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Team Building Through Curriculum Development

BY SARA EMRICH PICKETT

This article describes the process by which a first-grade team and reading resource teacher in a private school in southeast Michigan collaborated to create a workable framework to use a variety of reading resources—and in the process built a powerful team. In addition to being successful in our first-grade program, this idea has applicability within and across grade levels and provides a structure from which teachers can learn from each other and pool professional resources.

During my second year teaching first grade I found myself working with an entirely new team: two new teachers and a new reading specialist. The reasons for the dramatic turnover of teachers in first grade that year were relocation, a transfer to a public school (and better pay), and a new mom who decided to stay home. One of my new teammates was fresh out of college; the other teacher was returning from raising a family with several years of intermediate teaching experience; the new reading resource teacher had early childhood teaching experience but was new to the resource position; I had been teaching kindergarten, first, and second grade for a total of 9 years in both public and private schools, but I had only 1 year of experience in first grade. We were all relative rookies in first grade.

A Team Challenge

Aside from a professional workshop on balanced literacy that we each attended after being hired, all of us were in different places in our careers and new to the school. There was a generous set of reading materials from which to work and performance indicators (a set of objectives) for our reference. We soon found that we needed a more comprehensive framework to bring together the many pieces of our program and time to incorporate new ideas and to share our wealth of knowledge from years of teaching. The following summer we were given the luxury of creating curriculum together.

In the two private schools in which I have worked, the curriculum was developed within the school over time—by the teachers. Usually there is an overview document, a scope and sequence, that connects the curriculum across the grades, and a veteran teacher in each grade who “remembers when,” and can bring new teachers on board. In this case, I was the “veteran” and had soaked up as much as I could from the outgoing teachers in the previous year. We also had a lot of new ideas, but little time during the school year to share and develop them.

Our first-grade reading program consisted of a combination of guided reading and phonics-based approach. We also used daily journal writing as part of our literacy workshop, a spelling program that focused on high-frequency words, and a traveling book bag program called Traveling Tales (Pickett, 2004). In my classroom, I included a multi-sensory approach using Orton-Gillingham methods (Greene, 1997) and *Making Words* (Cunningham & Hall, 1994). Our reading specialist utilized reading rods (Spann, 2001), poetry, and other reading games. Then our lower school head purchased a set of anthologies. We needed to determine how we could incorporate all of these materials into a coherent, logical curriculum.

Our Approach

Our team was ready to coordinate our resources and to create a workable whole so we decided to prepare for our second year together during the following

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summer. In a private school, there is often a fairly generous grade-level budget (compared to a \$25 gift from the PTO my first year in a public school) and a pool of professional development money available. When we approached the lower school head with our idea, she suggested that we apply for a summer grant. The funds for the grant would be drawn from a competitive professional development budget within the school. Our proposal, which included a small stipend for each participating teacher and registration fees for a summer workshop, was enthusiastically accepted by the grant committee. We scheduled time over the summer to meet. Our goals were to:

- Attend a summer workshop together.
- Gather our resources in one place.
- Brainstorm: Share our individual visions for the ideal reading program.
- Design a framework in which to organize our new program.

Consensus Building

Everyone had something to bring to the table. Among the team members, we had a wealth of information, from professional resources and experiences gathered from years of teaching and working with children to knowledge gained from numerous workshops and college courses. Our first task was deciding how to narrow the spectrum of possibilities and create a well-rounded program.

The four of us met over the course of several weeks in June in the headmaster's conference room, gathering all of our materials in one place. First we discussed our differing needs and desires for the outcome of our grant workshop; we all agreed that we wanted input into the final product. Our goals and teaching strategies were divergent and ranged from center-based learning and thematic instruction to differing philosophies of education. In the first few days, we looked at the vast array of materials we had to share and realized we would have to come to a consensus about what could be accomplished during the few weeks we had that summer. We had a new set of anthologies to work into our program, I wanted to teach the team some of the methods I had learned through an Orton-Gillingham course (Peter, 2000), and we all wanted to extend our understanding of balanced literacy by attending a summer workshop.

Where Do We Start?

It could have become an overwhelming task. Looking at the mountain of teacher resource books, textbooks, anthologies, and workbooks, it would have become easy to get discouraged. We decided, however, to design a workable framework on a timeline, with weekly reading goals divided into separate, but related parts. From phonics to literature-based strategies and materials, we had a place to incorporate all of the pieces of our program. It looked like a highly structured weekly calendar, organized by months. We also decided to purchase binders in which to collect lesson plans, poems, worksheets, and other materials organized in the order in which they would be taught.

With the structure in place, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work. We gathered the new anthologies and looked through every story to find the ones that would fit our framework. We used the computer lab to create the monthly calendars and bibliography and other components of the final product. We sorted the materials and assembled our binders (a set for each teacher). In the end, we created four volumes of resources for each of the team members. The calendar framework was placed in the front as a guideline for the materials that followed.

Each column on the schedule included specific skills or resources that we would be using. For example, the "Red words," words that don't follow the rules of phonics, would be introduced individually, using a 9-step procedure based on Orton-Gillingham research (Peter, 2000, pp. 50-59). Isolated phonics skills would be introduced in mini-lessons. Related consumable materials—i.e., *Explode the Code* (Hall, 1984), *Phonics in Context* (Heaton, 1997), and *Clues to Meaning* (Staman, 1987)—would be used as independent work to support these lessons. The newly acquired *Signatures* anthology series from Harcourt Brace (Farr, 1999) would be used in whole group instruction, immersing the students in literature-based activities. We agreed that the anthologies would support our phonics instruction and introduce other concepts of print and language structure by exposing the students to quality children's literature. The stories in the anthologies were drawn from outstanding trade books and would be used to address specific skills to accommodate the broad range of learners.

Professional Development

Another component of our summer grant work involved the Wright Group Guided Reading Program. This program was in place when we arrived, and all of us had training in using "running records" (Clay, 1993) and organizing the guided reading component of our program. What was missing was an overview of how to incorporate small-group instruction with whole group, individual, and independent work. In order to fully integrate the phonics and literature for a well balanced, differentiated reading program, we realized that we would need more training. The Balanced Literacy Program was a 3-day workshop designed to incorporate "Shared Reading and Writing" with centers and guided reading.

The workshop took place in August, several weeks before we returned to school. It energized all of us. What a difference it makes when all team members can attend a workshop together. We bounced ideas off of each other and wrote notes back and forth. A wish list began to emerge for the materials we would need to incorporate the "Shared Reading and Writing" components of the program. We contacted the regional sales representative to help us to gather some of the support materials we would need to get started, one of which was the teacher's guide, a critical missing component. Shortly after the workshop we placed an order for big books to implement shared reading in the fall—something that we had all wanted to do, and now we had the training and teachers' guides to implement this whole-group strategy.

Share with Colleagues

One of the requirements for the summer grant was that we share what we learned with our colleagues and with the grant committee. At one of the first faculty meetings, we shared our rationale, our framework, and our binders. It was an impressive but also intimidating display. The desire and motivation to reorganize an area of the curriculum had come from within our group and that is what enabled it to work so well.

We shared the information in November with the grant committee members, and they were also amazed at the amount of work we had accomplished in such a short period of time. As a result, we were asked to give a presentation at the Independent Schools Association of Central States conference the following year. So a year later we shared our program as a PowerPoint presentation with an appreciative group of first-grade teachers and reading specialists.

Broadening the Scope

We had such a positive experience from reworking our reading program that the following summer we attended a weeklong math workshop in Wellesley, Massachusetts. We revamped the math program using the calendar framework from the reading program and based our lessons on the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards. We created another set of binders for our team to use because we had discovered that it was a useful way to keep all of our resources in one place.

I have discovered that a summer grant, such as the one I've described, not only increases within-grade level teamwork but can be an invaluable way to build consensus across grade levels as well. At a private school near Baltimore, Maryland, I was part of a K-2 initiative to advance the writing curriculum. All of the teachers from kindergarten to 2nd grade were required to attend a 4-week curricular development workshop led by one of the dynamic first-grade teachers. We all read the same materials and worked within and across grade levels to create a scope and sequence and a series of lessons from which we all worked.

Conclusion

The original intent of the summer grant was to share information, organize our reading instruction, learn new instructional techniques, and include all first-grade teachers as well as the reading resource teacher. An unexpected positive outcome of this summer partnership was a consolidated team. Our desire to make sense of the curriculum and share ideas had united us as colleagues over several summers. We really learned to work together and were on the same page (literally and figuratively).

The materials mentioned in the references and other resources sections are what we had available to us at the time. It is not meant as an endorsement of any particular program. We were striving to create a truly balanced literacy program, using materials from both a phonics approach and from a literature-based approach, to best meet the needs of all of our students. I believe that the process of collaboration is much more important than the particular programs or materials that a group has available.

Curriculum development as a team-building activity encourages buy-in by the faculty and increases morale. It could also encourage teachers to remain on the faculty, thus decreasing faculty turnover. The

carryover from year to year builds on itself. This summer grant was exciting and challenging in a number of ways. It allowed us to share materials, gain new perspectives, and most importantly solidify the first-grade program. It was well worth the time and effort involved.

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