Scaling Up: The Results of a Literacy Curriculum Implemented Across an Entire 53-School Education Authority

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In terms of the current professional literature on school improvement, what we are reporting here is about as politically incorrect as you can get.

The "inside-out" philosophy is currently ascendant. The current norm of the school renewal field advocates the development of study groups of teachers (generally called learning communities) who study their situation and make initiatives for school improvement. Governance of staff development and school improvement is often vested within those communities. Central district office personnel are to provide support. Some theoreticians of school improvement even argue that teachers "know all they need to know": they just require the opportunity to share their knowledge, exert their professional authority, and be unfettered from the constraints of central office bureaucrats and strategic planners. (See, for example, Schmoker, 2004.)

But--what happens if the trustees of a district and the administrative officers believe that division-wide initiatives need to be made to impel student learning beyond the vision of each school-based community of teachers? What happens if they make initiatives based on scholarship about how to build better curriculums? In other words, if prototype curriculums are scaled up to reach students across the division?

Although in the public school division of Saskatoon, we do support school-based learning communities, the central story here is of an extensive set of initiatives which we refer to collectively as the Literacy for Life program.

A note on the school district --

We are located in Saskatoon, a city of 210,000 people. Saskatoon is the largest city in the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada. The Saskatoon Public School District has 43 (K-8) elementary schools and nine collegiates (9-12), plus a K-12 associated school. There are more than 1200 professional staff and 450 teaching assistants who serve nearly 21,000 students. Ten elementary schools and three secondary schools are designated as "community" schools which receive special fiscal and human resources because their students, due to socioeconomic circumstances, may be at particular risk. First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students comprise 18 percent of the student body. Ten trustees, each representing a ward (voting section) of the city, comprise the governing board.

Deciding on Literacy for Life

The decision did not emanate from massive evidence that literacy was in bad shape in the division or a public outcry for improvement. We were not trying to remedy a poor situation and, although there has long been a need to increase student achievement in the schools serving lower SES and ethnic minorities, we were not in the kind of situation where everyone was shouting that we needed to "close the gap." In fact, we had made substantial initiatives to provide greater resources to those schools, improve community and parental involvement, and provide richer experiences for the students. These provisions were from conventional wisdom, but they were substantial.

Nonetheless, although we were not working in an atmosphere of crisis, we--a significant number of principals, lead teachers, and central office personnel--had an intuitive feel that the curriculum could be strengthened considerably. The experience of a smaller school district just across the provincial border in Alberta, where aspects of student achievement were rising dramatically, got our attention for several reasons: The research base being used, the extensive staff development provided, and the strong methods being used to study implementation and student learning. A goodly percentage of the teachers in the Alberta district had become action researchers, studying student learning vigorously as an effect of curriculum implementation (see, Joyce and Showers, 2002; Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins, 1999; Joyce, Hrycauk, and Calhoun, 2001).

A group comprised of elementary principals and central office staff studied the results and components of the Northern Lights Alberta literacy initiative and presented their findings to the Saskatoon Public School District trustees. The trustees favored a strong push in the literacy area and agreed to help keep a focus on reading and writing for several years and to try to avoid the "blizzard of paper initiatives" that plague many attempts to steer a steady course in school and district improvement (see, Elmore, 2004).

A core planning group of central office personnel met with a team of consultants to generate a plan based on research on staff development, school improvement, and literacy learning. The program we describe below emerged from the discussions, and we named it "Literacy for All."

The Component Initiatives of Literacy for Life:
Rationale and Overall Objectives

A strong effort to build a division-wide learning community is combined with curriculum development and an action research frame of reference toward school improvement, staff development, and the study of student learning.

* First, building a sense of unity and common purpose across the division's professional staff is a major objective, balancing the "site-based" and school-based "learning community" frame of reference that has been established in the district for many years. As described below, all schools participate in an initiative (Just Read) to increase independent reading by all students. All schools have initiated sections of a safety net program for older (Grade Three to Twelve) struggling readers and writers (Read to Succeed). All Kindergarten, Grade One, and Grade Two

teachers are studying a new repertoire for teaching reading and writing and are collecting data about the effects on student learning.

* Establishing a district-wide action-research style of professional work is a second objective. In the component strands of Literacy for Life, data collection and analysis are built in. Also, a cadre of assessors (teachers and administrators) has been developed to conduct formal assessments of student learning beyond what the classroom teachers routinely collect as they study student progress in alphabet recognition, vocabulary development, and writing.

* Extensive, research-based and action-research-oriented staff development. Just Read and Read to Succeed are based on studies of how literacy is developed and on previous evaluations of prototype components.

The models of teaching and curriculum that are the content of the Kindergarten, Grade One, and Grade Two initiatives are grounded in theory and research that has been conducted on those models.

* A cadre of teachers who can provide staff development and technical support to their colleagues. This component is designed to build a professional development cadre in the school division and to avoid a dependency connection on the external consultants who, of necessity, provided the initial training.

The primary strands that change the learning environment of the students include

a. Kindergarten curriculum and instruction, where all teachers are studying a new set of teaching models, particularly the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) (Calhoun, 1999), for teaching reading and writing. Teachers collect data on students' alphabet recognition, acquisition of sight vocabulary, and other aspects of learning to read and write. Simultaneously, teachers complete implementation logs about the curriculum and their use of the models. The information from these logs and the student data are analyzed and used in planning staff development sessions, studying the quality of implementation, and studying the effects district-wide on students.

b. First Grade curriculum and instruction, where again the core is the PWIM model, including extensive reading and writing and explicit strategy instruction in comprehension and composing think-alouds (metacognitive training) in writing.

c. Second Grade curriculum and instruction, with the above strategies, plus the use of concept attainment and inductive models of teaching to strengthen students' sentence and paragraph structures (see, Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 7th edition, 2002).

d. Read to Succeed, where more than sixty sections serve about 700 struggling readers from Grades Three to Twelve, with "overage beginning readers" being taught using the same curriculums and models of teaching described above--curriculum and models that are generally confined to on-age beginning readers (see, Joyce, Calhoun, and Hrycauk, 2001).

e. Just Read, whose purpose is to increase at-home independent reading at the developmental level for all students and to instigate action research on reading by students, parents, teachers, schools, and the division (see, Joyce and Wolf, 1996; Wolf, 1998).

Extensive staff development accompanies each of the four initiatives. Evaluation of student learning is embedded in each of them. Included are the regular collection of data by the teachers and periodic formal assessments by a team of specially-trained assessors. During the first year, all Grade One teachers and the teachers of 65 Read to Succeed sections received 10 days of staff development in workshops. During the second year, all Grade One, Grade Two, and Read to Succeed teachers received eight to nine days of training, and Kindergarten teachers participated in about ten days of training.

Curricular and Instructional Rationale

Important for our early literacy curriculum was the emergence of the Picture Word Inductive Model from the tradition of the language experience frame of reference, with the addition of concept formation and attainment models of teaching (Calhoun, 1999). The Picture Word Inductive Model designs cycles that begin with photographs of scenes whose content is within the ability of the students to describe. For example, photographs can be of aspects of the local community, or they can take students around the world with photos of scenes they can relate two. The students take turns identifying objects and actions in the picture. The teacher spells the words, drawing lines from the words to the elements in the picture to which they refer, creating a picture dictionary. Each student is given a set of these words that were "shaken out" of the photograph, and they study the words using the picture dictionary. They proceed to classify the words using the well-tested inductive model of learning, noting the similarities and differences across words, building categories, and identifying word properties (attributes). The teacher selects some student categories for extended study. Both phonetic features and structural/morphological characteristics of words are studied. The teacher models the creation of titles and sentences, and the students create same, dictating them and learning to read them. The students gradually learn to assemble titles and sentences into paragraphs about the content of the picture. The picture word cycles (inquiries into the pictures) generally take from three to five weeks.

A major assumption underpinning the curriculum is that students need to become inquirers into language, seeking to build their sight vocabularies and studying the characteristics of words, trying to build generalizations about phonetic and structural characteristics.

The students are to pursue a series of goals.

* The rapid development of sight vocabulary. At first, this comes through the analysis of pictures (a large photograph, 24 by 30 inches or more) would be the basis of study for three to five weeks. Imagine the students studying a picture of a woman holding a child in a market in Kuala Lampur or an airstrip in Lukla. The students identify items and actions: "banana," "smile" "cars," and so on. These words are printed and spelled by the teacher with lines going from the words to the objects in the picture. Thus the words are within the students' listening-speaking vocabulary. Additional words are studied as the teachers share nonfiction and fiction books about

markets or transportation around the world. Students visit these settings through their own exploration and reading of trade books.

* The inductive study of words. Students classify words, discovering phonetic and structural characteristics. They learn that the language is comprehensible--that words are almost always spelled the same, an onset in one word is likely to sound the same if it begins another word, that rimes have a lot of regularity, that adding "s" to *banana* and *smile* will create a plural, and taking "s" from *cars* will get you a single *car*.

* Extensive reading at the developed level. At the beginning, students can engage at the picture level (see below) and, gradually, can deal with caption level books as they learn how meaning is conveyed by the authors. They also learn to generate sentences from the words they have shaken out, at first dictating them, e.g., "The woman is holding the boy." And paragraphs are created from the sentences. The teachers model sentence and paragraph-making. And, of course, the teachers read to the children regularly.

* Regular (several times daily) writing. At first, students may just illustrate a word with a drawing. Gradually, they progress to writing picture-related sentences and paragraphs.

* The study of comprehension strategies. Although most of the research on comprehension is with older students, the search for meaning begins early and the modeling of comprehension strategies (explicit strategy instruction in the literature, see for example Duffy, 2003) is important from the beginning. (For greater detail on comprehension and PWIM, see, Calhoun, E., 1999, Joyce, Hrycauk, and Calhoun 2003.)

The Design of Training and
The study of Implementation

The staff development model developed and researched by Joyce and Showers (2002) was employed with adaptations to the realities of the school district structure and setting. The model was designed to ensure the development of high levels of skill in teaching models and strategies and to ensure high levels of implementation. The training model mixes four elements of instruction: the study of theory and rationale, demonstrations, the development by participants of lessons and units for their classrooms, and the sharing of experiences and effects on students. An extensive library of videotapes was available to use in the presentation of demonstrations and in explorations of rationale. The training sessions were structured so that the teachers from the 43 elementary schools could share experiences and results--an ersatz variation on the "peer coaching" element that has proved almost as effective as peer coaching in other settings.

The teachers studied their implementation of the selected models, using logs that deal with various aspects of the curriculum, including certain types of student learning (categories developed, sight vocabulary learned, types of sentences generated, etc). These logs were studied by the staff development team to provide a base for modulating training and for estimating levels of implementation. Those estimates could be used to determine the overall success of the effort as measured by implementation levels and to correlate levels of implementation with measures of student learning where that type of analysis is appropriate.

The Study of Implementation

Large-scale school renewal like *Literacy for Life* involve curriculum development for all its strands, extensive professional development for those strands (about 400 teachers in the current year) and for the literacy teachers, regular work with all the principals, the study of implementation, and the study of student learning. Across North America, many programs fail to address implementation, making the logic of assigning student results to the program problematical. As one scholar of change noted, one can be in the embarrassing position of reporting a lack of student learning effects only to discover that implementation had not taken place.

The study of implementation has two layers. One is the verification that the conditions designed to secure high levels of implementation by, in this case, teachers and administrators, were put in place. The second is the study of the degrees that the teachers and administrators implemented the new curricular elements in their classrooms. (Just Read will be reported separately.)

The conditions -- were they put in place?

The staff development events were scheduled (from 8 to 15 days per strand for all teachers, Kindergarten to Grade Two, and Read to Succeed). Attendance was very good--over 90 percent, on the average, of the possible participants--particularly good given the vagaries of school life as substitutes fail to show, children appear, but are sick and miserable, and so on. The administrative work to arrange for pay for substitutes, find them, and bring the teachers together with the consultant-trainers was orderly and responsive. The curricular materials were developed, the staff development sessions organized (with participation by the literacy teachers, as we will see later), and the training delivered. Sessions to orient principals were held regularly. The staff development sessions were designed around a training strategy that has been extensively researched and produces high levels of implementation of curricular and instructional models.

Degrees of Implementation in the classroom.

The staff development sessions were held with enough frequency (every four to six weeks) so that teachers were supported in learning the models and using the student data, particularly if the teachers in the schools communicated regularly.

Data on implementation were collected four times each semester from each teacher approximately one week before the scheduled staff development events. Prior to each event, teachers were asked to complete a log of use in which they described what they did and how the students responded, listed their questions and requests for help, and reported data on certain types of student learning. In Kindergarten, for example, the learning of the alphabet and the acquisition of sight vocabulary were studied and reported. Also, the teachers were asked to bring to the sessions materials they had developed to support lessons they were using with their children.

The consultants and literacy teachers analyzed the logs as they prepared the staff development sessions, examining the implementation that appeared to be occurring and the student learning that was taking place. During the sessions, discussions were held with the

teachers about their practice, which yielded further, if informal, information about use of the content of the training.

Throughout the year, the consultants and trainers made estimates of the levels of use that was taking place. Looking at the year as a whole, their estimates are as follows: (These estimates do not include the literacy teachers. They are very high users.)

Kindergarten --

Full and energetic implementation -- 50 percent of the classrooms.

Regular but somewhat mechanical use -- 25 percent.

Less than regular and solid -- 25 percent, ranging to non-users.

Grade One --

Full and energetic implementation -- about 60 percent

Regular but mechanical use -- about 20 percent

Less than regular and solid -- about 20 percent -- only two or three complete non-users

Grade Two --

Full and energetic implementation -- about 50 percent

Regular but somewhat mechanical use -- about 40 percent

Less than regular and solid use -- about 10 percent -- a couple of complete non-users --

Read to Succeed

Full and energetic implementation -- about 40 percent

Regular but somewhat mechanical use -- about 45 percent

Less than regular and solid use -- 15 percent

Summative Measures of Student Learning

In this "scaling up" experiment, involving the entire division faculty for Just Read, and intensive work by 80 Kindergarten, 80 First Grade, 80 Second Grade, and 70 Read to Succeed teachers, student achievement is a critical objective, even though the organizational and social

purposes are important. The K-2 and Read to Succeed initiatives reach over 4000 students and Just Read reaches all 20,000 of our students. Unlike school improvement approaches where the organizational climate is improved with the expectation that school improvement initiatives will follow (see, Schmoker, 2006), the current effort utilizes substantive initiatives to build a more synergistic school improvement climate (see, Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins, 1999). Assessment became an important part of building a district-wide action research community (see, Calhoun, 1994).

The Assessment Cadre

A cadre of central office personnel, principals, and teachers (the literacy cadre mentioned above) received training in the administration of the

Gunning Procedure (Gunning, 1998) and the *Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT)* (Wiederholt, & Bryant, 2001). All school principals studied the administration of the *GORT*. The Kindergarten and First Grade teachers studied student learning of the alphabet, sight vocabulary, and student writing. Schools studied, weekly, the amounts of independent reading done by their students.

A special team was trained to administer the Gunning Procedure in the Kindergarten, and the *Gray Oral Reading Test* in Grades One to Five and other grades served by Read to Succeed.

The *Gray Oral Reading Test* is built around a series of passages that the students read to the assessor. The passages proceed from the simple to the complex. The assessor studies the students' ability to recognize the words and apply strategies for recognizing the words not recognized by sight. The assessor supplies words that are not recognized after a reasonable period of time (about three seconds). After the reading of each passage, questions are asked to assess comprehension of the content. The test yields scores on fluency and comprehension that have been normed on a substantial population of students. Thus, the results here can be compared with the normative picture.

The Gunning procedure, developed by Thomas Gunning (1998), presents to the students trade books that have been selected because they represent the following levels.

Gunning Levels

Level One. PICTURE LEVEL. The vocabulary is very small--sometimes only a half dozen words--and are closely linked to the pictures on each page.

Level Two. CAPTION LEVEL. There are a few more words and there is more action--more to comprehend. Most pages have a phrase that moves the book along.

Level Three. EASY SIGHT LEVEL. Extended text is introduced. The student has to read text beyond what is illustrated.

Levels Four to Six. BEGINNING READING LEVELS. The vocabularies increase, the complexity of the stories increase, and the understanding of even lavishly illustrated books depends on the reading of accompanying text.

Level Seven. GRADE 2-A. These are larger, more complex books. The student who can read at this level can read a large number of books on many topics and do so independently.

During the assessment, the books are presented to individual students and the cover pages are discussed briefly. Then, the student reads the books. For recording fluency and accuracy, the procedures described above with respect to the *Gray Oral Reading Tests* are followed, including questions designed to assess comprehension of the major aspects of the book. To ensure that the students are not familiar with the books, they are selected from titles published in Great Britain that have not yet been widely distributed in Canada.

Student Learning Results from Formal Assessments

The data reported here are from the formal assessments in late Spring 2006, with some comparisons from the ends of previous years. Controls are from previous years or norms of tests. Sampling was used, with several students drawn from each class or section of each initiative.

Kindergarten

The Gunning procedure was used to assess the students' ability to read books at various levels. The procedure is administered by a member of the school division's assessment cadre to a sample of six students from each of the kindergarten classrooms. The results are presented below.

Importantly, the assessment depicts the levels of the books the students are able to read with comprehension. This is the first year for this strand of the initiative. We know that in the past only a handful of the division students learn to read in the kindergarten year, and, by the beginning of grade one, only about a quarter of the students have 100 percent alphabet recognition.

At the end of this kindergarten year, only one student (of 350 tested) had not reached the Picture Level or above.

All the others could read books at least at the Picture Level.

Picture Level--30 percent

Caption Level--34 percent

Easy Sight--12 percent

One of the Beginning Reading Levels -- 18 percent

Level 2-A -- 6 percent

This is a very promising picture. And, it augurs well for the future. Thirty-six percent of the students are at the Easy Sight Level or better. In the past, many students have left Grade One without that much competence. The Level 2-A readers are on a par with many middle elementary grade students.

Grade One

In May and June, the Gray Oral Reading Test was administered to the Grade One students by the assessment cadre.

Two years ago a similar assessment resulted in a mean of 1.6 Grade Level Equivalent (GLE). One year ago the same procedure resulted in a mean of about GLE 2.2. The mean for this year is about 2.4. Only about 15 percent of the students were below GLE 1.8 (which could be called achieving "grade level"), whereas 70 percent were below that level in the assessment of first grade students two years ago.

Grade Two

The tests for the second grade students were given after just seven of the ten months of the school year had elapsed and, in test terms, there were three months left. In the GORT norms on the comprehension dimension of reading, the average score for North American students is about 2.7 GLE after seven months. That average includes all students, including students from the highest and lowest-achieving schools in Canada and the United States. The sample of 215 Grade Two students is sufficient to estimate effects for Grade Two students at an 0.01 level.

Here, the average is 3.2 compared with the average of 2.7 GLE for all students tested after seven months of schooling in the Second Grade. The difference is the equivalent of about a half year of schooling. Conservatively, with three months of school remaining, their average will be about 3.5, or about five months' above the scores for second grade students in general.

GENDER. Usually females learn to read earlier and better than males. The difference widens until about 60 percent of students enrolled in higher education are females. What is our picture here?

Essentially, there is no significant difference between these Grade Two boys and girls. This fits with past history when these curriculum and instructional components are combined/implemented. As achievement rises, so does equity.

The job is not done. There are still students who will leave Grade Two with serious gaps in their competency to read. However, the Grade Two results are positive, and we are working to accelerate the literacy development of those students who are needy. Read to Succeed will net some of them. But for the future, we hope that three years of intensive reading instruction in K-2 will result in fewer numbers of struggling students each year.

Read to Succeed

The average student enters Read to Succeed with an average annual gain in reading comprehension of about GLE 0.6, and a history of falling behind more and more each year compared to his/her age cohorts.

This year the average gain per section between September and June is about GLE 1.4, more than twice what would have been predicted from their past history, a better gain than their cohorts would usually make.

Data from the Gray Oral Reading Tests were collected from 477 students in 56 Read to Succeed sections in 52 schools. Data from a random selection of students in all sections are from administrations of the GORT by the district's cadre of assessors.

Because the design enables the comparison of performance on the test as students entered Read to Succeed in September and October with the performance of those same students at the end of the second semester, these data provide the most direct evidence about the progress students are making in the Literacy for Life initiative. The scores of most interest are those indicating levels of Comprehension (understanding of what is read) and Fluency (speed with accuracy).

Entry and Response

On entry, the average scores indicate an annual gain of about 0.6 GLE in Comprehension and 0.25 in Fluency, precisely the population Read to Succeed is designed to serve. At each grade level, the learning history scores are similar, i.e., over their years in schools, the entering students have gained at about the rates indicated above whether they are in grades three or eight.

Looking across the entire enrollment, the average gain in Comprehension for students participating in Read to Succeed is GLE 1.3 and, in Fluency, 1.15.

However, as is true in the past history of Read to Succeed, about 30 percent of the students did not attain these gains in their first year in the program. When these students are removed from the calculations, the average gain of the others was GLE 1.7 in Comprehension and GLE 1.4 in Fluency. The 1.7 level of gain brings most students to a new perspective on school and school achievement. They are now learning at a decent rate and bring better literacy skills and vocabulary to their classes in the core curriculum areas.

Past history indicates that the 30 percent who gained little in their first year will gain at the rate of the other students in the second year.

Over the last fifteen years, we have not reduced the number of first year non-gainers much in large-scale implementations of Read to Succeed, although some sections show large gains for all their students. It may be that it takes a while in most sections to reach students who are accustomed to failing and to reduce the initial fierce resistance of some students.

Fluency and Comprehension Correlates

The gains in Fluency and Comprehension are moderately (0.52) correlated. In each area, scores at entry are NOT correlated with end-of-year scores.

Gender

Sixty percent of the Read to Succeed enrollment is male. Scores at entry are similar for males and females, but females gained somewhat more, which is unusual in Read to Succeed

applications, and the small difference is statistically significant. We need to inquire into this difference.

Grade Levels of Class

In Read to Succeed, classes comprised of third graders, of fourth to sixth graders, of sixth to eighth graders, and above eighth all gained about the same GLE amounts on average. This fits past history with Read to Succeed. Nine year old and fourteen year old students who enter reading at about a third grade level gain about the same amount in the initial year. In a second year, more of the older students generate very large gains as their learning skills catch up to their native abilities.

Socioeconomic Status

The Read to Succeed curriculum appears to have similar effects in schools serving students from homes of various economic levels. Some of the highest-achieving sections are in schools serving the urban poor. And, the sections serving students from higher socioeconomic brackets are doing very well. In another district in Canada, the evidence is strong that ethnicity is not a factor in the literacy initiatives--children of First Nation parents appear to gain about as well as do other students. Similarly, students identified as having mild to moderate learning disabilities, so often linked to socioeconomic status, appear to gain equally with students not so diagnosed.

Summary:

The Inside-Out/ Outside-In Questions

This is a simple, straightforward, report that describes a complex, district-wide literacy initiative that scales up prototype curriculums built around comprehensive analyses of research on how students learn to read and write. The initiative was successfully implemented, and studies of student achievement indicated very large gains throughout the student body affected by the initiatives. We respectfully suggest that district-wide initiatives are feasible, provided they are built on research on staff development and the generation of district-wide communities of teachers and administrators. Dichotomizing the inside-out and outside-in approaches is not a good idea.

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