Close the Achievement Gap With Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Professional development of teachers and the role it plays in improving teacher quality is a topic of considerable interest. The authors of this study examined the effectiveness of professional development (PD) to improve the quality of teaching for 21 reading teachers participating in a No Child Left Behind Summer Reading Institute. Data collection occurred over the four-week period of the Institute and two follow up sessions during the academic year 2017-2018. Data evaluation was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The results suggest that PD helped this group of Mississippi Delta reading teachers improve in both content knowledge and pedagogical practice. The authors conclude that such PD plays a critical role in improving teacher quality from the underrepresented and underserved areas of the Mississippi Delta. Future studies could investigate the direct effects of PD programs such as that offered by the Institute on participating teachers students’ learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Professional Development, Reading Education, Rural Education, Teacher Quality

INTRODUCTION

Improving the student’s reading achievement for K-12 has remained a highly researched and talked about topic over the past two decades. Educators and researchers have conducted array of areas in education to find the means to increase students’ reading skills to meet the demands of society. The areas include examination of social economic status, motivation, equity, parental involvement, quality of teaching, to name a few. The consensus of educators and researchers suggests that the quality of teaching played a key role in students’ academic learning. The question is how we can help K-12 teachers improve the quality of their teaching, particularly those from underrepresented and underserved areas. In Mississippi, a traditionally underrepresented and underserved area is the Mississippi Delta.

Located between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in the northwest of the state of Mississippi, the Mississippi Delta is an alluvial plain with extremely fertile soil. Historically, the area has a rich agricultural past. Today, it is still an agricultural center that produces rice, soybeans, grains, poultry, and catfish. The economic value of these agricultural products matches that of cotton. The region is home to blues music, a musical genre that reflects the poverty and difficulty of life in this region.
The Mississippi Delta is also one of the poorest areas in the nation. One hundred percent of the students in the Mississippi Delta school districts receive free lunch supported by the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) funded by the United States department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (C. Johnson, phone interview, November 8, 2017). The CEP is a meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas and it allows the nation’s highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students (USDA, 2017).

Compounded by the poverty of the region, the school districts and schools in this area do not have adequate teaching resources to support teachers’ teaching, let along to improve faculty’ professional development opportunities. Take the example of the MAP 2016 test for the four school districts along the Highway 82 West in the Mississippi Delta, reading performance of students in these four school districts is lower than the statewide performance level. In October 2016, Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) released the Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP) results in English Language Arts (ELA). The test results ranged from accountability Level 1 through Level 5 that reflected minimal, basic, passing, proficient, and advanced English language skills. As an example, consider the six-grade test, the statewide average performance levels (for Levels 1 through 5, respectively) were 16.3%, 24.0%, 30.5%, 21.7%, and 7.5%. By contrast, the average percentage performance level for the four target school districts were 30.6%, 30.4%, 25.78%, 11.0%, and 2.28%. According to the MDE, students scoring level 3 (receiving 65 points and higher) and above are meeting or exceeding expectations. Over 61% of the six grade students from the target districts do not meet or exceed expectations. This compares with the state average of 40.3%.

In 2017, the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) provided funds to the Mississippi Valley State University (MVSU) to establish a Reading Institute to offer professional development in teaching reading to public and private school teachers in this region. These funds were under the direct supervision of IHL and allocated through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Title II Part A Improve Teacher Quality Program, a federal fund to provide the Mississippi Delta reading teachers with opportunities to receive PD training in reading to enhance teaching quality to improve their students’ reading performance and produce an overall improvement in academic outcomes.

The NCLB Act of 2001 mandates that every child should receive instruction in the core academic areas by highly qualified teachers. Reading is one of the core subjects. Students must be able to read and write to succeed in all subjects. The schools in the target area are historically underrepresented and underserved and suffer critical teacher shortages. The early and low-level reading achievement of students in the target region adversely affects content learning across the curriculum, reducing graduation rates, and contributing to the high rates of unemployment related to the well-recognized continued cycle of poverty in the Mississippi Delta. Therefore, it is paramount to help local teachers enhance the quality of how they teach reading. With the improvement in teaching quality, the reading ability of their students will improve, producing a positive effect on academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The International Literacy Association (ILA) reported the findings of the What’s Hot, What’s Not survey conducted nationally and internationally in 2017 (ILA, 2018). The results suggested that the top four hottest topics were early literacy, teacher preparation, professional development, and access to books and content. Well recognized by literacy professions, the value of teacher quality and content knowledge has a direct impact on the elements of literacy education excellence.

Professional development is one of the most meaningful and direct means of improving teacher quality (Dennis & Horn, 2014; Skourdoumbis, 2014; Skourdoumbis & Gale, 2013; Thurlings & den Brok, 2017). In today’s knowledge-based society, professional development for teachers is a significant way to sustain and improve the quality of teaching, particularly for those PDs that focus on subject matter knowledge, pedagogical practice, and engaging PD activities. Such PDs yield outcomes on teaching professional growth as well as improvements in teaching practice. Janssen, Kreijins, Bastiaens,
Examining the Psychometric Properties of the Standards Assessment Inventory


www.igi-global.com/article/examining-the-psychometric-properties-of-the-standards-assessment-inventory/196557?camid=4v1a