

In the Loop
Spring 2006
Dr. Frank Serafini

Building Capacity for Effective Literacy Instruction

Let me begin this column with an assertion; the quality of the classroom teacher, not the instructional program, is the primary variable in determining the effectiveness of a comprehensive reading program. This assertion is often hidden beneath the glitz and packaging of many commercial programs. It is not the quality of the wand, but the magic of the teacher that makes reading and writing come alive in today's classrooms.

In addition to this primary assertion, I would assert that no *significant* changes in instructional practices will occur until corresponding changes take place in one's theoretical understandings. In other words, unless we rethink why we do what we do in the name of literacy education and instruction, most changes will be cosmetic and superficial. The resources teachers select may change, or the daily schedule may be rearranged to accommodate new programs, but the core of one's instructional practices will remain intact.

What do these assertions mean for school reform efforts focusing on literacy education? I believe it means that we need to invest resources, time and effort into professional development models that balance pedagogical development with theoretical understandings. It means that we need to invest in helping teachers develop their theoretical understandings, rather than just changing their instructional approaches. Change occurs when teachers

understand more about effective instructional practices, based on sound theoretical foundations and current research, that support literacy development.

This begs the question, “What should professional development based on these assertions look like?” To begin, effective staff development needs to create space and opportunities for teachers to observe quality instruction, reflect on instructional practices and observations, and have time to dialogue with other concerned educators. Professional development should be based on the current needs and previous experiences of the teachers involved. As educators, we have been talking about “child-centered pedagogy” for many years, maybe it’s time to focus on “teacher-centered professional development.” The focus must be on growth, not change. Change will occur when teachers knowledge base expands and they are provided opportunities and support to grow and try new instructional practices.

There are three key principles of professional development that form the basis of my work with teachers and school boards; access and opportunity, choice and ownership, and dialogue and reflection. First, teachers need access to quality literature and reading materials, opportunities to share ideas with other teachers, and time and support to enact new instructional practices. Second, teachers need to have choice and voice in their professional experiences in order to take ownership and responsibility for their development. Finally, teachers need time to reflect upon and discuss their instructional decisions and practices with

other educators. These principles provide the foundation for the four essential components of professional development described below.

In addition, I need to help classroom teachers, administrators and literacy coaches or specialists develop a *Preferred Vision* for the instructional practices and learning environments they create in their schools and classrooms. It is our role to help teachers articulate what they want their instructional practices and learning environments to look like, sound like and focus upon. In order to develop a preferred vision, teachers must be able to critically examine their teaching practices based on current theoretical understandings. Growth without direction is confusion, and direction without growth is learned helplessness.

In order to help teachers and literacy coaches develop a Preferred Vision, I recommend the following four components of a professional development model:

1. Presentations – professional development providers should be willing and able to present new information that challenges and informs teachers about quality instructional practices.
2. Demonstrations – teachers need opportunities to see what quality instructional practices look like and talk about what they observe, either by visiting actual classrooms or through video clips of teachers teaching.
3. Learning Experiences – teachers need opportunities to try new instructional practices on their own and have time and support to

reflect on how things went and what may improve their instructional approaches.

4. Readings – other professional voices need to be brought into professional development experiences by reading educational journals and professional publications.

These professional development experiences do not guarantee that teachers will grow and develop, rather they provide the necessary foundation for professional development to occur. Helping teachers and administrators develop a preferred vision for their schools and classrooms, is an important step in realizing the types of quality instructional practices that will benefit our children and students.