

Breaking the Code:
An Action Research Study of My Role as an Instructional Facilitator
2003-2004

QUESTION: What happens when a middle school creates reading intervention classes to teach 6th, 7th, and 8th graders who cannot decode how to read and spell phonetically (encode)? Some related questions I am investigating:

- How helpful or important is it to provide the teachers with a reading program or curricular materials?
- How do the teachers use this curricular program?
- How helpful or important is it to provide the teachers with training by a teacher experienced in teaching reading intervention to middle schoolers?
- How helpful or important is it to provide teachers with time to collaborate and share best practices?
- What factors do students credit as helping or hindering their learning to read and write?
- What factors do the intervention teachers credit as helping or hindering their students' learning?

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE:

Setting: My public, urban middle school serves 600 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. 95% of our students qualify for free lunch, and 85% are learning English as a second language. The average education level of my students' parents is less than sixth grade. Most students enrolled in sixth grade reading at a fourth grade level. Approximately 75 students at our school did not pass a test called the Core Phonics Survey because they did not recognize all of the sounds of the alphabet.

My previous study: This study is a companion to a study I completed last year called *The Power of Pretzels*. In the 2002-2003 school year, we had informal reading intervention courses that served more as tutorials for students with their regular Humanities classes. Action research I conducted last year revealed that though the one-on-one help students received in their informal intervention courses in 2002-2003 helped students pass their core classes, they did not help students master the foundational literacy skills they needed to read and write independently. What, I wondered at the end of last year's study, would happen if intervention courses targeted a basic building block skill, such as decoding? What, that is, would happen if we put resources into teaching students who could not sound out words the ability to do so? How fast could seventh graders reading at a first grade level catch up with their peers—and what other effects might learning to read have on them?

Initial actions taken: Last summer, I created two intervention classes to replace one of students' two elective courses and purchased a packaged curriculum entitled *Breaking the Code* to use in the courses. I then got two experienced teachers to teach the courses; and asked teachers to conduct the Fry Oral Reading assessment and recommend students whose independent reading level was below level 2 for intervention. The first semester, each class had approximately 15 students in it. The first semester courses focused on decoding and reading comprehension strategies taught through a process called reciprocal reading, in which students identify specific reading strategies as they use them. The second semester, each class had approximately 20 students in it. The second semester courses focused on writing—encoding, punctuation, handwriting, and organization. These students have at least an intermediate proficiency level in English.

A teacher experienced with teaching middle school intervention trained our teachers early in the year in the reading component of the program as well as in reciprocal reading. At the semester break, I trained the teachers in the writing component of the curriculum. The teachers were not paid for their time spent in training.

RESEARCH TOOLS/DATA COLLECTION:

- Notes from trainings
- Surveys of teachers about what was most/least helpful
- Students' letters about their learning
- Student surveys
- Scores on core phonics survey, Breaking the Code assessment, and student writing samples
- Humanities course grades
- Standardized testing data for intervention students: State assessments (CST and CAT6 in English Language Arts) for 2003 and 2004; district essay exam (Performance Assignment) score for 2003 and 2004.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Power of Teacher Collaboration: My experience with last year's intervention teachers corroborated what much of the available literature tells us about the positive impact of teacher collaboration on student achievement. A great deal has been written about power of teacher collaboration. Richard Elmore, for example, has written after intense study of school leadership that "schools need to have structures that develop the knowledge and skills of individuals and that stretch this expertise among people occupying the same role (such as teachers) and different roles (Elmore, 2002). Other researchers have noted the importance of teachers learning together: "Schools exist to promote learning in all of their inhabitants," Roland Barth writes (Barth, 2002). Some have even commented that teachers collaborating with one another to promote student learning, when guided by "a clear, commonly held, shared purpose for student learning" is a necessary ingredient for a successful school (DuFour and Eaker, 1998).

Teaching Reading to Middle Schoolers: The research supports many different theories about the best way to teach pre-literate teenagers. While some advocate for teaching phonics and phonemic awareness just as one would to a young new reader, others argue that students who have been in school for 7 years without learning to break the code need a different approach, one that focuses on teaching students to identify whole words rather than see words as a sum of their phonetic parts.

DATA AND ANALYSIS:

Interesting data emerged from all of my sources.

- Notes from trainings: I found that much of the conversation consisted of the teachers asking each other questions, rather than asking the trainer questions about the curriculum. The teachers wanted to share their concerns and help each other strategize.
- Surveys of teachers about what was most/least helpful: Both teachers rated all of the professional development activities as either invaluable (5) or very helpful (4), and their comments on the surveys revealed that working together and planning together was more helpful than the curriculum itself. For example, one teacher wrote, "V. and I always met to plan lessons. We were always on the same page."

- ❑ Students' letters about their learning: The students' letters showed a surprising honesty about their need to learn the basics and about their opinion of the classes. While reluctant middle school readers are often defensive and claim to not need extra help, 32 out of 33 students admitted to learning a lot. One teacher's letters showed a fondness for and appreciation of the teacher being "nice," "wonderful," "fun" and "caring" (sic), while the other's more often contained words like "boreing" (sic), "hard," and "to much work" (sic).
- ❑ Student surveys: 25 of 33 students responded in the affirmative to the question, "Did you like your intervention class?". Students commented that they felt comfortable, safe, and that they were sure they were learning. The surveys also revealed that students had metacognition about what strategies they had learned to make them better readers and writers. One student wrote, "I learned about proofreading and stuff"; another wrote, "My writing has improved by looking things in the dictionary or asking others what does this word mean"; and a third commented, "My reading has improved by following allong in the book or paper." The student surveys also revealed that most students felt they could read more fluently: 14 students noted that they could read more quickly and could read harder words. 23 students reported that their spelling had improved. 10 reported that their handwriting had gotten neater. And 15 commented that the intervention course helped them in their core classes. As one student wrote, "In the other class the teacher toldme to write a paragraph so I did and I get the paragraph correct."
- ❑ Scores on core phonics survey, Breaking the Code assessment, Flynt Cooter exam of expository reading comprehension, and cold writing assessments improved. In order to be enrolled in this class, students had to score below 75% on the Core Phonics Survey. By January, all of the students scored at least 97%. On the Fry Oral test of fluency, the average score went from a 3.8 to 6. Though 90% of the intervention students scored a "1" (meaning "does not mean standards") on the cold essay writing in September, all but one student scored a 2 ("meets some standards") or 3 ("meets most standards" on similar writing assignment in June. On the Flynt Cooter assessment, which tests students' comprehension of expository text, the average gain was 2 levels.
- ❑ Humanities course grades: Slightly less than half of the intervention students continued to fail or barely pass their Humanities courses, which are graded against grade-level state content standards. Of the 33 intervention students, 5 are receiving Bs, 12 are receiving Cs, 1 is receiving an A, and 15 are receiving Fs. 9 of the 11 8th graders are failing while only 4 of the 7th graders and 2 of the 6th graders are failing.
- ❑ Standardized testing data for intervention students: State assessments (CST and CAT6 in English Language Arts) for 2003 and 2004; district essay exam (Performance Assignment) score for 2003 and 2004. Every student in intervention had scores that qualified him/her as "below basic" on the California Standards Test in 2003. The average scaled score was 260. Results from the 2004 tests should be in around October of 2004.

Several interesting trends appear in the data:

- Differences between teachers: Though both intervention teachers had over 8 years of experience and had strong pedagogy, the one who was most successful with her students made her students feel comfortable, treated them "nicely" in the students' words, made the class interactive and fun, and nurtured struggling readers in a way they badly needed. The other was "too strict," and "boring." Though it was difficult for me to coach the more rigid teacher to be warmer with her students, once she compared the letters her students had written with those of the other class, she started asking the other teacher how she made it fun—and then started to be warmer. This difference was evident in the students' testing data as well. The students of the more nurturing teacher had an average gain of 1.7 on the writing assessment, while those of the less nurturing teacher had an average gain of 1.2.

- Low impact on students' course grades: 45% of the intervention students are failing their core Humanities courses. A larger percentage of the intervention students at each successive grade are failing, suggesting that the intervention course is not enough to bridge the increasingly wide gap between rigorous grade-level standards and the students' low reading and writing levels.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

This study has several immediate implications for my school, some of which have already led to further action:

- *Pretzels are powerful, but time is invaluable:* Though providing snacks and a professional atmosphere for teacher trainings is helpful, we must build more time into the professional work day for teacher collaboration. I brought the intervention teachers' estimation of the benefit of working together to the professional development committee, which agreed with me—and got our board to approve funds to pay for substitutes so that every teacher at the school next year can have more time throughout the year to collaborate with colleagues.
- *Since one size does not fit all, I need to help teachers learn how to be tailors:* That is, one curricular program will never meet the needs of all students in a given class. Effective teachers modify scripted programs. Though Breaking the Code was a great starting point for the teachers' curriculum, the teacher who modified it more had better success with her students with special needs and with curing the panoply of ailments that caused her 15 students to have spent 6 or more years in school without having learned to decode. Next year, one of our professional development foci will be on the many ways to teach different students in the same class different ways.
- *Closing the gap takes time:* Though the data shows that the middle schoolers made big gains in their reading and writing abilities, they finished the year still far below grade level, and their core course grades reflect this gap. These students will continue to need support in bridging the gap between their fifth grade reading level and their 8th grade coursework, for example. This summer, I will be programming students into a second year of intervention to make sure they continue to catch up. This lesson is key for large scale intervention and remediation plans in huge districts, counties, and states, which expect to see huge gains on state assessments of grade-level standards in one year's time.
- *Making good teachers great:* The student voices in this study speak clearly to the importance of teacher to student interaction and relationship. In the classroom of the teacher who made her students feel comfortable, achievement gains were higher. Cultivating a positive relationship with one's students, however, is rarely listed on the government lists of criteria for "highly qualified" teachers. If we are to believe that great teachers are made, not born, we will do well to coach teachers in the development of positive rapport with their students. Experienced teachers may need coaching in this area, too—and peer coaching might be the best bet:

CONCLUSION:

This study strengthened my belief in the power and importance of teacher collaboration and ongoing professional development. Even given a solid curriculum to follow, teachers are most effective when they tinker with the script laid out for them and share their best ideas with colleagues. I know that I will be most effective in my role as a facilitator the more I can capitalize on the amazing resource of peer coaching.

REFERENCES

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- Elmore, Richard. (2002). Hard Questions about Practice. *Educational Leadership*, 59 (8), 22-25.

Appendix 1

INTERVENTION TEACHER SURVEY

Please rate each of the activities below for its usefulness in helping you to teach your intervention students. (1= not useful; 5= invaluable). Please also rank each activity from 1 to 5—1 being the most helpful and 5 being the least.

_____ How helpful was our first session with Gloria Rodriguez? 5 4 3 2 1

Comment:

_____ How helpful were the Breaking the Code teacher's guide and materials?

Comment: 5 4 3 2 1

_____ How helpful was talking with other intervention teachers about your classes? Comment:

5 4 3 2 1

_____ How helpful were Critical Friends Groups in helping with your intervention class? Comment:

5 4 3 2 1

_____ How helpful was the second training session on writing in helping your intervention class?

Comment: 5 4 3 2 1

_____ How helpful were the reciprocal reading cards and strategies in teaching your students reading?

Comment: 5 4 3 2 1

What were the challenges you faced with teaching intervention?

How successful do you think you were in teaching your students to read and write?

What would have helped you teach your students more effectively?

