# Closing the gap through professional development: Implications for reading research

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Susan is a second-year language arts teacher in an urban middle school who completed alternative certification. For two years, she has struggled with the curriculum guide that informs her of what she is expected to teach to prepare her students for high-stakes statewide tests at the end of the school year. She finds she cannot ad-here to the guide since students in her class range widely in ability and motivation. Each year, approximately 20% of her students have received failing grades; only about 35% have passed the state read-ing test in earlier grades. Susan is not sure why many of them do not achieve state expectations or why some of them cannot read.

Today, as part of his work in the school, a consultant came to Susan's classroom to demonstrate techniques for engaging students in text by activating background knowledge and pursuing before-, during-, and after-reading activities. Susan and four other teachers observed as the consultant broke the ice with students to make them comfortable, introduced a nonfiction text, and then facilitated large- and small-group discussions about the reading. Last week, Susan attended a preparatory session at a central district site with other volunteer and selected teachers from her school, so she had some idea of how the lesson would unfold. But she was not sure how her students would respond to the lesson text, the consultant, or the observers.

The consultant began by telling students what they could expect to learn. Because he had not met these students until today, building a relationship with them seemed critical. Although demographic differences could be perceived between the consultant and the students, an "ice breaker" focused on their similarities, rather than their differences. As the lesson proceeded, the consultant capitalized on the strengths of students, all of whom were engaged because they were experiencing success and gaining confidence. The observing teachers could see smiles and hear occasional laughter. All groups were constructing meaning from the nonfiction text and then communicating their ideas to a central recorder in their group; all students had roles and responsibilities.

After several groups reported orally, the consultant asked the students to record their learning in their own words. Susan was surprised by how many students actually focused on the details of the text and seemed motivated to understand.

Just before leaving, the consultant asked students to talk about their reactions to the text and the lesson. He arranged a time to meet with Susan during her preparation period while students wrote their reflections in journals. This afternoon, the consultant will meet with another group of teachers in a workshop to reinforce principles of learning and strategies from the previous week's large-group session. Together, they will work on planning individual lessons and units of instruction with embedded informal assessments; broad concepts and skills matched to state standards are a focus for the lessons. At the end of the day, the consultant will meet with the school principal to discuss the day's experiences and, if time allows, will present a workshop for the entire staff.

The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA) is a nonprofit advocacy organization that engages with school communities through professional development to build relationships with educators, students, parents, and community stakeholders. NUA consultants are former and current university professors, former superintendents and principals, and classroom teachers with an average of 18 years' experience. The organization is currently involved with partnerships in 26 school systems in 8 cities across the United States. The goal for each site is to advocate for students in a manner that reverses the effects of institutional racism and improves life trajectories, working with district partners to close the achievement gap by reversing underachievement in urban youth and supporting administrators and faculty to increase student success. Over a minimum three-year period, the National Urban Alliance has shown some measurable growth in partner districts.

In some cases, student achievement has increased, with inner-city schools showing greater gains than their suburban counterparts, particularly with respect to students of color (Brandt, 2006; Indiana Department of Education, 2006; Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.).

The model for each initiative is predicated on partnering with school districts so that, rather than creating an additional program, NUA consultants capitalize on the strengths of systems that are already in place. Moreover, the NUA model for professional development is not a "one-shot" experience. After completing an extensive diagnostic instructional assessment of a district, a process that contains six layers (both qualitative and quantitative), the organization tailors a specific course of study or school action plan drawing on ideologies of social advocacy and including best practices in curriculum development, instructional practice, assessment, and engagements with community stakeholders and parents.

With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind legislation, many U.S. school systems are faced with a seemingly insurmountable task: ensuring that all students have the skills necessary to read, write, and calculate in an increasingly competitive world. Scrambling to meet these challenges while also coping with increased variance in teacher qualifications and changing student and community demographics (Darling-Hammond, 2000), many school districts have launched professional development initiatives intended to help teachers learn how to meet the needs of learners who are diverse in terms of both abilities and backgrounds. Many schools have four or more simultaneous initiatives—few of which have been shown to result in any significant, measurable, or sustainable gains in student achievement (Fullan, 2004). It would be helpful if literacy researchers could evaluate comparative professional development systems to determine which programs and organizational structures are most effective for schools and communities, as well as the nature of their direct and residual effects on students' reading achievement. Studies that investigate the effects of multiple simultaneous initiatives on students' reading achievement would also be useful.

Contexts, or framing systems, are critical for professional development consultants and initiative directors as they facilitate large-group sessions and school follow-up visits such as those described in the opening vignette. The NUA conducts rigorous internal professional development and evaluation procedures to ensure consistency of the goals, values, and dispositions of its personnel. The organization also strives to balance the reciprocity among culture as a

motivator, language as a mediator, and cognition as a facilitator of learning. This triad forms one structure through which the NUA provides services. For each angle of the triad, educational research supports particular practices that provide validity, reliability, feasibility, and appropriateness of professional development content for partner districts.

With few exceptions, in each district that has engaged in an NUA diagnostic instructional assessment, statistically significant achievement differences have existed between students of color, including African American and Hispanic American students, and their Caucasian and Asian American counterparts. Moreover, while results on writing assessments tend to be highest in these trend analyses, mathematics scores are typically lowest and reading scores usually in the middle. It seems plausible that math scores might improve if reading achievement increased. Therefore, in order to examine the fundamental question of closing the achievement gap across subject areas, it is important to simultaneously examine current research in reading.

It is also important to investigate the obstacles that NUA consultants and partner teachers potentially experience in the task of reversing the underperformance of students. One of the most crucial factors in attempting systemic change is the role of leadership in the reading program. Without administrative, organizational, and community participation that empowers teachers and students, professional development in reading instruction cannot begin to make the necessary strides that will counteract negative consequences for learners, especially students who are underperforming (Haberman, 1995; Levine & Cooper, 1991; Mann, 2006). Building administrators are responsible for creating time for teachers to examine their practices and to collaborate with their colleagues, and they must also model instructional leadership for their building faculty and often their community at large. Fullan (2004) explains that time is a critical variable in creating change. NUA works with administrators and community stakeholders to create awareness of the prerequisites and intervention factors that can lead to sustained improvements (Cooper, 2005; Cooper & Sherk, 1989; Levine & Cooper; Levine, Cooper, & Hilliard, 2000). Thus, an examination of the role of administrators—not only their leadership style, but also their awareness of time and the predictable obstacles to effecting change for teachers—is warranted in order to determine those factors and phenomena that contribute to their success as catalysts for change. While some of these issues may be addressed in the current literature on educational leadership

and professional development, they should not be ignored by literacy researchers.

In this vein, it is also important to highlight for the educational community those schools that employ successful reading interventions and that emphasize students' strengths over weaknesses. In *Star Teachers of Students in Poverty*, Haberman (1995) discusses those qualities that distinguish the concerns, priorities, and time management of exemplary teachers versus those teachers who are less successful in creating climates of success for underperforming students. Program evaluation studies, as well as critical ethnography research (Carspecken, 1996) that would reveal models of enrichment, are necessary in order for us to comprehend fully the phenomenological effects for students who receive constructive reading instruction and become engaged in learning, as opposed to those who experience instructional practices that emphasize homework, timelines, and traditional methodologies such as round-robin reading, end-of-chapter questions, and notorious worksheets. Thus, there is a need for researchers to examine more closely those highly effective enrichment activities for successful K–12 reading programs (Renzulli & Reis, 1997).

Preparation programs for teachers of reading should also be investigated and compared in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The variance in preparation of teachers entering the workforce is vast. While teacher education programs strive to maintain consistency across the United States, filling schools with teachers has necessitated a plethora of alternative certification programs and a resulting compromise in quality for entering professionals (Froning, 2006). It is often difficult to gauge levels of knowledge of reading pedagogy—or what NUA has called the "pedagogy of confidence," a term used to indicate the empowerment of underperforming students as they move toward higher intellectual performance (Jackson, 2000). The gap between theory and practice remains wide in terms of how reading methodologies are taught and applied in the field, especially in urban schools. Pedagogical connections to students' cultures, a process that requires advocacy and social justice activism on the part of teachers, might foster patterns of cognition that would improve the lives of students most challenged by poverty. Research is needed that examines formally the relationship between culture, the change process, and mastering domains of cognition required for the complex processing of text, subject matter, and real-world application. Moreover, research that describes a connection between reading

achievement and career choice might disclose some factors that could reduce cycles of poverty.

NUA consultants often encounter teachers whose lessons are driven solely by the content of a textbook, rather than the larger "macro" concepts (e.g., power, change, boundaries, systems) that could connect content to real-world themes and enable concept learning by the students. That is, teachers often relinquish an opportunity to make text-to-world or text-to-self connections. Many of these teachers begin planning their lessons by "measuring out" chapters of content, rather than by considering how to help students understand the skills and processes necessary to read independently and engage collaboratively on common themes and projects. Thus, even at the elementary level but certainly more pronounced in secondary curricula, covering content is often emphasized over mastery and student application—quantity in teaching is emphasized over quality. When teachers state they have "covered" a topic without checking for understanding, this usually reveals they have actually covered up and glossed over what students need to know to gain mastery in reading. One metaphor might be that they fear the thought of not finishing everything on their plate, rather than making sure that the food is sufficiently nourishing and pleasant. Literacy researchers might examine the depth and complexity of current curricula and how the process of "covering" it is directly related to the time students are given to process and retain information.

Until literacy strategies are embedded in substantive content and within specific contexts, they will remain both superficial and ineffectual for students (Emig, 2006). NUA consultants have frequently observed upon entering a new district that teachers choose strategies because they pacify students or "seem fun," rather than promote students' abilities to recognize relevance, identify conceptual patterns, and deepen conceptual reflection—abilities that may transfer to and improve achievement in other disciplines. Literacy research is needed that examines if and how such transfer might occur, with particular attention to time spent planning instruction, the influence of student choice and interest, and how the purposes of reading lessons are determined. The results of such studies may affect the scope and sequence of reading methods courses for institutions of higher education, and of reading and language arts curricula for elementary and secondary schools.

NUA strives to include all teachers who wish to participate in its systemwide professional development. Because NUA focuses on the literacy of a discipline, rather than on particular subject matter, our professional development initiatives include not only teachers of language-based texts, but also those who help students understand signs and symbols (e.g., teachers of math, music, etc.). For those mathematics educators who participate, connecting reading strategies to relevant instructional practice in their discipline has been a challenge. NUA has encountered several individuals in partner districts who have been able to make connections across semiotic systems for themselves and for their students; however, more explicit connections across the symbology of math, music, and other nonverbal discipline-related modes of communication must be explored by literacy researchers. This might reveal the interdependence of verbal and nonverbal texts, allowing teaching across disciplines to become more synchronous and, more important, to share strengths. While Thinking Maps (Hyerle, 1995) have been effective in creating a bridge for reading and math instruction by providing NUA consultants and teachers with a common language, correlational research designs that target the relationship between math and reading scores on high-stakes tests have not been useful for planning effective instruction. More rigorous research is needed to cull the factors common to both the epistemological beliefs of teachers and students regarding this relationship, along with qualitative studies that might reveal the commonalities of these disciplines beyond the skill of decoding.

Research might also relate implications for how and why certain texts are chosen. NUA has developed specific guidelines for choosing relevant, meaningful, and culturally appropriate texts for teachers and students in partner districts. Research that explores the process of text selection has yet to produce sufficient leveling strategies that are "user friendly," beyond those already successfully applied through Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), a criterion-referenced reading comprehension test that tracks students' reading development over time (Harris & Cooper, 1985). This is an ongoing challenge for many individuals within the larger school community (e.g., tutors, parents, friends, et al.), those who work to extend learning beyond the school day and help children find and read books at their instructional level outside of school. Hence, literacy researchers need to contribute to establishing clear guidelines for appropriate text selection beyond "classic" texts, so that noneducators within the community will know how to identify resources that will interest and challenge young readers. Such advocacy for enabling sustained community commitment to "other people's children" is somewhat uncharted territory for the literacy research community.

Every consultant who works with NUA is first a student advocate. While many teachers express their cultural or generational fears through skepticism about students and though they often convey their isolation, NUA works to enable teachers to glean opportunities for success. NUA participants often change their belief systems from those mired in stereotypes about who can learn, and they experience the epiphany that their underperforming students can succeed. Changing the belief systems of any community is labor intensive, and with respect to teachers it ultimately demands improved student data interpretations, yet community epistemology regarding beliefs about literacy has not been effectively communicated. Anyon (2006) writes that "educators are in an excellent position to build a constituency for economic and educational change in urban communities" (p. 16). Educators enter the field intending to "teach to change the world" (Oakes & Lipton, 2002, p. 22). Many NUA consultants have suggested that some teachers have become disengaged and lack the confidence to attempt to broaden their influence beyond their classroom door because of their isolation, overwhelming responsibilities, and limited resources.

The experience of NUA suggests that answers to these formidable challenges can be found. Good data strip biased ideologies of their negative influences on social policies. Teams of like-minded leaders can indeed effect change for the betterment of a community. Scaling up the process is the next challenge. NUA and those who partner with us, as well as the thousands of progressive individuals at work in communities across the United States, await answers. Galvanizing a community and then a nation in the spirit of a social justice movement is the next frontier that literacy researchers should explore for all students.

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