The Language and Literacy Spectrum

Volume 27 | Issue 1 Article 2

2017

Partnering for Professional Development

Jennifer Davis-Duerr
SUNY New Paltz, duerrj@newpaltz.edu

INTRODUCTION

When I met Katie, she had just recently been hired as the school's literacy specialist. Neither she, nor the building principal or assistant superintendent were clear about Katie's role and responsibilities. This is an all too common occurrence in many schools (Hathaway, Martin, & Mraz, 2016; International Literacy Association, 2015). As a teacher educator leading a partnership with the school, my work had been focused on preservice teachers and professional development for their cooperating teachers; however, during my weekly visits, I got to know Katie and the challenges she was experiencing. I quickly realized how isolated a new literacy specialist could feel, and how little attention is given to supporting literacy specialists' professional growth. While there is clearly a commitment to supporting classroom teachers' professional growth to achieve the school, district, and state goals in literacy education, it appeared as if literacy specialists' professional growth may be overlooked.

Literacy specialists like Katie must have their professional development needs met if they are to empower teachers in their buildings with the knowledge and skills necessary to address students' language and literacy development. While there is substantive literature guiding professional development for teachers, little attention is given to the professional development of literacy specialists. This paper describes how transforming a school-university partnership became an innovative way to address the professional development needs of an elementary school's literacy specialist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Development of Literacy Specialists

There is a dearth of research and scholarly literature to guide the design of professional development of literacy specialists as compared to classroom teachers. Standard 6, Professional Learning and Leadership (International Literacy Association, 2010) emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning through participating in and facilitating professional learning and leadership. In the draft Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017 (International Literacy Association, 2016), literacy specialists' professional growth is assumed to be largely the responsibility of the individual, as they are expected to "seek out and participate in literacy professional learning activities, growing individually and within larger educational systems…" (Standard 6.1), and to "self-assess and reflect on their own roles as literacy leaders and learners…" (Standard 6.2). In one of few studies investigating how literacy specialists experience professional growth, Commeyras & DeGroff (1998) found that these professionals improve their practice through reading more professional literature than classroom teachers, but are rarely involved in collaboration as compared to classroom teachers. These findings are consistent with expectations that literacy specialists pursue professional growth independently. In contrast, there is considerable research to guide the design of high quality professional development for classroom teachers.

Characteristics of High Quality Teacher Professional Development

Current scholarship in the field of teacher professional development is very consistent, providing five characteristics of high quality professional development (see Table 1):

Table 1: Characteristics of High Quality Teacher Professional Development

Content Focus	directly connected to the acts of teaching and learning and is applied in daily practice within classrooms
Sustained Duration	sustained over time and provides continued support
Collective Participation	teachers from the same or similar context (i.e. district, school, grade level, subject area) participate in professional development together
Active Learning	combining various tools, techniques, and experiences in which educators can examine, observe, practice, and receive feedback
Fostering Coherence	degree to which the professional development is related to the school curriculum and goals, the teachers' current knowledge and beliefs, the needs of their students, and current school, district, and state reforms, policies, and standards

Content focus. Professional development activities that are content focused are "grounded in day-to-day teaching practice, and are designed to enhance teachers' instructional practices around content" (DeMonte, 2013, p.7). Examples of this include professional development inservice workshops focused on curriculum and/or assessments that have been adopted by the district, as well as techniques for differentiating instruction within the literacy instruction program.

Sustained duration. Professional development impacts classroom instruction when teachers have at least 14-20 hours of contact time that includes multiple opportunities for in-depth discussion of content, repeated practice in applying new pedagogical strategies, multiple and varied experiences with the content throughout the school year. An example of this is when an inservice workshop is followed by observation of the teachers applying the strategies, and then time to discuss their experiences and specific feedback.

Collective participation. When teachers from the same or similar context (i.e. district, school, grade level, subject area) participate in professional development together, there are increased opportunities for productive discussion of concepts, skills, and problems that arise in implementing new ideas, resulting in an interactive learning community (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Furthermore, teachers from the same or similar contexts are also better able to share and build upon their common understandings of curriculum, experiences with curriculum materials, and assessment requirements, thereby increasing their abilities to integrate what they've learned (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Their shared professional culture provides a forum for debate, problem solving, opportunities for informal exchanges (Avalos, 2011), and a sense of commitment that increases their capacity to grow (Garet et al., 2001). An example of this is when all teachers in a particular grade level attend a professional development session together and are provided with opportunities to process their learning together.

Active learning. From Avalos' (2011) review of over ten years of research in teacher professional development, it is clear that combining various tools, techniques, and experiences is most effective. Activities such as observing other teachers, receiving feedback about their own

teaching, analyzing student work, planning classroom implementation, producing presentations, leading discussion (Archibald, 2011), and producing written work may improve outcomes of professional development due to increasing teachers' engagement and helping them relate to complex concepts (Garet et al., 2001). The variation and challenge evident in these tasks aligns with what is known about adult learning theories in teachers' professional development (Smylie, 1995). Examples of this include breaking up a large group of teachers and giving each small group a focus question to guide their discussion of a demonstration or article.

Fostering coherence. The impact of professional development is also greatly influenced by the coherence or degree to which the professional development is related to the school curriculum and goals, the teachers' current knowledge and beliefs, the needs of their students, and current school, district, and state reforms, policies, and standards (Archibald, 2011; DeMonte, 2013; Desimone & Garet, 2015). When teachers participate in a series of professional development activities designed to build on one another, and for which a clear purpose has been communicated, teachers report greater changes in their knowledge and skills (Archibald, 2011; Garet et al., 2001). An example of this is an inservice workshop that focuses on how teachers can use small group reading instruction to meet specific Common Core Learning Standards.

These five characteristics of high quality teacher professional development are ubiquitous in the literature and are even threaded throughout the New York State Professional Development Standards (State Professional Standards and Practices Board for Teaching, 2009). Unfortunately, far too many teachers are required to attend professional development that is not designed with these characteristics in mind. One innovative way to address this pervasive problem is to develop school-university partnerships in which teacher educators partner with school literacy specialists.

School-University Partnerships and Professional Development

School-university partnerships take on many forms, but at the heart of this arrangement are university teacher educators collaborating with school teachers to support college students who are preparing to become teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2013). There exists an abundance of evidence and scholarship describing the benefits of school-university partnerships for the development of preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and teacher educators (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Gerla, Gilliam, & Wright, 2006; Holen & Yunk, 2014; Rakow & Robinson, 1997; Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2008). Sadly, this literature reveals the absence of literacy specialists' involvement in these partnerships. Sandholtz's (2002) findings show how school-university partnerships bring about professional development that exhibits all five of the characteristics of high quality professional development; however, literacy specialists were not involved in this work. How might school-university partnerships meet the professional development needs of literacy specialists as well?

ONE SMALL-SCALE SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

Making a small-scale partnership valuable

The small-scale partnership I have developed involves just one school. This makes it significantly different than many described in the literature, which often involve large districts with multiple schools, and many teachers and university faculty coming together (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Leslie, 2011). Although those partnerships are highly desirable given their impact on all involved,

these large-scale partnerships are often not possible due to geographic reasons, or because teacher education programs do not have a large number of faculty committed to this work. However, I have found that when an individual teacher educator collaborates with a building-level leader, such as a school's literacy specialist, a small-scale school-university partnership can accomplish many of the tremendous outcomes evident in larger more complex partnerships.

Goals of the partnership

I developed this school-university partnership to accomplish three main goals: 1) to provide preservice teachers a long-term placement in which to grow and develop into effective literacy teachers, 2) to support the school to refine their use of evidence-based practices in literacy instruction and assessment, and 3) to gain knowledge and experiences that improve my teaching of undergraduate and graduate students becoming classroom teachers and literacy specialists. All three of these goals are met by involving Katie, the school's literacy specialist, in this small-scale school-university partnership, though this article is focused primarily on the attainment of the second goal: supporting the professional growth of the literacy specialist and classroom teachers at the school such that evidence-based practices in literacy instruction and assessment are used consistently.

How does it work?

The partnership is comprised of ten undergraduate preservice teachers paired with ten classroom teachers. Each fall semester, the preservice teachers complete their literacy-focused fieldwork placement in the teachers' classrooms one full day per week, and each spring semester the preservice teachers stay with these same teachers for one of their student teaching placements. In the fall semesters, I am in the building one day per week overseeing preservice teachers' literacy-focused fieldwork experiences, and during the spring semesters I am in the building multiple days throughout the week supervising their student teaching. In addition to checking in with cooperating teachers while I am in the building, I also meet with Katie, join her in meetings with the school and district administrators, and support other teachers as needed. While this arrangement has had a substantial impact on my professional development, it is especially beneficial for Katie's and the classroom teachers' professional development as is described below.

RESULTING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Our unique partnership and the innovative ways in which the literacy specialist and I have collaborated has brought about professional development opportunities for Katie and the classroom teachers. The resulting professional development is illustrative of the research based characteristics of high quality professional development: Content focus, sustained duration, collective participation, active learning, and fostering coherence.

Content Focus

Katie learns more about literacy and adult learning. In the school-university partnership, when Katie and I co-plan literacy professional development for the teachers in her school, I frequently bring in current research and other professional literature pertaining to the topics we are preparing to teach the teachers. When crafting presentations, we review and discuss this literature together,

thereby deepening her literacy content knowledge. We then work together to design the professional development sessions for teachers, which leads to Katie's increased knowledge of ways of constructing learning experiences for adults that are engaging, take into account their knowledge and experiences, and meet other specific needs of adult learners (Smylie, 1995). In addition, when Katie asks for assistance within her work with struggling readers, I provide advice and share professional resources that help her improve her diagnosis and intervention instruction. Katie's growing knowledge of literacy instruction and assessment, as well as her increased skills in teaching adult learners is building her confidence and helping her to become a better resource for teachers in the building.

Classroom teachers learn more about literacy instruction and assessment. The professional development Katie and I have co-planned is designed to help teachers address Common Core literacy standards, differentiated reading and word study instruction, and state expectations for tracking student growth. For example, we have provided multiple sessions related to interactive read aloud, selecting and implementing various small group reading instruction formats (guided reading, book clubs, strategy-focused groups), word study curricula, as well as assessment in comprehension, fluency, and decoding. The sessions we've provided are either directly related to what teachers need to do with their students in their day-to-day literacy instruction or to helping teachers gather valuable information to differentiate their instruction and monitor students' progress.

Sustained Duration

Katie learns throughout the year. Because the school-university partnership is a well-articulated school-year long commitment, this structure provides for the type of long-term focus that leads to deeper learning. The two of us are continuously working together to co-plan and co-present professional development for the teachers. We meet weekly, dedicating our time to planning professional development, sharing resources, analyzing data, and discussing our experiences with teachers and students in the building. Because we have a standing meeting each week, I am able to provide Katie with ongoing professional development about the topics that are most relevant to her and to the building literacy education as a whole. This sustained professional development supports Katie's ability to be responsive to teachers' and students' needs more quickly, which builds her reputation within the building as a knowledgeable and capable leader.

Classroom teachers are taught and retaught in ways that work. Our unique school-university partnership has resulted in classroom teachers' sustained professional development throughout the school year in a variety of formats. Because Katie and I work in various classrooms throughout the building, we are able to check in with individual teachers informally to identify and help to solve problems they are encountering as they implement new practices. We also provide impromptu modeling, observe and provide feedback to teachers, meet with smaller groups of teachers to discuss common problems, and can easily identify when new professional needs arise. Furthermore, we are able to discuss issues together, pooling our knowledge and expertise, thereby supporting classroom teachers more effectively. These various ongoing supports have built teachers' competence and commitment to using new techniques in their classrooms.

Collective Participation

Katie learns with a literacy expert. As the sole literacy specialist in the building, Katie rarely has the opportunity to learn alongside others who have the same roles and responsibilities. The school-university partnership has provided her the opportunity to learn with me (and I with her). When we review professional resources together, co-plan professional development, and discuss problems we're encountering in our teaching of teachers, we achieve more professional growth than either of us do individually. We are able to have in-depth conversations about concepts and techniques we read about, make suggestions to one another, mull over new ideas we want to try, and reflect on what's working and not working. This collective participation helps Katie feel more comfortable as a literacy leader in the building and supports her confidence as she realizes how much knowledge she has.

Classroom teachers learn with each other. Katie and I have provided a variety of professional development sessions, all of which have been attended by the full staff of classroom teachers in the building or grade level groups of teachers. On occasion, one or both of us have also provided very brief "refresher" sessions for mixed-grade level groups of teachers who voluntarily attend to clarify their understandings. Because teachers throughout the building and/or throughout a grade level have received the same instruction, they have often relied on one another for clarification and support. Their informal discussions about professional development have also led to identifying topics for future professional development, which are quickly communicated to Katie or me.

Active Learning

Katie learns what she needs and applies what she's learned. All of Katie's professional development through the school-university partnership is active learning, because it is all authentic, occurring for the purpose of applying it immediately either in her work with teachers or her work with struggling readers. For example, when I facilitate professional development sessions, Katie attends and observes how I teach teachers. This is followed by informal debriefing conversations in which we'll talk about what I did, why I did that, and what influence it had on the teachers' learning. When I observe Katie providing professional development, we discuss how she thinks it went, and I am able to provide specific feedback to increase her comfort and effectiveness in future sessions. We've also had the opportunity to discuss challenging situations that arose in professional development sessions, such as teachers' resistance to changing their instruction, their questioning of the relevance of particular content, or their disengagement. This "on-the-job" learning is rarely possible for literacy specialists, and yet is essential for building the interpersonal skills that literacy leaders need to be effective in a school.

In addition to collaborating for teachers' professional development, Katie and I also collaborate to analyze data. We analyze and discuss teachers' evaluations of our professional development sessions, as well as grade level and school-wide literacy assessment data. These experiences have helped Katie apply her strengths in analyzing individual student's assessment results to looking at larger sets of data for a variety of purposes. In this way, she has become better prepared to use data to inform decision-making that meets the school's needs.

Classroom teachers learn what they need and practice what they've learned. Co-planning and co-presenting many professional development sessions for teachers has helped us to develop sessions that are engaging and applicable for teachers. While I tend to be focused on content and the research that supports it, Katie brings her knowledge of our audience and their context. This helps us to provide sessions that take into account teachers' current needs and include ways of learning that they will engage with. For example, when Katie and I co-planned sessions focused on balanced literacy, we were able to anticipate confusion and resistance, as well as incorporate examples from various classrooms throughout the building. Knowing that other teachers were already doing particular practices helped to improve teachers' receptivity to these ideas. In addition, my knowledge of and experience teaching adult learners helps me to create professional development sessions that include demonstrations, collaboration among teachers to determine how to apply new ideas in their classrooms, small group discussion of dense content, creation of materials, and opportunities for teachers to identify challenges and develop solutions immediately.

Fostering Coherence

Katie's learning is aligned. Effective professional development is aligned with state, district, and school goals and policies; therefore, literacy specialists must work closely with administration to ensure understanding of these goals and policies. At the outset of the school-university partnership, in order to create coherence, we scheduled multiple meetings with the principal and assistant superintendent. This ongoing arrangement helps all parties develop a shared understanding of what is happening and what needs to be happening in literacy instruction and assessment within the school. This accomplishes two important goals; 1) we have developed long-range goals for the literacy instruction and assessment in the school that are supported by the principal and assistant superintendent, and 2) Katie is learning ways of navigating these discussions and is building professional relationships with administration. The long-range literacy targets drive the content and skills Katie is learning throughout the year so that she can better support the teachers in the building.

Classroom teachers' learning is organized. Using the long-range goals for literacy instruction and assessment, Katie and I were able to develop an effective sequence of professional development that builds the teachers' knowledge and skills over time. We began with revising and updating the school's literacy assessment framework, and then teaching each assessment within that framework. We then helped teachers build their capacity to use assessment data within a balanced literacy framework. Additional sessions provided supports for using student data to differentiate reading and spelling instruction. The coherence of this professional development and the alignment with school, district, and state goals and standards helps teachers to make connections across sessions and see the relevance of what they are being required to learn.

CONCLUSION

In every school and district, there are many challenges to providing effective professional development that successfully helps teachers address Common Core standards and respond to other mandates in schools today. From tight budgets to tight time tables, many school and district administrators are struggling to find ways of providing high quality professional development that impacts student learning. Because school literacy specialists are situated in the school context and have a wealth of knowledge, they have the potential to meet these demands effectively, but they

must be adequately supported to do so. According to Katie, collaborating with a literacy teacher educator is an effective way of providing literacy specialists the support they need to become valuable leaders of professional growth within a school:

> Even though I finished my graduate work in literacy, when I started working with you, I was new to the profession. I was worried that I was not qualified enough to give input during our discussions. As our relationship progressed, I became more confident and able to express my ideas and share resources more frequently – I began to see the value of what I was sharing. Working in such close proximity with you helped me become more confident in the knowledge I had, and more confident in assisting other teachers who have more experience than myself.

Literacy teacher educators are often the best source of in-depth knowledge about language and literacy development, and are the professionals most familiar with current research in the field of literacy instruction and assessment. In order for teachers, specialists, and children to be affected by this expertise and for literacy teacher educators to remain current with the demands of the field in order to effectively prepare new teachers, literacy teacher educators must participate in literacy learning within schools.

School-university partnerships are the ideal context for literacy specialists, teachers, and literacy teacher educators to learn from one another, thereby improving student learning and advancing the field of literacy education. With this, it should come as no surprise that teacher preparation accreditation has been calling for schools and universities to collaborate for quite some time (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010), and now *requires* such partnerships (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013). Clearly, it is imperative that educators commit to developing and sustaining partnerships. In some areas, large and complex partnerships are an impossible undertaking due to personnel, geography, financial constraints, and time. Small-scale school-university partnerships that connect literacy teacher educators with building-level literacy specialists are an innovative, valuable, and cost-effective means of affecting school change while simultaneously attaining professional growth for all involved.

The most valuable resource educators have is one another. Developing even a small-scale partnership takes time, but is worth the effort. The following suggestions are based on my experience developing and sustaining multiple small-scale school-university partnerships in various states. First, literacy specialists and classroom teachers are advised to remain connected with the literacy professors that inspired them in their undergraduate and graduate studies. In addition, literacy specialists and teachers are encouraged to approach their principals about partnering with a nearby teacher preparation program, and should outline the ways in which such a partnership would help them meet professional goals and address literacy program needs within their school. Building and district level administrators should identify early childhood and childhood teacher preparation program chairs within the college or university nearest them for information about the program practicum requirements. Although this information is often available on the institution's website, calling the school of education directly may be the most efficient way to get accurate and up-to-date information. Before approaching teacher preparation faculty, consider outlining the benefits for teacher candidates placed in the school building or district and ways in which the college or university faculty could best support the school or district; this will help to form a partnership that benefits all involved.

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