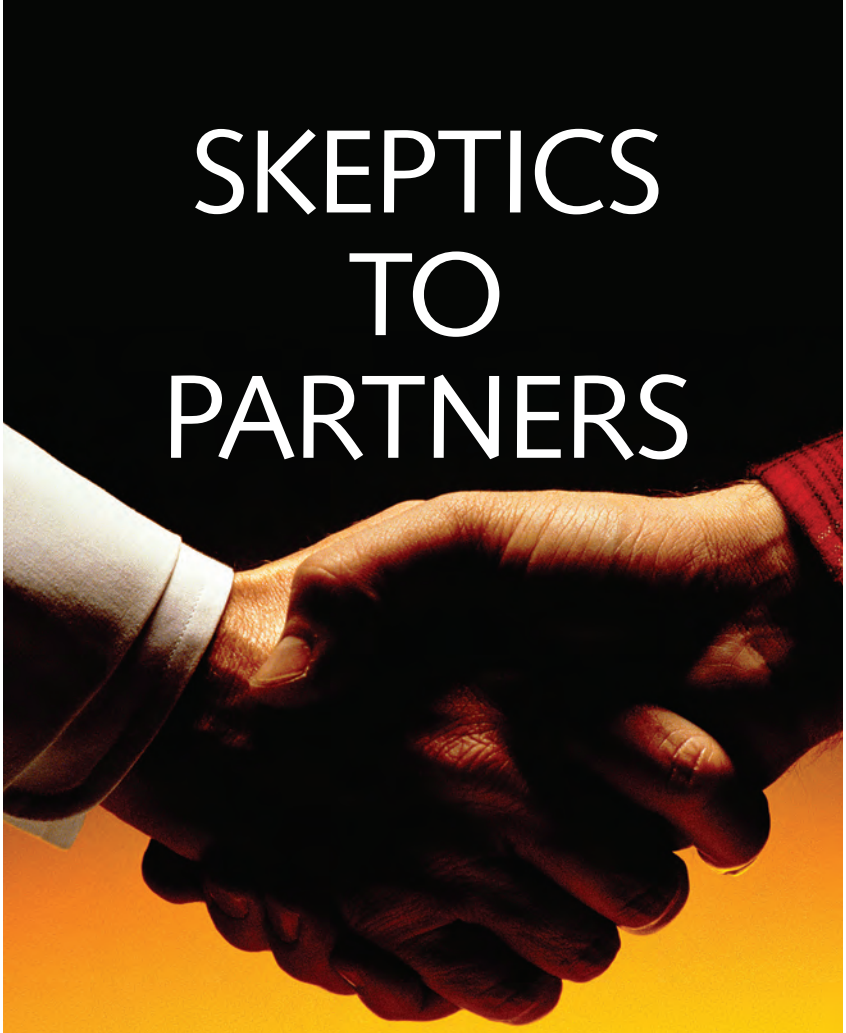
SKEPTICS TO PARTNERS



University teams with district to improve ELL instruction

BY DEBRA O'NEAL, MARJORIE C. RINGLER, AND DIANA B. LYS

As residents of the ivory tower, we know we cannot exist on our own. Without our partners in local school districts, we have no research and no real-world context. We also know that to establish a meaningful partnership with schools, all participants must perceive value and anticipate meaningful outcomes. What started out as an effort to help two schools achieve high levels of teacher implementation of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) resulted in a deeper understanding of the true learning value of a sustained and committed partnership among university faculty, district personnel, and school-based educators.

Our partnership began when, as faculty members at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., we facilitated a three-day summer workshop and developed a plan for ongoing follow-up with the schools. This effort yielded high levels of implementation of the model, improved teacher attitudes, and most importantly, developed higher levels of professionalism and leadership within the schools. Partnerships such as these create valuable relationships where university faculty are welcomed into schools, teachers and administrators benefit from research-proven methods, and all stakeholders learn.

MANY LAYERS OF COLLABORATION

The goal of this partnership was to implement the SIOP model in rural North Carolina elementary schools. The SIOP model gives teachers the necessary skills to teach content while simultaneously focusing on academic language development. Primarily designed for use with English language learners (ELLs), the model is being implemented widely in schools with high ELL populations, where all students benefit from an approach that focuses on both language and content knowledge. The two schools in the study have a 40% ELL population, which makes them perfect for implementing the SIOP model.

There were many layers in this collaboration: personnel from several university departments, the federal programs director at the district level, and two elementary school principals and 17 teachers at the schools. Each stakeholder had a specific role, with

university personnel collaborating with the district to plan and finance the summer professional development and faculty members providing content and working directly with principals to plan follow-up and peer coaching sessions.

BACKGROUND

Showers and Joyce (1996) discuss the importance of peer coaching and how this model, when successful, helps teachers develop collegial relationships based on improving their content knowledge. We were hoping to create this type of partnership not only among teachers, but between teachers and their principals, principals and the federal programs director, and public school personnel with university faculty. To this end, we were fortunate to have buy-in from all parties.

The participants demonstrated their commitment through their actions. The two principals actively participated in the summer training, met with the university faculty monthly, and most importantly, spoke with each other on a regular basis to reflect on implementation of the model. The federal programs director attended our monthly coaching sessions and served as a constant cheerleader for the project. At the time, we had no idea how powerful and important her role was. But now, working with other districts and attempting to replicate our success, we realize the importance of that level of support.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

From the beginning, this project was planned as a professional learning community. Based on the research of Joyce & Showers (1980), we knew that a one-shot approach to professional development was not an effective path. Darling-Hammond's (2005) research indicates how poorly we fare in collaboration, observation, and curriculum design when compared to countries such as China and Japan. With this knowledge of the ideal, we knew we had to get a long-term commitment from stakeholders to continue the learning beyond the initial workshop, and so we began our planning six months before the first gathering.

The SIOP is a research-based model that we teach to others through 20 hours of intensive immersion in a 2½-day block. We begin with an introduction to new terminology that we would use over the course of the sessions. We built understanding of background information and explained that we were modeling what the SIOP should look like in the classroom. The next crucial component covered key features of first- and second-language acquisition through a highly interactive session that allowed participants to discover and discuss the similarities and differences between the two. The SIOP model was then presented through eight blocks, one for each component of the model. See box on p. 54 outlining the components. Each block contained an introduction specific to that component, an activity that implemented the component, and a video clip of the model in action in a classroom.

The initial sessions were followed by eight monthly coaching sessions, monthly principals meetings, and homework for the teachers. During the initial year of follow-up, we focused on implementing one new component a month. The university faculty spent a half-day observing in each school looking for particular SIOP components, meeting with each principal to discuss his or her observations and involvement, and a final joint meeting with the two teacher groups. The after-school meetings included an opening activity focused on the previous month's component, review of the component, a preview of the next component, and an activity to support its implementation in the classroom.

Each school was responsible for creating a public bulletin board that highlighted the monthly SIOP component. In pairs, the teachers decided what was important to share in the public forum and updated the bulletin board each month. Principals also included a "SIOP moment" in faculty meetings to raise faculty awareness, as they would be taking the model schoolwide in the second year.

As part of the homework, teachers communicated with a grade-level colleague at the partner school using Skype to discuss a new strategy they tried and to evaluate its success or failure. The goal of using Skype was

- Professional development may be supported by external assistance.
- Professional development provides job-embedded coaching or other assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom.
- Professional development achieves educator learning goals by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement.

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EIGHT COMPONENTS OF THE SIOP MODEL

1. Lesson preparation:
- Providing content and language objectives for all lessons
- Using supplementary materials
- Adapting content

2. Building background
- Linking concepts to students' background
- Creating links between past learning and new learning

3. Comprehensible input
- Using appropriate speech
- Explaining academic tasks clearly
- Using a variety of techniques to make content accessible for ELLs

4. Strategies
- Teaching learning strategies
- Using scaffolding techniques
- Using higher order questioning

5. Interaction
- Providing frequent opportunities for interaction
- Using grouping configurations
- Allowing for sufficient wait time

6. Practice/application
- Providing hands-on experiences with new knowledge
- Integrating all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)

7. Lesson delivery
- Promoting student engagement
- Enacting lesson supporting language and content objectives
- Reflecting on practice —"did I do what I set out to do?"

8. Review assessment
- Reviewing lesson objectives
- Getting regular feedback from students

Source: Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008.

to build a professional learning community across schools and to model the effectiveness of interaction for learning.

The university coaches created a monthly electronic newsletter with tips and review. They were also available through e-mail and Skype videoconferencing. By maintaining ongoing communication between teachers and coaches, professional development was always front and center. Each carefully planned activity for university faculty, teachers, and administrators served as foundational elements for the learning community to come.

CREATING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

After the initial year of collaboration, principals became responsible for ensuring follow-up in their schools. One of the schools had a new principal who was not involved in the project, so schoolwide implementation was left up to the teachers. At the other school, the principal played a leading role in sustaining the learning. She scheduled two meetings a month: an information session on SIOP and a work session for developing grade-level lesson planning and materials focused on the SIOP topic of the month. Each grade level had a SIOP day, where a teacher demonstrated a SIOP-based lesson followed by a group discussion. These discussions led to implementation of new classroom strategies. The principal required teachers to turn in two SIOP lesson plans monthly and performed SIOP-focused observations. This would not have been possible without a principal who was engaged in the learning process, was trained as a coach, and who, most importantly, served as an educational leader. She summed up the two-year process by stating, "I really feel the focus on SIOP strategies has strengthened our instructional program. It has now become a way of life for our folks. Kids enjoy and are engaged in instruction, and lessons are more productive."

One of our hidden goals was to re-energize teachers, to give them pride in their skills, to create ownership in the learning community, and to nurture a new sense of collegiality and leadership within the schools. The learning community we created allowed for teachers to make all of that happen through their constant grade-level collaboration and continued involvement with the model.

We saw evidence of the evolution of the SIOP learning community when administrators and teachers shared the project's success with others. The principals and two appointed lead teachers from each school attended a national SIOP training for coaches. At the state level, these same teachers presented their work at a conference for English language learners. We felt great pride as we witnessed this evolution taking place. The professionalism, confidence, and collegiality they exhibited was inspirational. None of this would have been possible without the support of the federal programs director's funds; support from this office was essential to the sustainability of the project.

RESEARCH

We examined our project's effectiveness based on Guskey's model (2000) for evaluating professional

development. We looked at the five critical levels of professional development and evaluation: participants' reactions, participants' learning, organizational support and change, participants' use of knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes. The teachers completed self-assessments of their use of the SIOP before the workshop and at the end of the school year. Another group of teachers from the same school district, but not at these two schools, received the initial SIOP training but did not receive the follow-up coaching and served as a control group. There was a significant difference in the implementation level between those who participated in the follow-up learning community and those who did not. The level of fidelity of implementation of the SIOP model reported by the teachers in the learning community supports the use of sustained and supportive professional development to realize change in teacher practice.

Teachers completed a survey at year's end about the level of administrative support they received. The administrators answered the same questions, and the data indicated that their perceptions of what they provided were closely aligned to their teachers' perceptions. The learning outcomes were all viewed positively; their comments included: "Students spent more time on task," "students were more actively engaged in learning," "grades improved from low C's to high B's and A's," "SIOP has helped both ELLs and struggling learners." Finally, teachers believed that students were more involved as active learners and became true stakeholders in their own learning.

Although the focus of this article is the creation of the learning community, we cannot overlook the effect that the positive experience has had on the learning communities. If all of the participants' efforts did not yield the desired results in the classroom, we believe that the excitement and renewed commitment to teaching and learning would not have evolved as successfully as they did. We observed vast improvements in teacher attitudes, motivation, and collaboration, and a renewed focus on professional development to improve student achievement. Additionally, the heightened school awareness created a buzz of excitement for those who were to embark on this journey the following year.

THE FUTURE

The entire faculty at both schools, including the earlier participants, participated in the next SIOP summer workshop. At the end of the summer, the appointed coaches and principals returned from their national coaching workshop with new ideas and excitement. They spent the summer planning for the upcoming year and have set in place a calendar that includes bimonthly meetings and observations. With the support of a substitute for their classes, the school coaches have a day each month to observe and coach their colleagues. These are informal, nonevaluative sessions to deepen collaboration and provide ongoing encouragement. Teachers have additional meeting time to review the monthly SIOP component and share successes and challenges. All of these sessions require coaches and principals to collaborate and conduct instructional conversations with school teams. The university faculty has retreated to a more supportive and consultative role, allowing teachers and administrators to develop the learning community to meet the unique needs of the school and students.

BENEFITS

This partnership has benefitted all parties, but most importantly, the schools participated in high-quality professional development in keeping with the value Showers and Joyce (1996) placed on peer coaching teams. They remind us that, although on the surface this should be very natural, this work is often complex, requiring teachers, administrators, and university faculty to change their relationships. The partnership we created achieved the cohesiveness and respect needed to sustain ongoing learning communities.

Through this project, we realized that we had started out with a limited view — seeing professional development only through the eyes of the teachers who work with students. Now we know that as faculty coaches, we were not only facilitating sessions and offering content but also honing the entire process and learning alongside all stakeholders. Through this new lens, we now have a higher level of appreciation for the important role that both the principal and district leadership play in creating and sustaining quality professional development. The positive relationship that developed between the school district and university has replaced former skeptics with true partners for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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