



Contextualized Support for Urban Teachers Implementing Writer's Workshop

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Gladwell (2000) describes context as “the tipping point” for leveraging change. This paper explores how differentiated learning opportunities situated in the school context supported changes in practice for urban elementary teachers during the implementation of Writer’s Workshop (Calkins, 2003 & 2006). The teachers in this study were offered an integrated network of support and professional growth options tailored to meet evolving learning needs over time in order to ensure high fidelity implementation in their classrooms. These learning opportunities included demonstration lessons and follow up debriefs, targeted learning walks, and working with a peer partner, university partner and literacy coaches. The key levers for change examined in this paper were dedicating time for teachers to engage in critical dialogue with colleagues, and offering multiple contexts for teachers to lead these conversations.

Review of Related Literature

Passman (2002) reported on the importance of reflective dialogue to support building learning communities within schools. Richardson and Anders (2005) also highlight the importance of critical dialogue among teachers to support reflection and changes in practice. Research on teacher learning has pointed to the benefits of teachers participating in classroom observations and receiving follow-up support with close attention to tailoring learning opportunities to the classroom context. The insights from related research offered guidelines for creating multi-layered support for the teachers in this study (Stallings, Needels, & Stayrock, 1980; Frey & Kelly, 2002). Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birn and Yoon (2001) suggested that both structural and core features be considered in designing professional development. Structural aspects include types of learning opportunities and the duration and degree of collective participation by all teachers. Core features were described as the content focus, opportunities for active engaged learning and coherence of professional development activities. Elmore (2004) and Fullan (2006) highlighted the importance of “learning in context.” These streams of research were influential in shaping the diverse and continuous learning opportunities situated in the school context and sharply focused around implementation of Writer’s Workshop.

Fullan (1998) argued that “systematic professional development, learning schools and school districts, and success for all students are closely intertwined” (p. 3). The literature on effective professional development has advocated both for teachers identifying the content they need to learn, and embedding learning opportunities in the school setting (Fullan, 2006; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010; Little, 1998). The principles and conditions for effective teacher learning have been identified in the research, yet these evidence-based powerful practices take time to find their way into implementation in schools. The study reported in this paper illustrates the complex relationship between the conditions for learning shaped and influenced by the

school context and culture, and the responsiveness and participation of teachers when offered a voice and in shaping and leading the conversations.

Methods

Site and Participants

The site was an urban elementary school (K-6) serving 91.9% Hispanic students with 35.2% of those students designated as Limited English Proficient, and 97.2 % classified as low-income. The participants were 10 teachers, two literacy coaches and a university partner. The school leaders included the principal and the assistant principal and they attended all school wide sessions, Instructional Leadership meetings, and Targeted Learning Walks. The teachers included one first grade teacher, two second grade teachers, two fourth grade teachers, one fifth grade teacher and two sixth grade teachers. One second grade and one fourth grade teacher taught in bilingual classrooms. The ten teachers had teaching experience ranging from 2 to 20 years. There are 35 teachers in the school with three to four sections per grade level. All of the teachers in the school were invited to participate in professional learning activities and did engage in self-selected opportunities. All teachers participated in the school wide professional development sessions and grade-level meetings. The ten teachers in this study represented a range of grade levels, experience, and teaching philosophies, and agreed to allow their classrooms and practice to be closely examined throughout the year.

Menu of Professional Development Experiences

The teachers included in were offered a diverse menu of professional learning experiences, leadership opportunities and support throughout the year. The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) was formed at the beginning of the year for the purpose of examining student and teacher data on writing and planning professional learning activities during weekly meetings. Teacher data included observations from the Targeted Learning Walks, teacher surveys and grade-level notes. Student data included the analysis and compilation of scores using the 6+1 Traits throughout the year. The ILT used this information to plan professional development activities including selection of professional readings. At the beginning of the year, the literacy coaches took a strong leadership role during these conversations, but gradually released responsibility for planning and facilitation to the teachers. Instructional Leadership Team participants served as a conduit of information and feedback from teachers at all grade-levels allowing a forum for input from the entire teaching community. Targeted Learning Walks offered participants an opportunity to visit classrooms and observe a designated facet of Writer’s Workshop. The areas of focus included classroom environment to support Writer’s Workshop, the mini-lesson, and conferencing. In addition, demonstration lessons were scheduled and teachers at primary and intermediate levels offered to teach a mini-lesson, show how they used the classroom environment to support writers, or conference with students. Following these lessons, the observers met with the demonstration teacher to engage in dialogue about the lesson. Teachers were able to work with a peer partner to plan lessons and visit each other’s classrooms. Teachers in the study also facilitated the conversation and learning about Writer’s Workshop during grade-level meetings. All teachers in the school received equipment and supplies to furnish a writing center and create a meeting

area in their classrooms. Figure 1 provides a description of professional development, leadership opportunities and other types of support provided for teachers throughout the year.

Figure 1: Menu of Learning Opportunities and Support

Event	Description	Administrative Support Provided
ILT Meetings	Weekly meetings focused on planning on-going professional development for staff based on surveys and feedback from grade-level meetings	Participants released from supervision duty
Demonstration Lessons/Debrief	Demonstration Lessons/Debrief sessions offered four times during the year focused on aspects of Writer's Workshop	Release time provided with substitutes covering classes
Grade-Level Meetings	Weekly grade-level meetings facilitated by ILT member focused on professional reading, feedback from teachers on challenges/opportunities offered by Writer's Workshop	Copies of professional books and articles
Peer Partners	Teachers were paired up to observe each other's classes and visit to make note of classroom environment to support Writer's Workshop	Literacy coaches covered classes for visiting teachers
Targeted Learning Walks	ILT members participated in visits to all classrooms four times during the year to observe lessons, classroom environment and look at student work	Release time with substitutes covering classes
Staff Development Sessions	Five meetings throughout the year focused on using 6+1 Traits to analyze student writing and set priorities for mini-lessons. Meetings were collaboratively led by ILT members, Literacy Coaches and the university partner	Copies of professional reading
Coaching and Mentoring	Literacy coaches and university partner worked in classrooms to model, scaffold new practices, and provide feedback for teachers	University partner supported by targeted funds
Furniture, Supplies and Texts for Writing Center	All teachers received storage units, easels, chart paper, texts and supplies to furnish the writing center	PTO funds and school budget

Research Design and Questions

Grounded theory examined through a constructivist lens was the research design for the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This design allowed for a fine-grained exploration of teacher learning in action as it unfolded throughout the year. Three research questions were explored:

1. What types of support did teachers need in order to implement Writer's Workshop with high fidelity?
2. What types of support did teachers find most effective to support the implementation of Writer's Workshop?
3. What types of changes were evident in teachers' practices and student writing?

Data Sources and Analysis

Rich descriptive data on teacher change were collected including notes from demonstration and debrief sessions, ILT meeting notes, field notes from classroom observations, follow-up conferences, grade-level meetings, and Targeted Learning Walks. Other data sources included student writing, teacher surveys, and notes from planning sessions with the Literacy Coaches. At the end of the year, teachers were given a survey using a five point Likert Scale to measure and quantify how highly they valued the differentiated learning opportunities and support provided for implementing Writer's Workshop. Fidelity of implementation was determined through examining classroom environment, anchor charts, notes from classroom observations and student work.

The data were coded and analyzed for evidence of high fidelity implementation of Writer's Workshop, for emerging themes that offered insight into the changes in teacher practice throughout the year, and for the types of support that teachers reported as essential to changes in their practice. The following data codes were used to categorize the events:

A = Administrative Support: Time, Resources, Maintaining Focus;

DL = Demonstration Lesson: Lesson followed by debrief;

TLO = Teacher Participation in Leadership Opportunities: Instructional Leadership Team; Targeted Learning Walks; Delivering/Facilitating Professional Development Sessions;

CM = Coaching/Mentoring;

SDS = Staff Development Sessions.

Changes in teachers' practice were coded as **CP** (changes in practice) and these changes were documented during participation during classroom observations, demonstration lessons and Targeted Learning Walks. Student writing was also examined for evidence of change over the course of the study and samples were coded as **CSW** (changes in student writing) when changes in quantity or quality of writing were noted.

Findings

The findings in this study were organized around three key themes that emerged from the data: the role of administrative support; the importance of time to engage in critical dialogue;

and, changes evident in teacher practice and student writing. The themes will be discussed and explored in detail and the findings will be summarized to show the frequency of participation in learning opportunities and impact on teachers' practices and student writing.

Administrative Support

The analysis of the survey and field notes indicated that teachers valued the school administrators' commitment to the vision of high fidelity implementation of Writer's Workshop. This finding was consistent across various data sources including surveys, anecdotal conversations, and notes from Instructional Leadership meetings and grade-level meetings. Dedicated time for teachers to meet in a variety of contexts and the fact that teachers facilitated the conversations about topics of importance to them was noted as both important and novel in their teaching careers. The teachers were provided with release time to attend demonstration lessons and debrief sessions following the lesson, and had opportunities to participate in Targeted Learning Walks while a substitute covered classes. One teacher stated

I really felt so much support from the principal and assistant principal. In the past, most new initiatives were introduced during school wide professional development days and then we were supposed to go back to our classrooms and figure out how to do something new. At most, we had one or two training sessions on new ideas...But this time, it is different because we are learning about teaching writing by seeing it and reading about it. The best is having time to talk to other teachers about it and figure it out...

At the beginning of the year, only two of the ten teachers in this study had created a designated meeting area for Writer's Workshop. In the other classrooms, paper, writing tools and dictionaries were placed randomly around the room. Calkins (2006) suggests that it is far easier for teachers to engage students when they are consistently clustered close together for a short mini-lesson providing explicit instruction on the skills and tools writers need. Initially, none of the teachers had a designated Writing Center. Data from the Targeted Learning Walks showed that students lacked the necessary tools and a dedicated writing center for revising, editing and publishing their work. The teachers were struggling to build community and fully engage students during the mini-lessons as students sat at their desks. The administration provided the funds to equip each teacher in the school with a rug for a meeting area, storage units, texts, easels and supplies for their Writing Center. By March, all ten teachers had a designated meeting area and a well-provisioned Writing Center. Calkins (2006) highlights the importance of "teachers and school leaders" being intentional in creating a supportive environment by providing the tools for writers to do their important work. The literacy coaches set up a model writing center in a primary and intermediate classroom and videotaped the writing centers including footage displaying the organization and tools in the writing center, students using the writing center and they conducted a brief interview with the teacher discussing the challenges and potential of managing the writing center. This video was shared with the entire staff at a mid-year staff development session. One of the second grade teachers in this study commented after viewing the video "Now I see how the writing center should look and I know how to set it up." The Literacy Coaches also visited classrooms to help teachers set up and manage the Writing Centers.

Data from the teacher surveys, feedback from the Instructional Leadership Team, and informal conversations with the ten teachers confirmed that they recognized how important these resources were for their classrooms and appreciated guidance from the Literacy Coaches in setting up the writing center. At the end of the year, the teachers were asked to rate the level of each aspect of administrative support on a five point Likert Scale with one describing the aspect as “very evident” to five describing it as “not evident.” Figure 2 presents a summary of the responses from the ten participants in the study.

Figure 2: Teacher Ratings of Administrative Support

Key Themes	1= Very Evident	2=Evident	3= Undecided	4= Little Evidence	5= No Evidence
Focus	n= 3	n=6	n=1		
Protected Time	n=7	n=3			
Resources	n=10				

The results of this survey illustrate how highly the ten teachers valued the commitment of administrative support for protected time to learn with colleagues, consistency of focus on improving their practice in teaching writing using the Writing Workshop approach, and allocation of resources necessary for implementation. Survey results show administrative focus, allocation of time for learning and allocation of resources were consistently rated by teachers as “very evident” to “evident” with only one teacher reporting ambivalence on this aspect. These findings illustrate a high level of teacher recognition of administrative support for implementing Writer’s Workshop.

Time to Engage in Critical Dialogue

Teachers in this study had the opportunity to attend four demonstration lessons followed by a debriefing on the lesson. During the debrief session, the observers reported what they saw during the lesson and asked questions as the demonstration teacher listened. The demonstration teacher responded to the questions and helped the observers think through how they might try it out in their own classrooms. Teachers freely exchanged ideas, asked questions, and in some cases asked for more support from the literacy coaches. Teachers also engaged in dialogue during the Instructional Leadership Team meetings, Targeted Learning Walks, grade-level meetings and staff development sessions. Lieberman and Mace (2010) argued that research has enriched our understanding of the importance of the social aspect of teacher learning that by necessity makes practice “a public contribution to be shared, used, shaped and understood by the community” (P.80). The data around teacher interactions point to the importance of the opportunity for teachers to engage in purposeful conversations with colleagues in the debriefing sessions following the demonstration lessons. Wenger (1998) identified learning, meaning and

identity as the three processes that shape the work and nature of learning communities. These three processes entailed learning in the context of practice, being intentional in learning, and learning in collaboration with others in order to transform teaching practices. All ten teachers noted that in previous years as new practices were adopted, limited opportunities were provided to observe and learn from colleagues and to engage in critical dialogue about teaching practices. Following a demonstration lesson, two teachers commented on the value of watching another teacher deliver a mini-lesson on how to choose a topic and how this validated her own teaching. One teacher went on to comment on the importance of time for discussion following observation of a lesson to meet with the demonstration teacher in order to tease out the planning, classroom culture and context for the lesson. She pointed out “It was like holding a mirror up on my own teaching...” These interactions clarified the rationale for the teacher’s decisions in planning and delivering the lesson. Six of the ten teachers requested follow-up coaching or a visit to observe another teacher after experimenting with new practices. As teachers adopted the vocabulary and practices of Writer’s Workshop, the data show that seven of the ten teachers asked questions and requested help more frequently in the second half of the year either from the university partner or the Literacy Coaches. The dedication of time for Literacy Coaches to help teachers in improving classroom practice through modeling and scaffolding has been documented as crucial to transforming teaching (Jorissen, Salazar, Morrison, & Foster, 2008).

One area of struggle teachers noted was delivery of a tightly focused mini-lesson. Six of the teachers requested more professional development on modeling strategies during the mini-lesson. Demonstration lessons and professional readings were offered focusing on how to teach a sharply focused mini-lesson on a specific aspect of writing. The professional readings on mini-lessons were discussed during the Instructional Leadership Team meetings and grade-level meetings. The teachers worked with peer partners to plan and critique each other’s mini-lessons. Literacy coaches also provided modeling and assistance in planning mini-lessons.

Evidence of Changes in Teacher Practice and Student Writing

Demonstration lessons, Targeted Learning Walks, ILT meetings and school wide professional development sessions provided abundant data around evidence of changes in practice. As noted in the first section, all ten teachers transformed their classroom environments to include a meeting area and a Writing Center. The structure of instruction changed when the meeting area was used to deliver mini-lessons. Teachers posted anchor charts in the meeting area offering guidelines for students in choosing a topic, examples of good leads, and ideas for adding juicy details to incorporate into their writing. The Writing Center provided tools for editing and publishing, such as a thesaurus, multiple dictionaries and books with tips for effective writers as well as various types of paper and markers and other writing implements.

Changes in Student Writing

The data also showed changes in quality and quantity of student writing over time. These changes were noted by teachers, literacy coaches, and the university partner as teachers gathered with students’ writing folders and analyzed the writing using the 6 + 1 Traits Rubric. During Targeted Learning Walks it was noted that over the course of the year there were more diverse genres of writing posted and “celebrated” in classrooms as well as increased student engagement during mini-lessons and writing time. Student engagement was one of the focus areas for a

Targeted Learning Walk towards the end of the year and this finding was evident in the classrooms of the ten teachers included in this study, and particularly notable in the 4th, 5th and 6th grades. Examination of student writing also revealed that in every classroom included in this study, teachers allowed students to write in their dominant language. This issue was discussed early in the year and the teachers all agreed to encourage students to write in their dominant language. The 4th, 5th and 6th grade teachers found that some students often used both languages and used “Spanglish” in their writing.

During the final staff development session for the year, teachers reflected on student growth and examined evidence from student writing samples from the beginning to the end of the year. These samples included a beginning, middle and end of year sample on an open-ended prompt, and writing from students’ writing folders. The target set in the School Improvement Plan was to increase the quantity of student writing by 75%. Teachers compared writing samples at the beginning, middle and end of the year using features of the 6+1 Trait Rubric (Culham, 2003) and concluded that the goal was met, and even exceeded in the two sixth grade classrooms. Second, fourth and sixth grade teachers identified improvement in ideas, organization and word choice. These three areas had been selected for instructional focus through mini-lessons and conferencing. Very little qualitative change was noted in sentence fluency and conventions. As teachers in the fourth and sixth grade classrooms analyzed writer’s notebooks, they found that students produced longer drafts and engaged in some revision around leads, word choice and conclusions as the year progressed. The two teachers in bilingual classrooms noted that when students wrote in their dominant language, they produced more complex and authentic pieces of writing. Several teachers observed that allowing students to choose their own topics seemed to create a space for them to explore issues and challenges in their own lives such as being newcomers to the United States and the educational system, or being raised by aunts, uncles or grandparents when their parents returned to their country of origin.

Discussion

This study highlighted the importance of both the structural and core features in creating a supportive context for teachers as they experimented with changes in teaching practices (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birn & Yoon, 2001). The findings suggest that a shared focus on specific goals including creating a classroom environment that supported writers, teaching a tightly focused mini-lesson, increasing student engagement and the quantity and quality of writing influenced changes in teachers’ practices. Administrative dedication of time and resources were noted by teachers as evident and essential in supporting their growth and learning as they implemented Writer’s Workshop.

These findings also point to the importance of protected time for teachers to collaborate and engage in critical dialogue with colleagues throughout the school year in a variety of contexts. Providing teachers with time to learn has been recognized as imperative in the research, yet schools still struggle with carving out consistent opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development and critical dialogue to reflect on this learning because they lack the capacity to support these endeavors (Fullan, 2005; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). The school portrayed in this study leveraged school and district funds to support the teachers by providing necessary resources and time to learn from experts and each other.

Fullan (2005) argued that change is supported by “the amount of purposeful interaction between and among individuals” (Fullan, 2005, p.17). The data in this study pointed to the key

roles of school leaders, literacy coaches and the university partner in creating and nurturing supportive contexts for teacher collaboration and conversations on a variety of levels. This often meant taking a firm stance to protect this time when competing priorities surfaced and an Instructional Leadership Meeting or Demonstration Lesson could have been cancelled. One important finding is that spaces were created for the voices of the teachers as they shared their concerns and insights and these conversations were facilitated by fellow teachers instead of school-based, or external “experts.” These interactions with colleagues following a demonstration lesson, discussing a professional reading, or during an Instructional Leadership meeting served to create a shared language and set of norms for focusing the work of implementing Writer’s Workshop.

Implications and Limitations

This study offers insights into some of the conditions that may support and empower teachers as they adopt new ways of teaching and learning. As teachers in an urban school serving a high-poverty population, they faced many challenges including teaching students English and the academic skills and dispositions necessary to support their success. Flexible options for learning allowed teachers to choose opportunities that fit their learning style and schedules and tailor this learning to the needs of the population they served. Teachers also released control of the curriculum by allowing students to choose their own topics, write in their dominant language, and write about the challenges and accomplishments in their lives.

Participation in the Instructional Leadership Team, Demonstration Lessons, Targeted Learning Walks, peer partners, and coaching created an interplay of learning and leadership opportunities for these teachers as they experimented with new practices. The teachers in this study had opportunities to teach others about new practices through grade-level meetings, staff development sessions, and demonstration lessons. Lieberman & Pointer Mace (2010) refer to these opportunities as “making knowledge public, to critique it, and to build on it and pass it on (p. 81).

The role of administrative dedication and participation, resourcefulness and sustained focus needs to be underscored in this study because both human capital and extensive financial resources were dedicated to allocate time to allow teachers to learn together throughout the first year of implementation.

Teacher leaders and administrators can draw lessons from this study as they plan to implement new curricula and explore effective approaches for building capacity to support changes in teachers’ practices. The findings here suggest that teachers need to be involved in shaping a focus that is collectively defined and robustly supported by the school leaders. The teachers played a pivotal role in designing and delivering a diverse menu of learning opportunities situated in the school context and in the process, capacity for sustaining change was embedded in the culture of the school and the teachers became a community of learners drawing upon each other’s knowledge and skills. Empowering the teachers to be their own change agents created an authentic culture of teaching, learning and decision-making (Little, 1998; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). The lessons from this study offer promise for fostering changes in the ways teachers learn and lead together and transform their practice.

The limitations of the study reside in the limited sample size in terms of number of teachers, and the fact that this is only one school and the findings may not be applicable to other schools and teachers. During the implementation of Writer’s Workshop, there were optimal,

almost utopian, conditions for fostering change including making funds available to purchase all of the necessary equipment and supplies and using professional development funds to pay for substitutes and release time for teachers from other responsibilities. Other schools may struggle with trying to support teacher learning in the face of shrinking budgets and the need to place a top priority on performance on high-stakes tests. Schools tend to position resources to support the initiatives that will yield the highest return on the investment. This leaves us with questions: What do we value in terms of learning for students? Do curricular changes such as Writer's Workshop yield far greater long-term benefits to students because writing is really manifesting thinking and learning? These are the questions that linger in the mind of this researcher.

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