction each day.

These basic principles are all that some experienced principals and teachers need to guide their efforts at creating a strong Balanced Literacy program in their schools and classrooms. However, for many others, principles alone are not enough. These teachers and principals may need further assistance interpreting the instructional implications of such principles. District #2 provides such interpretations through two kinds of concrete specification. First, they outline and describe a set of *instructional strategies* gleaned from their various readings and experiences that teachers can use to achieve specific subgoals of a Balanced Literacy program (e.g., running records as a means of assessing students, direct instruction in the three-part cueing system as a means of assisting students to identify unknown words). Second, they provide a *framework* for combining these strategies in such a way that will ensure comprehensive attention to the full range of assistance and practice opportunities that children need in order to learn to read (e.g., the Read Aloud component serves as a means of reading *to* students, the Guided Reading component as a means of reading

[2]District #2's literacy program includes a focus on writing as well as reading and a strong impetus towards exploring links between writing and reading. However, the core of its literacy philosophy is based in reading and so we stress that aspect here.

with students, and the Independent Reading component as a means of reading *by* students). Together, these instructional strategies and the overall framework comprise the specifications of quality literacy instruction, known collectively throughout the district as *the* Balanced Literacy program.[3] They are conveyed through a variety of professional development activities made available by the District #2 leadership to new and struggling teachers and are more or less codified in the training materials given out during the past two summers to teachers and staff developers participating in their extended year program (Community School District #2, 1998).

It should be noted that, even with the level of specificity provided by the Balanced Literacy program, there is a lot of room for teacher interpretation and improvisation. Selection of texts and plans for teaching points to be made are based upon teacher assessments of student needs at any given point in time and thus cannot be easily specified in a programmatic way. The forms of instruction used require teachers not only to continually revisit their plans for meeting students' current learning needs, but also to respond dynamically to those needs as they reveal themselves in the course of instruction. While experienced teachers may be able to predict many of the difficulties and responses students will have with a particular lesson or text, they can never predict them all. As a result, such just-in-time teaching must by its very nature be improvisational.

The relationship between the Balanced Literacy program and administrator practice in District #2 is complex. As described above, the Balanced Literacy program is: (1) an exemplar of an ambitious program of instruction that seeks to achieve high-level cognitive outcomes on the part of students, and that demands high-level forms of implementation on the part of teachers; and (2) an exemplar of a program that has been specifically designed with wide-spread implementation in mind and thus has demanded some degree of specification. Rather than being viewed as a static context within which administrators do their work, however, the Balanced Literacy program should be seen as both *shaping and being shaped by* their work. Over time, the Balanced Literacy program has remained open to modifications and to differential guidelines with respect to its enactment across classrooms and schools. Understanding administrator practice that supports high-level programs, we argue, requires attention to the subtle interplay between how large-scale programs are specified and how they are supported.

Administrative Support of Literacy Instruction

In this section, three broad streams of administrative practice related to the teaching and learning of literacy in district classrooms are identified and described. They include: (1) identifying teacher

[3]For a more in depth description of the Balanced Literacy program see Stein & D'Amico, 1998.

needs and providing support; (2) identifying unmet student needs and fashioning programmatic adjustments; and, (3) appraising the potential value of new instructional strategies and programs. After each description of administrator practice, the ways in which that practice is enabled by or interacts with the specifications of the Balanced Literacy program is addressed.

Identifying Teacher Needs and Tailoring Support

The role of teachers in the new reform pedagogies can perhaps be seen most vividly in the instructional tasks they choose and the manner in which they support students' interactions with those tasks. Unlike earlier modes of instruction in which students progressed lockstep through a standardized set of experiences and teachers' primary roles were demonstration, assignment and assessment (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), today's teachers are expected to carefully design or select tasks that will both build on students' prior knowledge and provoke the development of important understandings. In literacy, a crucial teacher responsibility is the choice of a text combined with the careful enactment of a planned instructional activity for a particular student or small group of students. Together the text and instruction are meant to offer just the right combination of challenge and support to push the student(s) to the next level of reading proficiency. In the District #2 Balanced Literacy program this key responsibility of teaching occurs during Guided Reading.

The purpose of Guided Reading is to provide direct instruction that is tailored to meet the specific needs of a particular group of students. The teacher selects a text which provides useful practice in a reading strategy that the assembled students appear to have missing from their reading repertoires (e.g., building awareness of word structures and patterns to assist in decoding and deciphering words, interpreting quotation marks, identifying how metaphors are used). This requires both assessing what the students in the group can already do well and what they need to learn, and then choosing a text that is relevant for the focus of the lesson (i.e., a text which provides challenges to the students relevant to that focus but does not present too many other challenges which might distract the students from that focus). Making this complex set of instructional decisions requires that teachers are familiar with a large repertoire of children's literature, know what reading strategies and skills students need to acquire, and know how to assess children's reading proficiency.

This form of instruction is intense and requires the full attention of the teacher conducting it. Added to the complexity of planning for and running Guided Reading sessions itself are the challenges associated with managing the activity of the rest of the students in the room so that they are productive and do not distract the teacher from her work with the Guided Reading group.

Moreover, since the format of a given Guided Reading lesson is dependent upon the intersection of (1) the reading strategy being taught with (2) the capabilities and needs of the students and (3) the affordances of the text, there cannot be an exact script for conducting Guided Reading sessions. While the frame of activities in a typical lesson and the intent/purpose for Guided Reading overall are provided to teachers through the Balanced Literacy program specifications, teachers' actual practice is a combination of their interpretations of these guidelines and the realities of the classroom situation.

Guided Reading is a highly demanding form of instruction for teachers to implement well and as a result demands high levels of support from outside the classroom in order to be successful in more than a few scattered classrooms of highly motivated and skillful teachers. Principals and professional developers agree. When asked which components of the Balanced Literacy program was the most challenging for teachers to master and implement, they unanimously cited Guided Reading.

Not surprisingly, our classroom observations indicated that teachers do have difficulty implementing Guided Reading well. It was rare among the 72 classroom observations to find *focused* Guided Reading sessions in which the teacher had a clear instructional purpose for the lesson. While teachers often provided significant support to the students with whom they were reading, they only sometimes helped the students abstract that support into a general strategy for reading which they could later use on their own. In addition, management issues were a problem for some teachers, even those with strong and purposeful Guided Reading lessons. Some teachers had difficulty finding time in their day to meet with more than one guided reading group. Others had difficulty focusing on their work with the guided reading group because of distractions from the rest of the students.

The District #2 leaders are aware of and concerned about these teachers' struggles. They recognize the demands that Guided Reading places on teachers and they expect that learning to do it well will take time and effort, especially for new teachers. District #2 leaders become familiar with the difficulties of *specific teachers* by spending time in district classrooms themselves, through ongoing conversations with principals who regularly visit teachers' classrooms, and through regular interactions with district staff developers who spend large amounts of time in classrooms assisting teachers with all aspects of literacy. These multiple sources of information allow administrators to diagnose the roots of teachers' difficulties as opposed to the more typical administrator practice of checking off the presence or absence of superficial features of a prescribed practice.

District #2 administrators' response to the confusions and complexities associated with Guided Reading has been to provide deeper and more concentrated attention to this aspect of Balanced Literacy within their professional development system. They use three approaches to providing this more concentrated attention. The first involves *increasing the degree of specification* of what Guided Reading does and does not entail. Teachers who are experiencing difficulties are encouraged by their principal and staff developer to attend full-day professional development sessions sponsored by the district -- sessions which target underlying rationale and theory, as well as provide demonstrations of and suggestions for improved instructional strategies. The professional development sessions include explicit conversations about teaching behaviors that *are* and *are not* Guided Reading. Live demonstrations of quality Guided Reading practice are followed by discussions which include a review of the aspects of the instruction that signified it was Guided Reading (December 12, 1997 observation, Professional Development for Focus Literacy teachers). This technique helps distinguish Guided Reading from other forms of small group reading instruction with which many teachers are acquainted (e.g., round robin reading), an important exercise given the tendencies of teachers in general to assimilate new ideas into their existing schema (Ball, 1988).

Second, new or struggling teachers *observe* Guided Reading in more experienced teachers' classroom. This form of assistance is called intervisitation, a professional development strategy in which new or struggling teachers visit more advanced teachers in order to observe the enactment of particular strategies first hand in real classroom settings (Elmore & Burney, 1996; HPLC, 1998; Maloy, 1998). By observing a session of Guided Reading in an actual classroom, teachers receive a first-hand view of what is involved in all the interactions that comprise Guided Reading in a setting which is more similar to their own classroom than is possible to provide in the workshop setting of a professional development session. Intervisitations can occur between teachers from two different schools, or they can occur between teachers in the same school who are at different levels of practice. In either case, there is always a careful plan worked out in advance regarding who to visit and what the focus of the visit should be. In addition, teachers are usually accompanied by a staff developer or principal who can help them to interpret their observations and discuss how to transfer what they've seen to their own practice.

The third and final approach is *assisted learning in context of the teacher's own classroom practice*. Administrators firmly believe that district-based professional development and the opportunity to observe others doing it well is not enough. As stated by a District #2 principal, "You learn by doing. You learn by observing, but mostly, you learn by doing." Thus, principals and professional developers within schools often focus their visits to teachers' classrooms on

Guided Reading, helping the teachers to reflect upon and improve their efforts at implementing it. "It's really about getting down deep and dirty and up close—helping people see their practice...to help them see where their kids went on this journey," says another principal. After observing a teacher's lesson, a principal may ask her how it went and where she thinks the instruction needs work. She may ask probing questions to help a teacher focus her reflections. As one principal explains, "You have to have taken good notes and point out to them, okay, what was the purpose of this lesson? What did you hope to do? Do you think you met that goal? Well, maybe you met it with Jose. How do you think you did with Peter?" Both the principals quoted above note that a lack of *purpose* for a teacher's lessons is an indication to them that the teacher has only a shallow understanding of Guided Reading, or any other component of the Balanced Literacy program. Asking teachers questions about their goals and purposes for observed lessons is one way principals help the teachers reflect upon how to deepen their understanding of Guided Reading and make their lessons richer.

The support principals provide for teachers struggling with Guided Reading is not only one-on-one, but also with small groups of teachers or through school-wide endeavors. In one of the schools studied, several of the teachers were having difficulty meeting with more than one Guided Reading group a day and were questioning the trade-offs associated with meeting with more than one. The principal was working with them to devise a close study of how each of them was using their classroom time. This information would then be used as data to further discussions about the optimal way for teachers to manage Guided Reading in their individual classrooms. In other schools, considerable effort had been made to "level" all the books available in order to both familiarize teachers with the children's literature available and facilitate their choice of texts for Guided Reading lessons, thereby reducing the complexity involved in planning.

The above discussion of Guided Reading illustrates how district administrators identify areas of teacher need and provide support that is tailored to those needs. Although this illustration was drawn from one particular component of the Balanced Literacy program (Guided Reading), as the next section of this paper will show, District #2 administrators have also identified areas of need with respect to other parts of the Balanced Literacy program and tailored support related to those needs. We propose that identifying teacher needs and providing teacher support is scaffolded by the Balanced Literacy program. First, the specifications of this program allow administrators (district leaders and principals) to catch most overt and, in many cases, more subtle misinterpretations or poor executions of literacy instruction. Without some sense of what *ought to be occurring* in the name of literacy instruction, identifying missteps would be a more difficult process at best and inconsistently or never done at worst. Second, the Balanced Literacy program

allows district leaders, principals, staff developers, and teachers to converse about complex aspects of practice. During the time that the teacher is still learning, the specifications function as a set of guidelines and directions. As the teacher progresses and evolves they become a set of common references which enable on-going discussion between the teacher and her colleagues.

Identifying Unmet Student Needs and Fashioning Programmatic Adjustments

As mentioned earlier, one of the functions of the Balanced Literacy program is that it outlines the full set of practices that one should see in a comprehensive literacy program. When a gap in instruction emerges that is *not* represented within the program's framework, that framework is adjusted to meet those needs. District #2's current work in Word Study illustrates this point.

For many years there has been a debate among literacy practitioners and researchers over the power of phonics versus whole-language approaches to the teaching of reading. Despite an emerging recent consensus that both are needed and that they are best addressed in an integrated fashion (Snow et al, 1998), the design of instructional practices to do so is not a trivial matter. One of the most difficult points of contention involves contextualized versus decontextualized approaches to children's learning of letter-sound correspondences and other aspects of how words work.

Over the past several years, District 2 has been actively grappling with these issues. In the philosophy of the Balanced Literacy program, the study of words would ideally emerge from or be folded into the literature-based instructional strategies that comprise the program. The reading strategies children are taught include "sounding out" words in addition to figuring them out through contextual or pictorial cues. The Balanced Literacy program recommends that teachers integrate teaching points around letter-sound correspondence and word and grammatical structures into various aspects of the program such as Guided Reading and Shared Reading.

Our research shows that folding the study of words into a literature-based program is challenging. If teachers wish to *embed* the study of words into one of the Balanced Literacy components, the complexity of what they must know and be able to do increases. They must learn to capitalize on opportunities that *emerge* from work with text and they must learn how to *systematically embed* such instruction into work with text. In the latter case, this demands that teachers have a plan of to-be-learned topics and know which pieces of children's literature are both at the right reading level for their students and are appropriate for supporting students' learning related to each of the particular topics included on that plan.

Data collected during the 1997-98 school year found that only a few teachers (a) incorporated strong, purposeful attention to words in their lessons; (b) had a plan of Word Study topics to be

covered in their grade; and/or (c) were knowledgeable and skillful enough to pull together students' needs, to-be-learned topics, and appropriate pieces of literature. Most of the teachers observed seemed to have a hit-or-miss approach to the study of words and a few rarely included the study of words in their instruction at all. The support some teachers gave students attempting to "sound-out" words rarely advanced further than stretching the pronunciation of the word for the students or helping them identify the initial sound. In a few cases, teachers attempts at Word Study lessons, whether contextualized or decontextualized, conveyed either erroneous or confusing information about words.

Conversations with the district leadership about these findings revealed that they were already aware of this situation through their observations of classrooms, review of students' achievement scores on standardized tests and conversations with staff developers and principals. As a result, they have been concerned about the lack of systematic attention to the study of words within District #2 classrooms. Their initial response to this problem was to add a new component to the Balanced Literacy program in the summer of 1997: Word Study. In effect, by labeling it and making it a separate, identifiable component, they gave the study of words both visibility and prominence within the instructional conversations of the district.

However, as the data gathered in 1997-98 showed, many teachers were experiencing difficulties in this aspect of their work. Principals at the three schools studied noted that a significant proportion of their teachers lacked the kind of knowledge necessary to take advantage of the instructional opportunities afforded by their students' experiences with text. "The newer teachers enjoy reading the books with the children, but the texts are not necessarily used for instruction in the way they should be," commented one principal. The principals and District #2 leaders note that many of the teachers coming out of teacher preparation programs with a strong whole language influence did not receive training on the teaching of phonics or grammar in their pre-service education. As a result, they do not possess coherent understanding of students' learning needs with respect to knowledge of words.

A more recent response of the district leadership to these problems is to suggest that teachers who are lacking deep knowledge of words adopt a phonics program, or at the very least study the teacher manuals that come with such programs, as a way of improving their knowledge and proficiency in this area. These recommendations have raised many concerns among principals and teachers. First, they worry that a separate, phonics-based piece of instruction may not be consistent with the underlying principles of the Balanced Literacy program, which has a strong literature base. Second, they are concerned that the decisions have been made without enough research into how to best address District #2's word study problem. In particular, some educators

in District #2 expressed concerns that reliance on a phonics program would lead to decontextualized and meaningless knowledge of words that students would not be able to effectively link to their knowledge of language or their efforts at reading. In addition, there was some concern that District #2 was moving toward a two-tiered system of literacy instruction: decontextualized phonics drills in the highest poverty schools, where the specifications of the Balanced Literacy program are followed most closely, and whole language in the relatively more affluent schools. In conversations about these issues at a recent principals' retreat (September, 1998), the principals and District #2 leaders agreed to begin an in-depth study of how to best incorporate the study of words into the Balanced Literacy program and support teachers in their efforts to do so.

The story of Word Study demonstrates how the Balanced Literacy program both shapes and is shaped by District #2's work. First the framework allowed administrators to identify gaps in the opportunities provided to students. It also allows them to identify possible shortcomings in the framework itself for supporting teachers' efforts to fill those gaps. This, in turn, led to further discussion about how to better specify the program in order to meet students' and teachers' needs. Even as such evolutionary moves are made, the District #2 community never looses sight of the entire set of principles that underlie their literacy instruction. The study group on Word Study is currently taking both the problem of learning about words and the initial suggestions made by the district leaders and exploring solutions that will both meet the concerns and remain true to the principles underlying their program. As we shall see in the next section, decisions about how to change, adapt, and augment literacy instruction in district classrooms are always made against the backdrop of these basic principles.

Evaluating New Instructional Techniques

A common challenge faced by teachers and administrators is the evaluation of instructional materials, techniques, and programs which claim to develop student's abilities to think, interpret text, and critically analyze information. The present-day landscape is cluttered with suggested programs and techniques. Some may be powerful and effective. Others may be useless and distracting. All are tempting. Decisions regarding which of these to entertain fall mostly to building principals and their faculties. New programs may be introduced by either principals or teachers who have heard about them through other colleagues or through professional readings, workshops, courses or meetings. We discuss the introduction and evaluation of two such programs or techniques within District #2—Interactive Writing and Partner Reading. While both these techniques have enjoyed a reputation for success and are promoted by educational professionals and researchers whom the district leadership respect, administrators seem to have an

easier time supporting the introduction of Interactive Writing than they do Partner Reading. We suggest that this difference is due to the fact that it is easier for teachers and administrators to see how Interactive Writing aligns with the framework and principles of the Balanced Literacy program.

Interactive Writing

Interactive Writing is a whole class activity in which the teacher and the students collaborate to write a text. The text is written on either an overhead transparency, a large white-board, or a blank big-book so that all the students have access to what is being written. The text itself may be written by the teacher or a student (or both), but the composition and editing of the text is worked out collectively, with the teacher providing significant support and facilitation. In some variations the students each have a small white board or clipboard with paper on their laps on which they make their own attempts at writing the text which is being constructed collectively.

Most of the teachers in the three schools studied were just beginning to familiarize themselves with this technique. A couple of principals had made professional development resources available to send teachers (and themselves) to training workshops on Interactive Writing. In at least one of the schools, a detailed debriefing session was held to hand out copies of the workshop materials and discuss the technique with those first through third grade teachers who were unable to attend the workshop. In addition, some teachers had visited classrooms in other schools where the technique was being used. Those investigating it were excited about the practice, but with the exception of two teachers who had included Interactive Writing as a component of their instruction for most of the year, their efforts were largely formative.

At this time, Interactive Writing is an "optional" form of instruction in District #2 and as a result, the Balanced Literacy program framework has not been reorganized to accommodate it. Instead, it is up to those teachers who wish to implement Interactive Writing to discover how to include such a form of instruction in their day while still meeting the other instructional goals of the Balanced Literacy program. Thus, much of the support for teachers implementing Interactive Writing comes from their school leadership, rather than the district leadership.

The teachers and principals involved in this study have assessed the worthiness of Interactive Writing against the principles of the Balanced Literacy program. Many of the specific supports the teachers provide students endeavoring to construct meaning during this form of instruction are similar to those they use in Guided Reading, Shared Reading, Independent Reading and Writing Workshop (e.g., making connections to knowledge about letter-sound correspondence, spreading

out pronunciation of words to spell or decode them, and reviewing the flow and meaning of an entire sentence to see if the individual words within it make sense). As is the case with those components, instruction during Interactive Writing is contextualized within the activity of comprehending or conveying meaning through genuine texts, such as writing an individual student's "news for the day". Because the principles and strategies of Interactive Writing are so consistent with that of the other components in the Balanced Literacy program, its implementation within District #2 classrooms is not nearly as philosophically troublesome as that of Word Study. As a result, neither the District leadership, nor the principals need to have deep philosophical conversations with the teachers about how to juxtapose Interactive Writing with the current Balanced Literacy program. Instead, their support can focus on the nuts and bolts of implementing this form of instruction well and fitting it realistically into their schedules.

Reading Partnerships

In contrast, ensuring that all the principles underlying the Balanced Literacy program are being addressed through the use of Reading Partnerships, requires a different kind of appraisal by teachers and administrators. Students supporting each other's reading in pairs occurs within a variety of instructional contexts and for a variety of instructional purposes in District #2 classrooms. For example, "Buddy Reading" or "Paired Reading" is often what a portion or all of the students in a classroom do while the teacher works with a Guided Reading group. In most of these cases, reading with a partner is seen as a way for students to *practice* reading while the teacher is otherwise involved. While some attention may be spent on discussing with students how to read well with a partner (i.e. when introducing a Buddy Reading station to students), generally reading partnerships are *not a focal* form of instruction in the classroom (Stein & D'Amico, in preparation).

However, in a few classrooms in District #2 the formation and effective implementation of Reading Partnerships among students is the *core* of the teacher's literacy instruction (Stein & D'Amico, 1998). The teachers implementing literacy instruction which places Reading Partnerships at its core are generally following a model of literacy instruction they have learned through extensive professional development in the Reading and Writing Project at Teacher's College, Columbia University. In this form of literacy instruction, a considerable amount of time is spent early in the year teaching students how to select books for themselves which are "just right" — providing them with some challenge, but not too much challenge. They also spend significant time learning how to both chose a reading partner and work well with a reading partner. The bulk of direct instruction in reading then occurs while students are reading together in pairs and the teacher circulates among them, consulting with them on their book choices, their reading partnership, and

their actual reading. Since much of the instruction emerges in the course of these consultations, it requires careful assessment and tracking of student progress and the ability to react productively to teaching opportunities as they present themselves.

This form of instruction creates subtle challenges for principals and District #2 leaders. Like the Balanced Literacy program, it is literature based and aims to support students becoming independent readers. However, unlike Interactive Writing, it does not fit easily into the structural framework for Balanced Literacy. In particular, the teachers and principals who learn about the program see it as supplanting either Independent Reading, Guided Reading or both and they are uncertain as to whether the Reading Partnerships will really fulfill the same functions served by these two essential components of the Balanced Literacy program. As one teacher explains, "We *need* the Guided Reading piece. Their partner reading *is* the [direct] instruction piece. Our [direct] instruction is *more* than that."

Part of the difficulty teachers have in thinking about the role that Reading Partnerships might play in their overall work is that the Teacher's College literacy program uses some of the same terms, particularly "independent reading" and "Balanced Literacy program", but with a different set of underlying assumptions. These terms have such power and centrality within District #2 literacy conversations, that alternate definitions cause confusion, frustration and even anger among some teachers. "You can't just make excuses and say it is terminology," complains one teacher at a grade level meeting her principal was leading on this topic. "I get ticked off because it isn't *just* terminology." Her concerns were not only about the words being used, but the set of assumptions that underlie them and the ability of the terminology to serve as a vehicle of communication within the group if those assumptions are shifting.

A concern that administrators in District #2 have with respect to the Reading Partnerships is its structural arrangement of ten to fifteen pairs of students, as contrasted with the four to six small groups of students typical of Guided Reading. Recall that one of the central principles of the Balanced Literacy program is that all at-risk readers must receive direct and focused instruction each day. The very structure of Reading Partnerships, with its large number of pairs in contrast to Guided Reading's small number of groups, may make this task difficult if not impossible. As one principal explains, "I don't know how the planning comes about. I don't know how you can be in a classroom with twenty kids and they're in ten partnerships and you get to all of them and guide that work and know that it's going to come out okay. I guess that's what I worry about."

Many of the comments and concerns quoted above came from a grade level meeting on Partner Reading and its potential costs and benefits that was facilitated by one of the principals studied.

The fact that they could have a deep conversation on this topic is emblematic of the strength of the shared understanding and language provided by the principles and specifications of the Balanced Literacy program. Each participant knew what the others meant by the phrase "independent reading" and were therefore able to both spot and discuss how the definition of that term differed within the Teacher's College program. Moreover, they all understood the basic principles underlying the Balanced Literacy program well enough to be able to discuss the possible trade-offs implicit in implementing Reading Partnerships.

Both these examples show that literacy instruction in District #2 schools is guided, but not stifled, by the Balanced Literacy program. New techniques can be entertained and alternate frameworks for literacy instruction can be considered. Occasionally, there may be tensions and heated debate among teachers, administrators and professional developers surrounding proposed new techniques and frameworks. However, teachers do have flexibility in their instructional designs as long as they are coherent with the principles of the Balanced Literacy program and the District #2 leaders believe their students are being well served. The administrator's role is to support teachers' efforts to appraise these new techniques and frameworks in light of the principles underlying the Balanced Literacy program specifications, the needs of their particular student population, and their own strengths as a teacher.

Administrator Practice In and Around Balanced Literacy

We began this paper with the proposal that understanding administrator practice that is supportive of large-scale implementation of high-level programs requires attention to the subtle interplay between how such programs are specified and how they are supported. In this paper, we have provided an example of how one specific kind of programmatic specification scaffolds administrator support of teacher learning. Specifically, we've illustrated how the instructional strategies and components of the Balanced Literacy program provide a framework for observations, conversations, and negotiations around teacher learning in Community School District #2.

Observations

Knowing where and how to observe during classroom visits can be a difficult task for administrators. Without some framework to focus and guide one's observations, the ongoing stream of activities, materials, and conversations can defy attempts at meaningful interpretation. When District #2 leaders visit schools, they observe in every classroom in the building, spending approximately 10 - 20 minutes in each. On the basis of these observations and information

supplied by the principal, the leaders are able to roughly gauge the quality of instruction in the building as a whole and each classroom in particular. District Leaders draw upon these observations to make overall judgments about the progress of the district as a whole, to formulate ideas regarding potential gaps in student learning experiences, to identify and design needed professional development experiences, and as occasions to deepen the conversation with principals regarding student and teacher needs surrounding literacy.

Similarly, when principals observe in their building's classrooms, they are able to focus quickly and make informed judgments. They have a sense of what to look for, how what they are seeing fits into an overall package of literacy experiences provided to children, and are relatively astute in differentiating weak from strong practice and recommending various forms of assistance based upon their observations.

We propose that district leaders and the principals who are able to "size up" the instructional milieu so efficiently can do so because they carry around a detailed of what strong literacy practice looks like. They do not merely scout for the use of a prescribed strategy or the presence of a specific Balanced Literacy component. Rather, using the underlying principles of the Balanced Literacy program, they determine whether the literacy needs of the children in a particular classroom are being met. In this observational process, however, the Balanced Literacy specifications serve a useful function. Administrators can tag what they are seeing in the classroom to the various Balanced Literacy components and the functions that are served by those components. In this way, the Balanced Literacy program serves as a template for accessing strong versus weak characteristics of instruction and for making judgments about the range of practices to which students are being exposed. As such, the Balanced Literacy program serves as a heuristic for observing and organizing the complex milieu of many classrooms and making decisions regarding which teachers (and students) need which kinds of assistance.

Conversations

Part of the difficulty of district-wide improvement efforts is the facilitation of communication across various organizational layers. "Meeting children's needs" may mean one thing to district leaders, something entirely different to principals, and still something different to teachers. Such breakdowns of communications are particularly apt to occur when programs are ill-specified, leading to variable and weak enactments of intended practices (Cohen, 1997). In District #2, the Balanced Literacy program and the various materials and professional development experiences that support it, provide a common set of terms and meanings that anchor discussions among district leaders, principals, and teachers.

By facilitating discussions that are anchored in common understandings, the Balanced Literacy program enables coordination among district leaders, principals, and staff developers in planning for and carrying out teacher support activities. After their visits to individual classrooms, district leaders talk about what they've seen with the building principal, referring often to the strategies and components of the Balanced Literacy program. For example, they might discuss the extent to which children are receiving opportunities to practice reading through engagement with familiar and enjoyable texts in terms of the nature of the Independent Reading sessions that were observed. Or they may discuss the need to coax students to the next level of reading competence by reference to the manner in which Guided Reading is being conducted. In short, the terms of the Balance Literacy Program reference agreed-upon meanings and an underlying philosophy thereby enabling district leaders and principals to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of various teacher's practices in an efficient and shared manner. The principal, in turn, relies upon the same shared understandings of these Balanced Literacy terms to carry on the conversation at a later point in time with her staff developers. In the case of struggling teachers, they make plans to provide further assistance, assistance which is also tagged by the terminology of the Balanced Literacy program and can be expected to carry with it all of the underlying philosophy and meaning.

Negotiations

District-wide efforts of instructional improvement are often characterized by a top-down, start-and-stop quality. A new initiative is adopted by district leaders, often with little or no negotiation regarding its selection or implementation. The life of such innovations is typically short and their impact small. Soon they are replaced by the next innovation, usually without reference to the one which preceded it.

By contrast the Balanced Literacy program has been District #2's literacy program for the past decade. As such, it has weathered the comings and goings of many educational trends and fads. No doubt, the fact that the program was grown through experimentation and study, not adopted, has impacted its longevity. Our sense is that its distinguished history has also been influenced by the fact that : (1) it is not a static program, but rather has remained open to modifications based on careful observations of its effectiveness; and (2) it is not applied in a rigid manner but rather is used as a flexible instrument in the hands of experienced administrators. Both of these kinds of negotiations form a major part of administrator practice in District #2.

Negotiations about the Balanced Literacy program

The Balanced Literacy program can be described as organic. As illustrated by the Word Study Vignette, it is capable of stretching and growing, but not in an undisciplined manner. Additions are carefully scrutinized by members at different levels of the district community to ensure that they are really needed and that they cohere with the program's undergirding principles. When judging how the current program specifications are holding up, the bottom line is always clear: Are all children learning to read? As such, modifications often emerge from the field because teachers, staff developers and principals spend the most time in close-hand observations of children as they are learning to read. A second and often equally compelling consideration in program modification is the capacities of teachers to enact a particular form of instructional practice given their skill and background knowledge. In these cases, principals and district leaders are often in the best positions to judge when and how program modifications should be undertaken. The overriding point is that the shape and form of the Balanced Literacy program is always negotiated, never proclaimed. Although who participates and how may vary, the basic process of negotiation does not.

Negotiations about the Use of the Balanced Literacy program

District Leaders talk comfortably and confidently about schools in which the principal is encouraging his or her "own" Balanced Literacy program—one that is consistent with the underlying principles of the Balanced Literacy program, but which may use a different framework or a different combination and pacing of teaching strategies. The focus of District #2 appears to be upon whether or not individual schools and teachers implement a form of literacy instruction that *is coherent with the underlying goals and purposes* of the Balanced Literacy program. If the form of instruction they implement does so, it is *a* Balanced Literacy program (lower case), even if it does not use the structure, components or strategies of *the* Balanced Literacy program (capitalized). This flexibility allows teachers and schools to tailor the program to meet the specific needs of the children under their care, as well as to experiment with new and promising strategies.

The management of this degree of flexibility could be overwhelming except for the fact that not *everyone* is encouraged to make such wide interpretations of the program. The degree to which principals encourage their teachers' to experiment with innovative practices differs based upon the extent to which their teachers *and* students are perceived as capable of effectively teaching and learning literacy using alternate strategies. District #2 leaders worry most about the students and teachers in the 13 schools which they have designated "Focus Literacy" schools. Because of the challenges involved in teaching at-risk students, such schools often have a difficult time attracting

and retaining strong teachers. Many of these schools have undergone changes of leadership in recent years and the new principals' endeavors to repair some of those previous poor staffing choices have led to a significant number of new and inexperienced teachers. As a result, principals in the Focus Literacy schools are facing the formidable task of improving literacy for a challenging and challenged group of students with a teaching staff that often needs a lot of support. Under these circumstances, the District #2 leadership strongly encourages principals to have their staffs closely follow the specifications of the Balanced Literacy program:

> In those [focus literacy] schools we really expect that the structure is adhered to because . . . Number one, it's good for the kids. Number two, it supports the learning of the teachers and it really gives them a solid base and foundation in which to know that they are doing a good job until they gain enough experience and enough strategies and enough of a repertoire where they can then flex. Until that occurs, it's very important that those kids get that solid rigorous instruction because they are starting three steps behind to begin with and you can't afford to let them fall five steps behind, (interview, district director of professional development, July 1, 1998).

Thus, the Balanced Literacy program is not a rigid set of specifications applied uniformly across all situations. Instead, administrators use it as a reference point for making decisions about forms of instruction that will best take into account the capabilities of individual teachers and the needs of the students they serve.

Facilitating Conditions

The context of any given district must be an up-front consideration in the design of any systemic program of instructional improvement. As such, it is important to recognize the conditions that existed in our example of Community School District #2 which serve to enable the effectiveness of this particular form of programmatic specification coupled with administrative support.

Background Knowledge of Administrators

District #2 leaders are deeply knowledgeable about the teaching and learning of reading and writing. They began as specialists in this area and they have deepened their understandings through ongoing conversations with literacy experts from around the city, country, and world. As such, they operate at the level of the underlying principles of the Balanced Literacy program. This leads to fascile assessments and flexible forms of negotiation that would be unlikely with the Balanced Literacy program in the hands of a less knowledgeable administrator. For example, district leaders know *how* the various strategies and components of the Balanced Literacy program are connected to the underlying principles and they are able to recognize when the principles are

being met through other programs and strategies. The majority of the district's principals also possess expertise in literacy and have similarly deep understandings of the principles underlying the Balanced Literacy program. Most of these principals were hired by the current administration, and they, in turn, have hired teachers who have shown the capacity and willingness to learn. As such, a critical mass of human infrastructure exists within District #2 for supporting the enactment of quality literacy instruction.

In other districts in which lead administrators and principals do not have a deep knowledge base in literacy, one would expect them to be less successful in supporting the implementation of a literacy program defined in the manner in which the Balanced Literacy program is. Ongoing observations, negotiations, and conversations around a set of principles demands deep familiarity with the learning-to-read process and instructional strategies based upon how children learn to read. When District #2 administrators mentor other urban districts that lack the infrastructure of District #2, they often recommend beginning with a more highly specified program, one in which less room is left for teacher and principal decision making surrounding how the program will be implemented. Future research will need to identify the relationship between administrator capacity, degree of program specification, and administrator support for teacher learning.

Focus on Early Literacy

Another facilitating condition was the District's decision to begin instructional improvement in the area of early (K-3) literacy. District 2's method of specification, which focuses on instructional strategies and framework components, appears to be particularly well suited to early literacy, an area of schooling which is currently dominated by attention to process and skills, perhaps at the expense of content. The Balanced Literacy framework is relatively silent on *what* to teach, and perhaps this is why Word Study has presented such a conundrum for them. In the Word Study study group, they have begun to specify not only the instructional strategies that should be used, but also to *outline a set of topics to be covered.* It will be interesting to observe if their forays into specifying the content of Word Study will have an influence on other aspects of their program. Will they begin to address questions regarding the body of knowledge that their students should be acquiring (e.g., genre, plot structures, character archetypes, common themes, literary cannon, etc.)? This is an aspect of literacy on which even the IRA/NCTE standards have been silent. Given the district's predilections to take on the hard questions, we expect that such issues will be fodder for future experimentation and study.

Conclusion

The widespread implementation of ambitious programs of instruction places huge challenges on teachers and the administrators who must support them. In this paper, we have argued that the nature of administrator practice in support of teacher learning is greatly influenced by the degree and kind of instructional program specification. The example which we have provided illustrates how administrator practice can be scaffolded by a particular form of program specification, one that is based upon principles, strategies, and a comprehensive framework of components. We have shown how the Balanced Literacy program (a) provides a label for certain features of practice, thereby enabling conversations which reference shared understandings and common sets of assumptions; (b) marks the territory of salient features that comprise effective practice, thereby making it easier for teachers, principals, and District #2 leaders to differentiate strong instruction from weak instruction; and (c) outlines the full range of practices that one should see in a comprehensive program of literacy, thereby permitting easier identification of possible gaps in opportunities provided to teachers and students.

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