Professional Development to Support Students with Disabilities in Multi-Tier Classrooms: A Case Study

Brooke Blanks, Ed.D.
Radford University

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand general education teachers' experiences with a school-wide effort to increase the use of evidence-based teaching practices that were highlighted through a professional development workshop in evidence-based reading instruction. A qualitative case study method was used to describe the experiences of five kindergarten and first grade teachers with a professional development program that was part of a school improvement initiative in early reading. Two themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Theme 1: Teachers do what they know how to do. Theme 2: Professional development must be evidence based. Implications of these findings for future practice and research are discussed.

Why America's school children experience chronic reading failure has been the subject of research and policy for decades (Allington, 1984; Torgesen, 2009). However, the reasons children are at-risk are less important than the quality of reading instruction they receive (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Significant negative academic, personal, and social consequences are associated with reading failure. During the past several decades, policy makers have launched several state and federal initiatives to improve reading outcomes for children, particularly children who live in poverty, are English language learners, and/or who have disabilities. Yet, reading failure remains a persistent and unresolved educational problem (NCES, 2011)

National and State Reading Initiatives

The *Report of the National Reading Panel* was released in 2000. The findings of this report became the basis for the Reading First legislation in Title I of the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which later became known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Antunez, 2002). Reading First was the catalyst for national and state level initiatives to improve student outcomes in reading.

Since 2000, the North Carolina State Improvement Program (NCSIP) has been working to increase instructional quality in reading and math for students with disabilities. The North Carolina State Improvement Project II (NCSIP) is a personnel development program funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). NCSIP II is focused on translating research to practice by using the findings of the initial NCSIP grant to develop and implement the research-based professional development program, *Teaching Students with Persistent Reading Problems.*

Although funded through an OSEP State Personnel Development Grant for students in special education, professional development efforts under NCSIP II include general education teachers.

One widely recognized approach intended to reduce reading failure is to increase teachers' knowledge and practice of effective instructional practices by providing them with professional development. Although many studies explore teachers' behaviors after receiving professional development, there is little precedent in the literature for exploring teachers' post-professional development behaviors through the lens of evidence-based practices in professional development.

Literature Review

Teachers in today's general education classrooms work in an environment of unprecedented accountability for student achievement. The latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act mandates that general educators educate all children to a level of academic achievement that makes college a realistic and attainable goal (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). More children with disabilities than ever before are served in the general education classroom (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010), and the law is clear that the general education classroom is the preferred educational environment for all children (IDEA, 2004).

Too many students experience chronic reading failure, including students who are at-risk and students with disabilities. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES, 2011) results indicate that while overall reading scores have improved slightly in the last 18 years, little progress has been made towards closing the achievement gap between White and Black students; furthermore, the increase in the number of students who scored at the proficient level is so small as to be practically nonexistent (Manzo & Cavanaugh, 2007). Students with disabilities and students who are at-risk continue to lag behind their peers in reading. Research also suggests that despite increased accountability and scrutiny, students who are most at-risk for academic failure are also those least likely to receive effective reading instruction (Stichter, Stormont, & Lewis, 2008).

Multi-Tier Reading Instruction in Early Elementary Classrooms

One promising approach to reducing reading failure is a multi-tiered decision making framework known as Response-to-Intervention (RTI), a comprehensive early detection and prevention strategy designed to identify and provide support for struggling readers at the first sign of difficulty (Deno et al., 2009; Gersten et al, 2008). RTI is a strategic approach for supporting children who are at-risk (due to disabilities, socioeconomic disadvantage, or limited English proficiency) for school failure before they fall behind (Coyne & Harn, 2006). RTI originally was intended as an alternative assessment model for evaluating children for learning disabilities (Coyne & Harn, 2006). However, RTI has evolved from just a special education identification tool to a general education instructional practice (Kavale & Spalding, 2008). As such, RTI is changing the way general educators work (Hoover & Patton, 2008).

Collaboration and evidence-based instruction are the cornerstones of effective RTI implementations (Gersten et al., 2009). Decisions are made using a team-based problem-solving

structure. Data from progress monitoring assessments are used to determine students' responses to instruction and also to identify children who need additional instructional interventions (Bursuck & Damer, 2011). Students move through the increasingly intensive tiers of instructional intervention based on their performance on regularly scheduled, research-validated measures. The successful implementation of RTI requires extensive knowledge and skill on the part of classroom teachers (Bursuck, Damer, & Smallwood, 2008; NJCLD, 2005; Gerber, 2005; Podell & Tournaki, 2007).

Preparing Teachers for Effective Reading Instruction

Teachers use a wide range of methods to teach reading. Some are highly effective and include evidence-based and/or promising practices. The consistent lack of growth in reading proficiency among US students, however, suggests that many teachers are not using methods that are consistent with what is known about best or promising practices in reading instruction (NCES, 2011). In their study of two schools piloting RTI, Bursuck & Smallwood (2009) found gaps in teacher knowledge in critical areas related to RTI implementation including scientifically based instruction, data-based decision making, and collaborative practice. Thus, it is unsurprising to learn that teachers require ongoing, high quality professional development to achieve and maintain effective, high quality professional practice, job satisfaction, and longevity in the profession (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Professional Development

Professional development means "a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement" (Hirsch, 2009, p. 12). To meet the demands of working in dynamic, complex, highly stressful environments, teachers, like all professionals, must have access to high quality professional learning opportunities throughout their careers (Fullan, 2010; Taylor & Labarre, 2006).

Traditional professional development. Traditionally, professional development has been delivered to teachers as one-time in-service workshops that feature an outside expert lecturing on a content area or topic with perhaps a few learning activities thrown in to keep things interesting (Fullan, 2010). Only 18 percent of teachers feel that professional development connects to their personal teaching situations or experiences (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001). Five to ten percent of teachers implement practices or ideas learned in traditional professional development (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Ten to fifteen percent of teachers report that professional development includes ongoing support or materials to be used in their classrooms (NCES, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that only 12-27 percent of teachers reported that professional development significantly improved their teaching practices (NCES, 2001).

Effective professional development. Three major reviews of the literature on professional development (Darling Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Quick, Holtzman, & Chaney, 2009) agree on the following essential characteristics of effective professional development: (a) deepens teachers content knowledge; (b) is relevant-helps teachers connect content knowledge to their students' needs; (c) facilitates active learning

in authentic contexts; (d) has coherence with school, district, state, and national goals; (e) is collaborative and collegial; and (f) provides sustained support for teachers' ongoing learning over time.

Professional development that includes the traditional elements of theory and demonstration with guided practice, immediate corrective feedback, and coaching produces the largest effect sizes for increasing teachers' knowledge and skills but also produces significantly larger effect sizes for transfer of training to the teachers' classroom practice (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Killion & Harrison, 2006). Without effective professional development, teachers cannot grow professionally and do not learn the skills they need to effectively teach students, including students who are at-risk for reading failure, in general education classrooms (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between a professional development program in evidence-based reading instruction and the teachers' subsequent experiences teaching reading. The context of the study is a small rural elementary school during the second year of a grassroots RtI implementation. The researcher examined characteristics of the professional development program in order to interpret and explain the teachers' instructional decision making. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What did teachers know about effective reading instruction after attending the professional development program?
2. What effective instructional practices in reading did teachers enact after attending the professional development program?
3. What characteristics of the professional development program explain teachers' subsequent knowledge and skills in evidence based reading instruction?

Design

A qualitative case study method was used to describe the experiences of five K-1 general education teachers as they taught reading in multi-tier classrooms after participating in a professional development program devoted to evidence-based reading instruction that was part of school and system-wide improvement plans. To answer the research questions, the researcher used a single-case holistic case study design (Yin, 2009).

Participants

Participants included a purposive sample of 5 K-1 general education teachers working at Stone Elementary School during the 2010-2011 school year. All teacher participants had Bachelors' degrees in elementary education; one of the teachers had a Master's degrees. One teacher was a National Board Certified Teacher. Two teachers were in their fourth year of teaching; the remaining three teachers had 28- 33 years of teaching experience. Most of the teachers had taught kindergarten or first grade in this rural school for their entire careers. Several instructional leaders also served as key informants for this study. They were interviewed in order to fill in

gaps in the researcher's knowledge of the administrative practices and processes in the school system.

Setting

As a state "School of Progress with high growth", Stone Elementary School is positioned as a high -performing school located in a low- performing county (NCDPI, n.da.). The "school of progress" designation indicates that at least 60% of students performed at grade level on the 2009-10 high stakes assessments. "High Growth" indicates that growth in student learning exceeded the amount of growth that is expected in one year (NCDPI, n.da)

Components of the Professional Development Program

The professional development program was a project funded through a federal Office of Special Education Programs State Professional Development Grant (SPDG). The program focused on preparing general education teachers to work with students who demonstrate persistent problems learning to read, especially students with disabilities who receive reading instruction in general education classrooms.

The trainer manual describes the program as a "thirty-hour course that will require participants to complete readings and activities, which are designed to increase knowledge and strengthen skills in teaching students who struggle with reading and spelling" (NCDPI, 2009). The training is delivered to teachers in a large group face-to-face format. It includes twelve training units to address the 5 key areas of reading (NRP, 2000). Learning tasks include a series of "Table Talk" discussion questions and three projects: (a) create a brief staff development program, including slides to educate their building colleagues about the findings of the national reading panel, (b) assess a student who is at-risk for reading failure and develop an instructional plan; and (c) select and review a reading program using the *Guidelines for Selecting an Effective* Program and develop a written report. The goal of the course was to increase teachers' knowledge of research-based reading instruction to meet the needs of struggling readers in general education classrooms.

Data Collection & Analysis

The researcher conducted approximately 200 hours of participant observation (Creswell, 2010) across the 5 teacher participants' classrooms. The three data sources for this study were (a) documents, which included professional development training and participant materials, the Stone school improvement plan, teachers' lesson plans, instructional materials, and assessment data; (b) transcriptions of digital audio recordings from interviews, (c) anecdotal field notes from classroom observations, staff meetings, and informal discussions with participants. Anecdotal field notes and interview data were the primary sources of data. Documents were used to triangulate data from these two primary sources. Rubrics were developed to interpret the content of the data sources in the following areas: effective early reading instruction (Bursuck & Damer, 2010; Darling Hammond & Richardson, 2010; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

The researcher used pattern matching, the preferred strategies for case study analysis (Yin, 2009). Coding procedures and a data analysis plan provided categories of information, which formed the basis of the emerging themes of the study (Creswell, 2009). The researcher and a second reader established reliability with consensus of final decisions, judgments, and conclusions relative to the findings from all data sources (Yin, 2009). Potential bias related to the researcher being embedded in the context was a legitimate concern, yet a significant amount of data was collected because of the interactions between the researcher and participants. Insider status allows the researcher to gain a valuable perspective that allows the researcher to produce a well-rounded, "accurate" portrayal of case study phenomenon (Yin, 2009). The use of research - based rubrics for data analysis, triangulation of the data among multiple data sources, the use of a second reader, and member checks reduced these threats to validity.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between a professional development program in evidence-based reading instruction and the teachers' subsequent knowledge and skills teaching reading. The researcher interpreted the teachers' experiences implementing strategies covered in the workshop through a lens that took into account the extent to which the professional development program was consistent with best practices in professional development.

Two major themes emerged from the analysis of the data; these themes are presented in the order that fits the narrative that describes the teachers' experiences. Theme 1: Teachers do what they know how to do. Theme Two: Evidence-based professional development is essential for RtI. The results have been organized to show how the participants' experiences related to teach of these themes as reflected in information gathered from the data sources of the study.

Theme 1: Teachers Do What They Know How To Do

The five teacher participants in this study were observed during their reading/literacy instructional blocks. Data sources included anecdotal field notes, teacher interviews, and teachers' lesson plans. These data indicated that the teachers' knowledge about evidence-based reading practices as well as their knowledge of reading theory influenced these teachers' instructional choices. Descriptions of the teachers' commonly used instructional practices were based on the aggregated field note and interview data. These descriptions were triangulated using the lesson plans and are embedded in the following sections that describe the instructional practices used to teach each of the 5 key areas of reading (NRP, 2000).

Knowledge and Skills

Phonics. Teachers in this study clearly understood the importance of phonics instruction and knew how to teach phonics to early readers. When teachers and instructional leaders were asked to talk about the five key areas of reading, all teachers were able to accurately describe why phonics is important.

…letter sounds and letters are the basis for their reading and their writing, and their speaking because we say those words and we drill it so much and Fundations has been great for that (Interview, Instructional Leader).

The teachers' lesson plans documented which letter sounds and spelling patterns were

taught each week and also documented that the teachers were using these commercial programs' guidelines, practices, and activities to plan this part of their literacy instruction. Data from anecdotal field notes confirmed that teachers were observed using research-based phonics instruction in all classrooms. Few data indicate that teachers provided instruction, evidence-based or otherwise, in the other four key areas of reading: phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Multiple data sources including interview transcripts, anecdotal field notes, and lesson plans tell the same story.

Phonemic awareness. Although two of the ten units in the professional development program address phonemic awareness-what it is and how to teach it, no instruction in the fundamental skills of blending or segmenting was recorded in the anecdotal field notes and no evidence of blending or segmenting instruction was found in the lesson plans. When asked, teachers did not describe how they teach phonemic awareness in their classrooms. There is little in their answers to indicate that they clearly understand what phonemic awareness is. Several teachers used a commercial program (Wilson Fundations) and believed that it provided phonemic awareness instruction. In fact, Fundations does not explicitly teach the phonemic awareness activities, segmenting and blending. During the interviews, each teacher was asked to describe how she taught phonemic awareness. Their answers follow:

I feel like Fundations does so much with phonemic awareness…in the beginning it starts off with introducing a letter or two a week (Interview, Teacher).

…well we have our new program, Fundations, this year, which is really good, I do writers workshop and I model for them to sound out words and connecting the letter and the sound for the writing (Interview, Teacher).

The significance of the lack of the teachers' phonemic awareness knowledge cannot be ignored. Because teachers did not have sufficient knowledge of phonemic awareness, either in theory or in practice, when students struggled with CVC word tasks, the teachers did not recognize that some students were having difficulty due to an inability to perform basic phonemic awareness tasks of isolating and manipulating the sounds of spoken language. Thus, appropriate instructional interventions were not provided to these students.

Universal screening data from Fall and Winter AIMSweb administrations show that 10% to 40% of students in the five teacher participants' classes performed below the school and district benchmark targets on the mid-year AIMSweb assessments of early reading skills, particularly *Phonemic Segmentation Fluency* which assesses children's ability to deconstruct words into their component sounds. When students' performance on early reading skills were compared to national norm targets on the AIMSweb assessments, the percentages of students in each class who were below benchmark ranged from 25-100 percent in early reading skills including phonemic segmentation fluency, letter naming fluency, letter sound fluency, and nonsense word fluency. Students' poor performance on Phonemic Segmentation Fluency is consistent with findings that indicate that teachers did not understand phonemic awareness or provide phonemic

awareness instruction even though a great deal of time was spent on these topics during the professional development program.

Vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. During the professional development workshop, teachers spent approximately 20 of the 30 in class hours "learning" about vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. The trainers and the professional development written materials gave thorough explanations of each area and provided examples of how to provide effective instruction. Yet, the aggregated data did not indicate significant teacher knowledge about vocabulary, comprehension, or fluency once teachers returned to their classrooms. When the teachers were asked to describe how they taught vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency to their students, the teachers did not do so.

> Okay, for comprehension I haven't done a whole lot as far as in my literacy groups yet cause some of them are just getting into books but as far as doing read- alouds, we'll kind of talk about stuff,... fluency-yeah, fluency just the more they practice reading and right now our homework is getting ready to be, we're going to have spelling tests on Fridays…I mean we really do a lot with vocabulary, as far as, I'll talk to them about the words that are in the stories we're reading what does that word mean, what's that word remind you of (Interview, Teacher).

Teachers did not articulate theoretical knowledge of vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension areas and the field notes and lesson plans do not document evidence-based instruction in vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. The anecdotal field notes and the lesson plans do not document instances of planned teacher oral read-alouds, which are the natural medium for vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency instruction with pre-alphabetic readers. Regardless of the time given to these topics in the workshop, it is clear that teachers left the workshop with little knowledge about the 5 key areas of reading (NRP, 2000) and few evidence-based instructional strategies for teaching these to struggling readers. Thus it is unsurprising that students did not demonstrate growth in comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency on either AIMSWEB, or state benchmark assessments. in response to teachers' instruction.

Instructional Decision Making

The data are similar when it comes to teachers' instructional decision making. The school was in its second year of a grassroots RTI implementation. Using data for instructional decision making was an essential element of the professional development in reading that all teacher participants' attended and was the focus of one of the projects the teachers were required to complete to receive CEUs for the professional development. The field note data suggested that teachers were not using the available assessment data (AIMSweb, DRA, Children's Progress, PALS, work samples) to form their instructional groups or to move children between instructional groups. When asked about how they formed their instruction and intervention groups, the following was a typical response.

> ….those are flexible groups. After a while, you know, I've seen how much I think they have progressed we, we'll adjust and flex, you know, so – some will move up, some may move down (Interview, Teacher).

Field note data indicated that during the two quarters the researcher was observing and gathering data in these five classrooms, a single student in one of the five classrooms was moved between groups.

Using data to differentiate instruction and to choose appropriate instructional materials was also a major topic addressed in the professional development program. Interview data offered insight into teachers' decision-making processes when planning instruction. Teachers were asked how they choose materials for the reading instruction.

> I kind of just look at my leveled readers and see what I think they're good at. The first day if I see that book's too hard, I just plan day by day, I don't plan by the week. (Interview, Teacher).
> We just find the books that we think are good for right now and we just pull from whatever skills we feel like they need. (Interview, Teacher).

These interview data when combined with the lesson plans suggested that teachers did not use a systematic approach to planning for evidence-based reading instruction or use research-based assessment data when making instructional decisions in their general education classrooms. Field notes, lesson plans, and instructional materials indicated that center activities required students to (a) read directions that were clearly beyond their current reading level, (b) use academic skills they did not yet possess such as using a dictionary, or (c) emphasized skills such as drawing, coloring, or decorating that were not academic tasks that promote acquisition of early reading skills. These data suggested to the researcher that the teachers did not know how to either integrate evidence-based practices in reading instruction into their literacy centers or effectively differentiate instruction within the literacy centers using evidence-based instructional practices.

Clearly, the professional development program had little impact on teachers' knowledge of evidence based reading or their skills in planning and providing students with evidence-based reading instruction. Although this finding is not news in and of itself, a common institutional response is to blame teachers or question their commitment, training, etc. When the researcher initially began looking at teacher characteristics, she quickly realized that it was unlikely that the problem rested in the teachers. After all, the 5 teachers volunteered to attend the workshop for a week in the summer so that they would not have to take time out of their classrooms during the school year. The field notes document that on average the teachers spent 9.25 hours a day in their classrooms during the school year and all teacher participants reported working at home during evenings and weekend. Most of the instructional materials teachers used were hand-made. Teachers purchased snacks, lunches, coats and other essentials for their students with their own money. All of the teachers were traditionally licensed through accredited and well-respected state universities. The school had a very effective mentoring and induction program for new teachers. The researcher was satisfied that commitment and preparation did not explain the teachers' lack of knowledge and skills after attending the workshop. Thus, she turned her attention to the professional development program and an alternative explanation was immediately apparent. The reading content was evidence-based but the design and implementation of the professional development program was not.

Theme 2: Professional Development must be Evidence Based

The teachers in this study were willing to learn new things and develop new skills. Indeed, these teachers repeatedly expressed their beliefs that professionals can always improve their practice and should be willing to try new things. Professional development is embedded in the school culture as is the belief that professional development can be an agent of school change. Three sub-themes emerged from the data that suggest in its current implementation, the NCSIP professional development program was not sufficiently evidence-based to affect teachers' knowledge or instructional practice. The sub-themes are relevance, guided practice, and coaching.

Relevance. The teachers were asked to discuss their thoughts on their experiences with the workshop. Although all teachers believed the content was important and helpful for teachers to know, these kindergarten and first grade teachers questioned the extent to which they could use much of this information in their own classrooms.

A review of the workshop materials and required assignments yielded data that were consistent with the teachers' concerns about the training's relevance to their teaching situations. To receive all 5 CEU credits, participants had to identify a student who was struggling in early reading skills, assess the student using a sample assessment developed for use as part of the RF training, use these data to diagnose the student's instructional needs, write goals and objectives to address the student's needs, and make evidence-based instructional recommendations (Foundations of Reading Trainer's Manual, 2009). An instructional leader explained,

> They'll get the 3 credits for sitting through the workshop, which is what the state says if you are going to come in and observe the class you will get the three credits, but if you are going to do the homework and all that stuff you will get the five… but the expectation was that they would do the homework and do it to a level that shows that they grasped the material and could go back and utilize the skills taught in their classroom (Interview, Instructional Leader).

The assignment was due by September 30, 2010. Early kindergartners typically do not have sufficient experience with early reading to be appropriate for this project because they have not yet received instruction. Thus, the kindergarten teachers assessed first grade students in order to complete the project by the deadline. Although the kindergarten teachers successfully completed the project and received their CEUs, data in the researcher's field notes indicate that they did not believe the project had much to do with the way they instruct or assess or plan for reading instruction in their kindergarten classrooms. Data from the document review of the RF trainer's manual raise further questions about the relevance the training had for the teacher participants.

> Make sure they [workshop participants] understand that it [the assessment required for the project] is a sample [emphasis in original] of items that are similar to those found on other tests and NOT [emphasis in original] a complete test. The BSRA [sample assessment] was developed for use as part of the Foundation training to provide practice in evaluating students. Actual tests that are appropriate for use with students are described on the CD and in the handout (Foundations of Reading Trainers' Manual Unit 4 Slides and Notes, n.d.).

These teachers had access to AIMSweb materials and data in their school and were learning to use these tools as part of their RTI implementation. It is possible that allowing teachers to complete the student assessment project using one of their own students and authentic materials from their lived professional experiences may have improved the relevance the teachers' found in the workshop.

During the training all participants were shown slides and received handouts explaining how to complete the assessment project. Trainers also shared a completed sample project with the teacher participants during the summer workshop. Teachers also had access to information about student assessment and writing goals and objectives via the online text that is available to all workshop participants. However, some teachers expressed the belief that the workshop would be improved by more explicit guided practice.

Guided practice. The professional development program consisted of approximately 30 hours of face-to-face contact with workshop participants in an interactive workshop format. The workshop materials included approximately 750 slides, an online text, and approximately 30 pages of supplemental handouts that include materials for in-class activities, resource lists, and examples of evidence-based practices in assessment and instruction. Participants had to complete discussion questions based upon the unit topics, which provide participants the opportunity to take the material to a deeper level of understanding (Interview, Instructional specialist). All workshop participants were required to complete 3 homework projects to receive five CEU credits for the workshop. The homework assignments included the following (a) review a commercial reading program, (b) assess an at-risk student using a pseudo-assessment tool developed expressly for the workshop and develop an instructional plan (including goals and objectives) based on the examples provided in the participant slides and materials; and (c) create materials to share information about the findings of the NRP with colleagues.

The interview data revealed conflicting perceptions of the extent to which teachers' felt prepared and supported to complete the homework assignments successfully. The teachers' expressed concerns about the volume of material and the instructional approaches used during the workshop.

> I thought it went really fast this summertime. I, I don't think I absorbed it, the way they threw it at us and they really, you know, and when things were challenged, I don't think they – I know that there were a lot of teachers in there that were lost. (Interview, Teacher).
> [They] needed more demonstrations. Too fast, that's again, throwing something out there and not taking time with it… It seems like we were always given more information — we were given the information and the ideas and, and, but you know, these are ideas and things that we don't know how to do, and nobody listens (Interview, Teacher).

Teachers also expressed that they did not have adequate support to feel confident completing the assignments.

> ….that's not something you can throw at people. I mean, it takes baby steps, you know? Or I don't know, let people practice what they're learning and, I mean I'll tell you, my project wasn't pleasing to them. I just, and there were no comments, kind of like national

boards, you know, they don't give you feedback, which is something you always give your students, but no, I was just told to do Section this, this and this over again and resubmit it (Interview, Teacher).

Three of the five teacher participants successfully completed the homework assignments and received 5 CEUS. Two of the five teacher participants did not successfully complete the homework assignments and received 3 CEUs. The interview data suggested that teacher participants desired more guided practice than they received. However, the professional development program did include a coaching component. Its impact is described in the next section.

Coaching. As written, the professional development program included three or more on-site visits to each participant. These visits were supposed to be conducted by certified trainers and were to occur over the year after participants attended the workshop. The purpose for the visits is to check the fidelity of teachers' use of evidence-based reading instruction; it is important to note that no opportunities for modeling or practicing evidence-based reading instruction were included in the workshop. (Trainer's Manual, 2009). A review of the tools that the training personnel developed to use during coaching visits indicated that these visits were not consistent with the research describing effective coaching. Instead the visits are intended to function as "fidelity checks" on teachers' usage of research-based instructional practices. No coaching visits occurred during the 18 weeks of the study.

Discussion

Answering the first two research questions of this study was straightforward. What did teachers know and do about enacting evidence based instructional practices after attending the NCSIP professional development program in effective reading instruction? Sadly, not much! Little evidence emerged that teachers' knowledge or use of evidence-based practice increased after attending the workshops or participating in the homework activities. Teachers used evidence-based practices in phonics and had knowledge about phonics after attending the workshop. It is not possible, however, to establish a causal relationship between the workshops and the teachers' knowledge or practice. The teachers had access to evidence-based reading programs and materials apart from the workshop that clearly describe how to systematically and explicitly teach phonics using evidence-based instruction that included unison responding and cumulative review. The teachers' descriptions of how they make instructional decisions suggest that access to these instructional programs alone may have been sufficient to produce their limited knowledge of effective phonics instruction. Indeed, the only observed use of evidence-based reading instruction occurred within the context of these commercial programs. While it is important that teachers have access to effective tools, no commercial program is an adequate substitute for an experienced, committed teacher who knows enough about reading to design and deliver effective instruction. What is needed is effective professional development to increase teachers' capacity to infuse all aspects of their literacy program with research-based instructional practices.

Answers to the third research question regarding the factors that explain the efficacy (or lack thereof) of the professional development to increase teachers' use of evidence-based

instructional practices in reading are addressed by the second theme; evidence-based professional development is essential for RtI. If we want to change teachers' practice, there must be some level of accountability for the developers and funders of professional development projects to ensure that such projects are consistent with what is known about effective professional development. Federally funded professional development programs must be grounded in research-validated practices that increase teachers' knowledge and change teachers' pedagogy

Accountability for providing effective instruction to all students is a vast and complex issue. On one hand, there is the logical desire to identify and extend effective instructional practices and also to recognize and reward effective practitioners (U. S. Department of Education, 2010). On the other hand, blame and punitive consequences are often attached to ineffective teachers and schools (NCLB). Yet, no studies were located that examined the extent to which federally funded professional development programs for teachers are consistent with research on effective professional development practices. Thus, the extent to which it is possible to hold accountable designers and funders of such programs is unknown. Perhaps it is time to explore these issues. Teachers need and deserve access to research-based professional development that is likely to improve their practice; to provide otherwise is simply a waste of teachers' time and taxpayer dollars.

One thing is certain; the data from this study and the literature concur that teachers need high quality professional development to learn to use instructional practices in their own classrooms (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Thus, helping teachers know how to use effective instructional practices requires effective, research-based professional development.

Conclusion

Response-to-Intervention requires that general education teachers know a great deal about research-based reading instruction because general education teachers are largely responsible for providing early reading instruction to the vast majority of students. Therefore, there is a need for ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development to support teachers and increase their use of evidence based reading instruction with struggling readers.

Clearly, there are many challenges ahead. Many questions remain unanswered. However, this small study makes clear that it is critically important to provide general education teachers access to high quality research-based professional development in order to implement and sustain Response to Intervention. The study suggests that there may be a need for increased scrutiny of federally funded professional development projects to ensure that teachers have adequate opportunities to develop knowledge and skills in evidence-based reading instruction. The extent to which similar problems exist in other federally funded professional development projects is unknown and should be the explored in future research.

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About the Author

Dr. Brooke Blanks is an assistant professor in Special Education within the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Radford University. Dr. Blanks' research interests include professional development, preservice teacher education, Response-to-Intervention, and inclusive education in rural schools. She teaches courses in assessment, instructional methodology, and supervises interns in K-12 settings. Her 15+ years of service in the helping professions have included K-12 special education in a variety of public and private settings, clinical reading education, and social work with community based service-learning programs serving at-risk youth and their families.