

Education & Learning Program: PreK–3 Teacher Instructional Practices

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A key component of the McKnight Foundation’s Education and Learning (E&L) Program is supporting PreK–3 teachers to improve their literacy instruction in order to develop proficient readers. This brief describes the ways in which teachers in the E&L schools changed their instructional practices in the 2013–14 school year, facilitators and challenges to changes in practices, and recommendations for the future.

The findings are from 91 interviews conducted in fall 2013 and spring 2014 with district and school administrators, PreK–3 teachers (including dual language and English language teachers), and literacy coaches in the three districts and five schools with an E&L Program implementation grant¹ and with six Urban Education Institute (UEI) staff responsible for teacher training and leadership coaching. The perspectives of the interviewees may not represent the full population of the staff in these schools or at UEI.

Key Practices and Levers for Change

The E&L Program aims to develop teacher knowledge and practices in several key areas. It seeks to increase teacher knowledge about literacy development, promote the use of common language about literacy to support alignment and collaboration across grades, enhance teacher use of data to inform instruction, advance the use of evidence-based instructional strategies, and boost teacher expectations for student learning. The levers the E&L Program has used to promote changes in practice include the STEP² literacy assessment and resulting diagnostic data (and special analysis of assessment data used in SPPS), professional development from UEI and school literacy coaches, literacy-focused professional learning communities (PLCs), and coaching for school leaders on how to support changes in teachers’ practice.

¹ E&L Program schools with implementation grants are Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS); Wellstone Elementary School and Saint Paul Music Academy, Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS); Jefferson Community School and Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS).

² STEP—the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress—is a developmental literacy assessment for grades PreK–3.

Changes in Teacher Practice

School and UEI staff described changes to teachers’ practice in the areas of overall understanding of developmentally appropriate literacy instruction, data-based decisionmaking, expectations for student learning, and specific instructional strategies.

Teachers developed a shared understanding of literacy development and instructional practices.

Across the E&L schools, teachers reported that the E&L Program gave them a common language for and understanding of literacy development and good literacy practice. A BCCS teacher described how STEP has given teachers a common understanding and language that promotes cross-teacher discussions of students’ literacy development:

The best lever for our school has been the implementation of the STEP assessment. We truly had as a building no understanding of how readers develop on a continuum. The STEP assessment has created a common language around milestones for readers within the component that readers need to demonstrate skill.

Both teachers and coaches in MPS said STEP has increased teachers’ understanding of the progression of literacy skills and how to identify gaps in those skills. A teacher said, “I think as a whole...we’ve definitely grown in learning more about the developmental trajectory of literacy and reading.”

Teachers improved their use of data to inform and individualize instruction. With the availability of detailed assessment data and professional development on how to use those data to inform instruction, teachers reported becoming more playful about learning goals for their lessons and narrowing the focus of lessons to the skills they identified in the data as needing attention. Teachers also reported becoming more adept at using data to individualize lessons for guided reading groups and small group instruction. Teachers in MPS and BCCS reported using STEP data to inform text selection and guide the questions they asked students about the text. A MPS teacher described the process of using data to

determine how to support guided reading groups:

The guided reading groups are more focused now in terms of what the child needs in order to move. Some students need comprehension so I put them in a group for comprehension. Others need word solving. And I'm seeing gains and that's been exciting.

According to one SPPS administrator, UEI professional development was a “wake-up call” for some teachers, helping them to understand the importance of focusing their instruction on students’ needs and not just the district curriculum.

Teachers had higher expectations for students and offered more rigorous instruction. Across all districts, administrators, coaches, and teachers reported that teachers raised their expectations for students. In BCCS and SPPS, the E&L Program changed teacher expectations for PreK students in particular. A BCCS district administrator said, “We never thought preschoolers were capable of doing what they’re doing now. If someone 5 years ago would have said you’re going to do guided reading with four year olds, I would have said they were crazy.” Similarly, in SPPS PreK teachers increased expectations for oral fluency and required students to form full sentences more frequently instead of giving short one-word answers. Teachers in other grades also mentioned developing an increased awareness of how much their students could actually do and that this knowledge increased their expectations for students.

As a result of the higher expectations, teachers said they ask students to engage in more rigorous work. MPS teachers described focusing more on higher level questioning and critical thinking. One teacher explained that she made more effort to get the students “to understand that reading at this level, once they’re in third grade, is about thinking. And not just about looking at words.”

Teachers described using new instructional practices to promote specific skills. When asked how their practice changed, teachers provided specific examples of strategies learned through the E&L professional development. Strategies included use of turn and talk, in which students reflect, evaluate, and share ideas with a partner, and sentence starters and sentence stems to foster oral language development; use of inference and critical thinking questions and visualization tools (e.g., anchor charts)

to promote comprehension; focus on word solving skills to improve vocabulary; and use of dots under words to support reading. A SPPS PreK teacher described strategies UEI coaches encouraged her to use with her ELL students:

...Instead of emphasizing certain words, have them repeat back to you a full sentence when we're doing journals. Instead of saying "Flower" say, "You are making a flower, can you say 'I am making a flower?'" It has made such a difference on their language skills. ... This year, we've talked a lot about vocabulary and putting it in context...Taking the time to get them to recognize not only the vocabulary but also the structure of conversations.

Variation in Changes to Teachers' Practice

While many teachers reported changing their practice because of the E&L Program, the extent of change varied widely across teachers. Challenges with the implementation of E&L Program change levers and situational factors sometimes inhibited change in teachers’ practices. In addition, district and coaching staff found that teachers who did not buy in to the E&L Program tended to not change their practices.

The availability of diagnostic data was critical for restructuring teachers’ practices but not all teachers had the same access to this information. For many teachers, just having data to diagnose student needs and skills gaps made the biggest difference in their teaching. BCCS and MPS teachers had STEP data, and SPPS teachers received a special analysis conducted by UEI of their Mondo and Concepts About Print assessment data. While STEP data tended to provide more diagnostic information than Mondo data, both sets of data informed teacher practice. However, not all teachers had access to the same kind of data. For example, dual immersion teachers in SPPS did not have access to the same assessments or their results as English instruction teachers. Similarly, English Learner teachers in BCCS did not have direct access to STEP results.

UEI professional development provided most teachers with support for using data to inform instruction and new instructional strategies, but some teachers felt it did not meet their particular needs for changing their instruction. Teachers reported that the professional development helped them learn how to use STEP and Mondo data to identify gaps in students’ learning and focus their

instruction. They reported that it also provided teachers with specific strategies they could try in their classrooms. However, several MPS teachers did not think the professional development impacted their teaching because the content was not differentiated for their needs. For example, teachers wanted professional development on text selection to be tailored to their grade level. Similarly, Spanish-language teachers in MPS thought the professional development was less applicable to them:

We have different needs and then sometimes it's English versus Spanish. [UEI trainers] were talking a lot this year about, if you go at this place on their website you can find these strategies for this STEP and some things just don't work in Spanish that way. There's not a resource for the Spanish teachers, so I tuned out or looked at other things that felt more relevant.

Without sustained training, some teachers reported not being able to maintain or further improve changes in their practice. Teachers reported that they were able to continue to improve their practices over time when they received ongoing support. However, instructional change stalled when support waned. In MPS, a few teachers reported that in the second year of the E&L program they received less support so that trainers could focus on new teachers. As one teacher reported, “I haven’t found it as helpful.... Teachers who are new at STEP versus teachers who are in their second year of it, we have different needs... We’re doing some of the same stuff we did last year.” In SPPS, the training emphasis moved from PreK and kindergarten teachers to first grade teachers because of the staged nature of how grades were brought into the E&L Program work.

In BCCS, coaching and administrative staff reported needing to “reboot” their understanding of the criteria for each STEP level after noticing some students moved backward when the next year’s teacher scored STEP differently and determined a lower level of proficiency. BCCS staff at all levels noted the importance of continuing to work on refining the new teaching strategies they learned, such as guided reading groups, learning centers, and whole group instruction, so that they could continue to improve the quality of previously learned strategies while learning new strategies around phonics and writing instruction.

Literacy coaches supported changes in teachers’ practice when they worked with teachers on a consistent basis and teachers were expected to work with their coaches, but often coaches did not have such access to teachers. Staff at all levels noted that coaches had a greater impact when they met regularly with teachers and the teachers were open to feedback. However, expectations around whether teachers must work individually with a coach impacted coaches’ access to teachers. District and school administrators and coaches reported that teachers who were not identified for coaching support or who refused coaching help were less likely to change their practice. In SPPS, the focus of coaching moved from PreK and kindergarten in 2012–13 to first grade in 2013–14. PreK and kindergarten teachers reported missing that support. In some schools, teachers could choose whether to work with a coach, and many teachers opted not to engage with their coaches. Teachers in BCCS mentioned multiple reasons for not working with their coaches, including the feeling that the coaches did not have time for them, the coaches not sticking to the allowable minute allocation when modeling lessons, and the amount of time it took to be observed by a coach because of pre- and post-conferences. A coach in one of the MPS schools explained her understanding of why teachers did not welcome the coaches in their classrooms:

I’d say maybe 75% of them value us. It’s for various reasons that they don’t want to [work with us], like they are stuck in, ‘this is the way I’ve always done it and you can’t make me change.’ Or they’re afraid of having another person in the room.

In addition to individual coaching, literacy coaches in BCCS served as facilitators of PLCs, which increased the amount of time teachers spent discussing ways to provide instruction that responded to assessment data. However, mid-year in 2013–14, BCCS moved back to a teacher-led PLC driven by teacher needs, resulting in less time being spent on analyzing literacy data and reviewing literacy practices during PLC meetings. In SPPS, kindergarten teachers did not have PLCs in 2013–14 and literacy coaches were not always available for PLCs in the higher grades because they split their time with other schools. Therefore, PLCs were not a venue for coaching teachers in SPPS.

Principals at the E&L schools varied in their involvement and roles in promoting change in teacher practice. Some school leaders held teachers accountable for instructional change while others just encouraged it. The principals at both MPS schools, with support from UEI leadership coaches, identified key instructional priorities for the school year that were clearly communicated to teachers and part of their regular classroom observation protocols and feedback. One of the SPPS principals also noted monitoring teacher practice and holding teachers accountable for making instructional changes with training from the UEI leadership coach.

In contrast, school leadership in BCCS promoted changes in teacher practice through encouragement at staff meetings and through the availability of professional development tools, resources, and coaches. According to a few BCCS staff members, implementation of new practices was not consistent because the school leaders did not monitor teachers. One BCCS staff member felt this approach resulted in an uneven uptake of the new practices across the school, “Because it was choice, I would say we have some pockets of huge growth in teacher understanding and practice.”

Despite school leaders’ involvement, several teachers did not buy into some of the instructional changes promoted through the E&L Program.

Teacher buy-in about literacy approaches and the appropriateness of STEP influenced whether teachers changed their practices. Teachers who believed in the literacy practices promoted by the E&L Program and who felt sufficiently prepared were more likely to engage in new instructional practices. However, not all teachers were convinced the new practices being introduced were better than their current practices or felt they had the resources needed to adopt new practices. When BCCS teachers were told they had to adopt a balanced literacy framework and address all the components of that framework, a large minority of the teachers felt that they could not implement the new framework because they lacked a scope and sequence and sufficient training to make such a transition. This has created a set of teachers on the staff who are less open to changing their practices. One MPS district respondent described levels of change in teachers as green, yellow, and red, where the green teachers are completely onboard and the red teachers have not changed their practice and are “sitting there waiting for the 3 years to run out.” In SPPS, teacher buy-in

was more uniform; however, fewer teachers were involved and the practices being changed were less disruptive.

Recommendations

Some important teacher practices improved because of supports and resources from the E&L Program. However, further work by UEI, the districts, and the schools is needed to refine and spread these practices. Teachers and other school staff identified actions to support their continued improvement in literacy instruction practices.

- UEI and coaches need to continue to provide training to staff for multiple years tailored to their stage of implementation so they can review and refine new strategies.
- Schools need to use a literacy assessment, such as STEP, that provides sufficient information to make good instructional decisions.
- Principals can promote the greater reach of coaches by requiring all PreK–3 teachers to work individually with coaches on certain practices.
- Schools can designate some PLC meetings for discussions of literacy data and strategies led by coaches and other PLC meetings for teachers to engage in their own planning.
- Schools need more bilingual materials and resources to support Spanish instruction based on STEP results.
- School leaders can continue to work with their staff on monitoring and supporting the use of new instructional practices.

The E&L Program will continue to help teachers refine and expand their teaching practices and to sustain these improvements. It will be important to keep monitoring the efforts to improve practice and their impact on student learning.