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Teachers as Learners: Professional Development in Early Reading Instruction

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This study describes the experiences of four elementary teachers as they participated in LEADERS, a professional development initiative in primary reading instruction. The study examined closely how a yearlong high-quality literacy project influenced teachers and classrooms in an urban school. The results revealed that participation had an impact on each teacher in at least one of four categories: knowledge of the reading process, change in instructional practice, reflection on practice, and theory to practice connections.

CURRENTLY, THE EDUCATIONAL community, special interest groups, and political arena are vigorously examining the nature of effective reading instruction delivered by qualified, well-prepared teachers. In a study of elementary reading practices, Baumann, Ro, Duffy-Hester, and Hoffman (2000) asked prominent members of the Reading Hall of Fame what they believed to be the most persistent problem facing today's elementary reading teachers. Not surprisingly, many responses focused on the limited amount of professional knowledge and teacher training at both the pre-service and in-service levels of a teacher's career. The study's respondents acknowledged that many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach, lack knowledge of children and of the reading process, and have limited expertise in reading instruction. Consequently, when asked to identify the most urgent need for reading education in the 21st century, the reading educators rated both pre-service and in-service professional development quite high.

The International Reading Association's *Excellent Reading Teachers* (2000) position statement points out that effective reading teachers have an awareness of social and cultural aspects of learning to read, are knowledgeable in how to teach students to read, and understand how to diagnose reading difficulties in order to meet individual needs. They understand how to scaffold students' learning while employing a variety of techniques, methods, and strategies. Effective teachers also possess attributes of good teaching in general, such as effective teaching pedagogy, classroom management, assessment, and knowledge of developmental spans of children, as well as access to and understanding of current research.

Ultimately, if we want a nation of readers, we must have teachers who know how to teach reading. To meet the literacy goals set forth for all school age children, we must provide opportunities for teachers to participate in high-quality, job-embedded professional development as well as support implementation, change, and reflection over the lifetime of a teacher's career.

Theoretical Framework

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) emphasized that "providing teachers with information about new instructional strategies does not necessarily result in changes in existing teaching behaviors" (p. 292). Implementation of new practice is more likely when teachers have support systems in place: peer coaches, and planning and reflection time to assess their own teaching of the new practice. Opportunities for planning and self-reflection are central for learning to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Initiatives that present opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues aim to establish such supportive communities of learners (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy 2000; Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet., 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Joyce and Showers, 1995; Snow et al., 1998). Ellis (1993) found that collegial talk played a vital role as teachers attempted to make changes in classroom instruction. Teachers, especially those who are new to the profession or those trying out new strategies/techniques, require a high degree of feedback and support when improving or changing classroom practice (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Snow et. al, 1998).

In her review on teacher change and implementation of new classroom practices, Courtland (1992) examined studies of literacy and writing instruction. Her synthesis of this body of literature generated important assertions about strategies and barriers for implementation and change. She found that projects that supported teacher change provided an ongoing supportive environment, opportunities for reflection, opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, and time for sharing. Projects that encouraged teacher ownership through professional development goal setting also produced successful results. Additionally, the review revealed that workshops focusing on teachers' current and emerging concerns, practice and theory, and teachers' stories of change aided implementation.

As reported in Richardson (1994), criteria used for measuring the degree of implementation of new practices include:

- the percentage of teachers using the strategy or new practice;

- degree of institutionalization of the new strategy or practice;
- degree to which the strategy is carried out in alignment with the way it was taught.

However, teachers do vary in their understanding and degree of implementation to any innovations. Maguire (1990) classified three teaching stances in regard to implementation and change in classroom practices:

- reflective teachers, whose teaching is theoretically based and continually changing and who modify and reflect on the results of their teaching;
- eclectic teachers, who have adopted some practice but are still searching for simple solutions to teaching issues;
- resistant and unreflective teachers, who simply do not understand the practices and choose not to implement.

The following case study presents the impact of participation in a year-long professional development project on practices and beliefs of four classroom teachers from a high-poverty elementary school with low to average student reading achievement.

Methods

The Professional Development Project: LEADERS

LEADERS (Literacy Educators Assessing and Developing Early Reading Success) is a professional development program for primary grade (K-3) classroom teachers. The project was a multi-year (1999-2003), multi-site, Eisenhower-funded grant project that involved three universities and nine school districts representing 19 elementary schools across the state of Pennsylvania. The participating schools had large numbers of students from high-poverty backgrounds and a large percentage of low performing students. Teachers volunteered to participate for one year in various activities, which included a summer institute (30 hours) and Saturday workshops (42 hours), individual

action research projects, and work at the school site with a project staff member.

During the workshop sessions, teachers were provided with demonstrations and modeling of specific strategies and techniques as well as the theoretical basis for the work. In addition, teachers also had the opportunity to discuss and learn about ways to modify instruction to address the different needs of at-risk children. At the schools, a liaison/coach visited the classrooms at least twice a month to demonstrate lessons, team teach, observe teachers trying new strategies, assist with assessments, work with students, provide resources, and plan lessons with teachers. The liaison/coach was knowledgeable in reading and included university faculty, doctoral and Master's students with teaching experience, and veteran classroom teachers on special assignment. Each liaison also assisted a classroom teacher by assessing some of the students using an informal battery of literacy assessments developed at the university. The informal assessment included:

- measures for phonemic awareness
- pseudoword knowledge
- word identification
- writing
- fluency
- comprehension

The classroom teacher and liaison then used these results to make data driven instructional decisions. Finally, each teacher used these results to personalize their experience in the LEADERS project and carry out an action research project later presented at an evening research poster session in June.

Teachers were also supported through peer collaboration. At minimum, the project required a commitment of at least two and not more than five teachers at a school for each year of the three-year project. We facilitated peer collaboration between teachers by providing workshop time for discussion and idea sharing among teachers across

grade levels in a building (e.g. kindergarten teachers working with third grade teachers) and across buildings within the district.

Finally, both the district and school-level administration supported the project. The principals assisted with recruitment efforts, contributed to the teachers' stipend, and donated a number of teacher in-service days, which enabled the participants to meet at the University for workshop sessions. The school principals also committed themselves to the development of the project in their buildings.

The overall objectives for teachers' growth included:

- improved content knowledge in reading;
- ability to design and implement lessons that reflect best practice;
- ability to administer, interpret, and use authentic assessment results for identification of difficulties and measurement of progress;
- ability to organize classrooms in ways that facilitate literacy growth of all students;
- involvement of parents in the education of their children;
- development of technology skills.

A balanced approach for reading instruction was advocated emphasizing content including:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- comprehension
- fluency
- vocabulary
- writing

Teachers documented their efforts by keeping notes and journals, sharing their experiences with other teachers in the project, and measuring student achievement through observations, informal assessments, and interviews.

School Context

Greene Elementary (pseudonym) is one of 54 elementary schools in a large urban school district. The school served students in grades K-5. The student population for the school year of this study was 338, with 38 percent African American and 62 percent Caucasian students. The school's percentage of free and reduced lunch was 79 percent, and therefore qualified it for Title 1 school-wide status. At minimum, each elementary teacher was required to plan for sixteen, 40-minute blocks of reading/language arts per week. Greene Elementary used a basal anthology series for whole group reading instruction and supplementary materials for small group instruction. The year of this study marked Greene Elementary's second year of participation in the LEADERS project.

Participants

The participating teachers included a kindergarten teacher, first grade, second grade, and fourth grade teacher. Although participation remained completely voluntary, the principal did recruit and encourage these primary teachers to participate. All four teachers had varying levels of educational teaching experience with a range of 6-20 years and a mean of 12.5 years. All four were Caucasian females. All but the fourth grade teacher had taught in the building for at least five years. At the time of the summer workshop, the fourth grade teacher was slated to teach first grade. Two days before school started, the school reassigned her to a fourth grade position, but she still wished to continue with the project.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study relied on descriptive case study research methods to explore changes in literacy practices. According to Yin (1994), case studies are the preferred method when events occur naturally, or cannot be altered or controlled "especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.1). Data for this study were collected within the classroom settings

during the entire school year. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) refer to these ongoing visits as "living among participants" (p.342). The two main sources of data were teacher self-reporting and researcher documentation and fieldnotes. Instruments included classroom observations protocols, field notes, interviews, self-report literacy practice logs, focus group transcripts, and LEADERS project documentation.

Analysis occurred on a recursive basis and was conducted simultaneously while collecting data. Miles and Huberman (1984) simplify this type of data analysis into three categories:

- data reduction, which refers to the "process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the 'raw' data";
- data display, which is "an organized assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking";
- conclusion drawing/verification (p.22).

This ongoing analysis shaped subsequent visits and frequently set the agenda for future visits.

Portraits of Four Classrooms

In the late spring of 2000, four teachers from Greene Elementary voluntarily agreed to participate in the LEADERS project. The contract they signed asked that they attend workshop sessions during the 2000-2001 school year, agree to work with and be observed by a site liaison/coach, implement new classroom strategies, administer student assessments, and complete an action research project focusing on literacy instruction in their classrooms. Throughout the year-long project, all four teachers from Greene Elementary attended all seventy-two hours of the project's workshop sessions. Additionally, all four made themselves available for communication either at school, over the phone, or via e-mail. During the year, the teachers were introduced or reintroduced to strategies for effective reading instruction and the

theories, research, and knowledge base from which the strategies derived. We encouraged the teachers to implement these new strategies and techniques and provided them with support to do so. The four teachers each made decisions on what, how, and when to use this newly acquired information in their classrooms. The following section presents the stories of the four teachers from Greene Elementary. Each vignette describes the teachers' background, classroom environment, and focus/action research project.

Nancy's Classroom: Kindergarten

Nancy taught full-day kindergarten at Greene Elementary during the year of this study and, in fact, has been one of two kindergarten teachers at the school for the past nine years. Nancy's class included twenty-two children—twelve boys and ten girls. Her print-rich classroom displayed student work prominently on the walls and frequently in the outside hallway. In the center of her room sat a large carpet square where most of her instruction took place. On one side of the carpet, a poster-board-sized piece of corrugated cardboard displayed a kindergarten word wall. Posters and wall hangings included school district communication and math standards, student-friendly writing rubrics, and class rules. Nancy's classroom library was a semi-private cove that included beanbag chairs that the students enjoyed and used frequently. For the entire school year, Nancy's two student computers remained inoperable; therefore, unlike the other kindergarten class, her students had no computer access.

Nancy decided during the LEADERS summer workshop, before any assessments were administered and results analyzed, that she wanted to focus on explicit phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. Nancy acknowledged that although the students truly enjoyed the stories from the basal anthology, they needed a strong phonics component that the series lacked. After reviewing the LEADERS assessment data, as well as her own kindergarten diagnostic tests, Nancy realized that phonics and phonemic awareness would not only be an interesting focus for her instruction, but also a necessary one.

Over the course of the year, Nancy implemented a variety of purposeful phonological awareness and phonics lessons. She directed Word Building (Beck & Hamilton, 1996; 2000) lessons or some type of phonological awareness activity (e.g. listen to the words and tell me which doesn't belong: can, start, man) every day. After being exposed to the Responsive Classroom's Morning Meetings (Kriete, 1999) during the summer workshop, Nancy adopted the four-step process (greeting, sharing, group activity, and news and announcements) into her morning routines. It was during this time that she carried out many oral language, listening, and phonemic awareness mini-lessons and activities.

Tara's Classroom: First Grade

During the year of this study, Tara taught first grade, a position she had held in the district for the past nine years. Tara's classroom included twenty-three children—fourteen boys and nine girls. Her print-rich room included a large word wall and an extensive collection of children's books stored on library shelves and in colorful baskets. The district's communication standards were posted on Tara's wall, as well as a variety of student-friendly rubrics and suggestions for reading and writing. Tara displayed a lot of student work on her classroom walls and bulletin boards, both inside and outside of the classroom, and from the ceiling. Her classroom configuration was traditional; the students' desks were lined up in rows and faced the front chalkboard. Tara was a strong proponent of traditional process-product classroom teaching in which she delivered lessons and students reciprocated by performing necessary tasks. Her students completed most of these tasks independently in their seats. Additionally, the students used three computers in the classroom, loaded with reading software, at least twice a week.

Unlike the others, Tara had a difficult time selecting an action research project for LEADERS. Her topic changed from writing to sight word development to multicultural literature and back to sight word development. Tara had a well-developed "bag of tricks" and believed that her strategies and techniques for sight word instruction were adequate. She reported using strategies such as working with the computer program, word walls, Word Building, a variety of games using

letter tiles, and sight word bingo. Moreover, Tara's class did get extra support in sight word recognition through the targeted lessons delivered both by the school's reading specialist and an educational assistant.

Susan's Classroom: Second Grade

Susan taught second grade at Greene Elementary during the year of her participation in the LEADERS project and this study. In fact, she had been one of two-second grade teachers at the school for the previous eight years. Susan's classroom included twenty-five students—twelve boys and thirteen girls. The students' desks were arranged into clusters with six desks forming a pod. Susan's classroom included a large carpeted area for group activities and a variety of small work areas crafted for learning centers (e.g. computer area, writing tables). Elements of the literate environment Susan created in her classroom included a large classroom library, pocket charts, and a rocking chair for sharing activities. Her print-rich classroom included a word wall, posters, and wall hangings including district communication standards, writing rubrics, and strategy posters.

After reviewing her class's LEADERS assessment results, Susan decided to focus her instruction on writing, concentrating on creative writing and style elements. Susan wanted her students to use creative language, voice, and originality in their writing, and she wanted to develop mini-lessons to teach such elements. By late December, Susan had planned and delivered a few lessons and worked on creating a plan for her writing project.

After the winter break, during a visit to Susan's classroom on a clerical in-service day, she shared her interest in an article printed in *The Reading Teacher* entitled "Bears, trolls, and pagemasters: Learning about learners in book clubs" (Frank, Dixon, and Brandts, 2001). The article described how a second grade teacher conducted book club discussions in her classroom. Susan was particularly intrigued by the fact that these second grade students were exploring children's literature and discussing their shared responses in a small group format without the teacher's constant presence. Shortly after reading the article and

attending the early February LEADERS workshop on responding to children's literature, Susan had asked to change the focus of her project to developing, implementing, and studying literature circles in her classroom. She wanted to expose her students to children's literature and book talks to motivate them to want to read more.

Over the next three months, Susan developed and incorporated literature circles modeled after the second grade class in the journal article. To meet her instructional goals for literature circles, Susan learned to level the books in her classroom library, determined and defined job responsibilities for the circles, and implemented the new technique. She created mini-lessons on teaching techniques for questioning, exploring author purposes, discussing book parts, and acting appropriately in a group. Susan also modeled higher-level questioning techniques aligned with the type of questions the students would encounter in the upcoming standardized test.

Lilly's Classroom: Fourth Grade

Lilly taught fourth grade at Greene Elementary during the year of this study. She had been employed by the school district the previous year as a first grade teacher in a different building. During the year of this study, she was initially assigned to Greene Elementary to teach in the primary grades, to reduce class size. Two days before school started, and after she had participated in the LEADERS weeklong summer institute, she was reassigned to a fourth grade position at the school. Lilly asked to continue in the LEADERS project, and the coordinators agreed that she could.

Lilly's homeroom class included twenty-four students—eleven boys and thirteen girls. Being new to the building and classroom, Lilly did not have excessively print-rich walls; in fact, they were mostly bare at the beginning of the year. She arranged her students' desks into six pods of four to five desks. She did have three small spaces in her classroom for group work: a computer center with two computers, a reading nook and library, and a general work area with a small table. For a new teacher, she had an extensive classroom library of children's

literature, built mainly with funds from the LEADERS project and her own personal family collection. Lilly leveled her new library using Fountas and Pinnell's Guided Reading (1996) leveling procedure, a project she and other LEADERS teachers at the school took on midway through the school year.

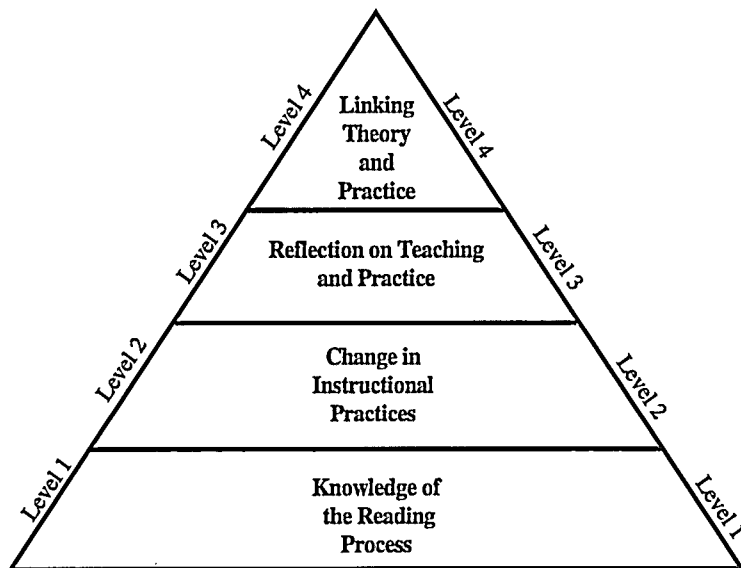
Based on the LEADERS student assessment results, Lilly decided to choose fluency as her focus area for her LEADERS action research project. Near the end of the second marking period, Lilly began systematically to incorporate fluency activities into her traditional reading and language arts instructional blocks. These activities, carried out several times a week, included silent reading, partner reading, and circle reading. Lilly also gathered outside resources and developed an oral reading poetry project designed to have students read poems chorally every day of the week for five minutes. By the week's end, the students would copy the poem from the board and *perform* in the primary classrooms of other LEADERS teachers. Students called themselves *poetry ambassadors*. Additionally, Lilly crafted mini-lessons focusing on selecting appropriate texts, peer coaching for reading, and expressive reading.

Results

Effects on Classroom Teachers

The study's results are presented through an aggregated summary of teacher change, highlighting individual differences, and a brief discussion of the LEADERS project's impact at the school.

Three of the four teachers at Greene Elementary were high implementers of strategies and techniques. The fourth teacher, who reacted favorably to the techniques and strategies, choose not to try anything in her classroom. Participating in the LEADERS professional development project had an impact on all four teachers from Greene Elementary. This impact can be best represented in a hierarchical framework.



The first classification, level 1, is designated for the teachers who increased their knowledge base and understanding of the reading process. The second level of the hierarchy, level 2, is earmarked to include teachers from classrooms where changes in instruction occurred. For this classification, the term change includes not only adding new practices but also modifying or removing existing instructional practices. The third level of the hierarchy, level 3, is comprised of teachers who, over the course of the year, systematically and consistently reflected on their teaching. The fourth and highest level of the hierarchy, level 4, is designated for teachers who insightfully reflected on the theoretical connections between the reading process, students' responses, and classroom instruction.

Unlike the other three teachers in the study, Tara, the first grade teacher, did not implement any new strategies or change her existing classroom practices. Tara's aversion to trying new approaches in her classroom had very little to do with the LEADERS project and almost everything to do with the lenses through which she viewed her teaching, students, and career over the course of the year. Tara felt "involuntarily" volunteered or obligated to join LEADERS when her principal asked her

to participate. She did not believe that the project changed her teaching much, but she also admitted that not too much could have helped her. Tara went through the school year in a self-described "burn out" phase and at times truly disliked her job. However, she participated in all workshop sessions and her knowledge of the theory and methods used to teach primary readers was enhanced and reaffirmed through readings, discussion, and workshop session presentations. She best exemplifies level 1, increased knowledge of the reading process.

Nancy, the kindergarten teacher, increased her knowledge of the reading process, and she also changed her classroom practices, thereby reaching level 2. She implemented many of the new techniques almost as quickly as she learned them. Nancy modified and restructured many of her existing practices (e.g. new approaches connecting student journal writing and phonemic awareness). Her decision to incorporate new strategies into her repertoire was geared completely toward meeting the needs of her students. Although Nancy's classroom instruction continued to reflect a child-centered curriculum, there was more focus on preparing the students to meet the literacy skills needed for first grade.

Susan, the second grade teacher, also increased her knowledge of the reading process and changed her classroom practice to meet the needs of her students. She added new instructional techniques and also removed a few from her repertoire of strategies. While making these changes, Susan consistently spent a great deal of time thinking and reflecting on the how and why of her own classroom practices and therefore reached level 3. By participating in the LEADERS project, Susan ended the year with a greater understanding of her own teaching methods and classroom instruction and a renewed commitment to teaching. Susan also recognized changes in her own teaching, particularly with regard to the role she played as teacher or central figure within the classroom. She became more aware of the importance of a more child-centered, constructivist approach. Allowing the students to generate questions, lead discussion, and shape their own learning experiences was a change from the teacher-centered classroom.

Lilly, the fourth grade teacher, also increased her knowledge of the reading process, changed her classroom instruction by creating and implementing new teaching techniques for fluency based on reflections on her students and her teaching repertoire. She too consistently monitored her practices and was able to define and refine why she did what she did in her classroom. Lilly, however, also made higher-level connections between her students, classroom practices, teaching beliefs, and an overall picture of the reading process. She attained level 4 because she linked reading practice and theory. Lilly's reflections included high-level hypotheses of how both strategies learned and her classroom instruction were connected to the reading process. For example, although her focus project was designed to incorporate fluency strategies, she found herself engaged in lengthy deliberations about fluency's relationship to comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation for reading. Again, Lilly was the teacher with the least years of classroom experience, yet her outgoing personality, free spirit, and independent thinking contributed to her open mindedness and positivity about teaching and learning. Her interest in the reading process was piqued. In fact, during the yearlong project, she applied to the University's reading specialist certification program.

Effects at the School

Given the importance of the school context as an integral part of the professional development project, findings of the impact the project had on Greene Elementary are described. One of the most promising results was the relationship building nurtured and strengthened through the year of the project. The teachers from Greene Elementary recognized the importance of collegial contact with each other; they saw each other as a support system in which they could share experiences and ideas. They participated in activities in and out of school with a common goal of improving practice in order to increase student achievement. They made classroom instructional decisions based on the results of the informal student assessment results. Their conversations at school often bypassed social, storytelling conversations and included more academic talk about reading, instruction, and students.

Also, three of the four teachers in this cohort, along with five other primary teachers from Greene elementary, teachers who made up the Year 1 and Year 3 LEADERS cohort groups, decided to start a literature study group at the end of the project's year-long duration. The group wanted to extend their professional learning by getting together to discuss books and articles on beginning reading instruction. This group decided in the summer of 2001 to meet weekday evenings every six weeks and as of summer 2003 continues to do so. In addition, three of the teachers also collaborated and developed a home and school, parent and teacher involvement project.

Conclusion

Consistent with recommendations from previous studies of professional development, the design of the LEADERS project reflects the need to provide educators with a model "in which teachers confront research and theory directly, are regularly engaged in evaluation of their practice, and use their colleagues for mutual assistance" (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p.11). The teachers who participated in the LEADERS project were provided the most up to date research in literacy as well as practical applications for classroom instruction. Site liaison/coaches, school administrators, and their peers supported them in the process. During the year, a common thread—the LEADERS project—linked all four teachers. These teachers created and developed a strong in-house support system for themselves and established a strong community of learners. Through decision-making, reflection, and increased collaboration with each other, three teachers took advantages of the unique opportunity to take ownership of their own professional learning and development. This ownership was empowering and served to strengthen the teachers' beliefs in their own efficacy and professionalism.

Courtland (1992) points out though "even after participation in long-term projects in which educators have opportunities for ongoing professional development, they will vary in their conceptual understanding of learning, their practices, and their degree of commitment to the innovation" (p. 546). Given the fact this project was

rooted in high-quality design variables, teachers still made personal decisions ranging from attending workshop sessions, to extending a hospitable welcome to the University site coach/liaison, to implementing new strategies. The findings from this study, similar to current research, again show that teachers will respond differently to the same experiences based on the decision-making rooted within their personal and professional situations and beliefs about teaching and learning.

The National Academy of Education recommended adopting the standpoint "teaching is a complex practice and the continuous learning of teaching across the teacher's career is an integral part of that perspective" (1999, p.8). In response, we need to nurture a culture where teachers are comfortable taking risks and updating practices and one in which teachers recognize the absolute necessity of such actions. While taking a closer look at the systems we have in place in our schools regarding teacher quality, we must also cultivate the notion of professionalism and commitment to lifelong learning – more strongly than has been done in the past. The teachers who are committed to lifelong learning and reflective teaching need to contribute to this mission by serving as role models and mentors to others. For the teachers less willing, we need to provide more in-depth mentoring, coaching, and opportunities for ongoing reflection of teaching practice. Just as we would not give up on the challenging second grade non-reader, we also can not give up on teachers who seem to have lost their desire to change, to modify or to adjust instruction. By establishing a supportive community of learners with common goals, focusing on all teachers, school cultures have the possibility of witnessing a shift from models that reflect teacher isolation to models of teacher inquiry, collaboration, and collegiality - a powerful combination that has positive implications for teacher change, school culture, and student achievement.

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