

BRIDGING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

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OVERVIEW

Instructional leadership refers to leadership behaviors that contribute to increased student achievement (Lashway 2002). Shields (2004) held that it is the role of an instructional leader to lead his or her community “morally, deliberately, and dialogically to achieve both social justice and academic excellence for all the students entrusted to [him or her]” (41). The purpose of this issue brief is to explore the current research in instructional leadership, its application to adult basic and literacy education, and its role in supporting the implementation of evidence-based reading instruction for adults.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?

Instructional leadership has evolved significantly since it first became the dominant paradigm for school leaders in the 1980s (Lashway 2002). What began as an investigation into the characteristics of dynamic and charismatic school principals soon evolved into a richer exploration of standards-based accountability systems, the use of data for decision making, and distributed leadership models (King 2002). Over time, the focus shifted from how educators teach to how students learn and, more importantly, to leadership behaviors that are strongly correlated with increased student achievement (Lashway 2002). While significantly more research on instructional leadership has been conducted for K-12 education than for adult education, there is evidence to suggest that much of the K-12 literature is relevant for adult education as well (Weirauch, VanHorn, Alamprese, et al. 2003; Alamprese & Strickney 1999; Smith & Hofer 2003).

Marzano, Walters and McNulty produced a seminal work in 2005 in the area of classroom, school, and leadership practices. This meta-analysis of more than five thousand studies identified a subset of approximately seventy that contained standardized, objective, and quantitative measures of student achievement. The analysis of those seventy led them to three conclusions: 1) leadership matters; 2) effective leadership can be empirically defined; and 3) effective leaders not only know what to do,

but how, when, and why to do it. The study further identified twenty-one specific areas of responsibility that are positively correlated with high levels of student achievement¹.

A key finding from this research was that instructional leaders need to understand what, when, how, and why changes should be made within the instructional program (Waters, Marzano, McNulty 2004). This finding supports Alamprese's assertion that the focus of change is often the central problem of program improvement (Alamprese 1999). Instructional leaders must be able to distinguish between major and minor changes (Beckard & Prichard 1992; Bridges 1991; Fullan 1993; Heifetz 1994; Hesselebein & Johnston 2002; Nadler, Shaw,

Walton & Associates 1994; Rogers 1995; Alamprese 1999), which Marzano calls distinguishing between first and second order change. First order changes involve tinkering with existing norms and fine-tuning processes and procedures, but second order changes challenge existing beliefs and norms. According to Marzano, Walthers and McNulty (2004), second order changes cannot be implemented effectively by outside experts, but must be undertaken by the instructional leaders already within the system. The authors suggest that instructional leaders must struggle through second order changes together; acquiring new knowledge, skills, ways of thinking, and even values (Walters, Marzano, McNulty 2004).

APPLICATION TO ADULT BASIC AND LITERACY EDUCATION

Instructional leaders in Adult Basic and Literacy Education are not as easily identified as the school principal in a K-12 setting. Few adult education programs have an onsite administrator; few programs follow specific curricula; teacher pre-service and in-service offerings vary widely from one setting to the next; and formal evaluation of teachers is inconsistent at best. Smith and Hofer (2003) have collected a wealth of information about the working lives of adult basic education (ABE) teachers. Through questionnaires, interviews, and observations of 106 ABE teachers over three years in three New England states, the authors concluded that ABE teachers need more support to provide effective instruction to adult learners.

The STAR pilot revealed that evidence-based reading instruction, in particular, requires:

- a cadre of highly trained teachers who know how to create homogeneous learner groupings based on reading component assessment scores;
- dedicated time for instructional planning;
- a variety of instructional materials in each
- component area targeting a spectrum of
- learner skills and abilities; and
- a disciplined and orderly instructional setting.
- Instructional leaders at all levels must see that
- teachers and students have the support they need

- to ensure academic success.

FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Alamprese (1998) proposed a logic model for ABE program operations that sheds light on areas of responsibility for instructional leaders in adult education. While adult education systems and structures may differ from those in K-12, the underlying areas of leadership responsibility do not. Whether in a traditional school setting or a community-based literacy program, an instructional leader should: 1) build a positive learning community; 2) establish instructional order and discipline; 3) monitor curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and 4) build a shared vision for continuously improving student achievement. Without the support of these researchbased leadership practices, the quality and quantity of instruction will vary dramatically from classroom to classroom and teachers will have limited success implementing evidence-based reading instruction.

- Building a positive learning community will only happen when teachers have a sense of security in their work, ongoing collegial interaction, time to build relationships with instructional leaders, and an opportunity to provide input into program decisions. The McREL research (Marzano 2005) highlights the areas of responsibility related to creating a positive learning community for teachers and students: culture, visibility, communication, outreach, input, relationship, and situational awareness.
- Establishing instructional order and discipline means that instructional settings are not chaotic, but instead have intentional routines and structures that support student learning. These structures and routines protect the learning environment from both internal and external disruptions.
- Expecting excellence in curriculum, instruction, and assessment tends to top the list of concerns for ABE teachers (Smith & Hofer 2003). Supovitz and Poglinco (2001) note that “standards, both as a concrete set of goals for student knowledge and skills and an abstract expression of uniform expectations for staff behavior and performance, provide an important framework and tool for instructional leaders” (5).
- Building a vision for continuously improving student achievement is one of the most important responsibilities for any instructional leader (Walters et al. 2004). Smith and Hofer (2003) note, “we won’t change the current situation [in adult education] by wanting it to change”(xii). Instructional leaders must operate out of strong beliefs about adult learning, inspire and lead innovation, challenge the status quo, recognize accomplishments, and acknowledge failures. If adult education is to thrive, instructional leaders must lead second order change at the state, program, and classroom level.

Pilot Perspective: STAR’s Exemplary Instructional Leadership

Implementing evidence-based reading practices challenged STAR instructional leaders at the state, program, and classroom levels to approach the teaching of reading in a way that

was new to them as adult educators. These instructional leaders were asked not only to implement evidence-based instructional strategies, but also to engage in systematic program improvement efforts. Ultimately, STAR instructional leaders unified around a strong national vision for improved student achievement in reading, a systematic and clearly defined approach to reading instruction, and the willingness of practitioners in six states to reflect on their practice and experiment with new ways of doing things. In many ways, this effort exemplified instructional leadership at its best.

PAVING THE WAY FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TO SUPPORT EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

Establishing instructional leadership in ABE programs will require action and assistance at the state, local, and classroom levels. The following guidelines are based on the research findings and lessons learned from the STAR pilot.

Guidelines for State Administrators and Policy Makers

- Retain expertise by funding programs at a level that can sustain a core of full-time teaching positions.
- Encourage local programs to provide input into state adult education policy.
- Give greater weight to state performance standards that emphasize student achievement, rather than numbers served.
- Implement projects and initiatives across programs that encourage practitioners to share expertise.
- Develop policy to support managed enrollment rather than open entry/open exit.
- Encourage programs to develop courses at multiple levels of difficulty to accommodate the needs of a diverse adult population.
- Provide incentives for high-intensity instruction that results in increased student achievement.
- Develop statewide reading content standards that are based on evidence-based reading.

Guidelines for Local Program Administrators

- Cluster adult education classes and programs geographically to maximize infrastructure and support systems and to allow for homogeneous grouping by skill level.
- Schedule paid staff meetings that include time for collegial sharing.
- Provide paid prep time for instructors.
- Convene program improvement teams that work collaboratively to analyze program data and plan second order changes.
- Manage enrollment to minimize classroom turbulence.

- Observe and evaluate teachers regularly to provide them with ongoing feedback on their reading instruction.
- Work with teacher leaders to clearly define and document the scope and sequence of all instruction that takes place within the agency.
- Review and provide feedback on class syllabi and individual lesson plans.
- Provide instructors with ongoing support for diagnostic assessment.
- Develop progress monitoring systems that include periodic student feedback.

Guidelines for Professional Developers

- Provide professional development that encourages professional learning communities and collegial sharing.
- Develop practitioner networks, peer coaching, and mentoring programs on reading improvement.
- Help teachers establish successful instructional routines.
- Provide training on flexible grouping and differentiated instruction in a multi-level environment.
- Provide embedded professional development such as onsite coaching or team teaching.
- Provide support for planning reading instruction.
- Provide ongoing training in planning instruction, delivering instruction, and monitoring progress.
- Develop reading content expertise among teachers and program administrators.
- Provide models for integrating reading skills with occupations such as healthcare, manufacturing, and construction.
- Provide ongoing training in adult learning theory targeted toward new practitioners.

Guidelines for Teachers

- Reach out to new instructors or colleagues, particularly those who work in isolation, and help them develop engaging syllabi and lesson plans.
- Invite colleagues to participate in multi-classroom projects and events.
- Share successful classroom routines, techniques for dealing with multi-level instruction, lesson plans, and teaching strategies.
- Invite others into your classroom or instructional setting.
- Work with colleagues to provide flexible cross-classroom groupings for reading.
- Volunteer for curriculum development projects within your agency.
- Model strategies for adapting curriculum to accommodate learner goals.

Pilot Perspective: State Leadership for Reading

In South Dakota, the State Director used a dual approach to establishing leadership at the state level that would eventually lead to all programs buying into STAR for reading improvement. First, South Dakota immediately recognized that local programs would need appropriate materials that teachers could use in their classrooms. The State purchased a set of research-based resources for every program. In addition, using incentive dollars, the state provided a \$500 stipend for each teacher to purchase supplemental reading resources such as graded passages for use in their individual classrooms. Second, the State required that all programs demonstrate local buy-in for reading improvement by providing set planning time for staff to meet with each other and their director. Each program took a different approach to creating planning time, but many programs used this as an opportunity to establish managed enrollment policies.

South Dakota's clear leadership and support for reading reform has resulted in systemic changes and statewide success.

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Footnotes

The 21 areas of responsibility include: culture; order; discipline; resources; curriculum, instruction, assessment; knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment; focus; visibility; rewards; communication; outreach; input; affirmation; relationship; change agent; optimizer; ideals and beliefs; monitoring and evaluation; flexibility; situational awareness; and intellectual stimulation. For a complete discussion of each, see Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2004).