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Right: Teachers work together during a Bilingual Methods training at DSD.

IN SEARCH OF “best practice” a professional journey

By Karen Martin

Gandhi summed it up: “Every worthwhile accomplishment, big or little, has its stages of drudgery and triumph; a beginning, a struggle and a victory.” This has been the story of my professional life as an educator of students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

The Beginning Seeing the Challenge

I started my career in 1991, fresh out of college with my bachelor's degree in education of the deaf K-12. I took a job at the Delaware School for the Deaf (DSD) as a resident advisor in the dorm program, working with upper elementary and middle school boys. During homework hour, I remember thinking with frustration, “Why are these kids, who are really smart, struggling so much with reading?”

With that one question, my journey began. Like Leonard Nimoy, host and narrator of “In Search of,” the early 1980s TV program about “the world of unsolved mysteries and those strange and unusual things in the world that defy explanation and often understanding,” I was in constant search mode. I wanted to find the best practices for teaching deaf and hard of hearing children to read.

Within a few years, I moved over to the school and began teaching preschool. At the same time, I started working on my master's degree in elementary deaf education at Western Maryland College. To complete my degree, I opted to do a thesis study. The focus: literacy for deaf and hard of hearing students.

I poured over research journals and looked for studies that involved deaf students. This was the late 1990s and research on metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” especially as this applied to reading, was all the rage. This body of research looked at the positive impact of students actively engaging in reading and learning, and teachers guiding students to be aware of their own thinking and reading processes. Also, this was the time when there was emphasis on the explicit teaching of the strategies that good readers use when they negotiate print. In *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*, Zemelman,

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Daniels, and Hyde (1998) called for increased emphasis on teacher modeling and discussing students' reading processes as well as teaching reading as a process, including use of strategies that activate prior knowledge, help students make and test predictions, structure help during reading, and provide after-reading applications. Additionally, there was a call for increased emphasis on measuring the success of reading programs by students' reading habits, attitudes, and comprehension.

This literature led me to inquire how a supplemental after-school program that provided explicit instruction of reading strategies might impact the abilities and attitudes of deaf and hard of hearing students (Martin, 1999). I worked with four middle school students in pairs over several months, utilizing some of the reading strategies outlined by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998). At the same time, I wanted to try something that would impact the elementary students. Thus, I worked with teachers and staff members to create the Elementary After School Literacy Program. Our goal was to provide elementary students with an opportunity to enjoy reading, while at the same time enhancing their reading abilities.

Both of these projects achieved success. The four middle school students showed more positive attitudes about reading, their sight-word vocabularies increased, and they reported more consistent use of the reading strategies (Martin, 1999). In the elementary school, the After School Literacy Program grew and improved. It became a two-day-per-week program; students alternated between meeting in small groups and meeting in one

large group. During the small group time, we experimented with having the students read and then re-write what they had read into a play. Eventually, we had a very popular yearly "Performance Night" in which students put on a play or skit of a story they had read during the program.

For large group time, students selected their own readings. They completed reading logs in which they recorded the books they had read, whether or not they enjoyed the books, and whether each book was "easy," "just right," or "hard." We also engaged in hands-on literacy centers and games. This was one of those things that began with my "gut feeling." Although time engaged in the authentic act of reading was strongly supported by research, I started to suspect that our students needed more than just time reading—they needed to engage in direct experiences and develop their language abilities through social interaction. We celebrated with a yearly "Family Activity Night" in which families came and spent the evening playing games and participating in the literacy centers so familiar to their children. At this event we also displayed the students' work from the program.

Looking back now, I realize that this was what Gandhi might have called "my beginning." I was starting to zero in on the importance of direct experience, American Sign Language, and social interaction in my students' literacy development. I had found and used the research, which had led me to change and to make more effective my teaching. My ideas were forming, and I knew there was much more work to do.

The Struggle Reading, Training, Learning

During the 1999-2000 school year, I team taught a first and second grade combined class with a deaf teacher, Debbie Trapani. We were a bilingual-bicultural team and the class was quite challenging—the 14 students possessed a wide range of abilities.

I had received training in the Four Blocks Literacy Framework (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999), a research-based program developed by teachers in Clemmons Elementary School in Clemmons, North Carolina. Now Debbie and I attended a Four Blocks literacy training offered through our local school district and implemented the program in our classroom. This was a very concrete attempt to align our English Language Arts instruction with the local public school. This approach was identified as “best practice” in literacy instruction because it acknowledged that “children do not all learn in the same way and [provided] substantial instruction to support whatever learning personality a child has” (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). The four “blocks” were:

1. Guided Reading—For students who learn to read through explicit instruction in reading
2. Working with Words—For students who learn to read using phonics and spelling
3. Self-Selected Reading—For students who learn to read using a “whole language” approach
4. Writer’s Workshop—For students who learn to read through writing

We modified this framework, especially the block that focused on phonics. The following school year, Debbie and I became literacy specialists. As literacy specialists, we would be instructional coaches for our teachers, charged with keeping ourselves and our teaching staff aware of best practices, training teachers in instructional best practices, acting as liaisons between the district instructional leadership and our school, and keeping our curriculum materials up to date. During the next few years we continued to refine our use of the Four Blocks framework. I coordinated training in the Working with Words block for our speech-language pathologists so that they could use the phonics techniques with our students who had enough hearing to benefit.

The other part of our struggle was to find literacy assessments that helped inform instruction for teachers. Again,



Above: Mary Hicks and Karen Martin, DSD’s current Bilingual Literacy Specialist Team

research was key. In *Reading Assessments: Principles and Practices for Elementary Teachers*, Barrentine (1999) compiled a collection of articles from *The Reading Teacher*, the professional journal published by the International Reading Association. The common theme among many of these articles was that literacy assessment needs to be developmental and sustained as well as authentic and observable. This led us to the idea of

having a literacy profile—a snapshot of students’ assessment results—for each student where teachers could see the results of multiple assessments over time.

We needed some school-wide assessments for consistency across grades. In one of my reading courses at Western Maryland College, I had been introduced to the Qualitative Reading Inventory-II, the second edition of an informal reading inventory that identifies student strengths and weaknesses in word recognition, comprehension, and reading strategies (Leslie & Caldwell, 1995). We decided to use the QRI-II rather than the evaluation that the public schools were using because the QRI-II includes a retelling component helpful to our teachers, who often included passage retelling in their students’ Individualized Education Programs. Further, it labeled questions as “explicit” or “implicit,” giving us more detailed information about our students’ comprehension and abilities to answer different types of questions. We do not use the miscue analysis component of the assessment because we do not require our students to orally read the passages, nor do we encourage word-for-word signing of the passages. We wanted to observe students as they were naturally reading, give them the opportunity to read and comprehend, and then test their retelling and ability to answer the questions. We are now using the QRI-5 (5th edition, Leslie & Caldwell, 2011).

The other component we wanted to include was a writing assessment. As part of our training in the Four Blocks framework, Debbie and I were invited to a comprehensive training given by Vicki Spandell, author of *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction* (2001, 2008), who in 1984 coordinated the 17-member teacher team out of Beaverton, Oregon, that developed the original, internationally recognized 6-trait model for writing assessment and instruction. Through this training, as well as training given by the Delaware Writing Project, the idea of taking our state Department of Education’s writing rubric, which was based on the 6-trait model, and re-writing it into more student-friendly

language was born. Through dialogue with our teachers, we came to the conclusion that no matter how important we felt the rubric was to improving students' writing, it would be useless unless the students really understood it and felt ownership of it as well. As a result, I worked with all of our teachers in workgroups, collaborating, discussing, and finally coming to an agreement on the language to be used in the DSD Student-Friendly Writing Rubric. In alignment with our school district, we began giving school-wide writing prompts three times a year.

In addition to identifying the school-wide assessments we would use, we had to convince teachers to actually use them. There were difficult times when we had to negotiate with some of our more veteran teachers about the value of adding these assessments and about the necessity of aligning ourselves with the district practices. However, those struggles were relatively easy to overcome. The desire of instructional staff to see our students succeed drove the process. The key was to involve them as much as possible, from as early on as possible.

The next pivotal development was our school's determination to better incorporate the use of bilingual instructional practices into our program. We participated in the ASL-English Bilingual Professional Development Program through the Center for ASL/English Bilingual Education and Research at Gallaudet University. Debbie Trapani and one of our upper elementary teachers, Mary Hicks, attended the lead mentor training and brought the training to our school. Through this training, we learned about research in best educational practices for bilingual students. My cohort read, reflected, interacted,

and struggled. Eventually, we came out with a much deeper understanding of the instructional task we have before us. We are responsible for guiding our students to realize proficiency in both ASL and English as bilingual students.

The Victory Leading to Struggles Anew

Here I am in 2012, 21 years after that first experience in the dorm when I formed the question that began my journey. My bright students' struggle with reading led to my gut feeling about the importance of direct experiences, keeping instruction meaningful to students, allowing social interaction, and using students' first languages—all part of the seven principles for student success outlined in *ESL/EFL Teaching: Principles for Success* (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Our program just moved into a brand-new, state-of-the-art

school building. Our instructional staff is strong. We share a common goal, and our leadership supports us in that goal. Debbie Trapani has moved on to be the coordinator of Family Advocacy and Child Educational Services, serving families and children with a hearing loss from birth to age 5 throughout the state. Mary Hicks has moved into the position of bilingual literacy specialist along with me. We are adding ASL assessments to the school-wide assessments included in our students' literacy profiles, and we're anxiously awaiting ASL Content Standards to be published.

I feel like we're on the precipice of victory, although victory may give way to new beginnings and lead to new struggles. With committed teachers and staff members and bright, curious students, I welcome them!

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