

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL), is working to infuse evidence-based reading instruction into state professional development delivery systems and adult basic education (ABE) classrooms. Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) began as a pilot project designed to improve classroom instruction by using a toolkit that translates reading research into practice. The project engaged six states in designing and implementing systemic reform in evidence-based reading instruction (EBRI) for intermediate-level adult learners.

The STAR pilot revealed that, for EBRI to be successfully integrated into classroom practice, it must be supported by changes in organizational practices and policies. Study circles, cyber chats, and site visits were conducted throughout the pilot to assist states and local programs in making these systemic and organizational changes. STAR instructors and program administrators used each of these activities to learn about and apply the best available empirical research on adult reading instruction to their daily practice.

The following four topics were selected for the study circles and this series of issue briefs because they are critical to STAR implementation: professional development, diagnostic assessment, supports for classroom teachers, and managed enrollment. This paper highlights key findings from the research on professional development for adult educators. It also gives examples of how some states and local programs enhanced their approach to professional development as a result of STAR.

WHAT IS EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION (EBRI)?

Evidence-based reading instruction (EBRI) is based on practices that have been shown to be successful in improving reading achievement. Success can be demonstrated in different ways. One way is through research studies where data are collected according to a rigorous design. Another way is through consensus among expert practitioners who monitor outcomes as part of their practice. Regardless of how success is shown, the results on which success is established must be valid and reliable, and should come from a variety of sources.

In adult basic education, there is a report that summarizes the research studies on reading (Kruidenier, 2002) along with one that provides the consensus among experts about the implications of this research for instruction (McShane, 2005). From these reports, we can conclude that evidence-based reading instruction for adult learners includes the following practices:

- assessment of learners' strengths and needs on each component of reading;
- use of assessment results for instructional decision making, at the program level and in the classroom;
- systematic and explicit instruction, consisting of teacher explanation and modeling and student opportunities for guided practice and application;

- instruction that maximizes learners' active engagement;
- instructional activities and materials that learners recognize as relevant; and
- continuous monitoring by teachers and learners of instructional effectiveness.

OVERVIEW

In order to be able to deliver EBRI, teachers need to have a firm understanding of how adults learn to read and what research has found to be the most effective ways of supporting their literacy development. Professional development is especially important for adult education program personnel because their level of reading training and formal qualifications vary. This is due, in part, to the fact that certification requirements for adult basic education are not as well defined as they are in the K-12 system, and because there are relatively more volunteers and paraprofessionals delivering instruction than there are in K-12 settings (Kruidenier, 2002).

The STAR pilot revealed that even seasoned professionals with considerable education and teaching experience require professional development to implement EBRI. STAR teachers had an average of nine years of experience teaching adults, 97 percent held a Bachelor's degree or higher and 83 percent were certified in K-12 or adult education. Yet, despite these credentials, on average STAR teachers correctly answered only 58.9 percent of items on a pre-pilot assessment of their knowledge of EBRI. Survey results indicate that at the beginning of the STAR pilot, many teachers may not have been placing enough emphasis on alphabetic and fluency instruction.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?

Professional Development Can Facilitate the Implementation of EBRI

Professional development plays several critical roles in the implementation of EBRI. First, it can be used to expand teachers' and program administrators' understanding of research on reading development and the core components of effective reading instruction for adult learners. Second, professional development provides a means of training teachers in diagnostic assessment and instructional practices. Third, professional development builds program administrators' capacities to support EBRI through instructional leadership. Finally, professional development is essential in preparing teachers and program administrators to use student data for the purposes of placement, instructional planning, progress monitoring, and program evaluation (Bingman & Smith, 2006; Smith & Gillespie, in press).

Pilot Perspective: A Problem-Solving Approach to Professional Development

In cooperation with one of the regional adult education service centers in Illinois, a STAR reading trainer developed a 15-week classroom program for EBRI. The hypothetical roster of 15 students with various reading abilities was representative of the multi-level classes that many of today's adult education teachers face.

The purpose of this effort was to uncover the main challenges and problems that teachers might encounter in implementing EBRI in order to generate practical strategies and solutions to address them prior to implementing STAR approaches. In consultation with

participating STAR teachers, numerous ideas and approaches to these implementation issues (e.g., student absenteeism) have been identified and integrated into instructional resources, which are now available to all service centers in the state as one professional development tool to improve reading instruction.

Effective Professional Development Has Several Key Characteristics

Education researchers have only just begun to investigate the forms of professional development that have the greatest impact on program personnel's ability to implement EBRI. Nevertheless, a growing body of evidence indicates what characteristics professional development must possess in order to be effective in initiating and sustaining change in teacher practice.

To be effective, professional development in adult basic education should (Bingman & Smith, 2006; Smith & Gillespie, in press):

- Provide training and resources to instructors that allow them to access, understand, evaluate, and use research appropriately to influence their instructional practices;
- Be job-embedded and delivered on an on-going basis;
- Include a diverse array of activities, such as presentation of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and classroom application;
- Support teacher collaboration and collegiality; and
- Include face-to-face interaction between teachers and professional developers.

FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS: STAR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MAKES THE MOST OF WHAT WORKS

There are many different models of professional development that successfully integrate all, or several, of the elements described above. These models can vary in content, duration, intensity, and mode of delivery, thereby giving program administrators the opportunity to tailor professional development to their specific program needs. The STAR pilot included several of these professional development options to support teachers and state and local program administrators in implementing EBRI for intermediate-level learners.

- Multi-session STAR Institutes were used to provide systematic training in evidence-based instructional and diagnostic assessment strategies. In these Institutes, teachers and administrators learned about the research supporting these strategies and had ample opportunities to practice and reflect on their classroom application.
- STAR Study Circles provided teachers and program administrators with the opportunity to engage in asynchronous, on-line discussions about organizational and systemic reform with the assistance of a trained facilitator.
- STAR Cyber Chats and Conference Calls connected teachers and administrators with professional developers and reading researchers who responded to questions related to EBRI implementation.

Pilot Perspective: Coaching for EBRI

To support the STAR pilot in South Dakota, the State Director of Adult Education created three regional coaching circles – connected via teleconference - to share knowledge and practice on key issues related to EBRI. The coaching circles included all adult education program administrators and all participating STAR teachers across the state. Experienced facilitators were selected to guide the presentation of the material and corresponding discussion.

The purpose of the coaching circles was to increase the knowledge and skill-level of participants in EBRI so that, in turn, they could share this information with teachers at the local level. The South Dakota coaching circles focused on a number of topics, including diagnostic assessment, selection of appropriate materials, and how to identify effective practices.

PAVING THE WAY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO SUPPORT EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

The results of the STAR pilot strongly suggest that effective professional development for EBRI requires leadership and action at the state, local, and classroom levels. The pilot also yielded important lessons that may be valuable to policy makers, professional developers, and adult education providers who plan and participate in professional development for EBRI. The following guidelines are based on those lessons.

Guidelines for State Administrators and Policymakers

- Increase access to high-quality professional development in EBRI for both new and experienced teachers.
- Create financial incentives for teachers and program administrators to engage in ongoing professional development.
- Make systematic, ongoing professional development in EBRI a priority for adult educators in your state.

Guidelines for Local Program Administrators

- Provide access to professional development that enables teachers to understand, critique, and apply research findings to their classroom practice.
- Provide teacher release time, paid planning time, or stipends to encourage teachers to actively engage in on-going professional development.
- Expand access to on-going professional development that facilitates collaboration, follow-up, and the application of learning to practice.

Guidelines for Professional Developers

- Plan job-embedded professional development that facilitates collegiality and collaborative learning among participants.
- Ensure that professional development is individually customized and differentiated based on teacher knowledge and learning style, and include a diverse array of

activities, such as: presentation of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and classroom application.

- Structure professional development activities such that new information is presented systematically and with ample opportunity for guided and independent practice.

Guidelines for Teachers

- Request paid time to engage in on-going, job-embedded professional development activities.
- Ask your program administrator for access to EBRI training that embodies the key characteristics of effective professional development. (See page 3.)
- Seek out opportunities to collaborate with your colleagues in learning and implementing evidence-based instructional strategies, and request time to carry out these collaborations.

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