

Professional Development in a Bilingual Adult Learning Community: The Case of P.S. 24

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Abstract

Public School 24 in Brooklyn, New York, represents a bilingual “adult learning community” model espoused by leading experts in the field of professional development. Its eight dual language teachers, a coordinator, and the principal are participants in the New York City Board of Education’s multi-year Development and Dissemination (D&D) Schools Initiative, a systemic improvement process that is documenting exemplary instructional practices in schools serving English language learners. This case study illustrates how P.S. 24’s D&D team developed a set of “best practices” in a bilingual setting. The hallmark of this model is that the professional development of the teaching staff is a job-embedded process requiring collaborations with external partners and a redefinition of roles for all adult partners.

Introduction

“As a demonstration site for the New Performance Standards in a bilingual community, our mission is to organize and support the cognitive and affective (social and creative) development of a bilingual nested learning community; focused on collaborations, professional development and New Standards of performance, where all students, parents and staff are provided multiple opportunities to develop a deep sense of ownership that ensures achievement of high standards.”

The original mission statement (1997) of P.S. 24, a 4-year-old elementary school in the low-income, immigrant Sunset Park community of South Brooklyn, called for a “bilingual nested learning community.” This concept emerged from educators’ understanding of what they needed to do to improve the education of English language learners (ELLs). This paper presents an ethnographic case study addressing the applied research question: What

specific professional development strategies and practices used by dual language teachers and their supervisors at P.S. 24 contribute to developing a bilingual, reflective, and skillful “adult learning community”?

There are, in fact, disparate literatures that deal with effective bilingual/dual language education and professional development models. The literature, in particular, documents that successful schools have strong professional development frameworks with specific characteristics. The “best practices” that constitute the “adult learning community” model of professional development are the following: reflective practice, teacher inquiry, continuous learning, and celebrating/sharing successful instructional practices (Lawson, 1997); on-the-job learning (Wood & McQuarrie, 1999); a supported curriculum, including training, mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance (Harwell-Kee, 1999); and transformational leadership (Showers, 1985). However, few studies have described and analyzed these practices in bilingual or dual language school settings (Clair & Adger, 2000; González & Darling-Hammond, 1997). In fact, most studies have discussed professional development issues as part of larger analyses of effective bilingual/dual language programs or schools (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999; Slavin & Calderon, 2001). This paper will describe the bilingual nested learning community model as it developed at P.S. 24.

Professional development would seem to be a high priority given that bilingual/dual language teachers suffer from a set of existential dilemmas and professional challenges (Clair & Adger, 2000); González & Darling-Hammond, 1997; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Their license area continues to be under attack as a political or ethnic boondoggle. Large numbers of bilingual teachers are not fully certified in their license areas. For example, in New York City, 27% are not fully certified, according to the schools chancellor, Harold O. Levy (2001). Teacher education and professional development models often reflect traditional, off-site workshop approaches. Last, many bilingual/dual language teachers may not have access to cutting-edge, research-based professional development models equal to their monolingual colleagues. Despite this, bilingual teachers are expected to implement the latest standards-based instructional reforms.

This case study addresses the question of what an effective “adult learning community” model of professional development looks like in a bilingual/dual language setting. It does so by highlighting dual language practitioners’ “voices” as they reflect on their “bilingual nested learning community” model. A description of the context, i.e., the school, its students and teachers, and its program characteristics, will be provided followed by a brief review of the literature on the “adult learning community” model. This article will focus on the teachers’ perspective of the five major components of the bilingual, adult learning community model. The teachers’ reflections through narratives are important, for they may be relevant to the broader discussion of the adult learning community and teacher development.

Description of P.S. 24

P.S. 24 opened in September 1997 as a pre-K–5 school. As of September 2000, 943 students were enrolled, 90% of whom receive free lunches. Thirty-one percent of the school’s students are English language learners (ELLs); most of these are Spanish speakers. In addition to meeting their needs specifically, the dual language program in this school has been developed to meet the needs of its predominantly Latino students (82.7%) who have a wide range of abilities in both English and Spanish. Many of these students have been classified as English proficient but are in need of further English language development. Students whose “best” language may be either Spanish or English study together and receive instruction in both Spanish and English.

Four years after opening, P.S. 24 became a bilingual demonstration lab site for standards-based, language arts teaching and learning, and for all the best practices associated with these educational innovations (Patthey-Chavez, Lindsay, & Gallimore, 1995; Thomas & Collier, 1999). According to the New York City Board of Education’s *1999–2000 Annual School Report* (1999), 27% of P.S. 24’s ELLs have attained proficiency in English and 67% have made mandated gains in English language acquisition, outperforming their peers throughout the city. They also made significant improvements in their Spanish reading scores of 1998, surpassing the citywide average.

Most teachers (88%) are fully licensed, and the majority (58.8%) are in their first five years of teaching. Thus, the teachers’ professional development is critical. It has been focused on balanced literacy and dual language strategies and techniques. Staff developers, reading recovery specialists, along with the principal and her administrative staff, provide ongoing professional development utilizing a collaborative coaching model. Teachers regularly work together to plan curriculum and to reflect on their teaching practices.

Since 1998, a school-based team, made up of eight dual language teachers and the dual language coordinator and the principal, has participated in a city-wide Development and Dissemination (D&D) Schools Initiative. The overall goal is to create a network among New York City public schools that have implemented exemplary bilingual, ESL, and dual language instructional practices. P.S. 24 was chosen because it is a demonstration site for standards-based language arts teaching and learning using a dual language model. Higher education experts joined the P.S. 24 team to assist them in documenting their instructional best practices. One of the consultants, from the Education Alliance at Brown University, has guided the team to engage in teacher action research (Glanz, 1999) focusing on their implementation of innovative read aloud strategies. It is in this context that we find the work of the bilingual nested learning community.

Adult Learning Community Theory

Educators at P.S. 24 are, in effect, implementing the new paradigm of a school as an adult “learning community” or “learning organization” based on Malcolm Knowles’ (1984) “andragogical” theory of adult learning. Knowles makes five assumptions about adult learning: adults are self-directed learners; they build on prior experience; they respond to a need to perform more effectively; they want real-world applications for learning; and they are motivated by internal factors such as self-esteem, recognition, natural curiosity, and innate love of learning. In turn, Lawson (1997) has described seven principles of adult learning. He proposes that adult learning takes place when a positive learning environment is created; when learners are involved in planning their learning, in identifying their own needs, in setting their learning objectives, in designing their learning plans, and in evaluating their own learning outcomes; and when learners are helped to carry out their learning plans.

The hallmark of an adult “learning community” is a professional development process that is job-embedded, requires collaborations with external partners, and redefines roles for all adult partners (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lieberman, 1995; Wood & McQuarrie, 1999). During the last two decades, research information from the fields of adult learning, performance improvement, and organizational theory has profoundly impacted staff development principles (Quinn, 1998; Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987; Zemke & Zemke, 1995). At the same time, other factors have changed the way educators view staff development. The implementation of standards-based education in schools has led to higher expectations for the performance levels of teachers, administrators, and students. According to Parker (1999), this complex “paradigm shift” has accelerated the use of inquiry-based and reflective staff development approaches.

Lieberman (1995) holds that there are two conflicting assumptions about how teachers learn: through direct instruction in “best practices” (the traditional workshop model) or through personal involvement in reform efforts. The latter assumption, she holds, is fundamental to the construction of schools as learning organizations because it views teachers as learners. Lieberman suggests that to create learning communities schools must construct new roles for teachers and staff; create new structures, such as problem-solving teams; work on new projects, such as standards development or proposal writing; and create a school-wide culture of inquiry.

Professional Development at P.S. 24

Lindholm-Leary (2001) notes that specialized and focused training may be particularly important in dual language programs with culturally and linguistically diverse students, as teachers have a greater range of student

needs to meet. She recommends that schools “select one area of focus and work on that area all year, with professional development, faculty meetings, and grade-level or team meetings oriented toward that area of focus” (p. 322). This recommendation is consistent with the P.S. 24 D&D team’s professional development model. In fact, D&D members at P.S. 24 participate in continuous learning with regard to standards-based language arts instruction and the dual language program model. There are many opportunities for disciplined inquiry built into the yearly school schedule, including weekly dual language team meetings, weekly grade meetings, and meetings among paired teachers. At P.S. 24, Knowles’ assumptions (1984) about the adult learning model are made real on a daily basis. For example, dual language and ESL teachers have volunteered to join a study group to discuss the latest book by Ana Celia Zentella on the Puerto Rican child as a bilingual learner (Zentella, 1997).

The external consultants have empowered P.S. 24’s adult learners during the action research process, adhering, in effect, to Lawson’s seven principles (1997) of adult learning. For example, much of the first year of the D&D project was spent in exploratory team meetings. Faced with a complex profile of student language abilities and language usage in their dual language classrooms, team members identified their own learning needs and developed their own action research question:

How do we use interactive read-aloud activities effectively in dual language classrooms when second language learners (both Spanish-dominant and English-dominant) are not proficient in their second language? What adjustments need to be made in the interactive read-aloud when it is used in dual language classrooms? How does the teacher modify or adjust for low proficiency second-language learners? (R. Parker, personal communication, July, 2000)

Ultimately, the team identified six classroom strategies that they would implement in order to improve the effectiveness of the interactive read-aloud activity, as follows: pre-teach key vocabulary in the second language, dramatic and exaggerated emphasis, develop fundamental skills in the first language, shoulder buddies or partners, use visuals to establish comprehensible input, and use the same book in two languages.

The consultant from the Education Alliance at Brown University and the dual language coordinator took on the dual roles of coach and “critical friend” in helping the teachers to pursue their research questions. The author of the article was assigned to document professional development activities for the D&D Initiative in the context of the adult learning community model. This involved collecting school data and information about various training activities, observing classes, attending meetings of the school’s professional development planning team, and interviewing teachers and other members of the school’s D&D team. All 10 members provided the author with a written

statement of their professional development experiences during the 1999–2000 school year. They responded to a request to share their reflections on one particular component of the professional development model. These statements create a portrait of P.S. 24’s bilingual adult learning community as drawn by the participants themselves.

P.S. 24’s Adult Learners: In Their Own Voices

The professional development activities that D&D team members participated in reflect P.S. 24’s model of a “bilingual nested adult learning community.” They include five components: teacher action research, coaching and mentoring, onsite-support and technical assistance from experts, parent education workshops, and the principal’s role as a clinical supervisor and transformational leader. The following excerpts from team members’ written statements are grouped using these five components.

Teacher Action Research

Teacher action research, sometimes called collaborative action research (Calhoun, 1993), is a form of disciplined inquiry that has reemerged as a popular way of involving practitioners, teachers, and supervisors to understand their work better (Glanz, 1999; McKay, 1992). Individuals or teams systematically examine how effective their work practices are and how to make them more effective. At P.S. 24, this process has been used to improve exemplary instructional practices in dual language classrooms. For example, a third-grade teacher described how the team process encouraged her and her colleagues to keep reflective journals, to assess children, and to have regular meetings on Fridays. She explicitly expressed the benefits of action research in the following way:

Action research allowed me to learn by putting everything I was observing and reading into practice in my classroom. It also helped to create a unity among a group of teachers who have dedicated themselves to solving an education focus question together. (R. Torres, personal communication, June 2, 2000)

Coaching, peer coaching, and mentoring

According to Harwell-Kee (1999), coaching provides a model of collegial reflection about instructional decisions. Mentoring, in general, involves an experienced teacher providing information to a newcomer. Coaching, on the other hand, is a continuous growth process for people of all experience levels (González & Darling-Hammond, 1997). A first-grade teacher at P.S. 24 detailed the assistance she received from a reading recovery teacher assigned to her as a staff developer. They met and discussed which area of the balanced literacy model they wanted to work on, with the reading recovery teacher modeling effective reading strategies:

The next day I would model a read aloud lesson and she would observe me to see if I had incorporated the strategies she modeled and the ones we discussed previously. . . . At the end of the month we videotaped each other doing a read aloud. We discussed and reflected on the lessons. . . . This kind of staff development helped me improve my planning and my effectiveness as a teacher. I learned a lot about the individual needs of each of my students and how to meet their needs in a more effective way. (N. Rivera Mendez, personal communication, June 2, 2000)

The dual language coordinator recounted the roles she played as coach or “critical friend” to facilitate the teachers’ action research:

I observed each teacher once a week during the interactive read aloud and documented the strategies used as well as the students’ participation. The teachers . . . were able to see more closely what they were doing because of the feedback I was providing them via the reflection logs I was keeping and the conversations I would have with them about their practice. In addition, the teachers and I met almost weekly as a group to discuss the strategies they were using and the results they were achieving. Action research has fostered collaboration and teamwork in the process. (C. Demoleas, personal communication, June 19, 2000)

As we can see, senior teachers at P.S. 24 are taking on new roles as coaches and mentors in the context of the D&D initiative, reflecting several of Lieberman’s (1995) suggestions.

On-Site Support and Technical Assistance

“On-the-job learning” (Wood & McQuarrie, 1999) is at the core of P.S. 24’s adult learning community model, whether taking the form of a study group, a series of writer’s workshops led by noted bilingual author, Alma Flor Ada, or the more formal D&D Initiative. P.S. 24 teachers have participated in more traditional off-site workshops sponsored by the local school district and the central office of bilingual education. However, a third-grade teacher affirmed that she found the on-site D&D initiative much more helpful than this traditional training:

The [district] staff development helped me to enhance my teaching methods, but they were unable to answer my question on how to help my second language students. Many of my colleagues had the same questions, but we never found the time to think about the methods needed to help this population. . . . When I was introduced to D&D, it was a relief to find a group of educators who were interested in my questions on second language acquisition. The research group made me feel important because I was sharing and participating with a

group of intelligent educators who wanted to help our community of learners.” (R. Torres, personal communication, June 2, 2000)

The on-site support and technical assistance provided by the D&D initiative respects Lawson’s principles of adult learning (1997) by involving the teachers in setting their learning objectives, including adapting the interactive read aloud strategy to literacy activities for linguistically diverse learners. The team structure allows these adult learners to evaluate their own learning outcomes in a collegial learning environment. Thus, site-based professional development is building their skills while helping to create a bilingual nested adult learning community.

Parent Education Workshops

Parents are adult learners at P.S. 24, and several projects directly incorporate them into the school’s adult learning community. A school-wide family literacy program offers parents the opportunity to participate in workshops on the balanced literacy instructional model as adapted for dual language classrooms. A kindergarten teacher participating in the D&D initiative related how she developed a set of workshops with parents of her Spanish-dominant class to let them get involved with the read aloud with their children.

Having this involvement with parents, I learned a lot of Hispanic cultural traits and new vocabulary because the meaning for some words are different in different Hispanic countries, even though we are Spanish speakers. . . . I got a wonderful experience sharing with parents the way to help the children how to build and develop their vocabulary, and making connections through read aloud and personal experiences in our literacy program. (L. Matos Elbarak, personal communication, June 2, 2000)

She reflects the norms of collegiality, openness, and trust that underlie the adult learning community model (Lieberman & Miller, 1991). Parents of ELL students are respected as the first teachers of their children. They are welcomed into the classroom as members of the adult learning community who have valuable linguistic and cultural knowledge. Teachers can learn from them and, at the same time, enlist them in learning how to participate in read aloud strategies at home.

The Principal’s Role as Clinical Supervisor and Transformational Leader

The principal has taken on new, transformational leadership roles (Lieberman & Miller, 1991; Parker, 1999). She was a learning leader in a multi-year University of Pittsburgh institute. She acts as a clinical/collaborative supervisor vis-a-vis her young instructional staff. She is the chief staff

developer and team facilitator in the weekly meeting of the school-wide professional development team. And, she acts as mentor and “critical friend” to individual teachers, giving them feedback after conducting “walk-throughs” with visiting researchers. She shared this vision of her role after one of the weekly team meetings:

I see all my team members as professional developers, even if they are not staff developers by title. This changes the leadership style of the principal to head learner versus just as head supervisor / administrator. As a member of this community of learners, I have had the opportunity to lead a new school where all adults are committed to professional development. (Y. Aguirre, personal communication, April 6, 2000)

These excerpts from the D&D team members give eloquent and reflective testimony of the existence of an “adult learning community” model of professional development in this bilingual school setting. In the voices of these educators, we hear the development and continued growth of all adult stakeholders, from parents to teachers to principal. This bilingual, nested community of adult learners is an exemplary “work in progress.”

Conclusion

P. S. 24, as a bilingual variation of the “adult learning community” model of professional development (Knowles, 1984), has evolved in the same way that the school was established: intentionally, collaboratively, and responding to the needs and interests of the students, the parents and community, and the pedagogical staff and administrators. This case study has documented through the narratives of the dual language team members how P.S. 24 has brought together adults to create a learning community committed to meeting the needs of its linguistically diverse students. It also illustrated how this bilingual, adult learning community approach to professional development has helped the pedagogical staff to improve their professional knowledge and skills.

The case of P.S. 24 brought together many of the exemplary practices of adult learning communities espoused by Lieberman (1995). Her suggestions included constructing new roles for teachers, creating new structures like problem-solving teams, working on new projects, and creating a school-wide culture of inquiry. We have shown how these professional development practices have been implemented in a bilingual school setting using strategies like teacher action research, peer coaching, and clinical supervision. P.S. 24’s D&D team focused on improving dual language teachers’ professional knowledge and skills through a collaborative action research process. Team members contributed to the school’s emerging culture of inquiry. The D&D team structure allowed teachers and supervisors to experience new professional roles as peer coaches, mentors, and transformational leaders. In keeping with

Lawson's seven principle of adult learning (1997), bilingual administrators and teachers were involved collaboratively from the beginning in creating a positive learning environment, in planning for their own learning, and in identifying their own needs. They have been helped by external partners in creating a school-wide culture of inquiry that respects them as adult self-directed learners.

As a school in only its fifth year of operation working with a population of mostly poor, immigrant, and language minority children, P.S. 24 has yet to produce definitive results in student achievement scores. It has, however, already established a culture of inquiry and continuous adult learning that is palpable and exemplary as corroborated in the eloquent testimony of the members themselves of P.S. 24's bilingual adult learning community. The case of P.S. 24 shows how the adult learning community model fits into a bilingual setting and how it can contribute to dual language teachers' ability to improve the academic achievement of English language learners. The concept of a bilingual nested adult learning community is a way of honoring and acknowledging the knowledge that bilingual and dual language teachers have or are developing. This study provides a model for other similarly situated schools seeking to apply the new paradigm of staff development that flows from Knowles' "andragogical" theory of learning (1984). Finally, the case of P.S. 24 gives direction and hope for setting up structures for bilingual/dual language teachers who are seeking to improve their knowledge and skills.

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