Use These 6 Keys to Open Doors to Literacy

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Basic to any student’s education is the ability to read, write, speak, and listen. Collectively, these areas of language are termed literacy, a focus in today’s education environment and a centrepiece of the No Child Left Behind Act. But with schools and districts wondering how to invest their resources to help students achieve higher literacy, what do we know about what works?

The National Staff Development Council and the National Education Association studied elementary, middle grades, and high-school staff development programs that demonstrated increases in student achievement. In studying dozens of staff development language arts projects, a few consistencies emerged. Some programs focus more on teachers implementing specific strategies, while others develop teachers’ deep understanding of literacy and literacy instruction; the content of many literacy programs emphasizes reading only, leaving out other essential elements of full literacy; and teachers beyond the early primary grades are not learning what they need to know to help underachieving students who are not fluent readers.

As the No Child Left Behind Act increases funding for professional development in literacy, a critical question becomes whether we produce teachers who can implement a program as it is designed or teachers who understand literacy processes and can select appropriate instruction based on their understanding of their students. This dichotomy is the crux of the debate in developing appropriate professional development programs for teachers of literacy.

A Study of What Works

The National Staff Development Council began the What Works series in 1997 with a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to identify content-specific staff development that showed evidence student achievement improved, teachers’ content knowledge deepened, and teachers’ content-specific pedagogy expanded.

The initial focus was on the middle grades. Then, in 2000, the National Education Association expanded funding for the project to include elementary and high schools. In the initiative’s four years, 74 staff development projects in language arts, mathematics, sciences, and social studies were studied, with the greatest number identified in language arts. The results included a summary of trends and practices that lead to improved student achievement and recommendations for appropriate professional development in literacy.

The What Works series includes only a small number of all the professional development programs available in literacy. National Staff Development Council and National Education Association sought nominations and searched extensively for content-specific staff development programs that increase student achievement and develop teachers’ content knowledge and content-specific instructional processes. Many programs reviewed lacked evidence that they impacted student achievement, and only those that showed direct evidence of improved student learning were included. When programs don’t have an explicit goal of increasing student achievement, they are not likely to include the
powerful design features necessary to support
teacher learning and changes in practice that
improve student learning.

Processes

In the 20 literacy programs included in the ele-
mentary, middle grades, and high school What
Works books, training (a learning process
devoted to building awareness and knowledge
and skill development) is one of the main forms
of professional learning. (See table on next
page.) Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers’ (1995)
research finds that training is most effective if it
includes presentation of theory, demonstration
or modelling, low-risk practice, and ongoing sup-
port through coaching or study groups. Follow-
up support helps teachers implement what they
learned with their own students after they leave
the training environment. Joyce and Showers
recommend having an expert provide feedback
and offer teachers suggestions for refining their
practices or having teachers learn more about
the practice itself.

Most of the programs examined in the What
Works series included a form of training that may
be less effective than what Joyce and Showers
outline. Most presented theories and included
demonstrations. However, it isn’t known the
degree to which low-risk practice or adequate
ongoing support was incorporated. Low-risk
practice may have been included in the design of
the training programs without being mentioned
as a specific component. Yet teachers frequently
resist practising what they have learned. They
believe if they see what a method looks like, they
are ready to implement it. They often hesitate to
slow down and develop a deep understanding
of what they are learning. Trainers, too, may
move too quickly through content to incorporate
the level of practice that allows teachers to refine
their application of the strategies before they
take them into the classroom.

Many, even most, of the literacy programs
included in the What Works series offered or
made available some form of ongoing support,
yet the specific degree to which this support was
expected, requested, or accessed is unknown. In
some cases, the level of classroom support is
superficial, and in other cases, it is extensive. In
many cases, the individual teacher has the dis-
cretion to determine whether to access class-
room-based support, making the application of
new instructional strategies inconsistent.
Occasionally, teachers who want classroom assis-
tance are unable to access support and are left to
solve their own problems.

Joyce and Showers (1995) reinforce the
importance of including theory development,
modelling, low-risk practice, and support to
increase the training’s potency. If training is a
principal learning design for literacy develop-
ment programs and it is being done inconsist-
tently and inadequately, the investment in
professional development likely will be compro-
mised and student achievement will not improve.

Deep Understanding

The content of the professional development
programs we examined in the What Works series
falls along a continuum. On one end of the con-
tinuum is content that focuses on implementing
a particular literacy program. On the other end,
the professional development content focuses on
developing teachers’ knowledge about reading,
writing, and various instructional strategies. (See
box on next page.) While some of the programs
included in the What Works series fall on each
end of the continuum, most fall in the middle,
offering teachers specific instructional processes
to use and providing some of the theoretical and
research base for them. Few, however, develop
teachers’ deep understanding of the conceptual
and procedural knowledge of reading and
writing.

As states move to approve or certify profes-
sional development programs and providers, the
question is whether we intend to have teachers
who can implement a program or strategies as
they are designed, or teachers who understand
literacy processes and can choose the most
appropriate instructional processes based on their understanding of their students. The questions may focus on the long term. What do we hope teachers will know and do after the program has been replaced?

Teachers who lack experience teaching literacy may need to depend on a set of procedures or strategies. However, as teachers mature and face more challenges with diverse learners, they will benefit students more if they have a deep understanding of literacy, literacy instruction, and if they themselves are active readers and writers. Helping teachers learn the theoretical framework and supporting research for the strategies they are acquiring and develop a conceptual and procedural understanding of how students learn to read and write is the ultimate goal of literacy professional development.

Content

Another finding is that the 20 programs included in the What Works series address reading far more often than writing, and no program specifically addresses other prevalent areas of literacy, such as speaking and listening skills. (See table on next page.) The national emphasis on reading has distracted from other forms of literacy. The Standards for the English Language Arts

Continuum of Content in Literacy Professional Development

Program Implementation
Emphasis is on assisting teachers to implement a specific instructional program of literacy instruction to ensure fidelity to the program’s design and research base. Implementers assume that teachers need prescriptive or scripted directions to deliver the program and that the instructional processes address the needs of all students.

Foundational Knowledge
Emphasis is on developing teachers’ understanding of the reading and writing processes and of the theory and research supporting the various instructional strategies. The approach assumes teachers know how students learn and can choose the best instructional processes for their students.

Some of the programs in the What Works series fall on each end of the continuum, but most fall in the middle.
(1996) includes areas such as literature study, research, using technological and information resources, respecting diversity of language use, and participating in a literacy community.

Teachers and curriculum directors struggle with national and state accountability programs that emphasize reading alone. For example, Reading First, one component of the No Child Left Behind Act, emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, with no mention of the importance of any other aspect of literacy learning. As a result, those implementing the act may question the place of professional development in other areas of literacy. The implications of No Child Left Behind are clearly that other aspects of literacy are not as important as reading and warrant little, if any, professional development time.

**Primary Area of Focus of Literacy Projects Included in What Works Series**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Literacy</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle Grades</th>
<th>High School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Reading, writing</td>
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**Teachers Need More**

While the professional learning of those teaching pre-K through 2nd grade is consistent with the five themes outlined by the National Reading Panel, teachers of older students are not getting the assistance they need to teach reading to students who are not yet fully literate.

The National Reading Panel’s report, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (2000), recommends instruction in five themes for students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade. They are

- **phonemic awareness**: the ability to notice and work with individual sounds in spoken words;
- **phonics**: the relationship among individual letters in the written language and sounds of the spoken language;
- **fluency instruction**: the ability to read text accurately and quickly;
- **vocabulary instruction**: development of the meaning of words used in spoken and written language; and
- **text comprehension instruction**: the process of making meaning of written text (Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn 2001).

Examining the content of the early literacy professional learning programs included in *What Works in the Elementary School: Results-Based Staff Development* (Killion 2002) reveals that these programs are consistent with the recommendations of the National Reading Panel and exceed them. Content in the What Works series includes

- instructional strategies
- diagnosing learners
- assessing learners
- comprehension
- vocabulary development
- language development
- word recognition
- phonics
- phonemic awareness
- word identification
- word recognition

Teachers of primary students develop an understanding of how to teach reading with experience and professional development. This same form of professional development and experience is unavailable to teachers of older students who have not learned to read. While some strategies are scattered through more general professional learning on reading, there often is not a depth of focus on poor or non-reading students’ learning needs.
Professional development programs designed for teachers of students in Grades 3–5 include content more appropriate to students who exhibit basic reading skills and apparently lack the opportunity for teachers to learn how to teach reading to poor or non-readers. This content includes:

- literacy analysis
- writing
- critical and creative thinking
- reading in the content areas
- writing in the content areas
- language skills

Similar trends occur in the content of literacy professional learning for teachers of students in Grades 5–8. The emphasis is on reading and writing in subject areas, developing vocabulary, analyzing literature, and critical and creative thinking more than on basic reading development. This kind of professional learning assumes students are reading and writing, and focuses on having them apply literacy skills and study.

### Standards for the English Language Arts

- **Students read** from a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction, non-fiction, classic, and contemporary works.

- **Students read** a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

- **Students apply** a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound–letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

- **Students adjust** their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

- **Students employ** a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences and for different purposes.

- **Students apply** knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss non-print texts.

- **Students conduct** research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

- **Students use** a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

- **Students develop** an understanding of respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

- **Students whose first language** is not English make use of their language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.

- **Students participate** as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

- **Students use** spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Source: Standards for the English Language Arts, by National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996.
literature. Providing teachers with professional development in literary analysis, however, may not be meaningful if the students they are teaching are unable to read the literature.

Another problem is that teachers in the various content areas may have been exposed to just a few before-, during-, and after-reading strategies to use when assigning reading to students. This approach does not allow teachers to help improve students’ literacy skills. All teachers are teachers of reading and writing, yet not all have a deep understanding of the reading process and an ability to teach it to non-readers.

Far more professional development is needed for teachers of middle-grade students who have specific responsibility for teaching reading and writing about how to develop these critical learning processes with young adolescents. This would ensure that at least some teachers in the middle grades have extended professional development in teaching reading to young adolescent non-readers or students whose reading skills are underdeveloped.

Our analysis of the seven programs included in What Works in the High School: Results-Based Staff Development (Killion 2002) suggests the issues are the same in high school. Most literacy professional development is designed for English and language arts teachers. It typically includes writing, the study of literature, literary analysis, and critical and creative thinking, and rarely includes reading unless the focus is reading and writing in subject areas. Professional development in literacy for teachers of older students who are poor or non-readers or -writers is shallow at best.

The Keys

As schools, districts, and states establish new policies and practices on teaching literacy, they must consider the following recommendations to ensure that teachers’ learning is of the highest quality and has the greatest likelihood of producing results for students. Professional development in literacy is most effective if it

Programs in the What Works Series

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<tr>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle Grades</th>
<th>High School</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Achievement First</td>
<td>• Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction</td>
<td>• Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Carbo Reading Styles Program</td>
<td>• Junior Great Books</td>
<td>• Junior Great Books</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Comprehensive Reading Program using Culley Strategies in Reading</td>
<td>• National Writing Project</td>
<td>• National Writing Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early Intervention in Reading</td>
<td>• Profile Approach to Writing</td>
<td>• Project Success Enrichment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early Literacy and Learning Model</td>
<td>• Project Success Enrichment</td>
<td>• Reading is FAME®</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early Literacy Initiative Project</td>
<td>• 6 + 1 Trait™ Writing Model</td>
<td>• Rockwood Reading Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction</td>
<td>• Student Team Literature</td>
<td>• 6 + 1 Trait™ Writing Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gateways to Literacy Project</td>
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</table>
1. Engages teachers in studying the theory and concepts underlying learning literacy so they develop a deep understanding of reading and writing processes. By helping teachers understand the theories behind various instructional strategies, professional development providers empower teachers to choose and use the strategies most appropriate for their students. When teachers lack this deep understanding, they focus on implementing the strategy rather than on student learning.

2. Provides opportunities for teachers to be readers and writers. When teachers practice literacy skills themselves, they are more aware of how readers’ and writers’ minds work. This understanding helps them know how various learners approach reading and writing and helps them appreciate diverse learners. Opportunities for teachers include joining book study groups; discussing current, quality literature; writing and then receiving feedback from their peers; analyzing literacy; or studying language.

3. Includes professional development for all areas of literacy as defined in the Standards for the English Language Arts. When teachers understand how to integrate the various aspects of literacy, their instruction and students’ learning experiences will be richer.

4. Ensures that teachers of poor and non-readers have specialized professional development that addresses their students’ age-appropriate needs. Teachers of intermediate, middle, or high-school underachieving students require specialized knowledge that frequently is not available in general professional learning sessions on literacy.

5. Expands professional development processes beyond training so teachers have many opportunities to learn about, study, apply, and reflect on professional practices in literacy. Teachers will benefit from opportunities to examine student work, engage in action research, participate in scoring conferences, analyze student assessment data, participate in study groups and literature circles, coach one another, receive expert coaching, engage in instructional dialogues, and provide training for other teachers.

6. Focuses the results of literacy professional development on increased student achievement. The professional learning experiences must affect not only teachers’ knowledge and skills, but also their attitudes and behaviors. This kind of professional learning typically is a multi-year effort of planned, coherent, and in-depth learning experiences rather than a one-day workshop or a 20-hour course. Learning experiences designed to improve student achievement include training, coaching, ongoing study and collaboration, dialogue, examining practice, analyzing student work, and other learning processes.

Conclusion

Literacy is fundamental to students’ success in school. Staff development leaders and providers will want to carefully consider how they design and implement professional development in the area of literacy. Additional funding and new legislation have and will continue to heighten the attention educators must pay to teachers’ professional learning in literacy.

To meet the goal of the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers’ professional learning experiences must prepare them to help all students to read by 3rd grade. We cannot meet this goal if we have teachers who are process rich and content poor, don’t pay sufficient attention to aspects of literacy beyond reading, or if we fail to support teachers of older students who lack basic literacy skills.
References


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