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Professional Development Initiatives that Bridge, Develop and Support Learning Environments for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School Communities in the US and Guatemala

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Professional Development Initiatives in Literacy for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School Communities in the US and Guatemala

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*Professional Development Initiatives in Literacy for Culturally and Linguistically
Diverse School Communities in the US and Guatemala*

Abstract

This paper describes action research initiated by members of the Alpha Upsilon Alpha Literacy Honor Society of the International Reading Association at Adelphi University. In an ongoing service project sponsored by the Nassau Reading Council (NRC) and sanctioned by the Minister of Education in Guatemala, the participants are teacher educators and teacher-researchers studying their own professional learning as they provide literacy pedagogical techniques for colleagues in the US, as well as observing the effects of the NRC professional development initiative in literacy for Guatemalan teachers. Educational insights will resonate in improved literacy practices in the US and Guatemala.

Professional Development Initiatives in Literacy for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School Communities in the US and Guatemala

This paper describes a collaborative project that brings together teachers and teacher educators in an international professional development effort in literacy education among teachers on Long Island, New York City and in Guatemala. This project, *Professional Development Initiatives in Literacy for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School Communities in the US and Guatemala*, integrates innovative literacy professional development models that include expert demonstrations of literacy techniques, presentations and workshops, study groups, collaborative and peer team investigations, and participatory action research. Participants are able to engage in professional development opportunities and exchange educational practices, via a combination of on-site and distance contacts. As collegial partners, they observe, experience, inquire, reflect, and respond to each other, as well as learn new ideas (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2008; Boyer, 1990). Reflective activities facilitate the process of meaningful transformation of their educational practices (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). The NRC international professional development project has the following goals:

- To incorporate professional development methodologies that support lifelong learning by the participating teachers;
- To support inter-personal and cross-cultural opportunities that foster positive dispositions towards honoring and respecting the rights of others;
- To cultivate the development of supportive and safe communities, invoke consciousness of others, and develop social justice orientations;
- To promote international student achievement in literacy across the curriculum.

The importance and positive consequences for students when teachers participate in effective professional development have been validated by the research literature (National Reading Panel, 2000; Learning First Alliance, 2000). Professional development is pivotal to school reform efforts and to the implementation of academic standards that will raise the effectiveness of cross-curricular instruction in literacy. Professional development may be offered in the form of workshops, in-classroom coaching, and individualized mentoring, supporting reflective activities to help teachers understand underlying theories of literacy and content area academic development and acquire expertise in using best practice methods (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998).

Balanced literacy approaches are now considered “best practices” in various instructional programs (Adams, 1990; Allington, 1983; Graves, 1991; Holdaway, 1979; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Successful comprehension requires explicit use of literacy strategies that enable readers to extract meaning (Harvey, 1998; Hoyt, 1999). An essential technique that teachers exercise to build student schemata and connect existing knowledge to new content, is the selection of passages that enable students to practice strategy use in a wide variety of rich literature (Fountas, 2006; Kiefer, Hepler & Hickman, 2007; Lesesne, 2003; Lipson & Wixson, 1986). Comprehension instruction helps readers make three types of connections: 1) Text to Self personal connections between texts and their own lives, 2) Text to Text connections that compare texts, their meanings, and author’s craft or structure, 3) and Text to World connections, which build on the reader’s background knowledge of topics (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). These connections develop higher order thinking skills that include inference, summarization, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Practice in the use of such

literacy critical thinking strategies provide opportunities for students to engage in higher-level critical thinking and become critically-literate readers and writers (Pearson, Roehler, Dole & Duffy, 1990).

Cultural and linguistic diversity makes it imperative that professional development address five criteria described by Villegas (1991):

- School personnel should have an attitude of respect for cultural differences and a belief that all students are capable of learning, and a sense of efficacy;
- Administrators and teachers must know the cultural resources students bring to school;
- An enriched curriculum should be implemented;
- Bridges must be built between instructional content, materials and methods, and the cultural backgrounds of students;
- When students are evaluated their cultural backgrounds must be considered.

As the US-Guatemalan initiative in literacy professional development takes into account the above caveats, the following research goals are posed.

Research Goals

This action research study is designed to gather and analyze data to assess the assertion that both US and Guatemalan teachers will improve their literacy practices when they engage in collaborative professional development. The goals for this study are:

- to investigate the methods used for international professional development approaches in literacy and content area studies;
- to engage in self-study of professional development experiences;

- to become aware of the literature and variety of instructional materials available that respond to the criteria of diversity and social justice guiding the NRC's international literacy project goals.

Methodology

As action research, this study involves K-6 public elementary schools in Queens, New York and in Guatemala City, Guatemala. Qualitative and quantitative data collection includes participant interviews, surveys, reflective commentaries and observational data. Part of an ongoing effort of the *Nassau Reading Council*, (NRC) an affiliate of the *International Reading Association (IRA)*, this project has been sanctioned by the Minister of Education in Guatemala, within the IRA's mission to engage in literacy professional development initiatives in developing countries. The *Beta Theta Chapter of Alpha Upsilon Alpha (AUA)* Honor Society at Adelphi University, on becoming aware of the NRC project, helped to raise funds for teachers in Guatemala to attend professional development conferences and workshops in the Normales (teacher training institutions), and to provide for children's books and professional resources and materials. In addition, the AUA faculty advisor and two members of the AUA leadership board plan to participate in the next international Guatemalan literacy professional development conference in 2009, at which time they intend to gather data as well as to provide professional development workshops for attendees. In the professional development sessions, participants will explore the concept of learning styles, internalize strategies, assess and set goals for themselves, confront their beliefs about their own learning and student learning. Participants will also experience valued opportunities to reflect upon

how and to what degree their personal attitudes, behaviors and perceptions impact upon the total teaching and learning experience.

Implications

Similar to the partnership between the National Urban Alliance and the International Reading Association, wherein professional development protocols and practices engage teachers in “reflective analyses of their practice and to introduce research-based, classroom-tested, culturally relevant strategies that develop and extend students’ thinking and literacy skills” (Cooper, 2004, p. 17), this action research study serves in both a service context and as a knowledge gathering opportunity for teacher-researchers interested in cross cultural and international literacy efforts. Educational insights gained from the experiences with US and Guatemalan teachers will resonate in the improvement of literacy practices and student achievement.

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