



SUMMARY

Join a group of early childhood literacy coaches in New York City as they spend two days learning more about data-driven planning and instruction.

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Facilitating Professional Conversations:

Data-Driven Planning and Instruction for the Early Childhood Classroom

As New York City

UFT Teacher Center staff members, we encourage the development of professional learning communities. One aspect of our work is facilitating professional conversations such as the two-day series on data-driven instruction that we describe in this article.

In the UFT Teacher Center collaboration with Region 5 (Districts 19, 23 and 27), we have provided monthly work sessions on early childhood literacy for coaches this year.

On a rainy Friday morning in New York City, 55 early childhood literacy coaches sat in two large rooms, singing “Willoughby, Wallaby, Woo.” While it might seem hard to believe, the singing was a part of a professional development series on assessment and data-driven instruction. We developed the theme of this series in response to conversations we had on assessment with literacy coaches. After the series, these coaches — who support teachers in grades K-3 — would be able to use this material with teachers in their schools.

Literacy Development, Adult Learning and Professional Development Standards

Our design and planning of the data-driven work series was grounded in best instructional practices in early childhood literacy, literacy development, adult learning and professional development standards.

Literacy development is a multi-layered process that children move through at different rates and points of time, Jeanne Chall wrote (1995). Regie Routman (2003), among others, names the process of literacy development a “continuum” while Chall has described the process as unfolding in predictable stages. Today, most early literacy practitioners and theorists agree that children move through both literacy development and the developmental stages of early childhood at their own rate.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2003), teachers of literacy need to know the developmental expectations for their students

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and the stages through which they will move. Then, in order to facilitate their growth and individualize instruction, teachers must use ongoing assessment in the instructional cycle (assessment, planning, instruction and evaluation).

A major formal component of early childhood literacy assessment in New York City, the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System 2 — ECLAS 2 — was used as the focus assessment in the professional development series. New York City mandates that teachers administer ECLAS 2 to students in kindergarten through grade 3 in fall and spring. Developed specifically to enable classroom teachers to make literacy instructional decisions, ECLAS 2 focuses on the five essential elements of reading — phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension. It also includes listening, writing and oral expression. ECLAS 2 (2003, CTB McGraw-Hill) aligns with the

research used in *Reading First*, New York State’s No Child Left Behind Act initiative.

Informal conversations with coaches and teachers helped us to frame a question for our series: How could data from ECLAS 2 be used more effectively to inform and plan instruction—for a whole class, small groups within a class and one-on-one? Since our goal was to impact positively the professional conversations on data-driven instruction by coaches and teachers, we realized the importance of a second question as well: How could we apply effective coaching techniques to create the conditions for those conversations? We kept in mind that we were planning for adults-as-learners.

Professional development standards of the National Staff Development state that if professional development is to be successful, it needs to employ what works with adults in learning situations, including opportunities to

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AUTHOR NOTES

The New York City UFT Teacher Center is a collaborative project of the United Federation of Teachers, the New York State Department of Education, the New York City Department of Education, participating schools, districts, school support organizations and metropolitan-area cultural institutions. UFT Teacher Center promotes teacher excellence and student achievement. Drawing on current research and best practices, the program’s major goal is to increase the academic achievement of all students, including those in our lowest performing schools. Online: www.ufttc.org.

Facilitating Professional Conversations: Data-Driven Planning and Instruction for the Early Childhood Classroom

Developed specifically to enable classroom teachers to make literacy instructional decisions, ECLAS 2 focuses on the five essential elements of reading — phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension. It also includes listening, writing and oral expression.

see, try out, discuss, practice, write about and group problem-solve, (1995, NSDC, 29-30).

Research about effective professional development and adult learners has been collected over many years. We became determined that our series would use the following three goals from the NSDC Standards, (1995, NSDC, p. 9):

- We would utilize effective modeling.
- We would offer practice on real-life examples.
- We would provide classroom instructional tools and strategies.

Day 1: Data-Driven Planning and Instruction in the Early Childhood Classroom: A Professional Conversation

We structured the series using our three goals, starting with modeling a conversation by coaches who were looking at data. We used a sample of ECLAS 2 assessment results — a second-grade summary sheet from the ECLAS 2 assessment conducted during the previous fall. The summarized data showed the students' performance levels in relation to the benchmarks in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading and oral expression, listening and writing, and spelling conventions.

We asked the coach-participants to think about three questions based on the data:

- What does the data tell me about the whole-class levels and what do these levels mean for whole-class instructional needs?
- What does the data tell me about how I might group my students for instruction?
- What does the data tell me about the instructional needs of the students whose levels currently fall on either end of the continuum, separating them as individuals from any other students?

We then modeled a conversation that coaches might have in order to illustrate a process of analyzing the summary sheet.

Coach 1 (Leslie): They all have passed the phonemic awareness level. They all seem to be clustered around the level 5-6 spelling benchmarks in phonics. This means that they have almost achieved mastery of one-syllable writing patterns, word families and blends. I guess we can build on this as we plan next steps.

Coach 2 (Deborah): But look in the category of decoding. The benchmark levels range from 2 to testing out at 6. That's quite a range. I think that really speaks to the grouping needs in this class. According to ECLAS 2, this category of phonics requires the use of more complex patterns and conventions to decode both familiar and unfamiliar words.

Coach 1 (Leslie): I guess we'll probably see a similar range when we view the levels in the categories in reading and oral expression and when we look at those, we can probably make some grouping decisions.

Continuing the Conversation: Practicing on Real-Life Examples

After modeling what an initial analysis of the ECLAS 2 data might sound like for the coaches, they had an opportunity to look at the summary sheets from their own schools. In table groups or with partners, they began to analyze the data. To guide their thinking, we gave them the three questions on a note-taking sheet.

At first, there was silence as they began to study the data. Then a buzz began to emerge. We listened to the conversations as the buzz in the room grew. Partners and table groups began to share with each other what they noticed. We heard one conversation:

Coach A: "The students in this kindergarten class need more instruction to build their phonemic awareness. Most of them did not master the syllable clapping. Clearly, the whole class can use instruction on this." (In syllable clapping the teacher says a word. Students repeat the word, clapping at the start of each syllable.)

Coach B (responds): "That's true, but only five students didn't master the rhyme recognition portion of the

test. (Rhyme recognition is identifying and generating rhymes.) The teacher can give small-group instruction to them and include rhyming activities in the learning center."

Other coaches mentioned decoding, reading sight words, letter writing, reading comprehension, spelling, and blending sounds. Other observations included strengths of the students and what they perceived as their needs, (i.e., skills that needed to be taught).

As this type of exchange took place throughout the room, we continued to prompt and ask guided questions to keep the thinking and conversations going as coaches directed their own learning, engaged in problem solving and made focused decisions about instruction. All of their decisions and conversations were based on the ECLAS 2 data collected from the assessment. These meaningful conversations would serve as models for their conversations later with colleagues at their schools.

We finally brought the whole group together to share some of their findings and talk about the experience. They found the opportunity to study the data with colleagues enlightening and valuable. They discovered more about their students because they were able to talk, listen and share with others.

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METHODOLOGY

Punctuating a Point

We did a shared reading lesson using oversized text from an old, familiar big book. The text was displayed without any punctuation. We asked the participants to read the text exactly as presented (without the punctuation). Next, we asked them to help us put the punctuation back into the text and then to read it fluently. We asked the participants how they might adapt this activity if they had only a small group of students needing this practice. Two coaches suggested the same activity in a learning center with overheads, instead of the big book.

Facilitating Professional Conversations: Data-Driven Planning and Instruction for the Early Childhood Classroom

We have learned that, in order for true transfer of learning to take place, adult learners need the opportunity to see and practice what they need to learn.

References were made to what the students needed to learn and what instructional format would be most effective — whole group, small group, or individual instruction. Many of the coaches expressed a similar thought: While some of the teachers in their schools were struggling with grouping their students for instruction, the coaches felt that studying the class summary sheet would give them a clear illustration of how grouping possibilities were indicated just by studying where needs clustered.

Day 2: Providing Classroom Instructional Tools and Strategies

Having completed the important work of analyzing the data from ECLAS 2 on Day 1, we were now more informed about what the students needed. For the remainder of the series we focused on a myriad of instructional strategies teachers could use to address the needs of their students. Just as we used three questions to guide analysis of the data, we would now use those questions again to guide discussion of instructional strategies. We asked the coaches to keep in mind the instructional needs they gleaned from the data and, in grade-alike groups, to brainstorm the instructional strategies they could use to address the needs of the whole group, small group and the individual students who would need customized support.

We charted a long list of the strategies the coaches and teachers were already using. Our series culminated with coaches modeling and practicing new strategies that would reinforce and develop the skills and knowledge students would need.

We have learned that, in order for true transfer of learning to take place, adult learners need the opportunity to see and practice what they need to learn. (Fogarty, 2004, p. 7). We began the journey of modeling and practicing various instructional strategies by modeling a strategy that builds reading fluency. We selected a fluency strategy to model because when we looked at the second-grade class data, most of the students were clustered around level 4 and level 5, indicating a need for support in this area.

Reading fluency means reading quickly, effortlessly and efficiently with good, meaningful expression, says Rasinski. It is the ability to simultaneously decode and understand what you are reading. He mentions several ways to build fluency: model good oral reading, provide oral support for readers, encourage fluency through phrasing and offer plenty of practice opportunities, (Rasinski, 2003). We modeled a strategy called *Pausing with Punctuation*, which demonstrates the importance of punctuation in reading fluency, (Ellery, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

Staff Development

The Staff Development Standards outlined by NSDC state that all staff development should be designed to improve the learning of all students. Staff development should provide educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate as well as to use learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal. One of our intended goals was that these coaches would walk away from this two-day series with a deeper understanding of the importance of looking closely at data to make decisions about instruction. From their feedback, we felt confident that we had given them the tools and the practice that they needed to do this with teachers at their schools.

Once again it was the coaches' turn to practice with real-life examples. They were asked to think about their students and the ECLAS 2 data that they had just analyzed. We distributed a variety of books, poems and short texts and a packet containing various strategies. They were to choose the appropriate method to fit an instructional need or needs of the class, which they determined in their analysis, and then discuss and record how this activity might be used throughout the reading block. Each table group would then present their lesson on an instructional strategy.

As we surveyed the group, we observed coaches engrossed in planning for data-based instruction based on their review and analysis of data. The second-grade group worked on fluency while the kindergarten group had come up with new ways to use nursery rhymes to reinforce phonemic awareness.

Hence, the reason for singing "Willoughby, Wallaby, Woo" on a rainy Friday afternoon, which by the way, is a wonderful way of increasing the students' phonemic awareness.

Reflecting on the Series

Giving coaches and teachers a forum and a structure for studying data together would definitely be something that they would implement back at their schools. The coaches wanted teachers to realize what they

now realized: Collecting the data is only a start. Analyzing and understanding what it tells us will help us make the instructional decisions so necessary to impact students and students' improved achievement.

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