Teachers’ Experiences of a Hybrid Professional Development Model of Reading Apprenticeship

The complex literacy instruction envisioned by new standards for literacy and college and career readiness remains rare in U.S. secondary schools (Fisher, 2009). National surveys indicate that secondary teachers prioritize content over disciplinary literacy and reasoning (ACT, 2013a, 2013b). These widespread practices detract from students’ opportunity to learn and meet the new standards. Effective PD is needed, at scale, to transform the normative practices of secondary, content-area instruction. Recent years have seen tremendous growth in blended learning as a means to scale PD, yet relatively few studies have examined these formats. This paper presents research on Reading Apprenticeship Writing Connections (RAWC), a hybrid professional development model that incorporates online and face-to-face learning opportunities for educators to support their instruction of literacy in content areas.

To build advanced literacy skills, subject area teachers must help students to draw inferences from academic texts, synthesize information from various sources, follow complex ideas, and write from textual evidence in their disciplines (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2010). However, many middle and high school teachers are unprepared to meet this challenge (Greenleaf & Schoenbach, 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The challenge of providing high-quality inquiry-based professional development at scale has led some to explore online and hybrid-professional development (Perkins & Wiske, 2005; Dede, 2006; Fishman, 2014).

Reading Apprenticeship (RA) is a model of professional learning and academic literacy instruction designed to improve literacy skills and academic achievement for all students. RA engages teachers in inquiries into their own disciplinary ways of reading, into student and classroom cases with multiple opportunities for professional reading, reflection, connection to classroom practice, and planning. In recent years, RA has adopted technological innovations such as online workshops and virtual peer groups to deliver content and support teacher learning. These innovations are expected to efficiently enable more opportunities for community building and learning. This paper investigates the benefits and challenges of the implementation of a hybrid of in-person and online PD components. Specifically, we present findings from an RCT study of RAWC, an application of the RA framework in middle schools with an emphasis on writing as a learning tool.

The first iteration of the hybrid course (2014-15) included 80 hours of PD: 7 days face to face and 4 hours/month online during the school year. The online PD activities were primarily synchronous and included large group learning of new RA modules (IGNITE sessions) and small group Professional Learning Communities (PLC) which focused on teachers discussing their classroom activities. A-synchronous work included text-based discussion forums. This has been repeated the following year (2015-16) with slight adjustments to the organization of the PD content and greater support for the online components of the initiative.

The study involves 27 schools with 90 participating teachers across two states. In addition to assessing impact on teacher and student outcomes, we collected data from teachers to document and examine implementation: during the implementation year we administered three teacher surveys and four focus groups with teachers to gather information on their PD experience and
their classroom applications of RAWC. In year two of the study, in which control teachers receive RAWC PD, but treatment teachers do not, we are administering three teacher surveys and conducting two in-person focus groups of teachers undergoing training and two virtual focus groups of treatment teachers. This paper will address two research questions:

1) To what extent do teachers participating in the RAWC professional development change their instructional practices to include use of RA strategies and approaches?

2) To what extent do teachers find RAWC professional development to be useful?

Preliminary Findings

RQ1: Based on survey results from 2014-15, constructs representing student practice of metacognitive inquiry and student practice of comprehension strategies were analyzed and significant differences between treatment and control teachers were found, regardless of subject matter taught or State.

RQ2: Survey results from 2014-15 revealed interesting differences by training location and type of training. Overall, PLCs elicited more positive responses than IGNITE training (i.e., high percentages of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that PLCs informed their instructional practices, almost 90 percent of respondents in one state and two-thirds in the other state found PLCs to be an effective learning experience). Far fewer respondents (half in State A and one-fifth in State B) found IGNITE to be an effective learning experience and two-thirds of respondents in one state and all in the other state found the online large group session (IGNITE) to be less effective than in-person training.

Overall, most teachers agreed that PLCs: helped them feel supported by colleagues (Agree = 75%; Strongly agree = 25%); allowed them to learn by sharing lessons and student work (Disagree = 8%; Agree = 67%; Strongly agree = 25%) and by sharing instructional challenges (Agree = 75%; Strongly agree = 25%); and informed their practice due to hearing their colleagues share approaches and challenges (Agree = 67%; Strongly agree = 33%).
References

ACT, Inc. (2013a). *ACT National Curriculum Survey 2012: English Language Arts*. Iowa City, IA.


