Teacher “capacity-building” helps urban children succeed in reading

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Reading failure is at epidemic proportions in many urban school districts. Rescue efforts appear to fail in such districts largely for one (or both) of two reasons: an overreliance on scripted reading programs as a singular solution and anemic efforts at teacher development or “capacity-building” (Cooter, 2003). To attack reading problems quickly and economically, urban school district leaders often purchase a so-called “ scripted” reading program (Success for All, Open Court, and Reading Mastery are ubiquitous examples). This is a predictable response that sometimes has merit. For one thing, scripted reading programs, often marketed by their salespersons as “teacher-proof,” can help a school district stabilize otherwise inconsistent instruction.

In urban centers where huge teacher shortages are prevalent and, consequently, where more than one half of the teachers hired work under emergency certification (i.e., have had little or no training on the teaching of reading), a highly structured program makes a great deal of sense. Furthermore, some scripted programs have enjoyed modest successes in a few urban schools in the United States. (The cities of Houston, Los Angeles, and Fort Worth are examples.) However, no scripted reading program has been found to meet the needs of all, or even most, students.

Another approach to improving reading instruction in urban districts is teacher capacity-building. Teachers, like professionals in business, medicine, and the sciences, require high-quality and ongoing professional development to remain on the cutting edge of effectiveness. Baskin (2003) has remarked that “You win on talent!” He meant that urban school districts must invest in their “talent” —teachers. Without this essential piece of the “reading rescue” puzzle, school districts cannot hope to break through the performance glass ceiling they experience, especially if they rely on programmatic solutions alone. Many average and below average city children fail to respond to commercial programs. They need alternative learning strategies delivered by a well-trained teacher.

In this column, I briefly review selected research into the benefits of teacher development as an avenue for improving reading proficiency in urban schools. I also look at a multiyear teacher development intervention in a major city school district and the evidence it yielded, which indicated that professional development pays significant dividends for many of our most challenged learners.

Research on the benefits of teacher capacity-building

Improving the quality of teachers in the classroom “does more to assist students who are educationally at-risk than any other policy-controllable issue” (Denson, 2001, p. 34), such as smaller pupil-teacher ratios or adopted materials (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Teacher capacity-building has been found to be the most productive investment for schools and far exceeds the effects of teacher experience or class size (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996).

Plecki (2000) examined ways researchers have used productivity and human capital theory to measure return on investments in teacher capacity-building. Educational productivity analysis uses classroom-level research as an alternative to typical input-output models. Educational productivity
Analysis is sometimes used by school districts concerned with the need to provide professional development interventions that are cost-effective (Denson, 2001). Plecki warned that test scores should not be used as the only measure of student outcomes, saying that they are “an insufficient measure of the content, number, and types of performances expected by the ambitious learning standards that the education reform efforts of this decade have promoted” (p. 11).

What have research studies using educational productivity analysis revealed concerning the benefits of teacher capacity-building? There is strong evidence in the research of the positive impact of teacher capacity-building on student achievement. For example, in 1992 and 1996 Connecticut students registered huge gains in reading and mathematics on the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress. State officials credited the development of four-week institutes with follow-up coaching for teachers at all grade levels as the primary factor for this improvement (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Researchers working with the Chicago schools (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001, 2002) found that teachers who were offered high-quality professional development followed through in using teaching methods they were taught (called “instructional program coherence” in the studies) leading to higher achievement gains on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in selected schools. In a similar study, a comparative analysis of highly successful schools with lower achieving schools, researchers found that the lower achieving schools had limited professional development and lacked common vision (Mosenthal, Lipson, Mekkelson, Russ, & Sortino, 2001).

Complex problems often require complex solutions. While it is not difficult to conclude after reviewing evidence-based research that high-quality teacher capacity-building helps children become better readers, obtaining consistent results over time is neither quick nor simple. Complex solutions take many months or even years to achieve. That said, what does effective capacity-building involve?

**A capacity-building model for teacher development**

During the 20th century a number of researchers (e.g., Bloom, 1956; Vygotsky, 1962) described ways in which learning occurs. Whether learning is done by urban children acquiring basic literacy skills or teachers becoming proficient in a new instructional methodology, the learning curve for human beings is both predictable and constant. Figure 1 presents a capacity-building model for teacher development (Cooter, 2003) that reflects the fundamental stages of learning drawn from the work of Vygotsky and Bloom.

A key feature of this capacity-building model for teacher development is distributed learning over time. It acknowledges that neither cognitive development of new knowledge nor field practice is sufficient in the professional development of teachers. Rather, the combination of both elements—new learning developed over time and practice under the guidance of a more knowledgeable coach—is the most effective practice.

It is sad that professional development for teachers usually begins and ends with what I term awareness-level or first-exposure training. One- or two-day workshops for teachers or, for that matter, college classes where myriad aspects of reading and writing instruction are introduced during a semester are awareness-level experiences. These experiences create little more than simple consciousness of a pedagogical construct. However, as Figure 1 indicates, first exposure training is a critical first step in the development of new expertise, but it is never sufficient. Many a school administrator has invested in teacher inservice training in an area of great student need only to become frustrated when no positive improvements occur. Inservice workshops can do little more than create a working knowledge about a topic. One colleague called the exclusive use of inservice training for teacher capacity-building a “spray-and-pray” strategy—spray the teachers with lots of information and then pray that some of it will stick and produce change. We must go much deeper in capacity-building efforts if we are to produce positive changes in reading classrooms.

The next level of teacher capacity-building is deep learning with limited capacity. This involves significant study of the new teaching strategy beyond the awareness level and is coupled with classroom applications. Thus, at the level of deep learning with limited capacity, teachers deepen their knowledge about the topic or strategy, but have only begun experimentation with students thus far.
Practice with coaching is an essential step in teacher capacity-building. This level of learning requires massive classroom practice over time with guidance from an expert coach. Coaching sessions focus on improving the quality of implementation and solving problems experienced by the teacher in training. As a practical matter, lead teachers or coaches typically model new reading strategies for novice teachers in the latter’s classroom. Coaches then observe novice teachers trying out the strategy with children and provide coaching sessions afterward. This powerful stage of development ensures implementation of new ideas because novice teachers know their lead teacher or coach will visit their classroom and expect to see new strategies demonstrated with students (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2002). I have seen firsthand that this kind of in-classroom support can help in the retention of teachers in urban schools that are hard to staff.

In the remaining two stages of the model, teacher capacity continues to deepen appreciably. Refined and expanded capacity occurs as the teacher fully understands most elements of new teaching methods and regularly uses them as part
of his or her usual protocol of instruction. Strategies begin to feel natural and automatic, and student performance in reading can improve appreciably on all measures (Cooter, 2003). Expertise and ability to coach others is the final stage in the teacher capacity-building model. Relative mastery of the new teaching methods has been achieved, and the teacher is now capable of coaching others on the strategy. The term relative mastery is used here because to fully master any complicated pedagogical method requires a great deal of time and practice. Teachers using guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) as a strategy, for example, often discover that they are able to do such things as select appropriate books for instruction and conduct guided reading lessons with ease, yet they may feel less confident about their ability to conduct and interpret running records as a diagnostic tool. On the whole, however, teachers have reached a level of proficiency and expertise using the method.

Is it possible for a teacher to be considered an “expert” while still needing further development? Vygotsky (1962) would almost surely have responded in the affirmative. He felt that with any complicated task we are continually at some stage of learning; we reside permanently in what he termed a zone of proximal development. That is why master teachers everywhere continue to burn the midnight oil pursuing ever more effective ways of helping children learn. The true benchmark for expertise in teaching is enabling urban children to continue to become more literate than ever before and at greater levels of proficiency.

**Diffusion of innovation**

While it is critical to understand how substantial capacity-building occurs for reading teachers, it is equally important to appreciate how new practices spread throughout a school district—the diffusion of innovation. The following terms are sometimes used to analyze this process (Baskin, 2003): sponsors, change agents, advocates, and target audiences.

Sponsors are the leaders of change efforts. Though they do not handle day-to-day change activities, they do control money, authority, or formal power. Sponsors are motivated to identify and begin change, and they see it that change is implemented so that reading issues are addressed. The most obvious sponsor in urban schools is the superintendent.

Change agents are designated by sponsors to steer both strategic and tactical activities. Change agents have resources and authority provided by the sponsor and sometimes assume informal authority (when not challenged by others). Change agents handle the day-to-day activities of teacher capacity-building. They usually have a central office title such as assistant superintendent or executive director, though I have known superintendents to sometimes award de facto authority to an outside consultant (this allows the superintendent to pay the change agent an annual fee that exceeds the salary schedule). Teacher colleges can also be an integral part of the diffusion of innovation. For example, the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Texas at Arlington have extensive teacher capacity-building partnerships in place.

Advocates are key players in the diffusion of innovation. They are stakeholders who usually have great need and may have access to money or other needed resources, but they do not have formal authority or power. Advocates for urban reading initiatives may include philanthropic foundations, corporate sponsors, and community organizations.

The target audience is the group at which the change effort is aimed and whose behavior we are trying to modify (Baskin, 2003). Urban students are the obvious target audience because it is their reading and writing skills the school system is attempting to improve.

Baskin (2003), a longtime architect of capacity-building and programs for the diffusion of innovation, offered sound advice for change agents: Have your authority clearly defined before embarking on the process and involve the sponsor appropriately in the process. These steps are important in urban school districts because the overall sponsor, the superintendent, can change many times over the life of a capacity-building intervention, creating attendant changes in needs and objectives. Further, it is very easy for change agents to assume responsibilities and informal power that they should not. This can lead to the emergence of interdepartmental strife. Advocates can be most helpful in building goodwill for change programs (Baskin, 2003), but change agents should map out exactly the role advocates are...
to play, because their exuberance can cause them to promise more than can be achieved in a given time.

Volunteers for capacity-building programs

Teachers sometimes have the option of participation in capacity-building programs. This situation is strikingly different from the districtwide adoption of a new scripted or “off-the-shelf” reading programs where training for adopted materials is usually mandatory. Thus, making participation in capacity-building programs optional for teachers can prolong the diffusion of innovation. In cases where teacher capacity-building is voluntary (see Cooter, 2003, for a project of this kind), it helps to understand how readily teachers may choose to participate. A model derived from the literature concerning diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1983) is shown in Figure 2. The following are definitions and approximate percentages for each group of “adopters,” as explained by Baskin (2003).

- **Innovators** are about 2.5% of the target audience (teachers, in this case). Innovators like risk and new ideas, and they do not worry too much about whether the innovation (i.e., the new reading strategy) will be successful. Their network of relationships tends to extend beyond the school in which they work.

- **Early adopters** are about 13.5% of the target audience. They are considered leaders within their local schools and, thus, are very important to the adoption process. Because of this respectability, others tend to follow their lead; these are key persons in the change process. Both principals and teachers are typically part of the early adopters group.

- **Early majority** is approximately 34% of the target audience. They are not leaders in the local school, but they interact frequently with peers and, thus, are important to communication about the change process. The early majority takes its time in adopting a new idea(s) but is earlier to adopt than the remaining teachers (50%).

- **Late majority** is about 34% of the target audience. These teachers are not negative about the ability to adopt a new idea(s), but they are significantly later in adopting than the remaining teachers (50%).

- **Resistors** is about 16% of the target audience. These teachers are not negative about the ability to adopt a new idea(s), but they are significantly later in adopting than the remaining teachers (50%).

Teachers and principals tend to be positive at the beginning of a capacity-building initiative, but they may raise tough questions about the program, its process, and its outcomes. Baskin (2003) warned that change agents often misconstrue these questions as adversarial, particularly those of the early majority, because the questions might come late in the process. If approached as being adversarial rather than treated as making positive information requests, some teachers in these groups may opt out of the initiative and even become negative about it.

![FIGURE 2](image)

**Diffusion of innovations**

*Note.* Adapted from Rogers (1983).
change, just skeptical. They tend to want lots of evidence about the need for changes and the efficacy of the capacity-building program.

Resistors make up about 16% of the target audience. They tend to focus on how things were done in the past and have little tolerance for uncertainty. Let’s be honest: They do not like change, and their decision process is often very slow. It is easy to think of resistors as negative, but this is generally not the case. Resistors just see more disruption to their normal activities—the status quo.

Change agents should be aware that saboteurs (Cooter, 2003) could come from any of the groups. Some teachers can be negative about a change from the beginning. Negativity about change comes from one’s perception of how disruptive the change will be personally. Teachers may start out positive about change but become quite negative if they discern more disruption than they were told or thought would occur.

Reading teachers will volunteer for capacity-building programs they believe are worth the effort

There is an interesting caveat to the diffusion of innovation model shown in Figure 2: When reading teachers see the benefits a capacity-building program has for students, even if the program is rigorous and time-consuming, they will volunteer in droves. For example, this phenomenon was seen in one such effort in the Dallas Independent School District in Texas. Teachers in grades K-3 (n = 3,000) began to enlist in huge numbers for a voluntary yearlong Reading Academy (n = 446). After seeing the classroom benefits enjoyed by colleagues (i.e., innovators and early adopters) participating in the first year (1999) of the Reading Academy, some 1,200 teachers applied for 800 budgeted seats in the year 2 academy (728 actually completed that academy). After seeing the classroom benefits enjoyed by colleagues (i.e., innovators and early adopters) participating in the first year (1999) of the Reading Academy, some 1,200 teachers applied for 800 budgeted seats in the year 2 academy (728 actually completed that academy). In spite of the program’s 90-hour, yearlong rigorous evening schedule with weekly implementation goals, by the end of year 3 nearly two thirds of the district’s 3,000 teachers in grades K through 3 had volunteered for and completed the Reading Academy. More important, student reading-achievement levels began to rise.

Improving teacher development in teachers’ colleges and school districts

There are several implications of the capacity-building model for teacher development. Colleges of education, particularly those serving as a pipeline to urban schools, should review the effectiveness of their existing teacher-development programs in terms of how well the students (i.e., public school children) of their graduates do on assessments of reading, mathematics, and writing. This action requires a very different mindset and level of accountability than has been the case traditionally. If colleges discover that their graduates have consistent problems helping urban children achieve as expected, professors might consider contrasting the capacity-building model for teacher development with the way they typically structure their classes so as to better provide potent, deep learning and coaching experiences. (They would also need to consider the socioeconomic and mobility patterns of the children to be served in constructing their curricula for effectiveness.)

Because deep training plus coaching takes much more time to accomplish than mere awareness-level or first-exposure training, professors may need to adopt a “less-is-more” strategy in rebuilding their curricula. In other words, what are the most essential skills and knowledge for a beginning teacher to have in an urban school? The answer to this question should fit within the twin parameters of (a) available time in a baccalaureate program for teachers and (b) requirements of a capacity-building model for teacher development. It is likely that only about one third of the traditional curricula for elementary teachers can be developed to an expert level.

The capacity-building model for teacher development can also benefit urban school district leaders. A two-stage approach is recommended for districts having extreme difficulties with literacy education. (I would define such districts as having more than 15% of students reading below grade level by 3rd grade and dropout rates in excess of 10% when comparing 9th-grade enrollment to the 12th-grade graduation figures.) Stage 1 is to implement a basal-reading program that has the best track record in other demographically similar districts.
This should be determined using norm-referenced test score summaries from the comparison districts (as opposed to high-stakes state tests). The program should be mandated in a district for two years while the second stage of the remedy is put into place.

Stage 2 would be to develop and implement a vigorous program of teacher development following the principles described in Figure 1. Research in the Dallas Independent School District revealed that a 90-hour professional development program for teachers was sufficient to raise teachers’ basic competency level to the early stages of refined and expanded capacity shown in Figure 1.

For best results, a second tier of capacity-building should be developed in specific areas of need for each teacher. This involves principals reviewing the performance of students in each teacher’s classroom over at least three years, determining any problem areas for students, and then providing each teacher with deep training and expert coaching in the specific need areas. If, for example, students in Ms. Spencer’s second-grade class over the past five years have consistently performed poorly on measures of reading vocabulary, then Ms. Spencer would be required to attend a 6-week, 18-hour program of deep study and coaching on methods of improving students’ reading vocabulary. A teacher or mentor with an exemplary record of success in vocabulary instruction, or a district-provided lead reading teacher, would follow up with Ms. Spencer to help her implement new teaching strategies.

The bulk of training would ideally occur in late July or early August (and the teacher involved would have an extended contract to pay him or her a proper per diem for the time spent). This would enable that teacher to begin implementation at the beginning of the school year when the new ideas were still fresh—a kind of “just-in-time” model of delivery. Other short-term modules could be offered for teachers needing specific help in such instructional areas as phonemic awareness, phonics, reading comprehension, fluency, or writing. In summary, the idea is to provide broad-brush training first for all teachers to establish good, basic instruction in all classrooms, followed by specific and ongoing needs-based advanced training.

Once the two-stage model has had a chance to gain purchase in a district, many benefits can occur. In Dallas, for example, we found that the attrition rate of teachers who had attended the 90-hour Reading Academy (n = 2,200) based on the capacity-building model for teacher development dropped to nearly zero. This school district typically has to replace from 1,000 to 1,200 teachers per year, and the national average for teacher attrition in U.S. elementary schools is about 11% (Easley, 2000; MacDonald, 1999). This drop convinced school leaders that when teachers received professional-development opportunities targeted specifically to their teaching needs they were less likely to leave their assignment. Most important, student performance on all measures improved significantly (Denson, 2003).

References


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TITLE: Teacher “capacity-building” helps urban children succeed in reading
SOURCE: Read Teach 57 no2 O 2003
WN: 0327400992010

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