Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 36
Issue 1 *September/October 1995*

Article 1

10-1-1995

Learning About Language Arts Instruction Through Collaboration

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You know when people ask you, 'What do you do?' I used to just say, 'I'm a teacher.' And they just look at you, and you know they're thinking, 'Oh, you just play all day.' But now, I want to say, 'I'M A TEACHER!'

Donna's voice shows the confidence she feels today; however, her metamorphosis did not happen overnight, nor did that of the six other teachers with whom she worked on a research project during the past three years. In this article, we describe how Donna and her colleagues learned more about language arts teaching through collaborative team work — research, and writing. We also discuss what this means for teachers who are trying to change their practices and the teacher educators trying to help.

In the United States, educational reform is taking many forms, many of which are state-wide. The passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 mandated systemic changes in the governance, finance, organization, and curriculum of K-12 schooling. One of these changes required the creation of K-3 nongraded primary programs characterized by seven "critical attributes," presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Critical Attributes of Kentucky's Primary Program

1. Developmentally appropriate practices
2. Multi-age, multi-ability groups
3. Continuous progress model
4. Authentic assessment
5. Qualitative reporting
6. Professional teamwork
7. Parent involvement

One of the mandated critical attributes is developmentally-appropriate instruction which includes meaning-centered language arts instruction that focuses on children's needs and interests. Another critical attribute is professional teamwork. The seven teachers described in this article first formed teams in the fall of 1991, the year we began to study them.

For the three years of the study, we observed and interviewed the teachers in an attempt to understand how they made decisions and changed their instructional practices in light of reform that mandates both developmentally appropriate instruction and teamwork. All seven viewed themselves as whole language teachers who were refining their understanding of children and attempting to provide developmentally appropriate literacy instruction within a nongraded primary program. In this article, we show what the teachers learned about language arts teaching, and more importantly, how they learned. Over the course of the three

years, we saw dramatic changes in the teachers' views of themselves, their teammates, their instructional practices, and their profession. Their gradual change occurred simultaneously with their collaborative teamwork, participation in research, and professional writing.

The context

The seven teachers involved in our three-year study teach in two schools and implement different types of primary program models. At LaGrange Elementary, Anna, Gayle, Kris, and Vickie teach low-SES, rural children ages 5-7. To these teachers, teaming means meeting often informally and at least once a week formally to share ideas and coordinate plans. The teachers then implement these plans in their individual classrooms.

At Atkinson Elementary, Donna, Joy, and Tina team teach low-SES urban children ages 5-9. They work together in one large room, planning and implementing instruction for 40 children, 12 to 15 of whom are designated as children with learning disabilities. Joy is the certified special educator on the team. As university researchers, each of us was responsible for one of the research sites (Diane at LaGrange and Ellen at Atkinson). We interviewed the teachers regularly about changes in their teaching. About once a week we observed and recorded the teachers' planning sessions or classroom practices. We also held several all-day, and two evening, cross-site meetings over the course of the study, in which all seven teachers came together to reflect on their understandings of developmentally appropriate instruction. The teachers discussed their dilemmas and challenges (from dealing with a wide range of learners to whether or not to teach phonics). They also reflected on the processes of the changes. During these meetings, the teachers wrote explanations of what they taught and why, and they elaborated on these

written reports during discussions. These questions and topics were generated primarily by us through examination of field notes. However, the meetings were flexible; we also dealt with issues the teachers wanted discussed. A research assistant recorded all talk in the form of field notes, and all teachers read and commented on this manuscript.

Collaboration as key to growth

In recent decades, we have come to understand the social nature of learning (Bloome, 1985; Bloome and Green, 1982; Bruner, 1960; Cazden, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). While educators are moving toward applying social learning theory to research and to teaching of young children, the field has been slower to apply it to the learning of adults, particularly teachers. Historically, teaching has been an isolated profession. Teachers rarely get to speak to one another more than thirty minutes a day. They do not often consult with each other and even become competitive in some circumstances (Pace, 1990). But, educators are beginning to understand the need to collaborate in order to learn and grow professionally (Hollingsworth, 1989, 1992; Hunsacker & Johnson, 1992; Nespor & Barlyske, 1991; Pace, 1991; Richardson, 1990). The teachers in this study confirm the need for, and benefits of, collaboration.

Learning through team collaboration

The teachers in this study learned invaluable lessons about themselves and each other through teaming. They studied themselves through interacting with others. Through sharing, the teachers were challenged in their ideas and practices of teaching and each affirmed that they were indeed on the right track. The interaction helped them feel less isolated. Kris, from LaGrange, expressed how she had felt as if she was floundering around on her own before the teaming mandate. A year later she said,

Working together made us all realize we were more on the right track than we thought we were. We learned that we were each doing some neat things, and that we needed to get into each others' classrooms and into each others' heads more.

Eventually, each teacher expressed how affirming it was to be listened to, and how encouraging it was to see and hear other teachers facing the same issues. Some of the instructional issues the teachers struggled with during informal discussions and planning time included how much to control the writing topics and genre which the children wrote, how and when to focus on skills of literacy while maintaining a meaning-focus, and how much time and attention to give individual children with special needs. Above all, the teachers wrestled with authentic literacy assessment — how to do it, when to do it, and how to use assessment to make instructional decisions.

At LaGrange, teaming involved setting goals, planning instruction together, sharing ideas and resources, discussing issues and problems, and supporting each other. For these four teachers, it was the first time they had really exposed themselves and their teaching to each other. They initially shared only certain aspects of their classrooms, because they cared so much that their teammates saw them as good. In addition, because these teachers were a new team, they had to justify spending so much time together. Vickie characterized some of their initial meetings.

We went over the information from team leader meetings, or we just talked, hit or miss, about things. We really were kind of anxious, I think, to get back to our own rooms and get busy planning for our own kids.

Gradually though, the teachers began to set goals and plan thematic units together. They agreed that having Diane there observing and recording what they said and did served as an impetus to get them to be productive. Eventually, all teachers could see a change in what was occurring at the team meetings (whether Diane was there or not). The teachers learned important things about each other as well. They learned what each others' strengths and weaknesses were, what kind of strategies and resources each had. They also learned about the personal lives of their colleagues that so affected their work. For example, Anna recalled:

> *We didn't even know each other that well. But now we've gone to each others' homes and seen that we have obligations there. Like Kris has two little children, and sometimes she couldn't do certain things we were doing. Last year I didn't always understand that.*

In time, the four learned to trust each other — critical to collaboration. The key to a support group seems to be in the commitment to the relationship and to an acceptance of varying viewpoints (Hollingsworth, 1992). The teaming mandate also encouraged teachers to share information on the children they taught. "Kid talk" during planning time became a critical part of literacy assessment and instruction. At Atkinson, the teachers all knew the same children and learned more about them through their conversations. Donna explained:

> *You never get away in the afternoon without one of us saying, 'Guess what so and so did today?' or, 'Look at his story!' So, you don't always know where every kid is, but you do, if you share.*

Sometimes one teacher had an insight about a child another teacher needed. At LaGrange, Gayle characterized how their discussions of children also helped their teaching.

(We) do a lot of 'kid talk'. We talk about the needs of the children, specific children in our rooms, and we know each others' children well enough to talk about their particular problems, and that's helped. Just having someone to bounce things off of is such a help.

As Kilbourne (1991) shows us, teachers self-monitor through conversations or stories about children and teaching. The teaming enabled the teachers in this study to tell each other stories about children, which became a regular part of their planning time. They became more metacognitively aware (Peterson, 1988) of good teaching and the benefits of collaboration. At Atkinson, Donna, Joy and Tina taught the same children in the same room together every day. They had more issues to struggle with initially, but teaching together became more and more important to them over the course of the study. At the beginning of the study, Joy explained:

It was difficult at first, and sometimes it's still difficult to give up having control of my own classroom, making my own decisions all the time without consulting two other people, but I'm working on that.

Later that fall, Joy discussed the same issue, demonstrating a change in her thinking:

The biggest difference for me is the way I plan. Before it was such a solitary thing. Now there are other people who have great ideas; it's not such a chore. It's more, 'I can't wait to see what they say about this.' And that's been so exciting. I just hope lots of other teachers get to do this too.

Finally, at the end of the year, when asked what had affected the changes most across the year, Joy said:

I guess I would have to say Donna and Tina. I can't imagine what it would have been like with people who weren't interested or didn't want to learn. Or that weren't able to share what they knew. I knew some things, Tina knew some things, Donna knew some things, and we were able to blend that and make it even better.

Clearly, the teachers not only learned about children and teaching, but also about themselves and their colleagues.

Learning through reflection

During the cross-site meetings in which all seven teachers gathered together for a full day of sharing and reflection, the teachers had the opportunity to share stories of teaching, of children, and of teaming with teachers from another school. The Atkinson and LaGrange teams asked each other questions and shared resources (from professional books to great songs for young children). These were days they all looked forward to.

These regular conversations with other professionals challenged the teachers' thinking. The time together gave them the opportunity to exchange instructional and programmatic ideas, to reflect on instructional decisions and practices, and to consider appropriate changes. They also resulted in changes in their language arts teaching. Because the focus of KERA's instructional changes is toward more authentic and purposeful activity, much discussion focused on what this means. All teachers agreed that, over the course of the three years, their classroom instruction has become more authentic, and they all agreed that they now emphasize the process more than the product. They have more student choice and more time for student-directed learning. Joy shared what she had learned about the teaching of writing,

I learned during the writing workshop that I have to back off, not having to be the spouter of knowledge and them soaking it in like sponges. I have learned so much about how kids discover things all on their own by looking at books or talking to each other. It is exciting to see that. Every day we say something to each other like, 'Oh, did you hear Brandon say that to Joey,' or, 'Can you believe he figured that all by himself?' Well, we should be saying by now, I think, 'Yeah, I believe it,' because kids have so many insights.

Joy's teammates, Donna and Tina, agreed that their practices now honor children's development more. Donna said,

Last year we just kept presenting them stuff to write about, even though we gave choices. But now it's a classroom of people working on their own time line.

Vickie, from LaGrange, also described how she had previously directed most of the classroom activities. Now her teaching better honors the children's ideas and what they know. She said,

There really is a big difference this year in how much I let my kids go off on things that they're interested in. The neatest things we've done this year are the things the kids decide to do. I'll have a theme... books I bring in to read... activities set up for them to do. But then they go off on a tangent. They may get excited about something or bring in a book from home or two or three of them want to go off and make a little play or write a book or make some thing. So this year, rather than saying, 'OK, let's do that tomorrow,' or just pushing it off, I'll let them do it. It creates such excitement, and then they usually write about it.

Kris put it succinctly, "We've taken the limits off the tops for ourselves and for the kids, and I think that's the best thing."

In addition to learning to honor the children's work and ideas and "backing off" from direct teaching, the teachers used these opportunities to explore other issues as well. For example, during one meeting a discussion about how to teach skills in whole language classrooms became a topic of conversation. The teachers shared their beliefs and strategies, and they all left thinking about what to do with children who were struggling. Later, Donna said,

> *Just getting together with other people who do something similar to what you do ... it's just so helpful to talk about it. You know all that sight word stuff we talked about — it was just such a good discussion — food for thought.*

Vickie's class also benefited by being part of the project. When asked to collect reading samples of children, Vickie learned her students could not decode as well as she had thought. She made a commitment to spend more time on this skill for some of her students.

As collaborators on the research project, the teachers had an opportunity to discuss and clarify what they learned through careful observations of children. Discussing children helped them learn more about children's development. Joy said,

> *I know a lot more about the development of emergent writers and readers. I think I've learned some from Donna and Tina, but mostly from our kids. Now I say, 'Oh, yeah, it's OK if you do that' to what I didn't think was really writing at the beginning. This year we are just accepting a lot more. I understand more about the stages kids go through and I can guess the next thing they will be doing.*

While all these teachers viewed themselves as knowledgeable about teaching language arts, they became more

metacognitively aware (Peterson, 1988) of what they knew after they began interacting regularly with their teammates as an outcome of the research project. Gayle, from LaGrange, explained:

> *The project has forced the four of us to be together, the team to be together, and talk about what we're doing and why. It makes you verbalize for one thing. And when you verbalize to each other — whether it's to the team, to you all (professors), or whether it's to another group of teachers — it really helps you to crystallize your reasoning, your thinking about why you're doing what you're doing and about your children. One of the things I learned last year was that if you can't say it, you don't know it. And I keep thinking about that and letting my children talk a little more.*

Our findings parallel those of Hunsacker and Johnson (1992) who also found that participation in a research project led teachers to reflect on their practice. However, it was conversations with others, and long-term support from them that were critical to the teachers' instructional changes. In this study, the teachers had the opportunity to converse repeatedly with other teachers, and over time, these conversations led to trust. Like Hollingsworth (1989; 1992), we also suggest it is commitment to the relationship and trust among those giving and receiving support that sustains change. Like the teachers in other studies (Hollingsworth, 1989, 1992; Pace, 1991), these teachers came to see themselves as knowledgeable, and they began to value their experiences, emotions and knowledge. They become stronger advocates of ways to create communities of learners for both teachers and children.

Learning through collaborative writing

In recent years, educators have encouraged the practice of having children write about what they are learning. For example, through writing children can explain complex

mathematical concepts, describe what they know about rain forests, or share their feelings about characters from a piece of literature. Teachers have incorporated the use of learning logs in all subject areas. What these teachers know is that writing can be an avenue for discovery; it can be a way of thinking, of knowing (Barnes, 1991; Elbow, 1973; Marzano, 1991; Murnane, 1990; Murray, 1986). Writing can be a form of thought, a mediator of thought, and can be used to enhance thinking (Marzano, 1991). Children can internalize what they know about math, the rain forest, or themselves as they use the language necessary for expressing what they are learning.

Just as children often learn content through the act of writing, so too did these teachers. Each team prepared a chapter for inclusion in a book about the development and implementation of nongraded primary programs and, in that process, discovered a great deal about themselves, their colleagues, and instruction.

Learning about selves and others. Through their writing, the teachers seemed to learn as much about themselves and each other, and how to work as a team, as they did about their chosen topic. Unlike many co-authors, the four teachers at LaGrange negotiated every idea, every line, even every word as they wrote. Although the process was sometimes painful, all four agreed the experience was immensely helpful to them as a team. Vickie said,

> *Writing that chapter made us feel more of a team, more headed in the same direction ... As we hammered it out, we began to talk the same language.*

Even though the teachers were doing similar things, they were able to understand their instruction more fully by clarifying the language they used to describe their practices. The teachers also agreed that through the writing they came to

respect each other more, which in turn, enabled the team to function better. Both Anna and Gayle used almost the exact same words when they said, "We became closer. We probably respect each other more as teachers, as individuals." Even though their chapter was primarily about strategies for authentic assessment, the LaGrange teachers wrote about their journey toward better teaching as well. They wrote:

> *Though our range of experiences has helped us on our journey, we often feel like first year teachers. We are changing, growing, and learning ... (Gregory, Moore, Wheatley, and Yancey).*

Learning about teaching. Both teams of teachers met regularly when writing their chapters for the nongraded primary book. They first talked about what they wanted to include in the chapter. At Atkinson, the teachers discussed their instructional strategies and the benefits and pitfalls of each. They evaluated their teaching as they wrote, sometimes claiming they wanted to change things. But writing about what they did was also affirming in many ways. When asked what she had learned from writing, Tina exclaimed:

> *I learned so much about the special education inclusion model. We started putting in examples about the self-esteem of Jackson, and how Dwayne became such a leader, and how Martin changed when he came to our classroom from the pull-out program.*

Through writing the chapter the three teachers also learned new teaching ideas from each other. Even though they teach in the same room, they often break up into small groups or with individuals and teach separately. They do not always get the opportunity to discuss these individual lessons, but writing gave them this chance. Tina said,

I also learned some things that Donna and Joy are doing in small group lessons. I would ask, 'You did that lesson? Tell me about it.' Gosh, it made me realize we don't have time to share what we do in small group lessons.

And finally, the teachers learned more about the writing process itself from doing it themselves. Donna said, "I learned how hard writing is, and that I like to write. I think I'm a good writer. But, I thought, no wonder it takes our kids just forever." The Atkinson teachers' writing experiences changed how they approached teaching young children to write. They began to pay closer attention to individual differences in what and how children write. In their chapter, they wrote,

Having such a wide age range from the onset forces us to provide a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for six, seven, eight, and nine year-olds as well as children with learning disabilities. We now try to make provisions for all learning abilities, which helps our students find their niche and feel good about themselves in a regular classroom (Cron, Spears, and Stottman).

The teachers at LaGrange reached similar conclusions based on their experiences in writing their chapter on authentic assessment. First they had to decide what would go in the chapter and then they had to share examples of the strategies they use to authentically assess the children in their classrooms. They shared children's work and their interpretations of each example. They also shared their difficulties and concerns. Through the writing process, they each came away with new and better ideas about what and how to assess young children. Anna claimed she was going to "totally reorganize her system after learning so much." Kris said,

Because of the chapter we wrote on assessment, I saw the ways they (her teammates) were doing it,and they saw how I was doing it. And we also saw the gaps. So, now I want to do more.

Gayle recognized the power of writing when she said, "We learned from getting together and getting it down on paper. We learned better ways." And Vickie added, "When I look back at what we've written, it gives me insight into the kids and how they're thinking and who's done what. I just think it's invaluable." The teachers agreed that all teachers would benefit from collaboration — to be connected to a network — as Vickie put it. It is not necessary to write together or even participate in research. What seems most useful for change is working as part of a collaborative team on some kind of professional development project that gives teachers the opportunity to talk and think about children, teaching, and the profession. Gayle explains why,

It forces you to think about what you are doing and why you are doing it, and if it's working, and why it's not or why it is. And it's an experience I have not had before. And it's made me feel better about myself. It has made me much more conscious of why I'm doing what I'm doing.

Again, interacting with others not only challenged the teachers' thinking about their practices, but it was also affirming. The teachers also realized that learning was up to them — they had to seek answers for themselves. They all agreed that having others to talk with helps the process.

Implications, concerns, and future directions

This study confirms the importance of collaborative experiences in the learning and continued professional development of teachers. Whether collaborating for teaching, researching, or writing, the shared experience provides the con-

text for growth. However, for such growth to occur, we must consider what helps to make collaboration successful.

Time. All of the teachers agreed that they need time in order to make changes effectively and efficiently. First, teachers need time to talk about their work. They need time to try out ideas verbally with others. They need time to discuss the children they share in order to gain multiple perspectives on the progress of particular children. Implicit in this need however, is that the time provided should be legitimate time. It should be provided during the school day when teachers can focus their attention on reflections, discussions, and problem-solving. Vickie claimed,

> *I think the only time that is valued for teachers is time on task — when we are moving around the classroom. I think for every hour we spend in the classroom we need an hour to plan, think about it, reflect, talk to another person or to refine the activity ... Time, it's got to come somehow, if you're going to know how kids learn, provide those opportunities for them to learn, provide all those materials, provide trips out in the community and have people come in. All of this sounds wonderful and I want to do every single bit of it, but there's a limit to what I can do. Yet, if you're saying this is what I must do to make sure I have the right program for my kids, and I can't do it, that's bad. That's not good for me. Somehow the time's got to be there — the time has to be built into the school calendar.*

Furthermore, the teachers all expressed that they wanted to be farther along in what they know about teaching and learning. Anna said she wants time to read about assessment. Vickie and Tina want time to understand how children develop into readers and writers. Tina also wants to continue to observe other teachers and is worried about losing the opportunity. She said, "There are so many teachers within our

building that are doing things that I'd love to go see. We need more time and resources." Joy describes the kind of time that is needed. She said,

> *(Teachers) don't need an in-service day at the end of the school year, they need many days, they need substitutes for them so that they can see other programs at work. They need days to conference with other teams about what they do. I don't want to be out of my classroom, but at the beginning you need to.*

Donna's frustration at not having the time needed is apparent here.

> *There's so much research I want to read and you just can't be current on everything. I don't know, sometimes I feel like I'm just treading water. I'm there, I'm doing some stuff, but I could be swimming laps. I always feel like I'm playing catch-up. I learned that there is always room to grow; that there are still so many things I need to know.*

Purpose. In reflecting on what they learned through collaborative teaming, research, and writing, the teachers acknowledged that having an expected outcome (e.g., a book chapter) required them to work together in ways they might not have explored otherwise. Although they ultimately recognized the value of what they learned from the experience, they all used the phrase "forced to" when describing what influenced their work. They expressed such comments as: "We shared strategies because we were forced to," "We know how to work together now because we were forced to," "It's so good to write about what you do. I wouldn't make time for it if I didn't have to," and "Unless people are forced to do something, it generally doesn't get done. So, we were really glad that we did have this impetus to get us going."

Because the notion of being forced seemed incongruent with collaboration, we asked the teachers about their use of this language. All seven teachers said that the forcing was self-imposed — internal. They all agreed that they had bought in to the philosophical changes and wanted to make them work. They had agreed to be part of a school-based team, the research team, and to write the chapters. In the process of accomplishing their goals they had to force themselves to get the work done, but they owned the work. The teachers from LaGrange wrote to us:

> *We were motivated and challenged, and we "forced" ourselves because we were excited about the opportunity to learn more and have the chance to study our teaching ... Along the way, we seemed to bring out the best in each other and as a result, became better teachers, writers, researchers, and team members. If we hadn't had (these) opportunities we wouldn't have spent so much time reflecting on our teaching and we wouldn't have grown as much as we have.*

In their reflections on this manuscript, these teachers began to wonder about other teachers who do not have opportunities to become involved in projects that lead them to reflect on their teaching. The analogy they used was that they all have children in their classrooms who, given the choice, would never choose to contribute or reflect on their work. Yet, as teachers, they do not allow these students to sit back. They said that if these children are not self-motivated or risk-takers, then it is their job to guide them. They asked, "Shouldn't teachers be guided in this way, too?"

Their ponderings and questions gave us pause. As teacher educators, we have come to understand that truly good teaching — the kind that brings about change — comes only with the same kind of interactions we know are good for children. As other educators (Richardson, 1990; Ross, Bondy,

and Kyle, 1993) have suggested, teacher education must focus on helping teachers clarify a coherent belief system about teaching and learning, reflect on those beliefs, and develop the capacity to implement those beliefs into practice. Teachers need to collaborate in ways that invite them to accomplish their goals and reflect on their work.

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Call for Manuscripts for the 1996 Themed Issue: Integrating Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum

The 1996 themed issue of *Reading Horizons* will be devoted to articles linking reading and writing with all areas of the school curriculum. Articles relating excellent practice, theory, and research, to integrating reading, writing, speaking and listening across the curriculum should be sent to Dr. Jeanne M. Jacobson, Editor, Reading Horizons, WMU, Kalamazoo, MI 49008. Manuscripts should be submitted following *Reading Horizons* guidelines: send four copies and two stamped, self-addressed business-size envelopes; include a cover sheet with author name and affiliation; using a running head (without author identity) on subsequent pages; follow APA guidelines for references and use of gender-free language. Manuscripts intended for the themed issue should be postmarked by **March 1, 1996.**