



POWER PLAN

By Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

**HIGH SCHOOL
FINE-TUNES
INSTRUCTION TO
BUILD READING
STRENGTH AND
STAMINA**

“There’s still a question on the table. How can we get our students to read more and better? I mean, they read what they have to, and they’re doing OK. But how do we ensure that they are ready for what comes after high school?”

This comment, made by an English teacher at Health Sciences High & Middle College in San Diego, California, focused the conversation that a group of teachers were having as part of a whole-school professional development session in February 2012. Health Sciences High students performed adequately for the school to meet accountability demands, but, as a history teacher noted, “We don’t get breakthrough results. It’s not like they’re blowing us away with their understanding or their performance on assessments.”

Over the course of the meeting, the teachers set a goal to help students read more

and better. A task force of teachers set out to determine what staff and students would need to make this goal a reality.

Teachers regularly asked students to read texts, often from textbooks but also from primary source documents. Students interacted with each other in collaborative ways each day, in nearly every classroom. Collaborative learning was a part of the culture of the school and occurred regularly.

In addition, teachers were skilled in checking for understanding and adapting instruction accordingly. Teachers used exit slips, audience response systems, Foldables, online discussion boards, Quizlet, and a host of other ways to determine what students still needed to be taught. In other words, Health Sciences had a lot going for it.

The school serves about 600 students, about 70% of whom qualify for free lunch, 14% for special education services, and 82% speak a language in addition to English. While collaborative learning, checking for understanding, and adapting instruction are important prerequisites for high-quality literacy learning, we came to see that there is more that can be done. We needed a literacy plan that would ensure students' skills improved.

RAISING EXPECTATIONS

The first component of the task force's professional learning plan focused on teacher expectations of student reading levels. A reading assessment provides individual students' Lexile scores. Lexile estimates text complexity based on the quantitative aspects of a text, such as average sentence length, vocabulary, and average number of syllables. During this session, teachers examined student scores, grade-level averages, and overall school averages. Teachers then compared student reading profiles to the demands of several careers.

As one teacher noted, "Given they path they're on, lots of our students won't be prepared for work in hospital as a CNA [certified nursing assistant] much less go to college." Another asked, "Why didn't we know this before? I

thought our students were doing pretty well. I know that some don't make it in college. I thought that was maybe finances or family demands. But maybe they're really not ready." Another said, "I don't think that I expect enough from my students. I've never asked them to read texts that were this hard. I guess I wonder if they can handle it, but I'll never know unless I try."

In response, another said, "Our expectations have become the students' reality. We have to raise our expectations and then figure out how to get students there." This generated a lot of conversations about text selection and appropriate instruction with complex texts, which aligned perfectly with the direction of the professional learning planned for the staff.

BUILDING STRENGTH AND STAMINA

As a significant part of ensuring that students read more and read better, the focus for professional learning turned to building strength and stamina in reading. Much like an athlete who focuses on one aspect and neglects the other, students who fail to experience instructional strength building do not get much stronger, and their proficiency stagnates. Similarly, neglecting stamina can result in students who can read but don't persist.

Reading volume remains highly correlated with achievement. As a teacher noted, "You can't get good at something you don't do." The professional learning plan focused on three instructional additions to the already reasonably strong literacy efforts: think-alouds with complex texts, close readings with complex texts, and wide reading from a constrained choice of texts.

Think-alouds. As part of the professional development, which includes seminar meetings as well as in-class peer coaching, teachers read complex texts aloud and shared their thinking about these texts with their students. This is part of the effort to build students' strength in reading. By introducing students to complex texts, they begin to implement the behaviors, skills, or strategies modeled for them (Duffy, 2014).

The professional learning included discussion about the qualitative factors of text complexity, such as levels of meaning, structure, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands (see chart on p. 16). In these sessions, teachers analyzed sample texts collaboratively to determine which factors contributed to the complexity.

In doing so, teachers from across content areas learned how to analyze texts for teaching points. For example, a group of teachers analyzing a math word problem focused on the language conventions used in the text, whereas a group of science teachers analyzing an informational text focused on its structure and knowledge demands, specifically background knowledge and vocabulary.

The second aspect of this component addressed the teacher behavior of modeling while reading aloud. As a group, we decided that think-alouds should not last more than 10 minutes. We didn't have much evidence for this, other than personal experience. In their presentation, the group of teachers who recommended this said that they hoped that think-alouds with complex texts occurred daily, but that they "didn't eat up too much of the instructional time. Students need to hear expert thinking and then get to work to do something with that thinking."

As part of the sessions focused on think-alouds, teachers watched video clips of their colleagues and identified aspects that the videos, taken from across a number of content areas, shared in common. The faculty agreed to two aspects: "I" statements and metacognitive comments.

The effective think-alouds included teachers using self-reflective "I" statements to focus their students, rather than directive "we" or "you" statements. For example, while sharing a text about Navajo code talkers with her history students, a teacher said, "I noticed that the author provides some background knowledge about the war in the opening paragraphs. I know all of this information, so I don't really feel the need to take notes or reread."

Later, after reading the section of the text, the teacher said, "I noticed some important details about the code itself. I found this interesting, but it doesn't really help me answer my research question about the role that the code talkers played in the war, so I am going to move on."

After reading the third section, the teacher said, "In this section, I know that the author used cause-and-effect structures because he describes an event and then shows how the code talkers were successful. When I add up all of these causes and the positive effects they had, I see that the Allies are on their way to winning the war. This is the part of the text that I want to reread because I believe it will help me when I write my response to the research question I have selected."

Close reading. Another aspect of the strength-building effort focused on students' close reading of complex text. Although not new, close reading has regained attention in recent years (Boyles, 2013). Close reading involves a number of in-

structional moves for the teacher as well as specific actions for students.

One of the most important aspects of close reading is that it requires students to engage in collaborative conversations about the text. Students negotiate the meaning of the text with others in response to questions they, or their teachers, ask about the text. Of course, the text has to be sufficiently complex to warrant this type of instruction, not to mention the time investment.

In addition, close reading requires that students read and reread the text as they mine it for information and ideas. In doing so, they make annotations so that they can easily find parts of the text to discuss or to write about later.

The professional learning evolved from a focus on the routines of close reading to the types of supports that students require to read complex texts closely. At the outset, professional learning focused on appropriate annotations. We determined that all students would learn three common annotations:

- Underline central ideas, which requires that they learn the difference between key details and main ideas.
- Circle words and phrases that are confusing or unclear, which requires that they monitor their own comprehension, providing teachers with information about areas of concern.
- Write margin notes, in which important information is summarized and synthesized.

In addition, these early sessions focused on ways to encourage students to reread the text. The most common ways we identified included:

- Changing the task, such as inviting students to read to get the flow and then reread to annotate.
- Asking a really good question, such as "What support does Rilke provide to support his assertion that it is important to be 'lonely and attentive when one is sad?'"
- Pressing for evidence, such as, "In which paragraph did the author provide evidence for that?"

Over time, the focus shifted from the procedures to the process. We identify three phases useful in engaging students in close reading. Importantly, teachers regularly reported that students were using this three-phase process in their own reading. The phases allow student to engage more deeply with the text as they understand more about it. These phases are:

- **What does the text say?** This is the literal analysis of the text in which students focus on general understandings and key details. The answers to these questions are typically right on the page and would be general comprehension questions.
- **How does the text work?** This is the structural analysis of the text in which students focus on vocabulary, text structure, and author's craft (e.g. genre, narration, literary devices). The answers to these questions are not as obvious and require searching through the text.
- **What does the text mean?** This is the inferential analysis of the text in which students focus on logical interpretations,

QUALITATIVE FACTORS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY

COMPONENT	ASPECTS	WHEN A TEXT IS COMPLEX ...
Levels of meaning and purpose	Density and complexity	Many ideas come at the reader, or there are multiple levels of meaning, some of which are not clearly stated.
	Figurative language	There are many literary devices (e.g. metaphors, personification) or devices that the reader is not familiar with (e.g. symbolism, irony) as well as idioms or clichés.
	Purpose	Either the purpose is not stated or is purposefully withheld. The reader has to determine the theme or message.
Structure	Genre	The genre is unfamiliar or the author bends the rules of the genre.
	Organization	It does not follow traditional structures such as problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast, sequence or chronology, and rich descriptions.
	Narration	The narrator is unreliable, changes during the course of the text, or has a limited perspective for the reader.
	Text features	Fewer signposts such as headings, bold words, margin notes, font changes, or footnotes are used.
	Graphics	Visual information is not repeated in the text itself but the graphics or illustrations are essential to understanding the main ideas.
Language conventionality and clarity	Standard English and variations	Variations of standard English, such as regional dialects or vernaculars that the reader is not familiar with, are included.
	Register	It is archaic, formal, scholarly, or fixed in time.
Knowledge demands	Background knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her personal life experience.
	Prior knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond what he or she has been formally taught in school.
	Cultural knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her cultural experiences and may include references to archaic or historical cultures.
	Vocabulary	The words used are representations of complex ideas that are unfamiliar to the reader, or they are domain specific and not easily understood using context clues or morphological knowledge.

SOURCE: Frey & Fisher, 2013.

the arguments they can draw from the text, and the ways in which multiple texts work together. The answers to these questions require more complex thinking and connections.

Teachers began to select much more complex texts than they had used in the past, but finding appropriate texts to use became a challenge. As a science teacher said, “I’m more than willing to do this, but I’m not sure where to find the texts.” To address this, the professional learning task force devoted a session to locating appropriate texts worthy of close reading instruction. As part of each session, teachers collaborated to create text-dependent questions that could be used to facilitate collaborative conversations.

Wide reading. To build stamina, we needed to devote more class time to reading. Despite the evidence that spending time during class independently reading topically related texts im-

proved achievement (Fisher, Ross, & Grant, 2010), not a lot of this was happening at Health Sciences. The plan included devoting about 10 minutes a day, several days a week, with students engaged in reading texts related to the topics under investigation. Students were allowed to select the texts they wanted to read from a content-aligned collection of texts.

In some classes, teachers started every day with this reading time. In other classrooms, teachers devoted three days a week to this. In addition, all English teachers required students to read 80 informational articles a year (and pass a short quiz on each) and join a book club with other students reading texts that they selected. The book club texts were aligned with essential questions. Students nominated and voted on the questions each May for the following school year. Some of the past essential questions were:

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have stayed with the participants and have become reference points for their professional work. Powerful texts have staying power. Add professional dialogue and collaboration, and the learning begins to shape a knowledge base.

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Power plan

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- What sets your heart on fire?
- What does #YOLO mean to you?
- Avenge or forgive?
- Can you buy your way to happiness?
- Are humans naturally good or evil?
- Which is worse, failing or never trying?

Students exercise a lot of choice in reading. The content-area reading students do for 10 minutes several times a week allows them to choose texts from a collection, all of which are related to the topics they are studying. The book club texts are drawn from a list of at least 40 choices, each addressing the essential question.

In addition, the essential questions introduce inquiry into English language arts. There are no required whole-class novels that students must read. Rather, teachers read texts in class, modeling their thinking, and students read texts of their choice to discuss with classmates. Inquiry and choice are directly related to motivation. And motivation to read helps build stamina.

REALIZING RESULTS

Just 2½ years after implementing this professional learning plan, the school received a Title I academic achievement award because the performance of students living in poverty had doubled for two consecutive years. Only 106 schools in California (out of thousands) met this standard; only three others besides Health Sciences were high schools.

Internal tracking also suggested significant increases in students' literacy development. Before this schoolwide effort, Lexile scores increased on average about 65 points. The first full year of implementation of this plan, average Lexile scores

increased by 113 points from the September assessment to the June administration. In the second year of implementation, scores increased an average of 133 points — and that's on top of the first-year gains.

Student performance on state accountability tests showed improvement as well. For the first time, no 9th-grade students scored far below basic. The Academic Performance Index (the measure of progress used in California to monitor schools) rose above 800 for the first time, meeting the goal set by the state. Clearly, students were reading better, and a dual approach to building reading strength and reading stamina have contributed to these gains.

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