Chapter 6

Learning to Partner: Implementation of a Partnership to Reform High School English Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses the cognitive framework to reveal the strengths and challenges of our high school English Language Arts workshop partnership. The chapter begins by describing a partnership with a medium sized district and one comprehensive high school. Then the chapter reviews central aspects of the cognitive framework of implementation. Next, the chapter illuminate factors enabling and constraining the trajectory of our partnership activities. The chapter concludes by discussing implications for reformers, educational leaders, and other stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy achievement for adolescents in the US has historically been an area of concern: data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) pilot studies of 12th grade students indicates that only 38% of 12th graders read at or above the “proficient” level, reflecting no change in the same figure from 2009. NAEP scores among adolescent readers over the last thirty years have raised concerns among educators, researchers and policymakers alike (Shanahan, 2008). Low and stagnant achievement levels are associated with an academic period during which literacy demands continue to increase as middle and high schools aim to prepare students for increasingly demanding college and career options. A College Board survey from 2004 for example, demonstrated that the knowledge and skills required for college and career are now equivalent and that American businesses spend $3.1 billion annually on writing remediation in the workplace. Similarly, college and university professors estimate that more than half of all college freshman are not prepared for college writing tasks, and 40% of all high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers are
looking for in job applicants (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Currently, reform efforts associated with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) promote unified instructional goals across states and target college and career readiness by emphasizing critical thinking skills across both grade levels and content areas (International Reading Association, 2012; National Governors Association, 2009).

Increased attention to national and international literacy rates since the 1980s has been associated with increases in funding, research and attention, yet this has been disproportionately focused on early literacy development. For example, No Child Left Behind’s Reading First policy targeted kindergarten through third grade reading instruction and achievement. Across the United States, state-level Reading First policy asked teachers to deliver systematic and explicit instruction which followed prescriptive instructional materials (Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin 2010; Coburn & Pearson, 2012; Kersten & Pardo, 2007).

Though the average reading score of 4th and 8th graders has increased in the last five years, only 35% of 4th graders and 36% of 8th graders read at or above the “proficient” level (US Department of Education, 2013). Unsurprisingly, low literacy rates are also negatively associated with high school completion, income, poverty, and interaction with the criminal justice system (Lundsford, Moglen & Slevin, 1990). Furthermore, there is a pervasive gap between the literacy rates of students of color and white students—with consequences for schools, communities, and society.

One way to understand this trend is as an extension of what Chall referred to as the 4th grade slump (Chall, 2003). This “slump” involves, in essence, a double-challenge hypothesis, that states that, as the literacy demands of coursework increases in middle high school, the amount and intensity of literacy instruction decreases. As a consequence, this leads students who struggle into a cycle of reading difficulty and, ultimately, disengagement. When students are disengaged from reading, it adds further challenges for secondary teachers. Students with low reading proficiency may struggle to complete coursework in math, science, and humanities. Overall, their motivation and engagement in school may plummet.

These national and historic trends in adolescent literacy achievement are also familiar at the local level. Our northeastern state has an overall high level of achievement, yet carries the infamous distinction of having the nation’s highest achievement gap. Within our partnership district, elementary and middle school reading scores steadily improved over the past decade, while high school scores stagnated or fell. The partnership project described in this chapter was developed in order to promote equitable and coherent literacy instruction within a diverse, suburban high school with a large proportion of students of color, and a significant internal achievement gap along racial and ethnic lines of difference. Our literacy workshop partnership brought together the frames of literacy instruction, implementation, and adult learning. Specifically, we adapted Teachers College Reading and Writing Project for the secondary level and for this specific context. We remained attuned to factors enabling and constraining the implementation of instructional reforms, including teachers’ knowledge and skills, as well as resources and prioritization. Finally, to promote implementation, we attempted to draw upon concepts from adult learning theory as way to value educators’ existing constructs regarding appropriate and effective literacy instruction. The partnership’s actors were based in University and a high school, together aiming to improve classroom practice. The partnership, as described below, was endorsed by District leaders and was also met with approval by high school administration.

Instructional reform requires changing the knowledge, skills, and practices of educators within a specific context (Coburn, 2001 & 2004; Cohen & Hill, 2001). Regardless of whether reforms are targeting elementary math, high school English Language Arts, or Special Education, within the education system, change is complex