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The changing face of education: Teachers cope with challenges through collaboration and reflective study

Teachers and administrators can become forces for change by studying and reviewing student work together to meet the needs of diverse students.

> One size does *not* fit all. To accommodate diversity, we have to change the way we teach. We can do that if we actually have *time* to collaborate and plan effective interventions for each individual child.
>
> Mississippi fifth-grade teacher

> Our district provided us with two hours each week to collaboratively study the needs of our students and to plan the best way to meet those needs. We've come to really know each individual child and how to intervene effectively.
>
> Mississippi second-grade teacher

> We have been working collaboratively with our fellow teachers for the past three years. When reflective conferencing was added to collaboration, it was a lot easier to solve problems and make good instructional decisions.
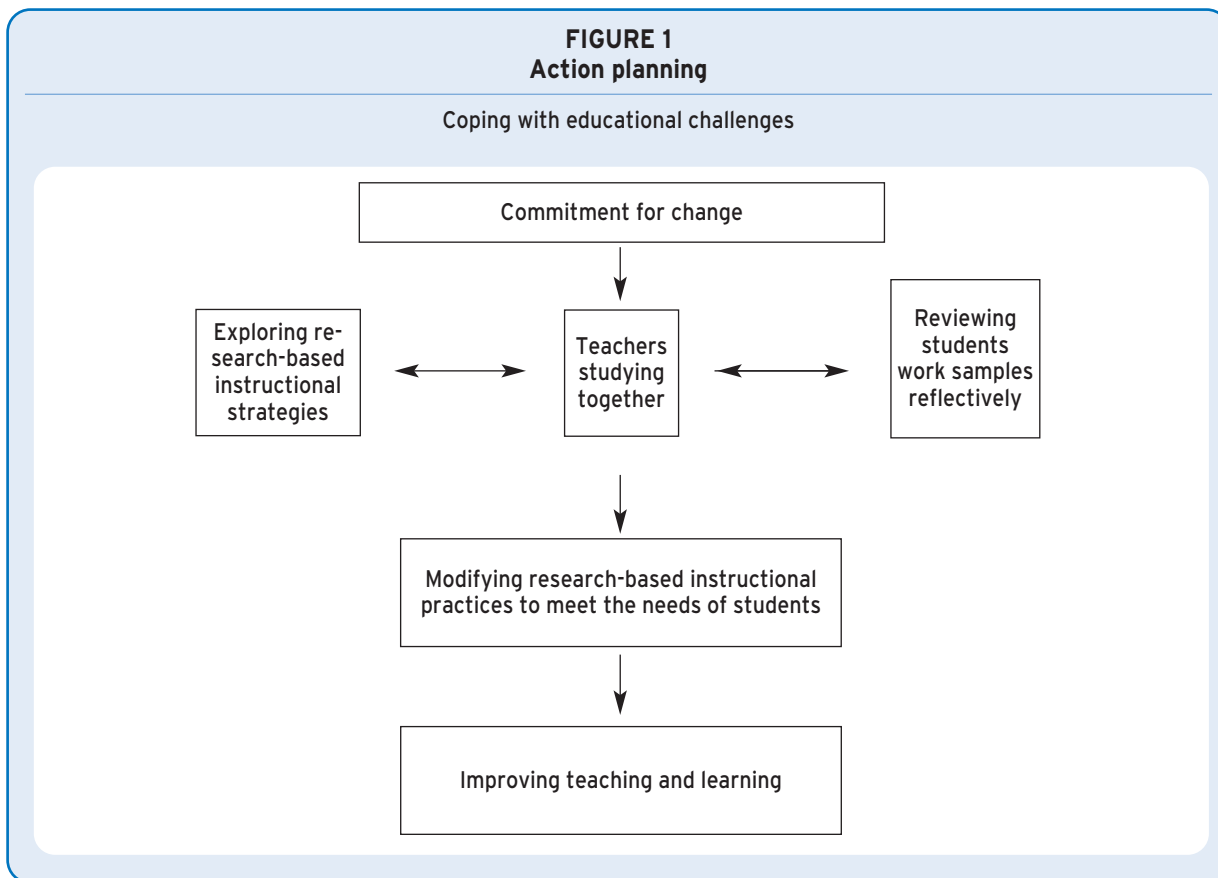>
> Mississippi third-grade teacher

As illustrated by these quotes, Mississippi teachers recognize they must initiate and develop instructional changes that will improve individual student achievement. They also realize they need time to plan and implement effective changes. Mississippi teachers are not alone; their comments mirror the sentiment of teachers elsewhere in the United States. The shared experiences of these teachers may inspire educators to modify their current practice to have a positive impact on literacy instruction nationwide.

Only 31% of U.S. fourth graders scored at or above the proficient level in reading on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This statistic alone highlights the urgency of meeting diverse student needs, especially in these times of legislative mandates for increased teacher accountability. Consequently, educators (i.e., administrators and teachers) are joining together to study, plan, and meet the challenges of their diverse populations and the legislative mandates. Research has documented effective strategies for schools to address these challenges (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; Fullan, 2003; King & Newmann, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, the literature stops short of uniting proven strategies into a step-by-step process. This article presents a three-pronged plan for coping with the changing face of education: (1) educators face the process of change, (2) educators find the time to study together, and (3) educators reflectively review student work in study teams and adjust research-based instructional practices to improve both teaching and learning.

Around the United States public outcries for accountability have challenged the nation's educational system. On January 8, 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) became law and outlined the principles of Reading First. Public Law 107-110 was enacted to close the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students. This law advocates that no child will be left behind if

FIGURE 1
Action planning

Coping with educational challenges

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                    ┌──────────────────────────┐
                    │   Commitment for change  │
                    └──────────────────────────┘
                                 │
                                 ▼
┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│ Exploring re-│      │   Teachers   │      │  Reviewing   │
│ search-based │◄────►│   studying   │◄────►│   students   │
│ instructional│      │   together   │      │ work samples │
│  strategies  │      │              │      │  reflectively│
└──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
                                 │
                                 ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
              │  Modifying research-based instructional│
              │  practices to meet the needs of students│
              └──────────────────────────────────────┘
                                 │
                                 ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
              │      Improving teaching and learning   │
              └──────────────────────────────────────┘
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educators are accountable, flexible, and have choices. NCLB (2002) presents a multifaceted educational challenge for teachers and administrators across the nation. Not only are the school administrators and classroom teachers responsible for the measured growth of their students in reading, mathematics, and language, but also they are accountable for the diverse student needs in the following subgroups: economically disadvantaged students, students from various racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency.

Over time the laws may change, but the general consensus is that a system of accountability is here to stay (Fullan, 2003; King & Newmann, 2000). Therefore, debating the issues will neither change the mandates for accountability nor improve student achievement. Rather than suffer the consequences of fate, educators must now choose a plan of action that changes the way schools conduct business (NICHD, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Figure 1 suggests such a process for administra-

tors and teachers committed to coping with the challenges of education today. This process includes reflectively reviewing student work together to modify research-based instructional strategies and improve student achievement.

Regardless of mandates for accountability, any effective change takes planning, inquiry, and time to facilitate (Fullan, 2000, 2003). All schools must focus teachers and students on the processes of effective teaching and learning, but the legislative mandates of NCLB do not dictate precisely how schools should achieve their success. Neither does NCLB determine the reading curricula, methods, or the materials to be used for classroom instruction—only that reading instruction must encompass research-based programs and practices. The districts and schools are allowed to consider the school's culture and needs to make the programmatic decisions for improving reading performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Therefore, state officials, school administrators, and teachers must

assume control over choosing the processes they use to meet these legislative mandates.

Teachers and the process of change

There is abundant research concerning how change occurs in educational systems (Fullan, 2000, 2003; Swafford, 1998). Change rarely occurs merely as a reaction to a mandate. Research suggests that the change process is very complex, and, for change to actually occur, teachers must experience a paradigm shift in philosophy (Fullan, 2000). One aspect of change, addressing the learning capacity of both educators and students, is at the heart of school improvement and accountability (King & Newmann, 2000). Educator dialogue and problem solving have been demonstrated to be effective for building a school's capacity to improve student achievement (Fullan, 1998, 2000). Looking for "quick fixes" outside of school wastes time and resources. Furthermore, faculties that work together can set clear goals for teaching and learning, monitor student progress over time, and develop action plans to increase student achievement and establish a learning community.

If change is to occur in classrooms across the United States—and it must—the change forces will be the administrators and teachers in each local school. Educators committed to change will strive to make a difference in the lives of children and engage in the adjustment of classroom practices (Fullan, 2000). Furthermore, instead of randomly grasping for new reading programs or practices, educators should employ an action plan that includes the following (Blythe et al., 1999; Showers & Joyce, 1996): holding conversations to understand what works according to research (collaborative inquiry), studying each student's assessment and work samples, and reflecting upon the practices under which the student's work was constructed. Accordingly, these reflective conversations will guide the school faculty in the process of action planning for differentiating classroom reading instruction to reach all students.

Administrators and teachers who meet the challenges of education today will find the time to interpret the mandates, establish a unified, across-the-board commitment for change, and acquire the skills to implement and support those changes (Fullan, 2003). Therefore, rather than take the one-size-fits-all approach to mandated educational change, administrators and teachers must have time to work together, adjust classroom practices, perfect teaching skills to meet diverse needs, and thereby improve student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Educators must make the change a positive, powerful process. The change process at the local level can build a community of learners as well as maintain program fidelity through the unification of a school's purpose and vision (King & Newmann, 2000).

Educators find the time to study together

Educators are challenged with finding the time to translate research-based strategies into classroom practices and to modify these practices for their diverse student populations (NICHD, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Research indicates that teachers who work in isolation rarely change instructional practices, thereby widening the research-to-practice gap (Greenwood & Maheady, 2001). In addition, effective application of instruction increases when administrators and teachers collaboratively study student data and plan the use of evidence-based practice (Baker & Smith, 2001; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Greenwood & Maheady). Furthermore, according to Showers and Joyce (1996), classroom practice improves as a result of teachers implementing the following sequential process:

- Presenting the rationale or theory of a research-based innovative strategy
- Demonstrating the skills required for implementation
- Practicing the skills required to fine-tune the processes
- Collaborating with peers to develop a plan for the incorporation of the skills with classroom practices
- Supporting one another in the implementation process
- Collecting and using student data to adjust the proven practices to meet individual needs.

As teachers engage in a process of questioning and investigating teaching and learning with their peers, they gradually revise their beliefs to incorporate those new practices in their classrooms (Fullan, 2000). Therefore, district and school administrators must provide an environment that enables teachers to study together regularly, to build a strong commitment to meeting the needs of each student through effective instruction, and to support one another as the changes occur (Strickland, 2002). In other words, school faculties must create an atmosphere of one for all and all for one (Joyce & Showers, 1995).

With traditional staff development, classroom application of innovative strategies is minimal because teachers do not have adequate time to study together (Showers & Joyce, 1996). Study teams, however, can provide teachers with opportunities to improve their practice by sharing and discussing their reflections, knowledge, and solutions. For example, high school teachers who studied together reported that collaboration improves the development of new professional ideas and yields positive changes in their teaching (Slater & Simmons, 2001). Likewise, elementary faculties express that the reflective process supports changes in beliefs and improves teacher quality (Swafford, 1998).

With the mandates of NCLB, meaningful professional development is more important than ever. Because professional development is very expensive, activities should be connected to improving both teaching and learning. Perhaps too often the school or district leadership assumes the responsibility for planning professional development opportunities for the teachers. However, effective educational leaders also elicit teacher input to construct professional development activities that review the research and evidence-based programs, model new skills, provide opportunities for teachers to practice the skills, and support study teams (Blase & Blase, 1998). Involving teachers in these decisions fosters the commitment necessary to achieve and sustain change in the classroom.

When the administrators designate time during the school day for faculty members to study together, teachers can make a positive change (Fullan, 2000; Murphy, 1997). Allowing time for change to occur is of the utmost importance (Fullan, 2003). For example, Mississippi has well-established study teams in many of its lowest performing schools. The schools' plans for improvement designate approximately two hours weekly for teachers to study teaching and learning together. These schools studied examples of how other schools find the time for teachers to work together (Murphy). The following provisions proved successful:

- Grouping teachers whose students attend art, music, physical education, and other special areas at the same time
- Grouping teachers by free periods
- Starting the school day 30 minutes later and having teachers arrive 30 minutes early one day a week to have 1 hour weekly for collaborative study (these teachers are provided release time as compensation for the extended day)
- Using trained assistant teachers and tutors in classrooms during study team times to implement whole-group strategies for fluency and comprehension
- Scheduling weekly reading camps by hiring and training a core of substitutes to conduct one-on-one reading tutorials until study teams begin meeting (during study teams the substitutes conduct whole-group strategies for fluency and comprehension)
- Amending school board policy to allow the early release of students one day a week
- Using federal, state, local, or grant funds to buy time for faculties to study together.

According to Kelleher (2003), "Research has shown unequivocally that professional development is most effective when it is embedded in teachers' work" (p. 3). In other words, teacher learning is most effective in the context of teaching. Teachers must collaboratively engage in study teams that devise curricula and assessments, look at student work to reflect upon their practice, and plan together to meet the needs of students (Kelleher).

Teachers reflectively review student work in study teams

Typically, faculty, grade-level, or subject area meetings are conducted to plan events, learn of new

trends or mandates, and review assessment data. Rarely, however, do teachers use this time to collaboratively examine student work or analyze the instruction that produced that work. If schools elect to address their staff development needs through collaborative study teams, it is imperative that teachers be taught to structure productive conversations about improving instruction for individual students. Without establishing a structured process and a regularly scheduled meeting time, teachers may find this step nonproductive as well as intimidating. Because of the challenges of education today, teachers must have a step-by-step process that narrows the research-to-practice gap and accommodates the specific needs of individual students. Therefore, it is noteworthy to return to the experience of the Mississippi schools that regularly engaged in the practice of teachers studying together over the past three years. The feedback from school administrators and teachers participating in collaborative study affirms the research of Showers and Joyce (1996). Some of the changes in these faculties' beliefs are as follows:

- Planning instruction collaboratively, rather than in isolation, reduces the workload

- Learning to engage in conversations that affect teaching and learning may be foreign to some and takes time

- Studying new research-based programs and strategies in the context of their own teaching promotes understanding

- Structuring conversations to examine student work and ongoing assessments in the context of teaching encourages instructional modifications to meet individual needs.

Many of these same schools report that study teams add more value to the reform effort than do other components of the model. On the other hand, some schools indicate that that time would be better spent in the classrooms. There is a need for empirical research, but it appears that when teachers actively engage in reflective conversations with team members, their students show promising gains in reading. Perhaps schools that find the study team nonproductive would benefit from the use of a structured protocol that guides the reflective process.

Several groups are leading the field concerning the use of protocols to structure reflective conversations:

- Coalition of Essential Schools in California
- Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in Massachusetts
- Project Zero at Harvard Graduate School in Massachusetts
- Teachers College at Columbia University in New York.

Each has contributed to the literature by stressing the need for a structured process or protocol to elicit teacher conversations about individual students' work and the teaching that produced the work (Blythe et al., 1999). The structure of one such protocol, the Collaborative Assessment Conference (Seidel, 1991), requires teachers to use analytical questioning of the context in which student work is produced (Blythe et al.). Surprisingly, however, the literature lacks evidence of this protocol's use to enhance teachers' conversations in well-established study team schools.

Perhaps schools with regularly scheduled study team meetings should designate a portion of the time to look at student work reflectively. Reflective conversations involve two primary inquiries: (1) assessing the quality of the student's work and (2) assessing the context of work production. The dialogue should include elements of background information about the student, the teacher's instructional process, and the assignment itself. Both steps are critical, but the order in which they are conducted may vary from team to team (Blythe et al., 1999). For example, some may prefer to assess the quality of the student's work first. Assessing the quality of students' work has been labeled by Blythe et al. as "describing, interpreting and evaluating" (p. 12) work samples to determine the student's understanding and growth over time using several work samples. Others may choose to examine the context in which the work is produced prior to assessing its quality (Blythe et al.). The study teams should choose the conference protocol that meets the specific needs of the school culture and accommodate individual teachers' needs. According to Blythe et al., the following steps should be used to choose a protocol:

- Taking stock of current ways of looking at student work

Website resources for study teams and reflective conferences

1. Reading Success Network and study teams www.sedl.org/secac/rsn/peer.pdf

   The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) carries out an integrated program of education applied research and development. Reading Success Network is a professional development program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education to improve reading instruction. This site includes a training manual on the rationale and use of study teams to increase professional and student learning.

2. Looking at student work www.lasw.org/methods.html

   This site provides an overview of different methods of looking at student work together. Schools may determine an appropriate method for reflective conferences by reviewing the work of others such as the Harvard Project Zero, National School Reform Faculty, Education Trust, and the Coalition of Essential Schools.

3. Free protocols www.teacherscollegepress.com

   Many different free protocols are available. This site provides the ordering information for the book *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice* by Joseph P. McDonald, Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter, and Elizabeth C. McDonald (2003, Teachers College Press).

4. Virtual collaborative assessment process www.lasw.org/protocols.html

   This site allows the reader to participate in an actual collaborative assessment conference. The virtual reflective conference takes the reader through the eight-step process of examining student work to reflect upon the practice that produced the work.

5. The Tuning Protocol: A process for reflection on teacher and student work www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/54

   This site outlines the seven-step process for looking at student work developed and used by the Coalition of Essential Schools.

- Establishing goals and framing questions
- Choosing, adapting, or developing a process for looking collaboratively at student work
- Implementing the process
- Reflecting on and revising the process.

The websites in Figure 2 provide a wealth of step-by-step processes using various protocols, including a virtual collaborative conference assessment. Teachers can actually participate in a reflective conference with an expert. Considering the repercussions of failure to meet the demand of the changing face of education today, school study teams should investigate different structures or protocols to begin reflective conversations about student work to improve teaching and learning.

Summary

High-stakes testing for accountability and recent legislative mandates have required that edu-cators must make an important choice. The choice is whether to allow policymakers to determine the fate of children in the United States or to become a force for change by planning action steps to improve teaching and learning. The action steps must include (1) building a collective mission; (2) restructuring professional development to provide time for faculties to study and make classroom decisions based on the educational mandates, research-based programs and practices, and student data; (3) developing and implementing a plan of reflective conversations, all of which will lead to improved teaching and learning; and (4) seeking funding to support the change process from federal, state, local, and private sources. Fate or action planning—the right choice for children is evident.

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