Why do teachers need to come together for professional learning?

Around the world, professional training processes for Reading Recovery® teachers demonstrate consistency in teacher development. The result is resourceful, observant teachers knowledgeable of literacy processing theory and able to support emergent readers/writers who present idiosyncratic learning profiles. Learning to read and write is complex. Teaching these processes demands a highly skilled teacher who is both flexible and perceptive.

Reading Recovery’s inquiry-oriented professional development model allows teachers to gain complex understandings and sets this training apart from other professional learning opportunities. The Reading Recovery in-service course has a solid theoretical orientation, robust content focus, active engagement, collaborative problem solving, alignment with relevant curricula, and sufficient learning time for participants. Additionally, it uses models and modeling of effective practices and provides coaching and expert support. There are multiple opportunities for feedback and reflection as teachers use observations of student behaviors and student data to inform their work.

How do teachers acquire complex understandings about learning and teaching?

To understand the complexity of a literacy processing theory shared by Reading Recovery practitioners internationally, high-quality experiences are essential. Effective teacher development requires a “norm of continuous improvement. The supporting rationale emphasizes the need for educators to refine skills and construct … knowledge while working with peers” (American Council on Education, 1999, p. 5).

Teachers in training are apprenticing into the role of Reading Recovery teachers. During sessions, they view two live lessons behind a one-way viewing screen as the teacher leader helps them to link theory to observations and to their own teaching experiences resulting in self-reflection, shared feedback, and deep discussion. Two lessons are needed to allow discovery of multiple differences observed among learners and teachers.

While observing, teachers engage in dialogic analyses of the lesson as it unfolds. They are encouraged to share their thinking, offer their hypotheses, present evidence to support their ideas, and explore suppositions offered by colleagues. They are guided to link theory to practice and apply their knowledge to the lesson being observed.

Why do live, face-to-face experiences provide the greatest benefit?

The sharing of two live lessons during training sessions influences teacher understandings efficiently and effectively (Clay & Watson, 1982). Observation, articulation, and interaction are keys to the experience. A one-way screen allows all in the group a direct viewing of a colleague instructing a student. When a teacher brings a child to teach a live lesson, the group engages emotionally with both teacher and child. Everyone is focused on supporting their colleague to understand more about how the teaching is effective and what they might suggest to enhance acceleration of the child’s learning. The live experience is more easily stored in memory and more easily accessed and transferred to a teacher’s own experiences. “Delayed discussion would not … [be] as effective and [recorded] replays lose the excitement of the on-task commentary” (Clay, 1986, p. 27).

Teachers learn to sharpen their observations and contribute real-time, constructive dialogues. The live, face-to-face learning opportunities allow teachers to try out ideas with colleagues, formulating and reformulating understandings through interactions with others (Lyons et al., 1993). Discussions occurring while watching lessons require considerable linguistic and cognitive demands of teachers and teacher leaders, and as teachers extend and refine their own thinking, they create “chains of reasoning” (Lyons, 1994) that lift the whole group to new levels of understanding.

When the class sits in rows at the viewing screen, each participant occupies a slightly different view of the teacher and child. This arrangement encourages multiple perspectives to surface during the discussion. The dialogue in the circle following the lessons provides another powerful opportunity for learning. Each participant is expected
to articulate ideas, listen actively to understand others, and follow a line of inquiry initiated by another colleague (Rodgers, 2000). Rodgers asserts that the physical positioning of the participants in a circle is a critical element that supports members to engage in collaborative talk and helps ensure that each has an equal opportunity to contribute.

Both arrangements, in rows at the screen and in the circle, provide a superior experience to viewing a live lesson on a video platform like Zoom or a recorded lesson, where the view is two-dimensional, fixed by the camera, and presented identically to all viewers. Synchronous video platforms present additional challenges that reduce participants’ access to elements of dialogue. With the thumbnail pictures of participants afforded by most video platforms, teachers and teacher leaders have difficulty perceiving nonverbal cues that contribute to meaning making (Sklar, 2000). People are accustomed to gleaning information from hand gestures or body movements such as a slight turn away or the tilt of the head. It is easy to miss a puzzled brow or quick lift of the eyebrows indicating surprise or disbelief when participating online.

Similarly, one misses the occasional rapid inhalation (as if about to say something) or sigh (signaling relief, sadness, or exhaustion). Thus, using online platforms makes it challenging to detect signals that would otherwise be an impetus for further exploration. Additionally, it may feel draining when participants cannot access nonverbal cues that support understanding (Sklar, 2000). When the online view is arranged such that only the speaker’s face shows, one cannot pick up cues from other participants. Yet, a multiperson screen forces participants to make sense of many people at once, which can also be overwhelming. Readers may have noticed that even an hour on Zoom can be unusually taxing.

Video platforms use a single audio stream, which further complicates communication (Sklar, 2000). Video chats become less collaborative with one audio stream because everyone’s talk comes through the same stream: child, teacher, and the colleagues viewing the lesson. It is difficult to discern individual voices, and often the person with the most sensitive microphone is heard above the others. These audio challenges contribute to stilted conversations and impede the engaging, collaborative inquiry desired. All such limitations suggest the need for caution.

The elements of live, active, participatory experiences are critical to teacher growth and development. When professional learning sessions happen live, in face-to-face environments, educators have rich opportunities for constructing knowledge collaboratively. These experiences support teachers’ efforts to sharpen observation, deepen understandings of theory, and ensure teaching decisions are supported by strong rationales.

Reading Recovery’s professional learning model offers highly lauded elements of effective teacher professional development. Research shows that how teachers are trained to work with the very lowest achievers makes a difference (Hattie, 2012). By staying true to the unique design of Reading Recovery’s professional learning, we ensure that teachers develop the understandings that importantly benefit their students.

References
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