Study of Early Literacy: A Network Model for Teacher Professional Development
by Melissa Brooks-Yip, Cathy Fleischer, and Naomi Norman

The Achievement Initiatives Team at Washtenaw Intermediate School District

The Achievement Initiatives Team, serving Washtenaw and Livingston County educators, focuses on creating and sustaining high quality learning environments. This is done through collaborative initiatives focusing on research-based, innovative, and inclusive models of teaching and learning. We support educators through professional development networks for instruction and assessment in literacy, science, and mathematics.

All of our educator networks focus on the development of instructional leaders, improvement of academic achievement, the needs of the whole child, inclusive learning environments, an asset (rather than deficit) based approach, and building systems that support struggling and disenfranchised students.

The Bigger Picture: Our Network Model for Teacher Professional Development

Instructional networks create space for reflective practice, peer learning and/or problem solving. Networks may organize around a subject, grade level, or other professional learning community. Through the relationships formed in teacher networks, power and energy for learning is generated (Wheatley, in Daly, 2010).

With this more holistic view of learning in mind, educators in our region who are participating in networks are redefining the nature of professional learning. Networks allow us to move away from only the reliance on outside experts or products and shift to high quality collaboration and the moving of effective teaching routines from one classroom, school and district to the next in a systematic way.

This new way of thinking about teacher professional learning is now a pervasive part of our work as an educational service agency and has required some substantial changes to our own thinking and regional professional development structures. We developed and shifted to an educator network model for professional learning rather than a workshop or seminar model popularly known as “sit and get.” The educator networks that we have co-constructed with local districts are organized around three key ideas:

1. Teacher Networks — Creating a constellation of learning communities, deeply interconnected, to share and explore the complexities of teaching in ways that reach all students. The network starts with a core group, which grows to connect with other teacher groups in school buildings and districts. The life cycle of a network is a multi-year approach, scaling up from a core group to a social network of relationships, or interconnected communities of practice. (see Lifecycle of a Network Graphic)

2. Teacher Empowerment — Empowering teachers to research, investigate, and define the instructional approach to which they will commit 5 years of effort in enacting. The teachers define this work in the research and development phase, and then try it out in the teacher action research phase. After looking at the learning and their research, teachers can make informed decisions about how to move forward.

3. Teacher Leadership — Developing a superordinate group of educators to direct and shape the course of the instructional work. The teacher network moves forward by creating a plan to roll out to the larger county group, all the while tracking feedback and adjusting the model by which they carry out.
Teacher networks are not only about teacher leadership. Rather they are about teacher stewardship. They are about teachers defining, enacting and being accountable for the instructional direction of not only their daily practice, but also the general direction of the profession.

**Why Networks?**

Meaningful improvement in teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge happens through education, not training. Through education, meaning a time and space for deep, collaborative learning over time, teachers are empowered with their own knowledge of content, best practices, and instructional decision-making skills. With confidence in their knowledge and pedagogy, teachers become adaptive to their students’ needs and are able to provide authentic learning experiences for their students, rather than following a script written by another outside their classroom. Knowing this, for our Study of Early Literacy (SOEL) network for preschool to grade three educators, we have chosen to develop an approach to teacher professional development that empowers and leverages teacher knowledge and everyday experience working with students. This approach aims to impact teacher learning across classrooms, schools and districts.

One of the most difficult challenges we face in education is combatting the notion that information can somehow be poured into minds, therefore making learning happen. This pervasive view, not only of how students learn, but of how adults learn, has led to many institutional and policy decisions that take a focus away from the more natural ways learning occurs; in terms of professional development, this leads to the mindset of focusing on teacher training rather than teacher education. What happens if, instead, we view learning as the act of “becoming” or growing into new understandings and new selves, a more holistic, social understanding. With this approach, our timescales shift and we don’t try to learn in a semester or during a weeklong workshop. Instead, we learn over the course of a year or three or a lifetime in an attempt to learn more complex, nuanced, and interdependent concepts, ideas and skills. Exceptions are welcomed, opportunities are provided to test a model, and differences among our students and colleagues are celebrated. We find joy in the process, not only in the achievement.

Improvement in anything means change, and change is a process, not an event. A process of change takes time, effort, and the building of individual and collective efficacy around learning.
Over the course of our first two years, the Study of Early Literacy (SOEL) group has built a community of learners to grow knowledge, apply it, and share for the purpose of improving instruction to meet the needs of all students.

**Study of Early Literacy (SOEL)- Why This and Why Now?**

Current studies and educational initiatives aimed at early childhood education all point toward an achievement gap in literacy, and low literacy levels predict high school drop-outs and incarceration rates. Recognizing this, SOEL began in an effort to prepare teachers to not only teach students to learn to read, but to read to learn from the start of their literacy journey (Reutzel, 2014). Good teachers, effective teachers, matter much more than particular curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, or “proven programs.” Investing in the development of effective teaching through professional development planning, is the most “research-based” strategy available (Allington, 2010). Research on raising student achievement consistently points to an effective teacher as the most crucial element in a student’s success (Rutman, 2012). For any professional development experience to be worth the very little time and money available in education today, teachers must be in the center of their own learning. Through intense professional reading and interactions with university professors invited to speak about their work in early literacy research, which culminate in teacher action research, SOEL is working toward the development of an instructional framework for early elementary instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Approach to Professional Development</th>
<th>Teacher Network Approach to Professional Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5 days</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert or administrator framed</td>
<td>Teacher framed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preconceived vision and direction</td>
<td>Co-constructed vision and direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context neutral</td>
<td>Context driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountable to PD developer and/or administrator</td>
<td>Accountable to students and teacher colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Community of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning as “getting”</td>
<td>Learning as “becoming”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher receiver of standardized test data</td>
<td>Teacher generator of formative data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research by experts given to teachers</td>
<td>Teachers conduct action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straightforward plan</td>
<td>Ambiguous and generative in nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage all teachers in the same way at the same time</td>
<td>Engage in different ways at different times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional teacher role as receiver of new information or skills</td>
<td>Teacher roles as learning, leader, research, developer, facilitator, skeptic, co-constructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher needs to be “fixed”</td>
<td>Teacher is a change agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficit model</td>
<td>Asset model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our first year of SOEL consisted of intense study of research anthologies of early literacy and drawing upon the knowledge of early literacy experts at top universities. As a result of that study, five “Big Learnings” emerged that captured what is crucially important in preschool and early elementary literacy education. See SOEL Big Learnings Graphic.

Prior Knowledge and Vocabulary
Intentional focus on building student’s background knowledge and vocabulary may be the single most important factor in their understanding in school. Some enter kindergarten with as much as 30 million word gap from their peers (Hart and Risley, 2003). Being aware of this gap, and knowing that the highest rate of vocabulary development occurs during the preschool years, we know that educators have time to intervene to help children make gains in vocabulary development that will later lead to improved reading comprehension (Neuman & Wright, 2013).

Integration
Literacy instruction is made more authentic, powerful, knowledge-enriching, and personally meaningful through integration with content-area instruction (Cervetti, 2009). Classrooms that are content centered (as opposed to focusing on rote activities only) have children learning about print through literacy practice with content specific texts. Through multidisciplinary projects or themes, teachers teach content through meaningful concepts, allowing children to build “knowledge networks” which will likely transfer to new areas of learning (Neuman, 2014). By integrating literacy into all subjects and exposing children to informational text, not only do they learn to read, they read to learn at a young age.

Inquiry and Collaboration
Students need opportunities to learn through authentic experiences, following their own inquiry questions in collaboration with others. Harvey and
Daniels say, “It’s about combining what we know about the research process, about thinking, and about people working together to create a structure that consistently supports kids to build knowledge that matters in their lives” (Harvey and Daniels, 2009). Our study in SOEL showed us that with a focus on comprehension, collaboration, and inquiry, teachers and students can realize the benefits of well structured, student-led, cross-curricular projects.

Assessment

If instruction is to be thoughtful and differentiated to meet the needs of all students, educators must be skilled in formative assessment as a means of determining learning progression and next steps in literacy instruction. Often, teachers are very familiar with summative assessments through high stakes standardized tests, but those are not commonly used to drive instruction. Formative assessments are commonly referred to as assessment for learning, in which the focus is on monitoring student response to and progress with instruction. Formative assessments provide immediate feedback to both the teacher and student regarding the learning process; therefore teachers know what next step to take for student learning. When formative assessment includes constructive feedback to students as well as self-reflection, observation, and journaling, it can result in significant learning gains (Johnson & Jenkins, 2009).

Moving Forward with Our Learning

With this first year of engaged learning under our belts, year two of SOEL is all about empowering and supporting educators to think about that learning in the context of their own classes—specifically by taking on the mantle of classroom action researcher. Participating teachers, administrators, and instructional leaders are spending the school year identifying their own research question, observing and collecting data, analyzing that data, reporting results, and determining next steps in instruction and teacher professional development based upon findings. Many educators have chosen to collaborate on their research questions, forming research groups which work together to collect and analyze data.

As we look to the future, the answers to these questions will lead us to next steps: determining how what we've learned might transfer to instructional practices and how we might share those practices with colleagues—in other words, finding ways to incorporate the five learnings into daily practice in the classroom across the county.

Why Teacher Research?

At its center, teacher research serves to remind teachers of the importance of their own eyes and ears in understanding the teaching and learning that goes on in their classrooms, as well as the power of their voices in helping others understand. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain that a teacher research stance makes “radically different assumptions about teachers,” one that includes seeing teachers as “deliberate intellectuals who constantly theorize practice as part of the practice itself.” (Inquiry as Stance, p. 2) Teacher researchers, in their view, work against the notion that data comes solely from standardized tests, that those who are best positioned to gather data are outsiders to the classroom community, and that the contextual complexity of individual classrooms doesn’t matter. Rather, teacher research distinguishes itself from what some call “Big R” research, instead aligning itself with a

SOEL has become a family of researchers who study the impact of instruction and professional development in our roles as teachers, coaches, and administrators.”
—PreK-3 educator in SOEL

“As SOEL members, we can celebrate our “ah-ha” moments, but also guide each other to purposely observe, reflect, and build our learning paths together.”
—PreK-3 educator in SOEL
social constructivist stance, one that relies on a few core assumptions about classroom inquiry:

- Important research arises from a teacher’s true wondering: the question that keeps nagging us in the middle of the night; the concern that drives us to keep thinking and re-thinking how we teach a particular lesson or assess a particular group of students; the puzzlement over why a strategy seems to work for some students and not others.

- Because the context of our classrooms is so different, our research must name, articulate, and celebrate that context instead of trying to reduce or ignore the variables that make classrooms so vibrant and interesting. Teacher research is thus steeped in thick descriptions and narratives of the classroom and is intended to gather data about a particular place and moment in time, rather than generalize to the rest of the world.

- This kind of case study approach to research relies on a culture of collaboration: collaboration with students, with other teachers, with administrators, with parents, and with potential readers of our studies. Together we make meaning and create understanding, as we place our classroom findings in conversation with the findings of others in other settings.

- This research is both ethical and action oriented: Teacher researchers are committed to finding the most successful ways to help students learn and so as they critically reflect on their findings, they are constantly rethinking their approaches to teaching and making appropriate change.

As we introduced the SOEL teachers to this new way of seeing their role in the classroom, a way that fell in line with the approach to professional development fostered in year 1 of the project, we spent several sessions thinking about what participating teachers really wanted to know and how they might transfer that wondering into a good question: one that was both researchable and doable in the time frame of a year’s study.

Teachers then began to situate their questions in the larger conversations they had been immersed in for the past year, those SOEL Big Learnings. As they thought back to the readings and conversations of year 1 and re-read that new knowledge through the lenses of their own classrooms, they chose questions that would animate their understanding by seeing how these learnings actually played out in real kids’ learning. Questions like these emerged:

- What happens to oral language when students are taught science vocabulary within a science class?
- What happens when math vocabulary is included on the word wall?
  o Does it increase use of math vocabulary?
  o Does it increase the understanding of math vocabulary?
- I wonder what happens when I introduce student-driven projects.

As our monthly meetings continue, teachers are introduced to one new research strategy each month: from keeping a classroom observation journal, to creating surveys and questionnaires, to collecting artifacts and student work, to conducting formal and informal interviews.

When teachers reconceptualize their own role, moving from classroom teacher to action researchers, they make changes: in their teaching, in their mindset, and in their position. At the most immediate level, they feel empowered to both institute and defend the revisions they make in their individual classrooms: Knowing that they have data to back up their claims, teacher researchers are able to confidently initiate particular teaching and learning practices and to share with others (colleagues, administrators, and parents) their reasons for doing so. When teacher researchers are able to state with the certainty, backed by their data, how and why a certain teaching strategy worked within their classroom, others tend to listen. In our work with multiple teacher research groups over the years, we have seen many teachers rise to leadership positions.
because of both their newfound knowledge and their confidence in sharing that knowledge with others.

Teacher researchers also learn that questioning their own practice is a necessary step in making change. It’s risky to admit to others that we don’t always have the answers, but adopting that stance of inquirer often encourages the kind of collaborative spirit that leads teachers to question, search for answers, and come to new conclusions as a team deeply invested in improving their teaching and their students’ learning.

**Tips to Starting Your Own Network for Teacher Professional Development**
(see Overview of a Network Graphic)

1. **Determine your inquiry question.** What is it that you want to learn about or what problem do you want to solve? After looking at county data, larger research on the achievement gap, and looming laws of third grade retention, SOEL was formed to answer the question, what early literacy instructional best practices help to produce literate, lifelong learners?

2. **Invite your core group of educators.** For SOEL, we invited two to three literacy leaders from each of the 14 districts we serve. Literacy leaders included classroom teachers, curriculum directors, literacy coaches, and building principals. This gave us a core group of just under 40 to start.

3. **Commit to focused time to study, investigate, research, and define the work.** SOEL spent the first year studying best instructional practices through intense book study of recent research in the area of preschool to grade three literacy as well as practitioner texts. We also spent time learning from professors of literacy from several universities in Michigan.

4. **Commit to focused time to allow teachers to perform teacher action research in their classrooms.** After our year of study, SOEL teachers enacted their own action research on one or more areas of the Big Learnings from year one. This not only refines teacher’s research skills, but teachers and students are engaged in the practices we read and learned about, and we can see how our learning plays out in teaching in the classroom.

5. **Define the instructional approach.** After our year of learning and our year of teacher research on the Big Learnings, SOEL must clearly define and communicate our instructional approach to our colleagues in the 14 districts. We must answer the question of best instructional practice looks like in preschool to grade three classrooms.

6. **Developing a superordinate group of educators to direct and shape the course of the instructional work.** SOEL will move forward by creating a plan to roll out to the larger county group, all the while tracking feedback and adjusting the model which we carry out. Our initial group of 40 will begin to train other teachers in the SOEL instructional approach.

**References**


Author Biographies

Melissa Brooks-Yip is the Coordinator of Instruction for Literacy at Washtenaw ISD and Livingston ESA. A former middle and high school teacher and literacy consultant, her main focus areas are K-12 literacy instruction, including disciplinary and digital literacy. She helps to create teacher leaders by supporting and forming networks for ongoing professional development aimed at improving literacy instruction to raise student achievement.

Cathy Fleischer is a professor at Eastern Michigan University where she teaches courses in English education and composition and co-directs the Eastern Michigan Writing Project (facilitating their Family Literacy Initiative and their teacher research group). A former high school teacher, she writes and presents frequently on the topics of teacher research, disciplinary literacies, and teacher advocacy. In addition, she is the imprint editor for the NCTE Principles in Practice books.

Naomi Norman is the Executive Director for Achievement Initiatives at Washtenaw ISD and Livingston ESA, regional service agencies in Southeastern Michigan. Her team supports professional learning for 14 school districts (serving 75,000 students) in the areas of teaching, school improvement, formative assessment, cultural proficiency, and data analysis. They focus on creating strong teacher-centered and teacher-led professional learning networks designed to improve learning and strengthen across-district collaboration and sharing of ideas and resources.