Abstract

The Partnership for Literacy:
A Study of Professional Development, Instructional Change and Student Growth

Judith A. Langer and Arthur N. Applebee
University at Albany

The need for more effective approaches to professional development as well as the need for research that traces its relationships to student performance have often been noted. A recent NAEP report (NcesWebmaster@ed.gov, 7/2005) analyses long-term trends in reading from 1971 to 2004. Findings indicate that while 9-year-olds scored higher on average in 2004 than in any previous assessment, the overall achievement of thirteen-year-olds has remained unchanged since 1999. While the results for middle school students are discouraging, the achievement scores of Black and Hispanic students did show increases over time. While this gap-narrowing is not nearly enough, it suggests that a more concerted intervention research effort, like the Partnership for Literacy, can offer clearer options in the advancement of more effective teaching and learning. It is to contribute to this professional knowledge-base and dialogue that this presentation is intended.

The Partnership for Literacy: Knowledge Base and Study Design

The Partnership for Literacy was aimed at developing instructional capacity by improving teachers’ knowledge, skills and beliefs about what their students are capable of doing (Cohen & Ball, 1999) in order to help their students develop the higher literacy skills necessary for success in English coursework as well as meeting the demands of standards and high stakes assessments. We called this instructional development and, as Cohen & Ball suggest, aimed to build instructional capacity by focusing on teachers’ understandings of instruction, students and materials.

In the years prior to this study, as part of the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), we conducted an extensive research and development program targeting the development of language and literacy skills across the school grades, in English and in other subjects where English skills are needed. Projects were conducted in a variety of classroom settings with diverse populations of students at elementary and secondary schools in selected school sites across the country, and were designed to identify essential components of effective curriculum and instruction, so that teachers, schools, and communities can prepare all of their students to meet the complex demands of a changing global society.

Using a variety of methodologies and a multidisciplinary team of researchers, the Center’s research drew contrasts between effective and less-effective classrooms and programs and examined the professional growth and development of new teachers. Synthesizing across studies (e.g., Adler et al. 2004; Applebee 1996; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran 2003; Gamoran & Grodsky 2003; Gamoran 2001; Halinan, Gamoran, Loveless, Kubitschek & Kelly 2001); Grossman, Smagorinsky & Valencia 1999; Langer 1995; 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004; Nystrand, 2001, 2001), CELA researchers
identified five key features that made a difference in student learning and achievement: strategic curriculum; knowledge from discourse and thought-in-action; thinking and learning in a social context; coherence/connections/and continuity; and generative learning. Together, these were conceptualized as components of **cognitively engaged instruction**. These became themes underlying the Partnership intervention.

**Validation Study**

Our studies showed that these instructional components contribute to a classroom environment that promotes deep cognitive engagement in challenging subject matter. In order to examine how the various components of effective instruction identified in the synthesis of findings from individual studies in fact relate to one another and to achievement, CELA conducted a validation study (see Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003) involving 64 classrooms in 19 middle and high schools in five states. Findings indicated that in fact the various components of cognitively engaged instruction coalesced as a common set of classroom emphases across this diverse sample, and further that greater emphasis on cognitively engaged instruction led in turn to higher spring achievement, net of fall performance and the effects of background and demographic variables. Further, cognitively engaged instruction was beneficial for all of the subgroups the study examined, including school level (middle or high school), community type (urban, suburban), academic ability (track placement and grade point average), and race/ethnicity. These findings led us to undertake this Partnership for Literacy study in a range of urban and suburban high and low need schools that wanted to increase student performance.

The research addressed three questions: 1) what are the relationships among the various components of instruction emphasized in the Partnership, including dialogic instruction, the provision of envisionment-building activities, and engagement in sustained curricular conversations? 2) what are the effects of engagement in Partnership activities on participating teachers, in terms of their curriculum, instruction, and values and attitude? and 3) what effects, if any, does the Partnership have on student achievement?

**Design & Sample**

The study used a lagged-treatment experimental design that permitted comparison of experimental and comparison classes over a two-year period. Participating schools were stratified by demographic characteristics (community type, size, and characteristics of the populations served), and then assigned randomly to cohort 1 or cohort 2. Cohort 1 began Partnership activities in the first year and continued for a second year. Cohort 2 participated in all data collection activities during the first year (providing a no-treatment control) and began Partnership activities in the second year. In keeping with CELA research to date, schools in both the experimental and comparison groups had substantial numbers of students from disadvantaged populations who have traditionally underperformed on achievement tests.

Across the two years the Partnership involved 21 schools, 69 classroom teachers, 8 support teachers, and 119 classes in two states (NY and WI). Combining across cohorts, of the 119 participating classes, 26 classes had no treatment, 63 had a teacher in the first
year of Partnership experience, and 30 had a teacher in the second year of Partnership activity. Some 58% of cohort 1 and 44% of cohort 2 schools were located in urban communities, with 43% of the students in cohort 1 schools and 29% of those in cohort 2 schools receiving free or reduced lunches. Two thirds of cohort 1 schools and 1/3 of cohort 2 schools had Title 1 programs.

Because all schools participated on a voluntary basis, we need to use caution when generalizing our results to the wider population of schools, some of which may be less ready for change than the schools in our samples.

**Intervention**
The year preceding the Partnership was devoted to developing the details of the instructional development program, including both the content that was focused upon and the processes used to maximize the effectiveness of the instructional development activities. The instructional development program was designed to give teachers both an overall framework for thinking about how to increase students’ literacy abilities, and specific approaches in curriculum and instruction that have been associated with higher achievement in CELA and other studies. These specific emphases were chosen to be understandable and realistic to veteran teachers and administrators, and also to provide productive leverage in obtaining more fundamental changes in goals and objectives. That is, they needed to be useful in changing both the surface activity that is obvious in the classroom, and the teachers’ underlying beliefs about what matters most in teaching and learning. The components focused on: 1) problem-based activity oriented toward improvement of student performance; 2) practice-based inquiry; 3) the development of a professional discourse community; 4) discipline appropriate conceptual and pedagogical tools for improving curriculum and instruction; and 5) ongoing reflection and assessment of progress.

**Implementation**
The intervention was offered to eligible middle schools, primarily those serving significant numbers of children living in poverty. The Partnership offered 1) a research-based approach to insuring that students have improved literacy skills, and 2) a professional development package that could meet continuing education requirements for teachers.

The first cohort of teachers received a week-long summer institute and two years of continuing support and feedback as they began to introduce new approaches to curriculum and instruction designed to raise the literacy levels of their students. A second set of institutes with a new cohort of teachers was offered during the following summer. This second cohort permitted us to try out and improve upon procedures in response to what we learned from the first year’s work. This second cohort received only one year of classroom based support.

The Summer Institutes (1 each year in each state) were used to introduce teachers to the goals of Partnership for Literacy and its content and instructional emphases as ways to improve student achievement. Teachers were helped to make connections to their own schools, students, subject area standards, and local high stakes tests. Instructional
facilitators shared lessons and in depth discussions of approaches in the context of the teachers’ schools and classes. Videotapes were also used to stimulate discussion about the ways in which the instructional and content emphases could be carried out. Participating teachers had an opportunity, with the help of the instructional facilitators, to develop a unit of study for their classes. These lesson plans were reviewed by the group (other teachers and facilitators alike), refined by the teachers, and used when school began.

Thus, the Summer Institutes served as the inception of the Partnership for Literacy, engaging the participants in all five components of the Partnership program: 1) problem-based activity oriented toward the improvement of student achievement; 2) practice-based inquiry; 3) professional discourse community; 4) conceptual and pedagogical tools for improving curriculum and instruction; 5) and ongoing reflection. During the school year, the instructional facilitators visited teachers in each school at least once a week (for classroom observation, consultation and feedback) and conducted a Partnership meeting with the teachers at least every two weeks, with a focus on instructional activities and student work. Videos and models were also provided for planning as well as reflection. With guidance, teachers examined the goals of student learning as conveyed in the standards, high stakes tests and middle school curriculum and actively collaborated to redefine their instruction and assessment in light of these demands and student needs.

Analyses and Findings
Two sets of instrumentation were used, based on measures that had been used in other CELA research. One set examined changes in features of curriculum and instruction as implemented over time in experimental and comparison classrooms; the other assessed changes in student achievement in the high literacy skills that were the focus of the intervention.

Measures of Teacher Change
Changes in teachers’ approaches to curriculum and instruction were assessed primarily using CLASS (Classroom Language Assessment System), a computerized data collection system developed by Nystrand. Using CLASS, an observer records significant features of classroom language (e.g., types and content of interactions between teachers and students) on a real-time basis. The CLASS program compiles coded data on a wide variety of specific features of curriculum and instruction that have been significantly related to achievement in previous studies (cf. Nystrand, 1997). To collect data on instructional content, the CLASS program elicited discursive descriptions of lessons and the topics of all discussions and lectures, and kept track of all questions verbatim. CLASS was administered twice in the autumn and twice in the spring semester. As an additional measure of teacher learning, we administered a questionnaire tapping teacher goals, conceptions of subject matter and students, instructional practices, and views of learning (Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000) before the Summer Institute and again at the end of each academic year. A series of principal components analyses were used for data reduction.

Measures of Student Achievement
A total of 7 achievement measures were administered by CELA researchers in the Partnership for Literacy Study classrooms: Fall Reading Comprehension, Fall Literary Analysis, Literature Achievement, Spring Reading Comprehension, and Background Measures. For changes in student achievement, three-level models were used, partitioning the variance at school, classroom and student levels. Treatment effects were modeled as years of treatment and also as cohort by year.

Findings
An initial analysis of interrelationships among important aspects of curriculum and instruction yielded an internally consistent measure of what we have called cognitively engaging instruction. Such instruction was also related to a more even distribution of engagement across subgroups, including lower-achievers who typically disengage from instruction.

The results of a series of hierarchical linear models indicate that engagement in Partnership activities led to large and significant increases in such instruction in participating classrooms. These effects began in the first year of participation. Follow up analyses that looked at finer-grained related measures indicate that some aspects of instruction seem to change more readily than others. During the first year of participation, teachers increased the amount of class time devoted to instruction, and increased the extent to which they built upon student responses during discussion; these two measures were not affected by further engagement in the project. Other aspects of cognitively engaging instruction, however, had a longer trajectory of continuous development across two years of Partnership participation. The ability to sustain open discussion, to ask authentic questions, to ask higher-order questions, to support envisionment building, and to foster extended curricular conversations all saw some growth during the first year, and continued growth during the second year.

Teachers’ reports on various aspects of their attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning also showed some changes as a result of engagement in Partnership activities. In particular, these measures showed increased concern for exploring ideas in selections that were read, and a move away from the belief that skills instruction had to come first. On the other hand, even after two years of the Partnership, there was little change in beliefs about whether or not all students are capable of learning, given the right instructional environment.

Analysis of effects on student achievement is complicated by the ongoing process of teacher development—to a certain extent, the “treatment” for students was constantly in evolution, as teachers gained experience in the Partnership and tried out new instructional approaches. And because of the study design, individual students had only one year of experience in Partnership classrooms. Initial analyses of achievement, based on fall and spring measures of reading comprehension and classroom-based writing, showed significant gains for students in urban classrooms. These results are encouraging, since these students are among those most often at risk for underachievement.

References


