

2-2013

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Recommended Citation

Perkins, J. H., & Cooter, K. (2013). An Investigation of the Efficacy of One Urban Literacy Academy: Enhancing Teacher Capacity Through Professional Development. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 52 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol52/iss2/6

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An Investigation of the Efficacy of One Urban Literacy Academy: Enhancing Teacher Capacity Through Professional Development

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Abstract

In order to systemically improve student achievement in elementary literacy, a large urban school district partnered with a local university to develop a model for high-quality professional development that hopefully would result in long-term changes in teachers' literacy instructional/practices. Schools were selected based on their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading/language arts' status. The resulting literacy academy provided approximately 150 hours of professional development over time through two semesters of graduate level course work; 60 hours of it job-embedded. The Literacy Academy was based on a capacity-building model to build teacher knowledge and expertise in reading instruction, specifically in the areas of classroom assessment and use of student data to inform instruction; effective teaching methods in such areas as phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary development, and writing; adapting instruction for students having special needs; and family involvement techniques. Weekly literacy coaching supported the translation of the new learning into practice. A mixed method design was used in this study and the results of this work are presented.

Introduction

Currently in America, school reform occupies a significant place on the political and social agenda. Urban literacy education is a significant field of research as is teaching expertise focusing on the diverse needs of urban children. Children's literacy development in inner-city schools is often impacted by high student mobility, poverty levels well in excess of the national average, majority-minority populations, large concentrations of English Language Learners (ELL), socio-political factors, unstable and ineffective school leadership (e.g., principals, superintendents), inadequately trained educators (i.e., teachers, principals, central office supervisors), and/or excessive teacher turnover. Unfortunately, many children are failing due to these inadequacies in our systems and resources (Neuman & Celano, 2006). As a result, researchers in the field of urban literacy education study literacy factors, characteristics, and solutions that differ significantly from suburban school environments.

Several studies have indicated that non-White and children of poverty are more likely to be taught by under-qualified or under-prepared educators (Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Theorson, 2001; Dilworth, 1992; & Haycock, 1998). The U. S. Department of Education (2001a) noted that even though there is a heightened awareness of the need for quality teachers, the United States continuously fails to meet the challenge of placing a competent teacher in every classroom though the primary goal of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b) was for each child in this country to have a highly qualified teacher. It has also been indicated in several studies that the achievement gap between more between more and less advantaged students is the result of the excessive disparate access to high quality teachers (Barr & Dreeben, 1991; Ferguson, 1991).

Research clearly indicates that the quality of teaching has great impact on the learning of children (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Insuring that there are highly qualified teachers in the classroom "does more to assist students who are academically at-risk than any other policy-controllable issue" (Denson, 2001, p. 34) such as smaller pupil-teacher ratio or adopted materials (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Fuller, 1999). Teacher capacity-building focusing on evidence-based reading instruction has been found to be the most productive investment for schools and far exceeds the results of teacher experience or class size (Duffy-Hester, 1999; & Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996). There has been an increase in the funding of professional development in high-poverty schools due to an apparent need; this need must be a priority (Williamson, Morrow & Chou, 2008).

Individual Teacher Capacity Building

The United States Department of Education (2009) cites seven characteristics that contribute to high quality teaching stating that participating in professional development focused on content and curriculum ranking second only to teacher cognitive skills (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). There is little argument that professional development specifically tailored to address the necessary content and match the school improvement needs enhances student achievement (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002). The research publication, *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan of the Learning First Alliance*, queries “What will it take to ensure the reading success of every child?” The answer was clear:

1. Effective new materials, tools, and strategies for teachers.
2. Extensive professional development for the purpose of learning to use these strategies.
3. Meaningful, ongoing professional development opportunities to ensure that all elementary teachers receive specific training in how to teach reading and how to implement well-designed reading programs should be provided (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Intensive and continuous professional development that is aligned with standards and has proven to be a significant force in shaping a school’s instructional quality and effectiveness (Corcoran & Goetz, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; & Little 1993.)

School Instructional Capacity Building

Newmann, King, and Youngs (2002) studied “school” organizational capacity as a factor in student achievement. In their work, they examined program coherence which they defined as the extent to which student and faculty programs at a school are coordinated, directed at clear learning goals, and sustained over time (p 646.) Although there is as yet a paucity of empirical evidence that coherence is an essential element, researchers Newman, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk in 2001 found a strong relationship between program coherence and student achievement in their work with the Chicago Public schools. Rolhieser, Fullan, and Edge (2003) describe the power of systemic focused professional development in Toronto and the notable gains made system wide in their early literacy efforts.

In an article labeled *Inside the Black Box of School District Spending on Professional Development: Lessons from Five Urban Districts* (Miles, Odden, & Fermanich, 2004), the funding of professional development and the results of the ex-

penditure were measured in five urban districts. The findings indicated that school systems lacked formal systemiccoordinated nor integrated professional development strategies. This lack of cohesion created fragmented professional development opportunities with common but mixed delivery systems and significant variability in costs.

The Memphis Literacy Academy

During 2003-2004, a collaborative partnership developed between lead administrators in the Memphis City Schools (MCS) and a group of faculty leaders focused on urban literacy education in the College of Education at the University of Memphis. Their goal was to create an innovative joint venture that would achieve several important objectives. These included:

1. Raising dramatically the reading abilities of elementary students in Memphis City Schools as measured by state and nationally normed standardized tests.
2. The creation and implementation of a 90-hour, two semester training model for MCS elementary teachers in grades K-5 with the goal of developing deep expertise in addressing the reading needs of Memphis children through the implementation of *scientifically-based reading research* (SBRR) in every classroom. This model would become known as *The Memphis Literacy Academy*.
3. Ongoing evaluation by MCS and the U of M Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) for the purpose of program refinement based on the performance outcomes of Memphis children on state and nationally normed tests.

The Academy's program was is adapted from the Dallas Reading Plan (Cooter, 2004), and updated with current research findings. It was is designed to provide teachers with deep learning of scientifically-based reading instruction content and strategy training, together with peer coaching in the participants' classrooms. At its inception, the Academy served 24 elementary schools with 144 teachers; the principal from each school enrolled. The schools were chosen from among those where more than 25% of the students were reading below TCAP proficiency level, in addition to where the Reading First program was not in place. The students in the schools were are overwhelmingly African-American in ethnicity, and the large majority of them qualify for federal free or reduced lunch programs through Memphis City Schools. There were nine instructor/coaches; the coaches were are all full-time employees of Memphis City Schools. Five of the coaches along with two

University faculty members served as instructors.

The teachers learned new strategies each week and had an implementation goal referred to as Classroom Action Plan, which they implemented in the classroom with input from the coaches. In the first semester, the course content of the Academy addressed the “big five” (National Reading Panel, 2000) areas of reading and in the second semester it covers small group instruction, reading comprehension, and writing instruction were addressed. The primary element of the Memphis Literacy Academy implementation was that, MLA would act upon the belief that the power to change the academic achievement of children is firmly in the hands of highly trained and compassionate teachers. MLA provided materials, tools, strategies, constant classroom feedback, and professional development that promoted teacher capacity building and thus student achievement gains were observed. Student achievement is clearly influenced by the capacity of the individual classroom teacher (Youngs & King, 2002).

Design

The mixed method evaluation design used both qualitative and quantitative data to examine participant perceptions and experiences, methods of instruction, and student achievement. The study analyzed data from teacher participants, classroom observations, and analysis of student achievement data.

School District

Memphis City Schools is the largest school system in the State of Tennessee and the 21st largest Metropolitan school system in the nation and serves more than 119,000 students among 191 schools in grades K-12. There are 112 Elementary schools in this district with approximately 87% African American students, approximately 9% are Caucasian and 4% represent other nationalities. Seventy-one percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Created as a special school district by a private act of the Tennessee General Assembly in 1869, Memphis City Schools (MCS) employs 16,500 people, including about 8,000 teachers, making it the second largest employer in the City of Memphis (Memphis City Schools, 2010).

Schools

Schools whose principals and teachers participated in the program were came from the from the district schools where over 25% of the students were below proficient on the TCAP reading results. From that pool, with the exception of those

schools involved in the Reading First program, all those interested in participating were selected. This resulted in a cohort of 24 elementary schools that taught students in grades Kindergarten through fifth (or sixth) grade. All but four of the participating schools contained more students eligible for free/reduced lunch than the district average (74.9%).

Participants

According to enrollment data, the majority (66.7%) of the 144 teachers who participated in the program taught in grades K-3, which were the target grades for the program. Nearly one-fourth (23.6%) were in specialists' roles in their schools (special education, instructional facilitator, literacy leader, or reading specialist). Table 1 summarizes the distribution of teaching assignments of teacher participants.

**Table 1: Teacher Participants by School Roles
Memphis Literacy Academy, 2005**

Position	N	%
Kindergarten	18	12.5%
1st Grade	25	17.4%
2nd Grade	25	17.4%
3rd Grade	28	19.4%
4th Grade	4	2.8%
5th Grade	9	6.3%
6th Grade	1	0.7%
Special Education	14	9.7%
Instructional Facilitator	16	11.1%
Literacy Leader	3	2.1%
Reading Specialist	1	0.7%
	144	

Instruments

One survey, two interview protocols, a focus group, and a classroom observation tool constituted the data collection instruments. The Teacher Survey focused on the teachers' experiences and their perceptions of resources, capacity, program development, and outcomes pertaining to the Academy. The Teacher Focus group questions focused on teacher perceptions of course delivery methods, design, content, and principal involvement. The Literacy Observation Tool (LOT©) was developed by researchers at the Center for Research in Educational Policy, College

of Education, University of Memphis (Smith, Ross, & Grehan, 2002; Sterbinsky & Ross, 2003), and is an instrument for observing elementary school classrooms in which teachers are engaged in teaching reading as well as other reading practices.

Procedure

Data for this evaluation were collected during the Spring and Summer semesters of 2005. Spring data collection occurred prior to May 20 which was the end of the 2004-2005 academic year for students. Teacher surveys were administered in April, 2005, by course instructors during a regularly scheduled class session. Principal surveys were administered by the program director in April, during a regularly scheduled session of the Principal Fellowship. Instructor surveys were administered in April during a regularly scheduled weekly meeting held by the program administrator.

Trained observers conducted twenty-three separate targeted classroom observations using the Literacy Observation Tool (LOT©). Observations thus represented 15.97% of the teacher participants. The study used a “targeted” LOT approach. In the targeted LOT, the observer spent forty-five minutes in a single classroom, making separate notations every ten minutes. The four sets of notes were then summarized to comprise one targeted LOT. Sites for the targeted LOTs were randomly selected from participating schools. Once the schools were selected, two teachers who participated in the program were randomly selected for the classroom observations. Teachers were not provided with advance notice. (In one case, due to scheduling conflicts, only one teacher was observed.) The first set of observations was conducted in March, shortly after the program started, at three schools resulting in six targeted LOTs. A second set was conducted in May at six different schools, resulting in eleven targeted LOTs. The third set of LOTs (conducted during summer school) came from three schools, with six teachers being observed. For the first two sets of LOTs, the classroom teachers were instructing the group of students with whom they began the 2004-2005 academic year with. For the third set of LOTs, teachers were observed working with a different group of students. These students were enrolled in the district’s school-based summer school program, which ran from May 27 through June 24.

Data Analysis

Teacher Survey

Of the 144 teachers participating in the program, 126 (87.5%) completed the Teacher Survey. Of these, 104 teachers also answered the open-ended questions in

which comments were requested. Survey questions centered on participants' overall perception of the value and impact of the program, as well as components of the program's content and method (including instructors and logistics). In addition, the teacher survey sought respondents' impressions of the impact on their principals, since their principals were participating in a parallel program.

As evident in Table 2, overall perception of the value and impact of the program was positive: nearly all (89.7%) thought the program had been effective in preparing them to teach elementary students to read. The response to the similar item (9) corroborates this finding: in all, 92.8% agreed (or strongly agreed) that the Academy effectively prepared them to improve the literacy skills of their students ($M=4.492$ on a 5-point scale). Consistent with these two responses, 94.4% indicated they found the professional development of the program valuable ($M=4.589$).

Table 2: Teacher Survey

(n=126)	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1. I find the course materials (texts, readings) relevant to my teaching practice.	69.8	29.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.704	0.458
2. Visits from my reading coach help me implement what I learn in the Academy.	49.2	37.3	6.3	4.0	0.8	4.333	0.836
3. Instructors have made clear the scope and sequence of the Literacy Academy curriculum.	53.2	34.9	6.3	4.8	0.8	4.349	0.861
4. Overall, the Academy blends theory and practice in ways suited to classroom teachers.	57.9	33.3	5.6	2.4	0.0	4.480	0.714

Table 2: Teacher Survey

(n=126)	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	M	SD
5. The professional development provided by the Academy has been valuable.	62.7	31.7	3.2	0.8	0.0	4.589	0.598
6. My principal is committed to the implementation of the Literacy Academy strategies for our school.	39.7	39.7	16.7	1.6	0.0	4.203	0.778
7. The Academy has helped me routinely use running records or other informal classroom assessment strategies as part of daily literacy instruction.	35.7	48.4	12.7	1.6	1.6	4.151	0.820
8. The Academy has helped me use practical strategies for providing reading instruction in flexible, small groups.	42.1	44.4	10.3	2.4	0.0	4.272	0.745
9. I believe the strategies I am learning during the Academy are positively impacting student achievement.	49.2	43.7	5.6	1.6	0.0	4.405	0.671

Table 2: Teacher Survey

(n=126)	% Strongly Agree		% Agree		% Neutral		% Disagree		% Strongly Disagree		M	SD
							Yes		No			
10. In general, has the Memphis Literacy Academy been effective in preparing you to teach elementary students to read?	89.7						2.4				1.026	0.159

Response Scale, items 1-16: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree

NOTE: Item percentages may not total 100% because of missing input from some respondents.

In terms of specific components of the program, responses were also strongly positive. Most notably, teachers indicated the course text and readings were relevant to their teaching practice (M=4.704), in addition, the program succeeded in blending theory and practice in ways suited for classroom teachers (M=4.48). According to the teacher responses, the instructors succeeded in clearly communicating critical content (M=4.643), and teachers largely agreed (88.1%, M=4.349) that instructors made the scope and sequence of the program clear. They were likewise largely in agreement that visits from reading coaches assisted them with implementing what they had learned in the Academy (M=4.349).

Strategies Learned

In terms of the influence of what they had learned, these teachers were most enthusiastic in their belief that the strategies they were learning were having a positive impact on the achievement of their students (M=4.405). They thought the program helped them with practical instructional strategies for instructing flexible, small reading groups (M=4.272). Also, making daily use of informal classroom assessment strategies was another positive aspects of their program participation (M=4.151). They even felt that developing the required classroom action plans helped them improve their instruction (M=4.264).

Participant Comment Section

Many respondents used the comment section to indicate how valuable they found the strategies they were taught at the Academy to be. While some teachers indicated they had already been using most or all of the strategies, one participant pointed out that they were now implementing them more effectively. Comments indicated that the program helped participants learn to use assessment techniques (such as reading inventories) and other tools to assess students' reading levels. As a result, teachers were better able to differentiate instruction. Respondents noted appreciatively the research-based nature of what they were being taught as well as the opportunity to immediately implement the concepts with their students. Program participants were also enthusiastic about being able to share strategies with other colleagues at their respective schools.

Teacher Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group participants were from two randomly selected course sections. From these two, subsets of participants were further selected (again randomly) and invited to participate in the focus groups. One group contained nine teachers, the other, eight. These were conducted during one week in April, in lieu of the latter half of one of the regularly scheduled classes. (Course instructors were not present.) The discussion questions focused on course delivery methods, design, and content. The focus groups also pursued the topic of the involvement of their principals. The following sections address the emerging concepts that are highlighted throughout [this](#) article.

School Teams

Discussants were enthusiastic about the program's selection of school teams to participate in the coursework and its implementation at their home schools. The team approach made it possible for them to share strategies with other teachers at their home schools as well as with each other. However, participants noted that the teaching of different grade levels at their respective schools did lessen the extent to which they could support each other at "home." They noted they actually found little time while "on the job" to interact with fellow participants. They would have found a formal meeting time with each other during the school day useful. The groups of schools that comprised a cluster (course section) of participants did not all have the same dismissal times. Thus, participants noted that it was difficult for some of them to complete their school day, travel to the host school, and still be on time for class.

Instructors

According to the focus group participants, their instructors had a wealth of real-world public school experience with which they enriched the coursework. Instructors were able to keep the class time engaging, with no “dead time.” The course used a “step by step” approach and featured a high level of group discussions, according to those who participated in the focus groups. Pedagogy also included teacher modeling. The hands-on experience was noted appreciatively; some participants indicated the need for even more hands-on activities, particularly for the more abstract concepts within the curriculum. Participants were able to collect useful “carry-out” materials from the course to use with their students. While the coursework was noted as being based in research, some observed that there was overlap in some of the course readings while others actually appeared contradictory. It was noted that some readings were more feasible for application to classroom practice than others. One critic of the semester-based program, who thought a three-hour instructional period each week was not warranted, noted that a workshop format would have been a more effective delivery system than the extended course approach.

Literacy Coaches

Participants were also enthusiastic about the coaching component of the program. This element provided them opportunities to personally discuss their classroom action plans with an expert. Coaching also assisted them in improving their implementation. However, some noted that the coaching visits needed to adhere more faithfully to the scheduled times.

Content of Program

With respect to the actual content of the program, teachers recognized that in addition to the strategies that the program helped them develop, they also found they had developed their academic vocabulary, which now meant they could better understand the professional literature. Participants noted the program grounded them in the basic importance of assessment. They also noted learning the significance of including all five essential components of reading in their instruction. Using “read-alouds” and retelling during instruction are two examples of specific techniques they learned. Miscue analysis was helpful as well; by documenting the difficulties their children were experiencing with reading (e.g., transitions from sentences to stories, and simply “calling words” which indicated a lack of comprehension), teachers demonstrated their own conceptual understanding. Some indicated

concern, however, about incorporating what they had learned with their adherence to the basal reading program adopted by the school district.

Participants expressed concern of a “parent piece” seemed lacking from the course. As a remedy, leaders of the Academy and others participated in parent meetings, offering parents expert advice. Take-home packets were provided for parents with ideas to help their children with reading. A textbook was included in the courses taught weekly that assisted the participants with parental involvement including diverse family types and cultures. Presentations and discussions (case studies) during class time addressed the benefits of family involvement and suggestions on involving parents in the educational process throughout their children’s lives.

Administrators’ Involvement

The focus group discussions acknowledged that having a parallel program for school principals was important; however, they heralded this as unusual in the world of teacher professional development. Having teachers and principals “on the same page” and possessing the same goals would indicate that the principals would have a better sense of what teachers were doing in the classroom. Shared professional readings further enhanced the professionalism. Teachers noted that their principals had found new ways to support them, via providing a teacher’s assistant while the teacher was completing the RICs to committing to send a cadre of teachers to the 2005 International Reading Association Conference.

Literacy Observation Tool

As indicated in the description of the LOT, the observation procedure primarily focused on six categories of basic elements of literacy instruction: Instructional Orientation, Instructional Components, Assessment, Learning Environment, Visible Print Environment, and Materials Used, while utilizing a five-point rubric (0=not observed, 1=rarely, 2=occasionally, 3=frequently, and 4=extensively). In the following descriptive analysis, percentages were frequently and extensively combined unless otherwise specified.

Since the first LOTs were conducted shortly after the program was initiated, the data collected were considered baseline results. The interval between these baseline LOTs and those that followed was, in some cases, less than ninety days. With this interval, comparisons were made, but should be viewed cautiously in light of the brief time that elapsed between baseline and post-program observations.

Baseline LOT (Administered March 2005)

Instructional Orientation

The most-observed instructional orientation in the baseline period was direct instruction to the whole class, seen extensively in 50% of the observations¹. Learning centers and cooperative/collaborative learning were used much less, at 33.3% and 16.7% respectively. Small group instruction was not seen frequently or extensively during any observations.

Table 3. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT[®]) Data Summary: Baseline LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 6					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION					
Small group	66.7	0.0	33.3	0.0	0.0
Whole class	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Learning centers	66.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	33.3
Cooperative/collaborative learning	50.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	16.7
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS					
Reading - The Teacher:					
Concepts of Print					
Book/print conventions	50.0	16.7	33.3	0.0	0.0
Alphabetics					
Letter naming/knowledge	83.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Phonemic awareness instruction	83.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Rhyming	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Explicit phonics instruction	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Fluency					
Models fluent oral reading	50.0	16.7	16.7	16.7	0.0
Has students read/reread orally together	83.3	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0
Vocabulary					
Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	66.7	16.7	16.7	0.0	0.0
Explicit vocabulary instruction	50.0	16.7	33.3	0.0	0.0
Text Comprehension					
Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	50.0	16.7	16.7	16.7	0.0
Makes connection to prior knowledge	16.7	0.0	66.7	16.7	0.0
Asks students for predictions	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Uses higher level questioning	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Guides visual imaging	66.7	16.7	16.7	0.0	0.0
Guides interactive discussion	50.0	0.0	0.0	16.7	33.3

Table 3. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT[®]) Data Summary: Baseline LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 6					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
Independent Reading - The Student:					
Reads self-selected materials	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
Writing - The Teacher:					
Letter formation/handwriting	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Writing process	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Language mechanics lessons	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Conferences with students	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Provides for students' sharing	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Writing - The Student:					
Writes independently	66.7	0.0	0.0	33.3	0.0
Response writing	66.7	0.0	0.0	33.3	0.0
ASSESSMENT					
Formal testing	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Portfolios	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
IRI, running records	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT					
Conducive to cooperative interactions	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	83.3
Students actively engaged	0.0	0.0	16.7	50.0	33.3
Effective classroom management	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	83.3
Teacher actively monitors	50.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	33.3
VISIBLE PRINT ENVIRONMENT					
Alphabet	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	83.3
Word wall	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
Labeling (names, objects, areas)	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
Classroom library	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0
Evidence of student writing/work products	66.7	16.7	0.0	0.0	16.7
MATERIALS USED					
Basal texts	66.7	0.0	0.0	16.7	16.7
Big books	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Books on tape	50.0	16.7	0.0	0.0	33.3
Computers	83.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7

Table 3. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT[®]) Data Summary: Baseline LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 6

The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
Fiction books	33.3	16.7	33.3	0.0	16.7
Non-fiction books	50.0	0.0	33.3	0.0	16.7
Poetry	83.3	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Newspaper/magazines	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Word/vocabulary materials	33.3	0.0	16.7	16.7	33.3
Worksheets/workbooks	83.3	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	50.0	16.7	0.0	33.3	0.0

Note: One targeted observation visit equals approximately 4 individual observations in a single classroom

Neither concepts of print nor any of the alphabetic components were observed frequently or extensively. Explicit phonics instruction was actually “not observed” in 100% of the observations. Among the fluency activities, modeling fluent oral reading and having students read/reread orally together were each observed “frequently” at 16.7% of the time (but never “extensively”). Neither of the vocabulary activities was observed frequently or extensively. The predominant text comprehension activity observed was guiding interactive discussions, which was observed frequently/extensively 50% of the time. Explicit comprehension strategy instruction and making connections to prior knowledge were observed “frequently” at 16.7% each (never “extensively”). Teachers were never observed questioning students for predictions, nor using higher level questioning, or guiding visual imaging. Students were observed “extensively” reading self-selected readings in 16.7% of observation. Writing instruction activities were not observed but students were each observed writing independently and participating in response writing during 33.3% of the observations. No assessment activities were observed frequently or extensively.

The learning environment appears to have been relatively positive in the classrooms observed. Classrooms were observed as conducive to cooperative interactions in 83.3% of the observations. Similarly, students were frequently/extensively viewed as actively engaged, and effective classroom management was likewise observed 83.3% of the time. Teachers were less often seen actively monitoring; this was only noted frequently/extensively in 33.3% of the observations. Classroom print environments were somewhat sporadic. The alphabet was displayed in 83.3% of classrooms, but only 50% of classrooms had libraries, word walls and labeling were observed only 16.7% of the time. Evidence of student writing or work products were seen “extensively” in 16.7% of the observations.

The materials most often utilized were word/vocabulary materials, which were seen frequently/extensively in 50% of observations. Basal texts, audio book and “other” materials were observed 33.3% of the time. Computers and fiction or non-fiction books were next in frequency at 16.7%. Big books, poetry, newspapers/magazines, and worksheets or workbooks were never observed frequently or extensively.

Post-treatment LOT

“Post-treatment” LOTs were conducted in May, 2005 and during Summer School, 2005. The primary instructional orientation viewed in the post-treatment observations was direct instruction to the whole class, observed frequently/extensively in 76.5% of observations. This was followed by small group instruction, noted in 17.6% of observations. Learning centers and cooperative/collaborative learning were seen in only 5.9% of observations.

Table 4. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Post-Treatment LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 17					
The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION					
Small group	58.8	11.8	11.8	5.9	11.8
Whole class	11.8	5.9	5.9	11.8	64.7
Learning centers	88.2	0.0	5.9	5.9	0.0
Cooperative/collaborative learning	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS					
Reading - The Teacher:					
<i>Concepts of Print</i>					
Book/print conventions	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
<i>Alphabetic</i>					
Letter naming/knowledge	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Phonemic awareness instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Rhyming	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Explicit phonics instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
<i>Fluency</i>					
Models fluent oral reading	41.2	29.4	17.6	11.8	0.0
Has students read/reread orally together	58.8	17.6	5.9	11.8	5.9
<i>Vocabulary</i>					
Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	35.3	29.4	11.8	23.5	0.0
Explicit vocabulary instruction	76.5	17.6	0.0	5.9	0.0
<i>Text Comprehension</i>					
Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	70.6	11.8	0.0	17.6	0.0
Makes connection to prior knowledge	29.4	58.8	5.9	5.9	0.0

Table 4. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Post-Treatment LOTs

Number of Targeted Observation Visits for 2004-2005: N = 17

The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION					
Small group	58.8	11.8	11.8	5.9	11.8
Whole class	11.8	5.9	5.9	11.8	64.7
Learning centers	88.2	0.0	5.9	5.9	0.0
Cooperative/collaborative learning	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS					
Reading - The Teacher:					
<i>Concepts of Print</i>					
Book/print conventions	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
<i>Alphabetics</i>					
Letter naming/knowledge	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Phonemic awareness instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Rhyming	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Explicit phonics instruction	76.5	11.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
<i>Fluency</i>					
Models fluent oral reading	41.2	29.4	17.6	11.8	0.0
Has students read/reread orally together	58.8	17.6	5.9	11.8	5.9
<i>Vocabulary</i>					
Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	35.3	29.4	11.8	23.5	0.0
Explicit vocabulary instruction	76.5	17.6	0.0	5.9	0.0
<i>Text Comprehension</i>					
Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	70.6	11.8	0.0	17.6	0.0
Makes connection to prior knowledge	29.4	58.8	5.9	5.9	0.0
Asks students for predictions	82.4	17.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Uses higher level questioning	58.8	29.4	11.8	0.0	0.0
Guides visual imaging	58.8	29.4	11.8	0.0	0.0
Guides interactive discussion	17.6	35.3	41.2	0.0	5.9
Independent Reading - The Student:					
Reads self-selected materials	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0

Table 4. Literacy Observation Tool (LOT®) Data Summary: Post-Treatment LOTs, continued

The extent to which each of the following is present in the school:	Percent Not Observed	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS, continued					
Writing - The Teacher:					
Letter formation/handwriting	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Writing process	88.2	5.9	5.9	0.0	0.0
Language mechanics lessons	76.5	11.8	11.8	0.0	0.0
Conferences with students	82.4	5.9	11.8	0.0	0.0
Provides for students' sharing	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Writing - The Student:					
Writes independently	76.5	11.8	5.9	0.0	5.9
Response writing	70.6	11.8	11.8	0.0	5.9

ASSESSMENT					
Formal testing	64.7	0.0	23.5	11.8	0.0
Portfolios	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
IRI, running records	94.1	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT					
Conducive to cooperative interactions	11.8	0.0	0.0	23.5	64.7
Students actively engaged	0.0	5.9	5.9	17.6	70.6
Effective classroom management	0.0	0.0	5.9	5.9	88.2
Teacher actively monitors	5.9	23.5	11.8	35.3	23.5
VISIBLE PRINT ENVIRONMENT					
Alphabet	41.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	58.8
Word wall	29.4	0.0	5.9	5.9	58.8
Labeling (names, objects, areas)	58.8	5.9	0.0	5.9	29.4
Classroom library	23.5	11.8	0.0	11.8	52.9
Evidence of student writing/work products	41.2	5.9	5.9	11.8	35.3
MATERIALS USED					
Basal texts	70.6	5.9	5.9	11.8	5.9
Big books	94.1	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0
Books on tape	82.4	11.8	5.9	0.0	0.0
Computers	76.5	0.0	5.9	11.8	5.9
Fiction books	58.8	11.8	11.8	0.0	17.6
Non-fiction books	94.1	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0
Poetry	82.4	17.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Newspaper/magazines	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Word/vocabulary materials	58.8	5.9	5.9	11.8	17.6
Worksheets/workbooks	76.5	11.8	5.9	0.0	5.9
Other	35.3	5.9	11.8	23.5	23.5

Note: One targeted observation visit equals approximately 4 individual observations in a single classroom.

Beginning reading and readiness activities (“alphabetic”) were rarely seen in many of the classrooms. Most frequent were phonemic awareness instruction and explicit phonics instruction, each seen “frequently” in 5.9% of observations (never “extensively”). Letter naming/knowledge and rhyming were not observed frequently/extensively; nor were concepts of print. Fluency activities were observed somewhat more frequently, with the teacher frequently/extensively observed requiring the students to read/reread orally together during 17.6% of the observations, and modeling fluent reading in 11.8% of the observations.

Among vocabulary activities, teachers were viewed frequently introducing or reviewing vocabulary in 23.5% of the observations and providing explicit vocabulary instruction in 5.9%. Text comprehension activities were not extensively observed. Explicit comprehension strategy was frequently (never extensively) observed in 17.6% of the observations; and connecting to their prior knowledge during 5.9% of the observations. Teachers were never observed asking students for predictions,

using higher level questioning, guiding visual imaging, or guiding interactive discussions. Independent reading also was not observed.

None of the observations revealed frequent or extensive writing instruction by the teacher. Student independent writing and response writing was noted extensively in 5.9% of the observations. Of the assessment activities, only formal testing was observed frequently/extensively (in 11.8% of observations). Neither portfolios nor running records were observed frequently or extensively.

These observations suggest a positive learning environment. Effective classroom management was frequently/extensively observed in 94.1% of the visits. The classroom was conducive to cooperative interactions and the students were actively engaged in 88.2% of the observations. The teacher was less frequently observed actively monitoring (58.8%). The most often observed print items were word walls and classroom libraries, each were noted 64.7% of the time. The alphabet was displayed in 58.8% of the classrooms. Evidence of student writing was observed 47.1% of the time, and labeling 35.5%.

Interestingly, the most frequently-observed materials utilized were “other”, at 47%. Next were word/vocabulary materials at 29.4%. Basal texts, computers, and fiction books were frequently/extensively seen in 17.6% of observations. Rarely seen were big books, non-fiction books, and worksheets/workbooks (5.9%). Neither poetry nor newspapers/magazines were viewed frequently or extensively.

Descriptive Comparison of Baseline to Post-Treatment LOTs

Preliminary comparisons of baseline and post LOT findings do indicate some changes in teacher practice (see Table 5). While the most pervasive instructional orientation continued to be whole class, the post LOTs evidenced demonstration of small group orientation, frequently or extensively, in 17% of the cases, compared to none in the baseline LOTs. Learning centers and cooperative learning, however, were observed less than in the baseline LOTs.

Table 5: Comparison of Baseline and Post Targeted* LOTs, 2004-2005

	Baseline	Post
The extent to which each of the following is <i>frequently or extensively</i> present in the school:	(n=6)	(n=17)
INSTRUCTIONAL ORIENTATION		
Small group	0.0	17.7
Whole class	50.0	76.5
Learning centers	33.3	5.9
Cooperative/collaborative learning	16.7	5.9

INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS

Reading - The Teacher:

Concepts of Print

Book/print conventions	0.0	0.0
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Alphabetics

Letter naming/knowledge	0.0	0.0
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Phonemic awareness instruction	0.0	5.9
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Rhyming	0.0	0.0
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Explicit phonics instruction	0.0	5.9
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Fluency

Models fluent oral reading	16.7	11.8
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Has students read/reread orally together	16.7	17.7
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Vocabulary

Introduces/reviews key vocabulary	0.0	23.5
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Explicit vocabulary instruction	0.0	5.9
---------------------------------	-----	-----

Text Comprehension

Explicit comprehension strategy instruction	16.7	17.6
---	------	------

Makes connection to prior knowledge	16.7	5.9
-------------------------------------	------	-----

Asks students for predictions	0.0	0.0
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Uses higher level questioning	0.0	0.0
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Guides visual imaging	0.0	0.0
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Guides interactive discussion	50.0	5.9
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Independent Reading - The Student:

Reads self-selected materials	16.7	0.0
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Writing - The Teacher:

Letter formation/handwriting	0.0	0.0
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Writing process	0.0	0.0
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Language mechanics lessons	0.0	0.0
----------------------------	-----	-----

Conferences with students	0.0	0.0
---------------------------	-----	-----

Provides for students' sharing	0.0	0.0
--------------------------------	-----	-----

Writing - The Student:

Writes independently	33.3	5.9
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Response writing	33.3	5.9
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ASSESSMENT

Formal testing	0.0	11.8
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Portfolios	0.0	0.0
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IRI, running records	0.0	0.0
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LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Conducive to cooperative interactions	83.3	88.2
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Students actively engaged	83.3	88.2
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Effective classroom management	83.3	94.1
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Teacher actively monitors	33.3	58.8
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VISIBLE PRINT ENVIRONMENT

Alphabet	83.3	58.8
Word wall	16.7	64.7
Labeling (names, objects, areas)	16.7	35.3
Classroom library	50.0	64.7
Evidence of student writing/work products	16.7	47.1

MATERIALS USED

Basal texts	33.4	17.7
Big books	0.0	5.9
Books on tape	33.3	0.0
Computers	16.7	17.7
Fiction books	16.7	17.6
Non-fiction books	16.7	5.9
Poetry	0.0	0.0
Newspaper/magazines	0.0	0.0
Word/vocabulary materials	50.0	29.4
Worksheets/workbooks	0.0	5.9
Other	33.3	47

**Note: One targeted observation visit equals approximately 4 observation periods in the same classroom over 45 minutes.*

While no alphabetic components were observed frequently or extensively in the baseline LOTs, phonemic awareness instruction and explicit phonics instruction were observed in small numbers (5.9%) of the post LOTs. Both of the vocabulary components were noted in post observations, but not in the baseline. Notably, introducing/reviewing key vocabulary was observed frequently or extensively in nearly a quarter (23.5%) of the post LOTs.

While all the text comprehension components observed at baseline continued to be seen in post LOTs (see Table 9), two actually decreased in frequency (connection to prior knowledge from 16.7% to 5.9%, and guiding interactive discussions from 50% to 5.9%). Student writing was also noted less often (5.9% vs. 33.3%) in post observations than at baseline.

Post LOTs found one of the assessment techniques (formal testing) frequently in 11.8% of the observations, an improvement over baseline where it was observed only rarely. The visible print environment changed from baseline to post, according to the LOTs—while the pervasiveness of the alphabet decreased slightly, all of the other elements (word walls, labeling, classroom library, and evidence of student writing products) increased in the extent to which they were observed frequently or extensively.

In terms of materials used, reliance on basal texts decreased almost by half (from 33.4% to 17.7% extensively or frequently as observed) from the baseline. Three types of materials observed during baseline (audio books, 33.3%; non-fiction books, 16.7%; and word/vocabulary materials, 50%) were evidenced less frequently in post observations (observed 0.1%, 5.9%, and 29.4% respectively). While worksheets/workbooks were not viewed frequently or extensively during baseline, there was a small (5.9%) presence during the post LOT observations.

Nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of the LOT observations during the “post” period were conducted at the end of the regular academic year, in classroom situations comparable to the situations where the baseline observations were made. During this time, teachers were completing the first of their two semesters of course work as part of the Literacy Academy. The remaining post period observations (35.3%) were conducted during summer school. During this time, the teachers were enrolled in the second semester of their program. As a result of the summer school program, the observed teachers may or may not have been in their home schools or in their own classrooms. Further, the students with whom they were working may or may not have been students with whom they had been working over the course of the previous academic year. What was consistent throughout all the observations, however, was the teachers’ ongoing participation in the Memphis Literacy Academy.

Discussion

Teacher Survey

Teachers generally were very positive about the content and relevance of the Academy curriculum and its effectiveness in preparing them to teach reading. Although overall, the teachers were appreciative of the principals’ involvement in the Fellowship, they indicated reservations concerning the knowledge enhancement of the principals.

Literacy Observation Tool (LOT©)

In both the Baseline and Post-Treatment LOTs, the most-observed instructional orientation was direct instruction to the whole class. Of instructional components, the beginning reading and readiness activities (“alphabetic”) were rarely observed.. Fluency activities were noted somewhat more frequently. During the Baseline LOT, neither of the vocabulary activities were observed frequently or extensively; although, during the Post-Treatment LOT both were observed. During the baseline LOT, the predominant text comprehension activity was guiding interactive

instruction. Other text comprehension activities were observed in baseline and post LOTs, but during fewer observations. Writing instruction was never observed frequently/extensively. Independent writing and responsive writing were observed in more baseline observations than during the post-treatment period. Assessment activities were not observed except formal testing. The Learning Environment was positive in both LOTs. All elements of visible print were observed, and several with greater intensity in the post-treatment period than in the baseline were noted.

Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program Results

The impact of the Memphis Literacy Academy on the reading achievement of Memphis children is reflected in the results of the 2005 TCAP Reading Test Scores. According to the Memphis City Schools Report to the Board of Commissioners (2005), children enrolled in the classrooms of MLA teachers improved 14.9% at the “proficient” level on the state’s TCAP when compared to the 2004 results.

Recommendations

The researcher suggested that the Memphis Literacy Academy leadership consider the following recommendations, which reflect observations of data gathered during the evaluation.

1. Review the instructional process relating to the administration of the Reading Inventory for the Classroom (RIC). The teachers appeared to value this instrument, but indicated frustration with the amount of time involved in administering the assessment. They also appeared (at least at the time data were gathered) to be uncomfortable concerning whether they were “doing it right.” The administration of the RIC apparently is rather difficult during initial administration, and it may require another semester of experience to make a huge difference to the teachers. Nonetheless, it would seem sensible to assess whether adjustments in the instruction, modeling and/or feedback could make the RIC more “user-friendly” from the outset.
2. Consider methods to lessen the difficulties some teachers experienced in arriving to Academy classes as scheduled.. Possible adjustments may include later class start times; more central location of classes (the Teaching and Learning Academy was suggested as a possibility); or allowing the classes to “float” from one cluster school to another, making a few meetings more convenient for each teacher.

3. Arrange for the same individual to serve as instructor and coach for each academy participant.
4. Consider ways to allow coaches more time for actual coaching of strategy implementation in the classroom. This could probably be accomplished to some degree by the implementation of the previous (3) recommendation. Other possibilities include adjustments to the locations of schools from which teachers are assigned to specific coaches, or adjusting the number of teachers assigned to some coaches.
5. Enhance the “Parent Involvement” component of the curriculum. Both teachers and principals indicated that this would be a welcomed adjustment.
6. Carefully examine assigned readings.
7. In the future, arrange for new cohorts in the Academy to start in the Fall semester and thus receive a full academic year of Academy participation and learning.
8. Consider surveying the first cohort of participants after the start of the new academic year and conducting LOTs in a random selection of their classrooms to ascertain perceived program value and the extent to which new reading strategies were implemented.

Recommendations Addressed

All of the above recommendations were considered and addressed:

1. Teachers no longer administered the RIC. Teachers were taught to analyze the data from the districts assessment such as DIBELS and the Formative Assessments from the district’s basal series.
2. All classes were moved to school sites with less travel distance and time for teachers.
3. The majority of the instructors were coaches; only one U of M professor served as an instructor.
4. Adjustments were made by assigning coaches to schools that were closer in distance and coaches were allowed to spend more time in each of their assigned schools.
5. Parent Involvement was enhanced during both semesters. Also, a textbook was purchased for each academy participant.
6. Outside reading assignments continued but decreased.
7. A new cohort began in August of 2006 and 2007.
8. We did not address this recommendation due to budget constraints.

Conclusion

The Memphis Literacy Academy was the recipient of the “Urban Impact Award” from The Council of Great City Schools. This award acknowledged the academy’s collaborative efforts of enhancing the professional development of educators. As of the publication of this article, over 500 teachers and administrators had participated and continue to utilize the literacy strategies and information in their schools and classrooms. The collaboration proved to be an effective model because the teachers benefited; consequently, students’ reading levels improved. As data continues to be collected, the state assessments’ scores continue to improve. Upon completion of the academy, many teachers shared they thought they were teaching reading prior to beginning the academy, conversely after a year of the intensive professional development, they now know that they are teaching reading.



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