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Professional Development in the 21st Century (Part II) – School-Based Teacher Professional Learning Communities

by Juanita C. García, Ph.D.

There is a substantial amount of research that describes the transformation of schools in the 21st century to function as learning organizations where teachers, administrators, students and families are collectively united by a shared vision of student and teacher success (Sergionvanni, 2006). Today's teachers face unprecedented challenges that require collective thinking and problem solving informed by increased teacher learning and reflection opportunities. Rodríguez et al. (2011) define learning communities as forums to "enrich teaching and learning... by combining individual skills and strengths of each teacher into a collaborative effort with a shared vision of student success." Well thought-out and research-supported teaching provides experiences enriched by reflection and interaction with colleagues.

Effective schools and classrooms require teacher professionalism that embraces a deep understanding of student diversity, assets and needs along with new standards. They also must hold high expectations for teaching effectiveness and student learning. Successful schools promote teacher and student efficacy and inspire a commitment to life-long professional learning and a collective responsibility for improving student performance (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Schools that build teacher learning communities recognize the power of working together to achieve a common purpose. Thus, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture (DuFour, 2004). A main contribution of School-Based Teacher Learning Communities is that sustained change in day-to-day practice is inherently local (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Teachers need daily opportunities to contextualize learning by identifying and interpreting problems through observation, reflection and interaction with each other, thus fostering more effective and consistent classroom practices.

This article describes three interrelated functions (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) that are critical for contributing to a teacher's knowledge base, and it shares insights into how one successful school built a learning community with professionalism and the ability to act upon what is learned.

Improving Practice by Building and Managing Knowledge

Sparks (2005) states, "Well implemented professional learning communities are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers and school leaders."Through learning communities, successful teachers never stop learning, and they contribute to the welfare of their own classes and the school as a whole. A commitment by the school to provide its teachers with formal and informal opportunities of long-term professional development is an essential element to improving practice. Teachers in learning (cont. on Page 2) "Engaging students in learning and preparing them for success must go beyond emotional engagement to include intellectual engagement. A quality curriculum forms the backbone of such engagement."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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communities build a trusting relationship with other teachers and encourage collective reflection and feedback as best practices are modeled in the context of in-classroom experiences.

In one such school I have worked with, for example, the teachers and staff meet as a learning community after school or during their planning period. The principal has developed a collegial relationship with teachers, involving them in the decision making process related to specific needs and resources. Teachers collaboratively work together and reflect on their students and their own teaching practice. Study groups are formed, and guided reflection is an integral part of the learning community process. Teachers are encouraged to participate in study groups where they focus on most current research or specific chapters in a best practices book chosen by the staff. Learning community sessions usually focus on key questions, such as: What is contributing to success in the classroom? What are major issues that are having a negative impact on learning? What can we do collectively to address these problems or issues? What does new research say teachers need to know and be able to do to support student learning? What professional learning must the team engage in for student learning to occur?

Creating a Vision, Language and Standards for Practice

A vision brings people together to create change. The vision statement should be forward-thinking and ambitious so that it inspires, and concrete enough for educators to see the future and their respective roles in preparing students for today and tomorrow (García, 2012). A well-defined vision statement, shared language about practice, and goals provide the foundation for collective responsibility for student success. The teacher remains accountable for what happens in the classroom, while an established teacher learning community makes the school accountable for student learning.

My sample school is committed to the holistic growth of its students. Serving prekindergarten through fifth grade, it has long been ranked as one of the top elementary public schools in its school district. It has a multicultural, diverse enrollment with a majority of low-income students. The philosophy of the school focuses on the development of the child morally, intellectually, socially and physically. The school strives to meet individual needs while encouraging high expectations, independence, self-discipline, self-confidence and an awareness of self-worth. The aim is to offer a variety of experiences at every grade level to foster full development of student talents and interests. Educators at the school accept no excuses for failure. All staff value the heritage and the capacities that students bring to the academic experience. Teachers incorporate research-based higher-order thinking literacy strategies into daily classroom instruction for all students.

Sustaining a School Culture of High Expectations and Success

Profound change in a school's culture often is needed to create learning communities that are central to a school's academic success. Strong leadership, persistence and time are central to the change process in order to improve practice, which provides the path to creating a culture based on mutual trust and respect. The organizational culture of the school reflects a certain style and character. A good school fuses values and norms – the very soul of the organization – to provide a strong functioning culture that is aligned with a vision and purpose and that inspires a common direction (García, 2006). A cohesive teacher learning community safeguards against shifting priorities

by keeping the school focused on agreed upon expectations and practices toward a shared goal of student success. A continuous celebration of successes is needed in sustaining school culture. It requires a renewal of professional motivation and an affirmation of making a lasting difference in the lives of the students.

School-Based Teacher Learning Communities hold promise for our schools. They can become supportive and rich learning environments for teachers and students alike. It is our hope that in this 21st century more and more schools will turn to professional learning communities to address the deeply-rooted systemic problems that challenge education today.

IDRA's Professional Learning Community Model supports school success and informs educators with effective instruction for English language learners. It provides schools with the needed support and concrete assistance to function as

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Publication offices:

5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101 San Antonio, Texas 78228 210-444-1710; Fax 210-444-1714 www.idra.org | contact@idra.org

María Robledo Montecel, Ph. D. IDRA President and CEO Newsletter Executive Editor

Christie L. Goodman, APR IDRA Communication Manager Newsletter Production Editor

Sarah H. Aleman Secretary Newsletter Layout



Stellar Science Strategy – Building on English Learner Proficiency for Effective Science Instruction

by Kristin Grayson, M.Ed.

Over the past several years, IDRA has teamed with San Marcos CISD and Texas State University through a grant from the Texas Education Agency to improve science achievement for students in K-8 in that district. Through this action research approach, seven umbrella research-supported strategies have been identified to help English learners (ELs) achieve in the science classroom. This article describes one strategy: Building on EL proficiency for effective science instruction. It also decribes its research foundation and the techniques that teachers can use to implement this strategy in their classrooms.

It is essential for teachers to design and plan science instruction that is understandable for ELs, is connected to experiential knowledge, and will build their scientific knowledge and cognitive skills. In order to effectively teach ELs, teachers must know which students come from a language background other than English. And they must also know their levels of proficiency in the four language domains of English (listening, speaking, reading, writing).

Research shows that teachers must know and understand theories about bilingualism and second language development as well as goals for instructional processes in order to successfully help their students (Genesee, et al., 2005). According to Stephen Krashen (1985), students can be moved to the next level of proficiency (i+1) when given comprehensible input. This theory of comprehensible input implies that experience in learning the first language can be of extreme benefit in learning a second language and that providing multiple sensory experiences greatly enhances the acquisition of the second language.

Having access to student language proficiency data can help teachers decide which instructional strategies are appropriate as they differentiate instruction for the students in their classroom, such as initial use of students' first language, increased use of visuals, more detailed explanations enhanced by visuals, phasing in the various levels of student engagement, and mediated scaffolding and modifications of instruction to ensure student comprehension. This type of strategic support, enriched through scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1986), improves the quality and efficiency of the second language acquisition process.

Many times, student language proficiency data are not factored into instructional planning, creating a disconnect between instruction and students' assets and needs. Because instruction requires interaction with students, teachers' knowledge of the students' proficiency in the language of instruction is critical to designing comprehensible learning opportunities. A key professional development area that needs additional focus and attention is precisely in the use of student data for instructional decision making. Often, teachers need training on the implications of what the assessment data reveal. Assessment data can help a teacher understand what the student is capable of in English and what the next level of proficiency is. The teacher's challenge is to move the student to that next level of English while at the same time teaching the content of science appropriate for the student's age and grade level.

Once the teacher knows the formal assessment scores of language proficiency and has observed and informally assessed students during class, there are a number of techniques that teachers can use to build upon students' level of English. Five of these techniques are briefly summarized below.

Technique #1

Teachers should post, state and use key scientific academic vocabulary throughout each lesson. This vocabulary should be used in numerous authentic contexts during a variety of multisensory experiences. Teachers and students use the vocabulary during paired and small group interactions. Providing sentence stems, such as "plants and animals are different..." model different English grammatical structures for students to use.

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Because instruction requires interaction with students, teachers' knowledge of the students' proficiency in the language of instruction is critical to designing comprehensible learning opportunities.



(Stellar Science Strategy, continued from Page 3)

Technique #2

Teachers can use visuals, gestures and real objects for meaningfullearning and instruction. This might include drawings, drama, sequencing of events and processes using an interactive whiteboard, sentence strips, charts, graphs, generating of questions, poems, songs, rap, and even the creation of a help wanted ad or other types of written text. All of these types of activities can promote higher order thinking skills for ELs as they allow for the natural acquisition of scientific academic language. Teachers can assess the use of this technique by observing ELs engaged with other students in creative production and observing a high level of academic interaction between students.

Technique #3

Teachers can chunk instruction into dynamic and cognitively engaging activities. These activities might only last 20 to 30 minutes depending on the grade level of the students. The activities become particularly meaningful because brain research, as cited by Jensen (2003), tells us that primacy and recency, or first and last experiences, are most easily remembered. By having short instructional segments, teachers maximize learning through this chunking of activities. Chunking of language is also an important concept. We learn and recognize vocabulary in the context of meaning phrases, and therefore vocabulary should not be used as single words in isolation but as chunks or phrases.

Technique #4

Teachers can use knowledge organizers, such as foldable, advance and graphic organizers, to scaffold learning and promote metacognition. By using organizers that connect phrases of scientific language in meaningful ways, students are able to comprehend relationships, similarities and differences of concepts. When students generate their own organizers, especially those that are hands-on (such as through an interactive word wall) or technology based, it is especially meaningful because students interact with each other to generate the categories and relationships themselves, thus they interact with the academic content in a more complex fashion. This also gives students the ability to reflect on their own thinking (metacognition) when they interact with others and explain how they have generated the relationships between concepts. Organizers provide for visualization of complex thought and promote comprehension and memory.

Technique #5

When using academic language, teachers can help

promote language development through a focus on the language form, meaning and structures (Cummins, 1984). For example, form might include looking at words in a textbook and seeing the similarities between root words when they are used as verbs vs. nouns or adjectives. A focus on meaning in science might include the comparing of identical words used in different subject areas. One example might be comparing the use of a "chart" in science and math vs. "charting a path" as used in a social studies textbook. A focus on structure is an explicit look at how language phrases are organized grammatically. Narrative text, as in literature, is quite different than the complex sentence structures with prepositional phrases and passive voice used in many science textbooks. All of this intentional focus on language (form, meaning, structure) improves the students' acquisition of academic English in science thus also improving their comprehension and science achievement.

In conclusion, teachers need to purposefully review student data, including their English language proficiency scores, and find the points of intersection with language and science content to systematically and purposefully develop students' science and English achievement. Teachers do this when they adapt their instruction planning for increasing student achievement through the integration of their language and science goals. IDRA has produced a publication titled, *Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners – A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades*, that is available for schools preparing their teachers to provide successful science instruction to ELs and other learners whose language proficiency is not at the expected level.

Resources

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Kristin Grayson, M.Ed., is an education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

IDRA Semillitas Project Features Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Early Childhood Education

IDRA's Semillitas [seedlings] project, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is designed to respond to the need for educational equity with culturally and linguistically relevant early childhood materials for Latino, Native American and African American children and families in New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Providing support and voice for underserved families, the project is creating awareness of the needs and assets of young children. Through this project, IDRA is fostering collaborative leadership and action in advocating for access to excellent early childhood education as well as leading professional development for teachers, parents and caregivers. The project is involved in the production of IDRA's supplemental curriculum, Semillitas de aprendizaje, that is based on the art of storytelling and high quality professional development. The enchanting, colorful series of Big Book stories comes with a research-based teacher guide and *Cartitas*, which are bilingual letters home to help foster parent engagement and support home-school partnerships for student success. Additionally, a set of 15 little math books support numeracy, literacy, and cognitive and emotional development. IDRA will soon launch an online network for sharing information and resources for parents and practitioners. For more information about the Semillitas project and the Semillitas de aprendizajeTM early childhood supplemental curriculum, visit www.idra.org.

Two-Way Dual Language Immersion Programs

by Kristin Grayson, M.Ed.

Two major objectives guide the implementation of two-way dual language immersion programs, namely, (1) having a successful forum for addressing the language and academic needs of English learners, and (2) having an opportunity for other students to gain a world class education that instills the promise of a more interdependent world. For English learners (ELs) to have an equitable education, programs must be in place that value languages in addition to English as a means for learning the academic concepts required of successful students.

The promises are many: the academic gap can cease to exist and the United States can become the exemplar of multicultural societies working together toward a common goal. ELs will become students who achieve academic success, leaving high school with a diploma and college-ready. One program model that can help make this a reality for ELs is a two-way dual language immersion program.

A two-way dual language program is based on the premise that two groups of students (each with different home languages, in the United States one being English) learn together in a systematic way so that both groups become bilingual and biliterate in the two languages. Stephen Krashen (1999) and Jim Cummins (1996) are two language researchers who heavily influenced the growth of bilingual and dual language programs. Both have asserted and confirmed in their research that, given time, the stronger language-minority students become in their native language, the more proficient they will become in their new language. Collier & Thomas (2004), two other noted long-term researchers in this field, describe a two-way program as an enrichment model that is transformative for teachers, parents, administrators and communities.

There are benefits for both groups of language students in a two-way program. Language-minority students build their native language proficiency, which in the long run strengthens their acquisition of the majority language (English). English speakers develop proficiency in a new language, and their English skills are strengthened by this additional cognitive process. They maintain use of English in the majority culture, so their English skills do not diminish during the time they are immersed in the new language, and their English school achievement eventually outperforms that of native English speakers who have been schooled in English-only instruction.

Both of these outcomes are well documented by Collier & Thomas (2009) in their numerous longterm studies. While dual language enrichment models help two groups of students become biliterate, they also are seen as one of the best options for closing the achievement gap for English learners.

In a two-way dual language program, there are generally two accepted models for language use and language instruction. In a 90/10 model both groups (native English and ELs) receive 90 percent of their instruction in the minority language (such as Spanish) and 10 percent in English in Year 1 (kindergarten). The percentage of English is increased by 10 percent each year until students are receiving 50 percent of their instruction in each language. In a 50/50 model, the instructional day throughoutthe elementary years is always 50 percent English and 50 percent the minority language.

Careful consideration in curriculum planning is done to alternate the language of instruction of content areas so that students become equally versed in math, science and social studies in both languages. Language arts for each language also is taught while paying strict attention to the different methods used in teaching literacy in different languages.

For example, Spanish literacy has traditionally been based on a very systematic sequence of learning vowels, syllables, and then syllables combined into meaningful word units. English, on the other hand, is typically learned through a phonological approach where individual letters are sounded out to decode the given words. Other high frequency (*cont. on Page 6*) Given time, the stronger language-minority students become in their native language, the more proficient they will become in their new language.

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words(sightwords)are learned through recognition and memory. The vast number of linguistic origins of the English words leads to current debates over the best approach for learning to read and write in English.

Once the two-way dual language program model has been adopted along with teacher training, teachers and students need to have access to the standards and resources that will enable them to develop skills in both languages. The program must address language standards in both languages as well as content standards appropriate to each grade level.

Collier & Thomas (2004) describe the implementation of the dual language model with strict adherence to five key principles as essential for student achievement and the closing of the achievement gap for ELs. These key principles are:

- · focus on core academic curriculum,
- include high quality language arts instruction in both languages with use of thematic units,
- complete separation of the two languages without use of translation or repeated lessons,
- use a 90/10 or 50/50 model, and
- use interactive and collaborative teaching strategies.

The school administrator is a key person to ensuring the fidelity of the model implementation and program principles and for creating a partnership between the school, parents and community to strengthen success.

Finding quality dual language teachers has posed a challenge in many school districts. Teachers must demonstrate proficiency in the academic language of instruction in which they teach. Teachers also must be qualified to teach the grade level and content to the students with whom they are entrusted. All of these competencies must be in line with corresponding federal, state and local teacher standards.

Parents of dual language students should be educated in the process of dual language instruction. They must understand that language learning is a process and that the data show that results may take three to five years to reveal the full effect of the bilingual benefits. Parents can be involved at many levels from supporting their own children to being advocates in the community about the program and its accomplishments. Parent, school and community partnerships strengthen all schools, especially dual

Available from IDRA

Science Instructional Strategies for English Learners A Guide for Elementary and Secondary Grades

A practical resource with seven research-based strategies for instruction of English learners in science with teaching learning premises, research support, essential teacher competencies, and steps for strategy implementation – along with a matrix of techniques for implementation. Customized professional development also is available. (No ISBN; 20 Pages; English; 2012) \$20.00





Minority Women in Science ~ Forging the Way

This student workbook and teacher guide includes: profiles of seven minority women scientists who have surmounted barriers to forge

Student Workbook (ISBN: 1-878550-67-5; 2000; 32 pages; paperback) \$15.00 Teacher's Guide (ISBN: 1-878550-68-3; 2000; 94 pages; paperback) \$25.00

Helping Your Child Discover Science

This bilingual (English/Spanish) pamphlet includes a list of what children are learning in school in science for each grade level (kindergarten through eighth grade) and suggestions for activities to do at home to support their learning.



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language programs.

Dual language programs must be evaluated through an ongoing and systematic review process. Leadership is critical for ensuring that the program is well defined from the beginning and that there is schoolwide support and understanding of the program. This includes the secretarial, library, custodial, lunch-room and other school staff. Leadership needs to ensure that programmatic details are defined, well implemented and evaluated accordingly, both informally and formally at the appropriate times.

Dual language programs have been shown to be the most effective way to close the achievement gap between ELs and native English speakers. In a well implemented two-way dual language program this gap closure usually occurs by the fifth grade (Collier & Thomas 2009). Program administrators need to be aware that these benefits do take place but will not happen overnight.

Data collection should be conducted to document student progress in proficiency in both languages within the domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Academic achievement also must be assessed. Having a strong database illustrates stories of student success, provides feedback for improving

the dual language program implementation, and builds support and credibility to continue this unique and incredible opportunity for students to become fully bilingual and biliterate. As it has been said, "¡Dos vale más que uno! [Two is worth more than one!]."

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Kristin Grayson, M.Ed., is an education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org.



St. Mary's School of Law Honors IDRA Founder, Dr. José A. Cárdenas

The St. Mary's School of Law in March 2012 celebrated the life and work of the late José A. Cárdenas, Ed. D., with the Lifetime Achievement Award at its Chicano Civil Rights Banquet. The event honored Cárdenas, "whose groundbreaking educational theories were instrumental in many Chicano civil rights cases, argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, U.S. Courts of Appeal and District Courts throughout the Southwest, including the landmark case of Keyes vs. School District No. 1."

IDRA president, María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., stated: "He was, in life, and is, in death, a source of inspiration. He instilled in many–within our organization and outside of it – what has come to be called the IDRA spirit: the unshakable conviction that all children are valuable and important, and the deep commitment to work in every way possible to make equal educational opportunity a reality." The St. Mary's School of Law also presented IDRA with the Chicano Civil Rights Award.



[left to right] Mr. Peter Roos, META Inc.; Mr. Al Kauffman, St. Mary's School of Law; Ms. Dayla S. Pepi, St. Mary's School of Law; Ms. Josie Danini Cortez, IDRA; Dr. Albert Cortez, IDRA; Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA; Ms. Laura Tobin Cárdenas, wife of José Angel Cárdenas; Ms. Kristin Grayson, IDRA; Ms. Norma Cantu, University of Texas School of Law; Mr. Aurelio M. Montemayor, IDRA.

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learning organizations in the 21st century, united by a shared vision of student and teacher learning.

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Juanita C. Garcia, Ph.D., is an education associate in IDRA Field Services. Comments and questions may be directed to her via e-mail at comment@idra.org.

Palmview High School Leadership Day

Palmview High School in La Joya ISD, Texas, began implementing the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program during the 2011-12 school year with a group of seniors who needed support to continue their efforts to graduate. The district also wanted to expose them to college as a possibility for their futures. The students shown here are at the University of Texas at San Antonio where they spent a day touring the campus, observing a freshman orientation class, and participating in college and career awareness activities. Palmview High School students also will serve as cofacilitators and mentors for the leadership day planned for the eight La Joya ISD middle schools that are implementing the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. The middle school leadership



Palmview High School Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors with Mr. Hector Treviño (teacher coordinator), Dr. Encarnación Garza (UTSA professor), Dr. Juanita García (IDRA) and Dr. Nilka Avíles (IDRA)

day will be held in May 2012 at University of Texas at Pan American in Edinburg, Texas.



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"Segregated minority and high poverty schools are far more likely than high wealth schools to have less qualified teachers and are less likely to have academically rigorous and high quality curriculum."

– Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, IDRA President and CEO

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