DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 366   CS 014 319

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TITLE   Applying Constructivist Principles in Reading Recovery
                 Professional Development Classes: Insights from Seven
                 Hundred Teacher Leaders.
INSTITUTION   Reading Recovery Council of North America, Columbus, OH.
PUB DATE   1996-00-00
NOTE   5p.
AVAILABLE FROM   Reading Recovery Council of North America, Inc., Suite 100,
                 1929 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1069. Tel: 614-292-7111.
                 Web site: http://www.readingrecovery.org.
PUB TYPE   Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT   Network News; p6-8 Win 1996
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Constructivism (Learning); Higher Education; Instructional
                 Effectiveness; *Professional Development; Teacher Education;
                 *Teacher Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS   *Reading Recovery Projects

ABSTRACT
                 Arguing that the task of the teacher leader is not to
dispense knowledge but rather to provide opportunities for teachers to
construct it, this article reports on activities in which teacher leaders
engaged during a session on the constructivist approach during the 1996
Teacher Leader Institute. It outlines five principles of learning that
provided a framework for the session and discusses how participants
constructed an understanding of leadership. The article then lists
characteristics of positive demonstration lessons identified by participating
teacher leaders. Finally, it discusses constructing a plan of action and
presents a 10-point plan of action developed by small groups of teacher
leaders. (SR)

Applying Constructivist Principles in Reading Recovery
Professional Development Classes: Insights from
Seven Hundred Teacher Leaders.

by Carol Lyons

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Applying Constructivist Principles in Reading Recovery Professional Development Classes: Insights from Seven Hundred Teacher Leaders

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Teacher leaders know that in order to assist RR teachers in becoming more effective, they must help teachers develop conceptual and practical knowledge about how children become literate. The most efficient and effective way to accomplish this goal is to guide teachers' conversations "on-the-run" while they observe and analyze teacher/student interactions in weekly demonstration lessons. This is true in part because language is the most powerful tool available to the teacher leader; however, it does not transfer meaning or concepts. Language enables the teacher leader to orient the teachers' conceptual construction by precluding certain pathways of thinking and making others more likely.

The theory of constructivism (Fosnot, 1996) has critical implications for the development of such knowledge about how children learn literacy skills. A fundamental principle inherent in constructivist philosophy is that learning is a constructive activity that individuals must perform. From this point of view, the task of the teacher leader is not to dispense knowledge, but rather to provide opportunities for teachers to construct it. Similarly, the university trainers' task is to facilitate and assist the construction of teacher leaders' knowledge about how adults learn rather than explicitly providing information. In order to do this, university trainers must create opportunities for teacher leaders to construct meaning that will inform and enhance their work with RR teachers. Translating this knowledge into practice, however, is the hard part. In response to teacher leaders' requests to help them become more expert at leading RR lessons behind the glass, a major strand of the 1996 Teacher Leader Institute was conceptualized and developed to introduce them to the principles and applications of constructivist theory. The series of activities in which teacher leaders engaged during the session "Making It Easy for Reading Recovery Teachers to Learn: A Constructivist Approach" were designed to begin the process toward understanding. The results of teacher leaders' work are reported in this article which is organized according to the five principles of learning, adapted from Bayer (1990), that provided the framework for the session. These are listed in Table 1.

Constructing An Understanding of Leadership

Teacher leaders individually and then collectively wrote definitions of "leaders" and "leadership". Careful examination of responses revealed that teacher leaders captured the heart of the constructivist nature of leadership, including ideas that the majority of "experts" influencing the practice of leadership in education did not discern. In an extensive analysis of influential writers from 1900--1990, Rost (1991) found a conception of leadership that suggested good management "...leadership is great men and women with certain preferred traits influencing followers to do what the leaders wish in order to achieve group/organizational goals that reflect excellence defined as some kind of higher-level effectiveness." (p. 180).

An analysis of teacher leaders' definitions of leadership revealed an understanding that leadership is not hierarchical as the experts' definition implies, but rather is reciprocal in nature. Many teacher leaders defined leadership as a reciprocal process that enabled participants to construct meanings that led a group toward a common purpose. Leaders were individuals who facilitated, assisted, guided, supported, modeled, encouraged, and extended individual's prior knowledge in order to help him or her acquire new and/or expanded understandings.

Teacher leaders' understanding of the Vygotskian notion of the "zone of proximal development" may have influenced how they defined "leaders" and "leadership". In any case, the difference between "experts" and teacher leaders may shed some light on why some of us are having a difficult time implement-

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Table 1

Principles of Learning:

Principle #1: Learning is an active rather than a passive process. In order to engage adults in the process, they need to be involved in a shared experience that becomes a catalyst for discussion.

Principle #2: Learning is by nature a social process and more likely to occur when individuals share ideas, inquire, and problem-solve together.

Principle #3: Learners must have opportunities to make sense of new and/or expanded knowledge and create meaning for themselves based on individual and shared experiences.

Principle #4: In order to make it easy for teachers to learn, they must actively participate in contextually meaningful shared experiences.

Principle #5: In order to generalize and apply new learning to other contexts, individuals need many opportunities to search for patterns, raise questions, identify problems, state them in comprehensive terms, and consider alternatives.

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continued from previous page

ing Reading Recovery in a school district. We are operating in an industrial leadership paradigm, which is hierarchical, individualistic, reductionistic, linear, and mechanical; ideas which are worlds apart from the ideas of constructivist leadership and the needs of today's schools and society (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Slack, 1995).

Analyzing and Interpreting a Shared Experience

The five principles of learning were then related to a very personal and meaningful shared experience; that is, leading behind the two-way glass. After thinking about and discussing effective and not effective experiences while leading behind the glass, teacher leaders identified characteristics of positive and not positive demonstration lessons in which they had engaged. The most frequently mentioned teacher leader actions that resulted in positive behind the glass lessons follow:

- Asking questions that helped teachers describe in specific words students' verbal and nonverbal behaviors.
- Listening carefully to teachers' responses and providing opportunities for others to extend, challenge, redirect, or support responses.
- Adjusting questions and comments based on teacher response via scaffolding and collaborative discussion.
- Connecting teacher's responses to form chains of reasoning among group members.
- Accepting varied and multiple responses to solve a problem.
- Using tentative language to ask questions and probe for clarification.
- Staying focused on the teaching/learning evidence revealed through student and teacher behaviors to support conversation and reasoning.
- Knowing when to stay out of the discussion because teachers are challenging and scaffolding each other, and when to redirect teachers' talk.
- Providing prompts and asking questions that lead to concept development and theoretical understandings.
- Asking questions to check for theoretical and conceptual understanding.
- Keeping discussion at the processing level.
- Connecting new learning and information to prior learning in meaningful contexts.
- Valuing quiet time for sensitive observation.
- Asking inclusive and "why" questions so that teachers provide a rationale for their response.
- Intervening when teachers drift or get off task.
- Taking a process check; redirecting and clearing up confusions that may arise while viewing the lessons.
- Tying up and bringing closure to the behind-the glass discussion.

- Reducing talk and support as teachers' comments improve and they become more self-regulated.

Close examination of the characteristics of the learning environment and teacher leader--teacher interactions during behind-the-glass demonstration lessons that were not positive were in direct contrast to most of the teacher leader actions mentioned above.

Constructing a Plan of Action

Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning. Those who support this theory believe that knowledge is constructed in the process of reflection, inquiry, and action, by learners themselves. Constructivists insist that ideas, principles, and theories are not immutable and purport instead that individual's energies be spent in conversation, reflection, and

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Teacher Leaders' Plan of Action

1. When leading behind the glass, implement the eighteen teacher leader actions that resulted in the most effective demonstration lessons.

2. Listen carefully to what teachers are saying so that you become very aware of and sensitive to their zones of learning...thereby making it safe and easy for teachers to learn.

3. Engage in a self-evaluation. Identify teachers who may need additional support; develop a plan that would make it "easier" for the teachers to learn; carry out your plan; and evaluate your effectiveness.

4. Incorporate the five principles of learning mentioned throughout this article in your work with trained RR teachers and teachers in training.

5. Encourage approximations...value, foster, and use them to assist teachers in gaining additional insights and knowledge.

6. Maintain high expectations of teachers and children and trust the process.

7. Early on, encourage challenges and see them as opportunities for everyone to learn.

8. Recognize varying levels of understanding among teachers; honor, acknowledge and value what they know, and develop a variety of ways to help every teacher gain new knowledge.

9. Develop techniques to enhance social learning. For example, share in small groups before whole group sharing; begin with a BUZZ; think-pair-share; state reasons to support a decision and reasons to change a decision observed within the lesson; do the same process of taking opposite sides on any particular issue or interest.

10. Create a community of learners of which the teacher leader is a member.

Applying Constructivist Principles...

debate that leads to a plan of action for improving one's life work. This perspective suggests that, rather than dispensing a list of activities or actions to use to improve their work with teachers, specifically when leading behind the glass, teacher leaders themselves need to be immersed in an environment where they are questioning, investigating, debating, and coming to some consensus about effective practices. They need to be part of a community of learners that actively works with others in order to develop action plans to improve their practice. Toward this end, small groups of teacher leaders developed the action plan on page 7 to initiate in 1996-1997.

Conclusion

On behalf of the U.S. university trainers, I would like to thank the teacher leaders who dialogued, debated, shared, and thought hard about their own and others' teaching and learning. As we progress toward the twenty-first century, we will begin to converge with a powerful group of professionals that began with Dewey, Bruner, Piaget, Luria, and Vygotsky and to join with professionals who bring new understandings of learning and the composition and functions of the brain to form the theory of constructivist learning. We must remember, however, that learning must be seen as temporary, developmental, and nonobjective, so the ideas in this article will be revised, revisited, renewed, and perhaps rewritten in the future.

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I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Applying Constructivist Principles in Reading Recovery Professional Development Classes: Insights from Seven Hundred Teacher Leaders. Network News)

Author(s): Carol Lyons

Corporate Source: Reading Recovery Council of N. America

Publication Date: Winter 1996

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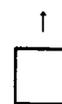
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