



How High-Quality Teacher Development Can Improve Educational Outcomes for Students

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In 2017, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 64% of U.S. students were unequipped to meet grade-level demands in reading. This finding raises important questions about the ability of adolescents to learn from academic texts and apply what they read to their lives – renewing concerns that have existed for over 40 years. Previous efforts to improve adolescent reading abilities have proven insufficient because they have failed to provide teachers with adequate training. Such professional preparation is essential to help teachers understand how students learn to read and develop effective strategies for reading instruction. Without this training, otherwise high-quality teachers will remain ill-equipped to meet the needs of their students, especially those with reading difficulties.

The role of teachers in developing reading skills, not just their role in communicating content, must be appreciated. School officials and policymakers alike must ensure that teachers receive high-quality professional training to develop their instructional practices.

Effective Professional Learning

Professional training for teachers has long been limited to single workshops, but such isolated experiences do little to improve teacher skills and have meager impacts on student achievement. High-quality professional learning can take many forms but must fulfill several criteria:

- **Provide extended engagement with the content being taught.** Teachers need to be able to work with new ideas over time. They need repeated exposure to the content and the ability to sharpen instructional practices over the course of several months or more.
- **Provide systematic opportunities for teachers to implement new instructional practices.** Although teachers need to apply the concepts they are learning, they should have flexibility to consider when and how to do so. And teachers should learn within a professional network where they can turn to peers for feedback as they experiment with new techniques.
- **Support teachers through ongoing mentoring.** Mentors should be available, experts in the area who can observe teachers, and coach them on new instructional practices.
- **Identify topics for development based on community needs.** The specific learning needs of teachers, and the needs of their students, will vary across districts and schools. Teachers should have a say in the topics on which they receive development assistance.
- **Evaluate teacher learning.** Teacher learning needs to be documented, by measuring what teachers understood before they began professional learning experienced and tracking how their understandings grow in the process and register at the end. Documentation about how and when teachers apply new techniques the ideas also needs to be gathered.

- **Evaluate student learning.** Students should be assessed in ways that align with the professional development experiences of their teachers. But assessments should be kept to a minimum and spaced out, because students need extended time to learn new skills and strategies and integrate them into their regular reading practices.

How Professional Development for Teachers Can Improve Student Reading

Well prepared teachers can help students navigate discipline-specific texts and learn how to apply various skills and strategies to analyze, evaluate, and apply information. Adolescents who frequently read and discuss discipline-specific texts demonstrate increased comprehension abilities – especially capacities to intuit the social, historical, and political contexts that influence and shape texts. In addition, they demonstrate improved vocabularies, knowledge about varied, discipline-specific information, and improved abilities to recognize when they do not understand a subject and how to improve their comprehension. All of these are skills that serve students beyond as well as within the classroom. To gain this full range of abilities, adolescent students must also be given the space to regularly read and discuss texts across all academic disciplines. Students need to learn what it means to read effectively within each discipline they encounter.

Steps to Further High-Quality Professional Learning

In order to improve teacher skills and student outcomes districts and schools must recognize the important role of middle and high school teachers in developing adolescents' reading abilities. There are several ways to effectively support teachers' efforts in this critical realm.

- **Teachers must have the necessary time and resources to apply the instructional practices they have learned.** They should have the authority to tailor class periods to their teaching needs and contribute to choices about how the school day is structured.
- **Teachers must have access to materials they need to support adolescent reading achievement.** Access to the right texts is especially important, and teachers must have a say in decisions about text adoptions.
- **Adequate time must be allowed for teachers and students to improve.** It takes time to apply new teaching strategies, and also for students to learn how to use them. Assessments should be done at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to document reading improvements, and teachers should be able to design and implement interim assessments throughout the year to assess and adjust their strategies.
- **Opportunities for professional learning must become more robust and accessible.** Districts need to move beyond the one-day workshop into a more integrative and ongoing model of professional learning. Educators need to consider how to best structure professional learning to give teachers choices about how they learn new approaches and provide mentors along the way.

Many of these initiatives will require both new thinking and additional resources from school administrators, community organizations, and policymakers. But it is worth meeting the teacher development challenge, because unless appropriate changes are made, adolescents in the United States will remain underserved and continue to struggle to develop the reading and comprehension skills they need to excel academically – and in later life.

Read more in Leigh A. Hall, “Creating Digital, Interactive Professional Learning Experience for Educators” (Paper presented at the Connected Learning Summit Cambridge, MA, 2018).