

Going farther, together: completing literacy professional development as peers

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Abstract

Purpose – In the Fall of 2019, Marietta College and Marietta City Schools, in Marietta, Ohio, piloted a program to improve literacy knowledge and pedagogy through completing LETRS training, a two-year literacy professional development based on the science of reading, as peers.

Design/methodology/approach – This project was aligned to effective professional development research that states better trainings are content-specific, allow support and collaboration and are ongoing throughout the school year (Blank and de las Alas, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardener, 2017) and respect participants work/life schedules (Bigsby and Firestone, 2017).

Findings – Some benefits of this collaboration were that teachers, college faculty and teacher candidates were able to communicate more effectively about literacy because we all had shared background knowledge and spoke the same language when it came to literacy. We were also able to make more meaningful clinical experiences for our teacher candidates because we created a stronger connection between the knowledge and pedagogy taught in students' literacy courses and the practices they saw in real classrooms. Inservice teachers saw the college faculty and teacher candidates as strong partners, which greatly strengthened our clinical preparation.

Practical implications – The paper includes implications for the development of stronger partnerships between teacher preparation program faculty and school partnership faculty and more authentic and meaningful clinical experiences for teacher candidates.

Originality/value – This project shows how meaningful partnerships and clinical experiences can be created when partnership faculty are seen as peers.

Keywords Science of reading, Partnerships, Teacher preparation, Educator preparation program

Paper type Case study

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

In the Fall of 2019, Marietta College faculty began collaborating with our partnership school faculty at Washington Elementary to attend science of reading trainings together. The science of reading is a collection of research from various fields that explains how best to teach reading and writing according to how our brains are wired and how to better assist struggling students (Moats, 2020; *The Reading League [TRL]*, 2022). Our goal was to be equals during this journey as we worked to provide the best possible clinical experience for our teacher candidates and improve reading instruction for the elementary students. This



joint training leveled the playing field and made us better collaborators and communicators as we all learned together.

We started our Literacy Alliance with Washington Elementary with the vision of providing our teacher candidates with experiences that will prepare them to be literacy leaders in their schools, supporting Washington Elementary teachers in their literacy efforts, and, most importantly, increasing elementary students' literacy skills.

We further committed to the following principles with the faculty: We will work toward the goal of improving elementary students' reading skills and improving the teaching skills of Marietta College teacher candidates, provide you with professional development and access to our college resources (i.e. Lego literacy kits, manipulatives, books and technology), develop a true partnership, recognizing that you are the teaching professional and have an equal voice and role in this process, be flexible in this process (student learning must come first, we agree to make changes if a particular program component or an Marietta College teacher candidate is not contributing to this goal), recognize all the hard work you do for elementary students, families and our teacher candidates and contribute toward your current literacy practices.

In order to achieve our goals, college faculty needed to learn how to provide effective training, what training the teachers needed, how to align our literacy courses with the information learned in these trainings and how to create a clinical experience that bridged the gap often found between educator preparation courses and "real" classrooms.

Creating effective professional development

Hearing the term "professional development" does not inspire positive thoughts or associations for most people. At best, it means a new idea to implement in the classroom and a free lunch. At worst, it feels like one more task added to a teacher's already busy day where they are expected to implement the latest fad in education. As the education pendulum swings back and forth, teachers often feel trapped and powerless to the "whims" of their administration. Not all professional development opportunities are created equal; however, when done well, they can be truly transformative.

There is a plethora of research on how to design professional development opportunities that are impactful to teachers and their students. [Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardener \(2017\)](#) "define effective professional development as structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes" (p. v). Their research found six components that lead to effective professional development. These components include a focus on specific content, collaboration among participants and trainers, best practices modeled by the trainer, coaching and support, especially during the implementation stage and adequate time to learn the content, practice it and implement it. [Blank and de las Alas \(2009\)](#) conducted a meta-analysis on professional development and student achievement, and they found the most effective trainings lasted at least six months and included support for the teachers in all stages of learning and implementing content-specific training.

Teachers need to feel as though their work and knowledge are respected during trainings. [Little \(1993\)](#) recommends grounding professional development opportunities in "a view of teachers not only as classroom experts, but also as productive and responsible members of a broader professional community..." (p. 133). They should be seen and treated as professionals who have dedicated themselves to student success and who have deep knowledge of their profession. These trainings should also relate to the "big-picture perspective on the purposes and practices of schooling" (p. 138). Teachers should understand how this training fits in with the curriculum and aligns with the district's vision of student success. [Sandholtz \(2002\)](#) also recommends that teachers are involved in the training and have a chance to contribute to the knowledge. They need to actively participate in all levels of the training ([Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002](#)).

Attendance of professional development opportunities is not always compulsory. Therefore, teachers must volunteer their time and energy to the offered training. Bigsby and Firestone (2017) outlined why teachers volunteer or opt out of these opportunities. Teachers who do not participate, even if they would like to attend, cited time as the biggest factor. They already felt like they had limited time to prep for their daily work, so they did not see how they would fit training and implementing a new strategy into an already busy schedule. They also cited needing to care for families after work hours, which is when the trainings were offered. The researchers recommended considering teachers' time and helping them maintain a better work–life balance. The trainings should clearly state the usefulness to participants and their students and show compassion for teachers' work and life schedules. They also recommended offering a series of professional development opportunities targeted at specific content teachers instead of offering one-size-fits-all trainings that are aimed at the entire faculty. Teachers tend to not volunteer for trainings that they do not see as pertinent to their areas of expertise.

Finally, we examined best practices in school and university partnerships. As members of the community, we felt our college was responsible for meeting the educational needs of our area and adapting to changes in curricula. We felt it was our responsibility to share our expertise with local teachers to better serve the youngest members of our community as well as our teacher candidates. We understood this training and the attendant resources would help build a stronger community for all (Broadbent & Brady, 2013; Holland & Ramaley, 2008; Ma & Green, 2023). We wanted our partnership school to see us as an advocate for their faculty and their students.

Identifying and implementing literacy needs

Based on the research of effective professional development and how to encourage teachers to volunteer, I partnered with two colleagues in my department to learn what our partnership schools needed and how to best deliver it. In 2017, Ohio's Department of Education established a Literacy Team who created, and later published, a plan to raise literacy achievement for all students across the state. One of the many recommendations to meet the literacy needs of all students was to increase teachers' knowledge of literacy through professional development centered around the science of reading to bridge the gap between literacy research and literacy practices in classrooms. Teacher preparation programs in Ohio at this time were not required to be aligned with the science of reading; therefore, many teachers were unaware of the science behind teaching students to read and how to best assist struggling readers. This omission was not the fault of the teachers but rather the fault of educator preparation programs. The Ohio Deans Compact, an organization that supports literacy and math for all learners through innovations in teacher preparation programs and partnerships between institutions of higher education (IHEs) and schools, offered incentives to rectify this knowledge gap. They offered a variety of grant opportunities to support IHEs if they aligned their courses with the science of reading and partnered with local schools to build literacy capacity together.

In 2019, Marietta College started the Literacy Alliance with one elementary school from one of our partnership districts. Together, we agreed the college would provide professional development trainings through Ohio's Department of Education, and they would be attended by both college faculty and faculty from the partnership school. The college set up two sessions with one of Ohio's literacy leaders and provided dinner and childcare for all participants. A meal and childcare would help ease the burden on teachers, who were also primary caregivers at home. These initial trainings introduced participants to the science of reading with an emphasis on the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Rope. These trainings also introduced a variety of resources and materials to participants if they wished to

learn more about literacy instruction. Participants shared frustrations with their inability to help all readers and their need for more training and support.

In 2020, the Deans Compact offered to fund Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training for teachers and institutions of higher education (IHEs) partners. LETRS was “[d]eveloped by Dr Louisa Moats and leaders in the field of literacy. Lexia LETRS teaches the skills needed to master the foundational and fundamentals of reading and writing instruction—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and written language” (Lexia LETRS®, 2023, para. 1). This training met the requirements for Ohio’s Plan to Raise Literacy after a study conducted by the [Ohio Department of Education Office for Exceptional Children \(2020\)](#) reported LETRS training increased teachers’ knowledge of reading instruction, and it also reported students with LETRS trained teachers improved in curriculum-based measures. LETRS would later be listed as a professional development that met the dyslexia guidelines and Governor DeWine’s Executive Order. At this point, our college faculty were working with one school from one of our partnership districts. Although we had the support of the principal for recruiting teachers for LETRS training, it was not mandatory. The principal could encourage teachers to sign up, but they could not require it. Because this training included a two-year commitment that included approximately 64 h of independent, online-course work, 48 h of face-to-face training and 96 h of homework without extra time off or extra pay, this was a huge ask. However, we were able to offer some benefits to volunteers. Through a series of grants, we were able to set up a support network. Participants were grouped to serve as support and accountability partners. We checked in with the pairs periodically and offered support if they needed a time management plan or help navigating the training. Additional grant money was procured later to purchase materials that aligned with the training and offer a small stipend for teachers who completed the full course. The materials purchased for the teachers were the same materials purchased for the college literacy courses. Therefore, teacher candidates would be trained with the same high-quality resources they would be seeing in their clinical experiences. This would increase their confidence in their clinical experiences and increase their effectiveness when working with classroom students.

The first cohort consisted of ten teachers from Washington Elementary and three Marietta College faculty members. Although the training was intense, all participants reported learning valuable information and understanding reading at a deeper level. However, they did report that time was a factor. This training absorbed a large quantity of their personal time that they would normally have used for lesson planning and time with friends and family. They also noted that the face-to-face trainings, although virtual, took place during the school day and substitutes were difficult to find. Moving forward, solutions to the substitute teacher shortage would need to be explored if we wanted to continue offering this training.

In addition to LETRS training, Marietta College also revised the 12-h reading core. Using model syllabi provided by a literacy organization, all four educator preparation literacy courses were aligned to the science of reading to reflect the knowledge and strategies learned in LETRS. This was a key task because it rectified the literacy knowledge gap in our educational preparation program and aligned with the knowledge current teachers were having to take training to gain. An example of our realignment is when we took out any materials that promoted the three cueing systems or running records. We did not want to include any material that implied guesswork was part of reading instruction. We also included materials on how our brains learn to read, so our teacher candidates would know the how and the why of teaching reading. The hope was that in the future, our graduates would not have to take additional science of reading training after they graduated. Future employers would see our graduates as assets since their educator preparation program was built on the science of reading.

Increasing teacher participation

Other changes from Ohio's Department of Education, which included new dyslexia guidelines that required teachers to be involved with professional developments that target identifying students with dyslexia and interventions grounded in the science of reading, led us to see the need for more teachers to be LETRS trained. The dyslexia guidelines were issued in 2022, and kindergarten and first grade teachers were required to meet these professional development guidelines by the following school year, and all teachers are required to have this training completed by the 2025–2026 school year. In addition, Governor DeWine of Ohio issued an executive order requiring schools to align their literacy instruction with the science of reading in 2023.

Our college faculty predicted more teachers would want and need LETRS training; however, we still wanted to abide by the research of effective professional development and honor the feedback from the first cohort of participants. Before writing the grant for LETRS training for the next cohort, we made an appointment to discuss the training with the district's superintendent and curriculum director. We explained to them we would be willing to write the grant to purchase LETRS materials and trainings, but we would need to know the district was committed to this and would require faculty participation. We also discussed the need to pair our field students with teachers who were trained or are currently participating in the training. We wanted our teacher candidates paired with teachers who knew the science of reading and were actively using the strategies and knowledge in their classrooms. This pairing would help eliminate the gap often found between what teacher candidates learn during their educational preparation programs and the strategies and knowledge they observe in their clinical experiences. We also agreed that our teacher candidates, who were deemed qualified by the district, would substitute for their cooperating teachers during LETRS training. The teacher would still be in the building, but they would have a trusted teacher candidate supporting their class. This worked out well for all groups. The district was able to receive required training for free, a solution to the substitute problem and teacher candidates who were educated in the science of reading. Marietta College received strong clinical placements for our literacy students, whose cooperating teachers had the same knowledge, learned similar teaching strategies and possessed the same materials and resources they used within their courses. Teacher candidates reported seeing instruction in their clinicals that they learned about in their courses. They were able to see a direct tie between what they were learning in college and what was being implemented in a real classroom. It was a win-win for the college, the school and the students. Because this solution was helping all entities, our next cohort was expanded to 15 teachers from three different schools in the district.

Current cohort

Due to the success of the first two cohorts and the requirements of the state, other partnership districts were interested in collaborating. Starting in the fall, a third cohort of 50 teachers began training. The participants consisted of 28 teachers from the original district, nine from a second district and 13 from a third district. Over the next two years, a total of 75 teachers from our partnership schools will be trained in the science of reading. This allows our teacher candidates to not only complete their literacy clinical experiences with LETRS-trained teachers but also complete internships with LETRS-trained teachers. Cooperating teachers and their students will have the benefit of an additional educator in their class who understands how to teach reading based on research and how to assist students who struggle.

Sharing our experiences

This has been a truly transformative experience that shows how a true partnership can look between a college and local school districts. Our college faculty have continued to offer professional development opportunities that benefit our partnership schools and ourselves and have even started including our pre-service teachers. For example, we hosted two speakers in the spring who discussed effective tutoring. In addition to inviting neighboring IHEs, we also invited faculty from our partnership districts as well as our current students. This allowed all participants to be seen as colleagues who are all part of the same profession, albeit at different stages. These trainings have had a positive impact on our teacher candidates and partners, as can be seen in the testimonies given by participants.

One of the biggest sentiments from participants who provided testimonies was the advancement to their learning and practices. For example, one participant noted the following:

LETRS. . . was offered to our staff a couple of years ago through a grant led by professors at Marietta College. This grant was designed to help our teachers build a strong foundation in the science of reading through LETRS training. I was part of Cohort I, and I can't even begin to emphasize the impact it has had on my teaching and the teaching of my colleagues.

Another participant was also grateful for the chance to further her knowledge and skills. She said:

I am 2018 graduate from Marietta College, and it has been wonderful to continue my education for teaching with the same college. Marietta College's partnership has allowed me to be trained in LETRS with no cost to me. LETRS has changed how I teach reading and phonics, and it was because of Marietta College reaching out and giving us this opportunity.

Leadership in the district was excited to share the following:

In the short time we have partnered with Marietta College, our teacher capacity in teaching and learning has grown tremendously. It has helped excite our staff's movement into the science of reading and really looking into their craft more seriously, searching for what is ultimately the best (evidence-based) practices for our students.

In addition to teachers feeling more confident and knowledgeable, they also reported seeing gains in their students' abilities. One participant remarked:

Our students are able to succeed as we now understand how to build those reading and writing skills to mastery for every student. The foundational and fundamentals of reading and writing helped our district and students excel in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, written language, comprehension, and most importantly, creating a love of reading in every student.

Another echoed this sentiment with the following:

I truly appreciate the efforts of and partnership with Marietta College. They have given me more chances to continue to better my teaching skills and increase student success in the Marietta City School district.

A participant even observed that their schools' progress was being recognized at the state level:

Without the partnership, I don't believe we would be as far along as we are now, and we would have many students who would not have benefitted from our staff's growth as professional educators. Our school's growth was even noticed at the state level when the governor of Ohio, Mike Dewine, came to town to visit and listen to the story of the partnership and the work our teachers were doing at the school. It was a very exciting time for our community!

Finally, participants also liked the change they saw in teacher candidates that served in their classrooms. One testimony stated:

It has been great for [college] students for just regular placements and for student teaching to know and understand the techniques along with the education world language. Students [from the college] are able to see the Marietta City Schools teachers put the learned techniques into place instead of just learning about them in a classroom. I truly appreciate the efforts of and partnership with Marietta College.

Moving forward, our college faculty have three recommendations for any group looking to partner with their school districts to implement effective professional development. First, find out what schools need, want or are required to have. Then, make an appointment with the superintendent or curriculum director to discuss offerings. Teachers have more engagement and success if the administration supports the initiative. Second, budget money for resources. Teachers have a harder time implementing the great techniques they learn if they don't have the materials in their classroom. We recommend purchasing the same materials for partnership faculty as you do for the higher education faculty. During the coursework, educator preparation programs can demonstrate how to utilize the materials. This will prepare the pre-service teachers for their clinical experiences because they will be familiar with the materials and how to best use them. Finally, even the playing field by being a participant side-by-side with partnership teachers and teacher candidates. It is easier to plan and support students if all members are speaking the same language and learning the same knowledge. The gap between colleges and partnership schools is quickly fixed when both groups see themselves as truly in this together with the same goal of student success.

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