Too often, the summer learning imposed on students and teachers tends to be an abandonment of our goals, values, and beliefs in English language arts instruction. The authors propose authentic reading and writing experiences instead, meeting the learning needs of students and teachers simultaneously.

An Intervention Change-Up: Investing in Teacher Expertise to Transform Student Learning

The end of a two-week summer intervention camp found us collecting the remains of a reading and writing whirlwind and placing disregarded books and student notebooks into boxes. Three hundred teenagers attended a district summer “academy,” offered to help students pass their state-mandated reading and writing exams. High school students must pass two State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) English exams for graduation, and our attendees failed one or both. One student (call him Max) left his notebook behind. Early in camp, we asked a question about students’ experience in their yearlong English class, and we checked to see what he wrote.

“Why don’t teachers teach as well as they used to? Teachers haven’t been teaching so well because so many kids have failed the staar. Have most teachers stop trying?”

Curious, hoping for a transformed perspective, we flipped to the back of his notebook where a final entry read: “Let me tell you something. Screw off. Don’t sweat the small or big stuff. That’s all.”

So, progress?

Creating Great Teachers by Design

Educators regularly search for factors that affect learning. Researchers often conclude that the teacher’s expertise, credibility, and relationship with students matters most in how and what students learn (“Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: Research Review”). In Visible Learning for Literacy, Grades K–12: Implementing the Practices That Work Best to Accelerate Student Learning, Douglas Fisher et al. begin: “Every student deserves a great teacher, not by chance, but by design” (2). It was this design idea that led us to question the quality of the professional development offered to English teachers and, by extension, the quality of intervention opportunities offered for the most at-risk, and often, most reluctant student populations.

As colleagues with distinct roles—Rasmussen, classroom teacher and literacy consultant; and Eastman, high school English language arts and world languages coordinator—we previously collaborated to design instruction to enable and sustain teacher-leader growth and provide best-practice literacy learning experiences for Texas students. We wondered:

• Are we studying the research and evidence-based practices known to work in literacy learning and giving teachers time to practice them?

• Are we concerned we have masses of high school students completely disinterested in education, unable to see the relevance of subjects taught to their lives?

• Are we intentionally designing opportunities for teachers to enrich expertise with their craft or merely expecting compliance and results?

We resolved to effectively answer these questions within our spheres of influence: one district ELA team and one district’s at-risk student population.

The goal of this article is to share how we implemented a summer learning experience designed...
for the benefit of teachers and students simultaneously. We facilitated what John Hattie’s research recommends: “a community of teachers [that] work together to ask the questions, evaluate the impact, and decide on the optimal next steps; . . . a community of students who work together in the pursuit of progress,” in essence, “the single most critical lever for instructional excellence” (preface). While we work in different districts in Texas, the district referred to throughout is Eastman’s, Clear Creek ISD.

Seizing the Opportunity

With backgrounds rooted in the philosophies of National Writing Project and Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, we championed research-based best practices throughout the school year, inviting curriculum writers, literacy coaches, department leaders, and teachers to visit a highly functioning workshop classroom, attend conferences and in-district professional development offerings, and explore ways to engage students in authentic literacy practices that shift instruction to student-centered learning. Implementing a balanced literacy model in their secondary English classrooms proved overwhelming for some, and they needed more. We imagined an in-depth professional development experience where teachers could sit in the seats as learners, think and talk about the longstanding research supporting a reading and writing workshop model of instruction, and then pivot directly, applying this pedagogy with students over a sustained amount of time.

Fortunately, we had just the right conditions. Similar to many school districts, ours planned summer support for students who were unsuccessful on the English I and II standardized tests (STAAR). Students were invited, but not compelled, to attend a two-week “academy” for remedial instruction to prepare them for the summer exam administration. Our most at-risk students were subjected, at times in the past, to yet another summer remedial program of worksheets, test prep, and undiluted misery with no care for the insurmountable research indicating the error of this pedagogy. We upheld John T. Guthrie’s assertion that “Contrary to popular practice, test preparation activities are a terrible way to attempt to raise reading achievement scores” (qtd. in Allington and Gabriel 1), so we questioned why we would condone this erroneous practice, which would force us to perpetuate the well-documented summer slide by abandoning our district goals, values, and student-centered practices with regard to English language arts instruction. The unethical practice of summer remediation was enough for us to charge forward with changes. A change-up all students deserve. We aimed to grow teachers and students alongside each other: both groups growing as thinkers, learners, readers, and writers.

Investing in Teacher Expertise: Morning Institute

In our experience, working with and training numerous ELA teachers, we confront a puzzling paradox: some teachers identify as readers, but few identify as writers. Rarely both. How can English teachers share a passion for reading and authentically model the thinking of readers if they do not read beyond the texts they assign? How can they advocate for writing or model the thinking essential to crafting language into compelling stories, poems, and essays if they do not write themselves? Many teach books they love but fail to teach students to love books. Too many assign writing instead of teaching students to become writers.

In a summary of findings from National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future published in 1997, Linda Darling-Hammond explains:

Teacher expertise—what teachers know and can do—affects all the core tasks of teaching. Their skill assessing their students’ progress also depends on how deeply they understand learning, and how well they can understand students’ discussion and written work. No other intervention can make the difference that a knowledgeable, skillful teacher can make in the learning process. (8)

Twenty years later, it is still not just what teachers know but what they can do themselves that makes the greatest learning impact. Students’ learning experiences become more real and meaningful as teachers embed talk of their reading and writing lives throughout their instruction. Empathy for
An Intervention Change-Up: Investing in Teacher Expertise to Transform Student Learning

As the learner grows, student engagement in learning increases, credibility soars, and achievement scores increase, too.

With this in mind, we designed a Readers-Writers Workshop Institute for a core group of 35 middle school and high school teachers. For three hours every morning of our ten-day institute, we facilitated learning designed to help teachers understand the deep theoretical foundation of the workshop model, inundating them with journal articles and ideas stemming from the work and research of Donald Murray, Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, Katie Wood Ray, Penny Kittle, Linda Reif, Donalyn Miller, and our own workshop practices.

We taught, with fidelity to evidence-based workshop routines and practices, how we hoped teachers would, in turn, teach their students, namely: reading self-selected texts, modeling moves of real readers and writers with a focus on precise teaching points, talking about these moves with one another to expand understanding, using mentor texts to teach structures and author’s craft, providing specific and ongoing feedback, and granting time to think and read and write as a means of developing proficiency as readers and writers.

These morning sessions reminded teachers what literacy learning feels like and how language and metacognitive processes work, which are paramount to reading and writing well. Our instructional design allowed teachers to feel the incertitude their students feel as they contend with the nuances of language and blank-page paralysis. We gave them time to read books they chose to read, based on their interests and curiosity. Is it fluff or a waste of precious teaching time to provide space for independent, self-selected reading? It might be to a high school English teacher until she experiences the sophisticated power of the routine and recognizes how independent reading challenges and leverages the natural creativity of her students.

Similarly, giving time daily for low-stakes writing may sound impractical until the teacher becomes the writer and explores her thinking, discovers and clarifies ideas, and examines how this writing invites engagement, amplifies voices, and leads to deeper learning. We knew teachers would come to
trust our testaments on how these daily pleasurable and thought-provoking routines would work. To quote a wise nobleman, “A gram of experience is worth a ton of theory” (“Robert Gascoyne-Cecil”).

**Collaborating for High-Quality Instruction: Teacher Planning Sessions**

We gave teachers space to engage in honest discussions about their morning experiences, space to lean in, listen, and learn—requirements for sustained teacher-learning that leads to change. In our experience, too little of this happens in professional development. Professional learning, without opportunities to envision and implement, only strengthens the stranglehold of erroneous, drive-by professional learning. Hence, teachers, suffocating under the load of unfunded mandates, stop learning and use their unopened binders of strategies as desk decorations. In the article “Building a New Structure for School Leadership,” Richard F. Elmore defines “distributed leadership,” explaining:

> the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of these skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contribution to the collective result. (15)

Because Elmore’s definition guides our district ELA team and administrators (at all levels), our leaders were able to bolster our work by funding teacher institute participation and purchasing boxes of high-interest young adult literature. Subsequently, return on investment proved extraordinary.

Not every teacher enjoyed being in the seat of the learner. Some expressed a belief in the workshop routines or preferred we talked pedagogy, but then hoped we would move to planning time or hand them high-quality lesson plans for the afternoon student sessions. Which is exactly what we did not do. We knew we could not do the hard work for them. We needed our talented teachers to craft inquiry-based, student-centered lessons aligned to students’ needs. In an *Edweek* article titled “Encouraging Educator Courage,” Alfie Kohn writes, “It takes guts, not just talent, for a teacher to lead students beyond a predictable search for the right answer—and to let them play an active role in the quest for meaning that replaces it. That entails not only accepting some predictability and messiness but also giving up some control” (2). Thus is the workshop model.

Instead of passing out packets with ready-made lessons, during mornings we modeled lessons previously vetted in our classrooms and encouraged teachers to practice the routines with students in the afternoons. Some teachers practiced with the texts we used in the models; others found texts better suited to their students’ interests and abilities. We encouraged innovation, and we gave access to resources. Most importantly, we gave teachers time—time to take risks, collaborate, plan, reflect on all of it, and revise their own practices.

To plan their afternoon student lessons, teachers paired up and did the following:

- Searched the library shelves and shared favorite book titles
- Huddled around computer screens and search engines
- Jotted down observations, reactions, discoveries
- Compared what did and didn’t work from day to day
- Dug into specific students’ needs discovered in one-on-one conferences
- Shared across grade levels and various campuses
- Carefully chose texts to engage struggling or reluctant readers
- Bonded with and created personal learning networks with peers
- Conferred with us about their successes, struggles, questions, and ahas
- Found and accepted support from us as they imagined new ideas and teaching styles

By design, 15 teacher-partnerships crafted afternoon lesson plans incorporating their morning learning. Every afternoon they trusted in our evidence-based pedagogy, practicing the routines of workshop with seemingly uninterested students. Our entire instructional model depended on teacher-student relationships.
Transforming the Learning:
Student Afternoon Sessions

Research on teacher-student relationships concludes: “When teachers are dependable sources of emotional and instrumental support in difficult times, students feel connected to their teachers and safe at school” (Furrer et al. 105). We knew giving up two weeks of their summer for remediation to pass yet another state-mandated test meant a “difficult time” for students, so we laid out a target ratio of 15 students to 2 teachers, in an effort to develop relationships quickly.

Small class sizes would allow teachers to confer regularly and challenge students’ mindsets and attitudes about their reading and writing lives from the outset. We reasoned perhaps many of these students were not successful on standardized tests because they hadn’t experienced conferencing opportunities where teachers got to know them and attended to their specific needs.

On day one, teachers gifted every student a composition book, a space to explore their thinking and practice skills as they grew as readers and writers. They also fostered reading by introducing students to displays of carefully selected diverse books we provided, and students chose one they wanted to read.

Students attended three concurrent lesson cycles each afternoon. Since attendance was not compulsory, we worried students might default to the perennial 50 percent dropout rate during the second week, similar to previous years with traditional summer remediation. That didn’t happen. Energy remained high with attendance soaring throughout the ten days of instruction. Administrators noticed, and more than one questioned, “What’s different?” Students were driven by an intrinsic motivation to attend.

Our observations during instructional time included the following:

• Students reading choice books for significant amounts of time
• Teachers kneeling beside desks or pulling up chairs and conferring with readers and writers. Some moved into hallways for more extensive conversations.
• Students talking to their peers about their reading and their writing
• Teachers moving through classrooms, listening, advising, and supporting student learning

Furthermore, teachers used excerpts from the books students were reading to teach grammar and model close reading. They taught skills with short but complex texts. Students responded to videos, spoken word poems, images, and stories—all carefully planned so students would think, feel, and want to share. They did. With partners and in small groups, they read the thoughts from their notebooks, commenting, laughing, and learning that real writers take time, exert effort, and make revisions. Laughing and learning! Suddenly, once-reluctant writers tackled the page and played with language to craft meaning. Most took a piece of their writing through to publication, and teachers celebrated with gallery walks and pizza. Our teachers modeled all of it, helping their students grow in confidence as they began to identify as readers and writers, instead of being stuck in the vicious cycle of faulty test prep. There were no worksheets, no textbooks, no corrections on essays with bright red pen. There were 15 communities of children in classrooms willing to try—not all, but most—and amazed teachers getting excited about new possibilities for the coming school year.

Not every student enjoyed the experience. Some put forth little effort; others stopped coming. But the majority attended approximately 90 percent of the ten-day experience, and, while we do not have quantitative data to prove every student grew as a reader and writer, we do have qualitative data that show many did.

Learning from What Students Said

Robert Frost said, “I am not a teacher but an awakener.” We knew at the start of this journey that many of our students needed an awakening, a reminder that they could learn and be successful in school, and we knew our teachers could do it. To begin our reflection on the whole of this summer experiment, we needed a process to evaluate it. First, we turned to our students.

We conducted video interviews with 31 students, approximately 10 percent of those who participated. We asked simple questions:

• Before this experience, how did you feel about yourself as a reader and writer?
• How do you feel as a reader and writer now?
• What did you expect these two weeks to be like?
What was the experience actually like?
Do you feel confident about the upcoming test?
What is something you want your future English teacher to know?
What made a difference?

We culled honest and powerful responses from our qualitative research, which solidified our beliefs about what works and what needs to change in literacy instruction:

- Three-quarters of students did not identify as readers and writers prior to attending, and, in many cases, they had not read a single book in more than two years.
- All but one said in two weeks they had a renewed love for reading and now identified themselves as writers.
- One hundred percent said they expected the experience to be boring. One student stated he thought it would be “packet after packet—just like at school.”
- One hundred percent felt the experience was “fun,” “relevant,” or “interesting.” Several said they were sad it was over. Many told us they planned to come for the first few days and stop but continued to come because they enjoyed it. One student said she felt like she found her family and now had to return to her home campus next school year.
- All but one said they felt confident approaching the upcoming state exam.
- One hundred percent said the choice of what to read and what to write about mattered to their learning.
- One hundred percent said they felt their teachers cared about them. They all believed these relationships mattered the most.

Responses to the question about their future English teachers proved instructive: Students said they wanted teachers to know them, keep working with them and help find books when they cannot. They also asked for space to make mistakes, and for teachers to “not hammer the test before the test and after the test.”

We repeatedly studied the interviews and shared them with the teachers. The patterns testified to our instructional design: Students said that discovering a love for reading books, knowing they could write about the things they cared about, being able to talk so much with teachers and peers, and the feeling of community made the difference.

Learning from What Teachers Said

Next, we asked our teachers. Exhausted, mentally and physically, their reflections glowed with energy. When asked if the experience met her expectations, one teacher wrote: “I anticipated a bit of restriction disguised as creativity in an effort to enhance ‘collaboration,’ which would actually be regurgitation. With that being said, no it did not meet my expectations. The workshop grabbed my initial idea and forced a 360. I believe in the creativity R/W WS promotes for teachers and will undoubtedly inspire for students. Win, win!”

When asked what they would tell other teachers about their workshop experience, one teacher responded: “It’s worth it for you as a person to see what you are capable of as well as to see how you, the real live teacher with a voice, can truly inspire students. After all, that’s what we’re here for.”

Education leader Douglas B. Reeves writes that the notion of “buy-in” as we understand it is a “myth.” He challenges the belief that people buy into anything before trying it. No, buy-in occurs after we experience possibility. Behavior precedes belief (42). To quote one teacher: “You have to try workshop before you truly understand how powerful workshop can be.”

Teacher leaders must be willing to embrace the evidence-based instruction that works for today’s learners. Our students need the natural differentiation and engaging literacy instruction teachers and students experienced this summer. Farewell drive-by professional development, farewell test prep disguised as competent instructional practice. As C. S. Lewis said, “There are far better things ahead than any we leave behind.”

Final Thoughts

We began this article with our young friend Max and his question: “Have most teachers stopped trying?” We know teachers have not, yet we wonder: Are we trying the right things? Are we embracing the evidence-based practices students say work for them? Are we building communities of learners where teachers and students feel trusted, respected, and safe to play and practice and make mistakes?
Max wrote as his final notebook entry: “Let me tell you something. Screw off. Don’t sweat the small or big stuff. That’s all.”

Did two weeks of afternoon instruction with Max make a difference? Maybe. Maybe he does not feel as empowered and successful as we need him to, yet. But, at least he feels something—and he’s writing about it. Can you hear him advocating for himself as he wags his finger at the state-mandated test?

Some have asked questions about test scores, and we do have some hard data that suggest growth. Nevertheless, we believe there are better questions to ask. Too often, we value only quantitative measures. We ignore the qualitative measures that matter more because they tell us what works, what doesn’t, and often, what we can do to implement change. We just need the courage to do it.

Works Cited

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Children often struggle with the idea of getting started on their writing, whether it be in or outside of school, and need a structured way to “get going.” Writer’s notebooks allow children and teens to take in the world around them and document their daily lives and provide an easy, informal way to start thinking about new topics and ideas. These notebooks are a great place to store favorite quotes, random facts, dreams, and ideas for the future. So, why wait? Get writing! http://bit.ly/247zdjm