

The Next Step in Professional Development

By Jennifer A. Snow

If you walked into a session of professional learning for a group of Reading Recovery teachers, you would see one teacher with one student, teaching a lesson behind a one-way-glass. On the other side of the glass would be a group of 5-10 Reading Recovery teachers, watching the lesson, making comments, and asking questions. A Teacher Leader would be facilitating the discussion, asking questions about what is being observed in the lesson. The other teachers would be making comments related to what they know about early reading and writing behaviors. There may be some discussion about what has been read in *Literacy Lessons* (Clay, 2016) and what Marie Clay found in her early childhood literacy research. Observation, reflection, and discussion tied to research and pedagogy are all cornerstones of Reading Recovery, a one-on-one, intense reading and writing intervention for first grade students originally developed by Marie Clay (Clay, 2016). Teachers learning by teaching alongside other teachers is the foundation of what has made Reading Recovery a highly successful intervention.

With all my years of teaching experience, I have come to understand the importance of growth in my teaching knowledge. It has become clear to me that my students' success in my classroom is a direct reflection of my teaching. I need to take control of my professional growth to meet the changing needs of my students. I have been a teacher for twenty years, spending most of my time in the primary grades in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. After nine years of being in the classroom, I trained as a Reading Recovery teacher and taught Reading Recovery and small intervention reading and writing groups. When I first began my teaching career my school district provided staff in-service days to allow teachers to learn from experts brought into our school. In many school districts, school-led professional development has become a thing of the past. Districts are no longer committing money and time away from students to bring experts in the field of literacy to the teachers for growth. We have to seek it out ourselves. Because of this, I have found myself thinking more and more about the last nine years of professional learning experiences I have had through Reading

Recovery. The first year of training for a Reading Recovery teacher is learning how to observe students' reading and writing to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses, and teach and respond to students during in-the-moment teaching. Reading Recovery teachers strive to gain expertise in enabling the literacy learning of the highest-needs students in first grade. What makes Reading Recovery training stand out from other professional learning is the amount of support Reading Recovery teachers receive not only during their first year of training but also during each following year as a Reading Recovery teacher. There is a strong belief in observation, collaboration, and reflection within a community of other teacher learners. These experiences have helped me to realize the importance of teachers relying on the same tools used in Reading Recovery to enable our own learning: observation, collaboration, and reflection. We may have to start this initiative on our own.

In this article, I argue teachers need to initiate our own professional learning journey that is centered on personal goals and includes peer observation, mentor text, mentor scaffolding, and authentic reflection. The importance of collaboration and focusing on practice are also noted in the professional development research literature. I will also offer five tips on how teachers can identify an area of growth in their own teaching and work with peers and mentors to improve in that area of literacy. Additionally, I will share how I have implemented these tips into my own classroom and teaching.

What We Know About Professional Development

Fountas and Pinnell (2020) argue that there has been a major shift in school improvement towards individual schools taking on a model of continuous professional development, rather than quick fixes. They believe that having this type of model within individual schools creates trust among teachers because there is strong collaboration and talking about what teachers are learning and thinking. They also believe that when teachers participate in professional development, they use responsive teaching practices which places students at the center of their teaching. According to Darling-Hammond & Richardson,

(2009), professional development should be collaborative among teachers and should help teachers learn new knowledge, apply it to their classrooms, and reflect on their experiences with other teachers. Research has shown that when teachers from the same grade or school participate together in professional development, there is improved teacher knowledge and changes are made in classroom practice (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Five Tips to Start Your Own Professional Development

1. *Personal Goals*

The first step in starting your own study is to reflect on your teaching and areas that you feel you need to know more about. Ask yourself, “What area in my literacy teaching could benefit from extended study?” Because focusing on all areas at the same time can be overwhelming, picking one area for your professional growth is important. Choosing one area allows teachers to become experts in that area and begin to view student learning through a different lens (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Examples of areas/goals for literacy professional development

- Improving student writing in other disciplines.
- Teaching students to be more fluent readers.
- Improving high frequency word knowledge.
- Classroom management for literacy centers.
- Learning about running records and how to use them in your decision making.
- Motivating students to read.
- Organizing your classroom library.

As a classroom teacher, *it takes time to be great at teaching all subjects*. teaching all subjects, each year I would put pressure on myself to be better at teaching everything. I realized that achieving this goal was often overwhelming and not attainable all at once. The summer before the start of the school year, when I was to teach first grade, I was excited yet overwhelmed. I knew that there were areas in my literacy teaching where I needed to grow and learn best practices. I decided to tackle one area the summer before my fourth year of teaching: guided reading. I wanted to learn more about how to assess students, place them in instructional groups, choose

books and lessons, and how to manage the other students in my classroom when I was meeting with groups. This seemed like a manageable goal for me that school year.

2. *Peer Observation*

Once you have identified an area of professional growth in your teaching, talk with other teachers and see if you can get a group together to do some study and professional reading together. This will be your cohort of peers to plan, bounce ideas off of, study, and observe each other. Your group can consist of one other colleague, 3-4 colleagues, or the whole building. I suggest that if you have over four members in your group, choose someone in that group to act as facilitator to keep the group on track. Teachers learn best from other teachers. Here’s how you can make that happen:

- Speak with your building principal and ask him/her to announce this new venture during a staff meeting or in the staff newsletter.
- Send out an email to your colleagues letting them know that you want to start a study group asking them to join you.
- Put a survey in colleagues’ mailboxes, asking them if they are interested in a study group and what area(s) they are interested in studying.
- Talk with your colleagues after school or during lunch time.

With the goal in mind to improve in my knowledge and teaching in guided reading groups, I approached other first-grade teachers in the building. I talked with them about my idea to do a book study and collaborate to improve guided reading in my classroom. They were both on board with my idea and wanted to form a group. As others learned about what we were doing, three kindergarten and two second grade teachers also joined. The two Reading Recovery teachers agreed to join to facilitate our book discussions.

3. *Mentor Text*

It is important to seek out articles or a book to do a book study with your cohort. Experts in the field of literacy have written many books and articles for teachers to use in the classroom. Some authors that have inspired me are Jan Richardson,

Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas, Debbie Miller, Lucy Caulkins, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Peter Johnston. Articles in journals *The Reading Teacher*, *The Phi Delta Kappan*, and *Educational Leadership*, are easily accessible through the internet and written in a practical way to help teachers learn the latest research and best practices for teaching literacy. (see figure 2 for other articles) These resources, and many others, provide teachers with techniques that can be implemented immediately in the classroom. Decide on dates to meet and what you will read each time. Plan out methods teachers will try before the next meeting.

Now that we had a peer group and a goal to learn more about guided reading groups, the next step was to look for a mentor text to guide us in our inquiry. We decided to read, *The Next Step in Guided Reading* (Richardson, 2016). A colleague of mine had recommended this book because it was easy for busy classroom teachers to use, with each chapter laid out nicely by reading levels. Once each teacher had obtained the book, we decided to read the introduction and chapter 1, which focused on how guided reading is set up and how to get our students ready to work in groups. We also made a schedule to meet once a month.

Figure 2: Articles for further reading in Professional Development

- Bates, C.C. & Morgan, D.N. (2018). Seven elements of effective professional development. *Reading Teacher*, 71(5), 623-626.
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- Fountas, I.C. & Pinnell, G.S. (2020). Literacy leadership from the classroom: learning from teacher leaders. *Reading Teacher*, 74(2), 223-229.

- Steeg, S.M. & Lambson, D. (2015), Collaborative professional development. *Reading Teacher*, 68(6), 473-478.
- Kinnucan-Welsch, K., Rosemary, C.A., Grogan, P.R. (2006). Accountability by design in literacy professional development. *Reading Teacher*, 59(5), 426-435.

4. Mentor Scaffolding

Seek out those teachers you feel would contribute to your groups’ learning, and they can become your mentors. Some of the best experts in teaching literacy can be found right in your own school building. Because of their experiences and knowledge of teaching, our veteran teachers can be valuable resources from which to observe, reflect, and learn. Some teachers have had extended training in specialized areas of teaching and can be valuable members to your group.

As the year went on, we knew that other teachers in the building could offer guidance in learning how to implement guided reading groups. We especially needed mentors from whom we could observe and learn. The Reading Recovery teachers became our mentors in our building. We learned how to be observers of our students’ reading and writing. With the help of their scaffolding, we learned how to watch our students and make notes to reflect after each lesson. We learned what to look for at each reading level and how to adjust our teaching in the moment. Each time we met, we talked about an area where students needed more or different instruction. Many times, the teachers needed guidance in how to provide that instruction. In these situations, we referenced our book, read additional articles, and collaborated with our Reading Recovery teachers. They would show us how to group students and plan lessons. Oftentimes they would demonstrate guided reading lessons to show us how to follow the plan and implement in-the-moment teaching.

5. Authentic Reflection

Teachers need to use authentic student work to determine if one’s teaching is effective. Simple worksheets and multiple-choice tests do not give teachers the data and information to make teaching moves that will improve student learning. We must be observers of how our students are learning. To authentically reflect:

1. First discuss what you see your students doing well and what they are struggling with. Choose a place to start your study. Authentic class writing, running records, notes and observations of student and teacher conversations are all examples of resources that should be used in discussions with colleagues.
2. Then once you and your teaching group have determined a place to start evaluating, think of classwork that students are already doing, and/or that you would like to see and choose one or two pieces to collect and bring to the next group meeting.
3. Next, plan together some data you will look at together pre and post. Brainstorm students' samples you can use and documents to bring together as a group to look through. Make a chart of the data you will collect before you start your study and after you have finished. Use this chart to determine if students made growth in the areas where you have improved and determine if that growth was due to your new knowledge and expert teaching.

After weeks of inquiry using mentor text, peer observation, and mentor scaffolding, we determined it was time to use authentic data to begin reflecting and planning next steps. The Reading Recovery teachers taught us how to correctly administer and score a running record. We decided to make it a goal to do 3-4 running records each week so that by the end of the month we would have a running record on every student in our class. These running records were also used in our study and discussions. As the year went on, we used student writing samples, running records, and notations from lessons to discuss students' progress. We created a student data chart to record data and used these charts to reflect and discuss our students' progress. During each month meeting, we talked about our goals, what was seen in peer observations, referred to the mentor text and our teaching mentors, and reflected on what students were learning.

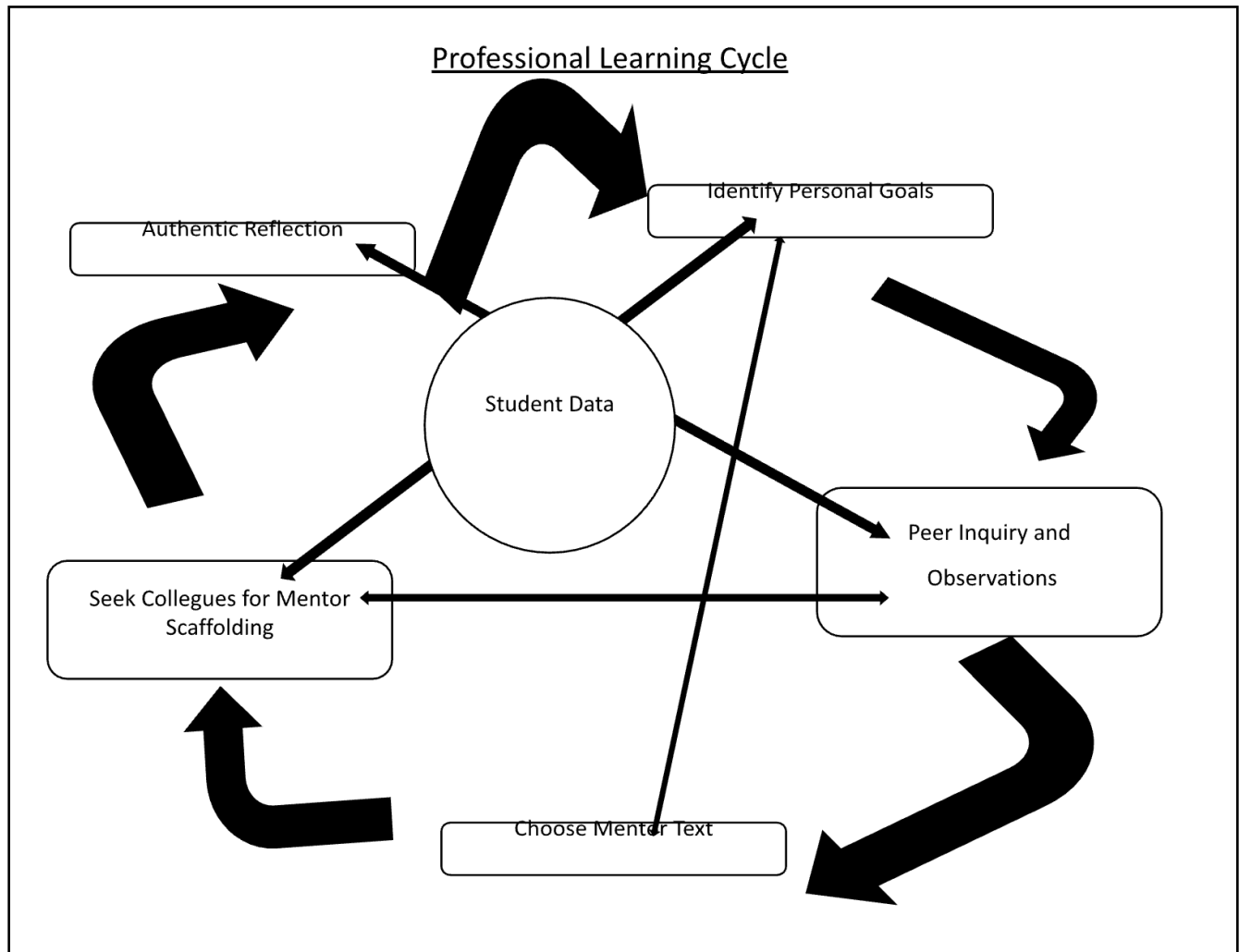
Conclusion

Teaching is a profession of life-long learning. According to Fountas and Pinnell, "The effectiveness of literacy education within the classroom is dependent on the expertise of the teacher" (2020, p.223). I am responsible for my students' learning and

with that comes the responsibility to grow in my own knowledge of literacy best practices. Twenty years of teaching in the classroom and Reading Recovery has taught me the importance of initiating the same tools used in Reading Recovery to enable my own learning: observation, collaboration, and reflection.

In this article, I argued that teachers need to initiate our own professional learning journey. Starting with identifying personal goals, then practicing peer observation, studying mentor text, using mentor scaffolding, and participating in authentic reflection are all important steps in this learning journey. All of these steps become a cycle that is centered on student data (see figure 3). When we see students who aren't progressing in the classroom, we must look in the mirror and change our literacy teaching. Self-initiated peer learning is the step forward in making these changes.

Figure 3: Professional Learning Cycle



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