More Knowledgeable Others: Exploring Professional Development of Rural Reading Specialists

Rachael Waller and Kari Dahle-Huff

Montana State University Billings — Montana, USA

Abstract: Educators in rural settings experience many unique professional circumstances due to the rural context of their schools; one such unique circumstance is professional development opportunities that are unavailable locally. Rural reading specialists have limited opportunities for local professional development as well as limited opportunities for collaboration with other reading specialists. This qualitative case study explored the characteristics of effective professional development for rural reading specialists. Reading specialists located in rural, Eastern Montana were surveyed about their professional development opportunities. From the survey results, focus group participants were identified to further elaborate on professional development considerations and opportunities for rural reading specialists. A key finding was rural reading specialists relied on the More Knowledgeable Other.

Keywords: Rural, reading specialists, professional development, More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

Teachers and schools in rural contexts experience unique professional circumstances regarding the needs of their students and their professional expertise. According to the Brookings Institute, about 19% of students in the United States attend rural schools (Drescher & Torrance, 2022). Rural students have similar educational needs to those in urban districts; however, the challenge to meet those needs is complicated by the rural context where trained, specialized reading professionals are not always available. Available reading specialists are often geographically disconnected from the broader field of education. Geographic isolation, as well as lack of funding for rural schools, may also result in loss of professional development opportunities.

While all educators working in rural contexts require specialized professional knowledge, they are uniquely positioned to share in culturally sustaining literacy pedagogies due to their highly adept knowledge of place. Rural educators bring assets such as intergenerational relationships, community knowledge, and an ethos of caring and concern (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Economic concerns in rural communities, including the rural brain drain in which it is common for rural
students to exit their communities (Carr & Keffalas, 2009) heighten the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogies so that rural communities can thrive. Rural reading teachers require knowledge of literacy practices and specialized knowledge of rurality. As in schools, standardized methods of delivery of professional development (PD) may not be effective because of the void of context, thus resulting in the pedagogy of erasure (Eppley, 2011).

Unfortunately, studies of educator professional development in rural contexts are not well represented in the literature (Glover, et al., 2016), and studies about reading specialists in rural contexts are sparse. Further, preparation of educators for rural contexts is also underrepresented in the literature (Anazo & Steward, 2015). Therefore, our objective with this research is to identify characteristics of effective professional development for rural, reading specialists, drawing themes from the literature and from participant data. The purpose of the research is to improve upon professional development opportunities for rural reading specialists with a greater hope of improving literacy in rural communities. The research question guiding this research is, what are the unique needs or considerations of rural reading specialists in terms of professional development?

**Literature Review**

Recent studies have called attention to the fact that many school districts in the United States are relatively small. Drescher & Torrance (2022) report that 14% of U.S. students are enrolled in rural districts (para. 6). Many of the smaller school districts in the U.S. are in rural areas and have the same expectations of meeting state and national standards as larger suburban and urban districts (Stockard, 2011).

Rural schools are unique settings in terms of structure, dynamics, and culture (Howley & Howley, 2005); it is important that professional needs be examined within this culture. Rural students typically perform as well as students in urban settings, but not as well as students in suburban contexts. To equalize opportunities for rural students to thrive in literacy, access to highly trained reading specialists is important. Trained specialized reading professionals are not always available in rural schools. Additionally, many rural reading educators have fewer professional learning opportunities due to geographical isolation, lack of connectivity to other schools, and lack of funding to support literacy initiatives (Barrett et al., 2015). Further, many rural schools lack access to adequate internet connections and other technologies, so they cannot access online trainings.

**What does effective PD look like?**

Desimone’s (2009) work employs four key themes in terms of defining effective professional development. First, teachers need to experience effective professional development as an active learning opportunity. Second, professional development should increase knowledge and skills and/or change attitudes and beliefs. Third, teachers need to use new knowledge and skills to deepen their own content knowledge or improve instruction. Finally, changes in instruction should foster increased student learning.

Bean et al. (2015) found that reading specialists need on-site professional development and an opportunity to work collaboratively with other literacy specialists to improve instruction. It is critical that professional development in all settings, but particularly rural settings, is framed with a non-deficit perspective (Glover, et al., 2016). Finally, it is important that PD also is context specific.
METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY CONTEXT

Rural schools have unique needs; their small settings and geographic isolation often mean it is difficult to collaborate with other professionals. Further, each individual community is also unique. Fowles et al., (2014) states: “Not all regions within rural areas are alike. Some rural schools are in less remote areas than others. Amenities differ greatly across rural regions, as do poverty rates” (p. 505).

The research presented here focused on rural reading specialists in eastern Montana, a considerably large geographic area. Swanson (n.d.) states, “And the Eastern Plains region [of Montana] has a total population of less than 107,000 – only about 10 percent of the state total, down from 14 percent of the total in 1990” (para. 8). The sparse population density of eastern Montana and large geographic region illustrates some of the unique considerations for educators seeking professional development opportunities.

The participants of this study were identified using purposive sampling of rural reading specialists in Eastern Montana. An initial Qualtrics survey concerning professional development was sent to 30 reading specialists in Eastern Montana. From that survey, three participants were then identified based on the following criteria: 1. Reading specialist/educator in a rural school district, and 2. Currently teaching reading interventions. Personal contacts were also a source of recruitment. It is worth noting that one participant moved from Eastern Montana to Wyoming during the study. We recognize the sample size is small and might not be representative of the experiences of all literacy specialists in Montana or in rural contexts.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in three phases. The first phase of data collection involved a Qualtrics survey on professional development opportunities for rural reading specialists. The second phase of data collection included a focus group interview with participants. The final phase of data collection was a follow-up focus group interview.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis occurred using deductive analysis methodology (Patton, 2002), drawing on themes from the literature concerning professional development and more specifically, rural reading specialist professional development. The following themes below were drawn from the literature and used to develop codes for data analysis:

Theme 1: Characteristics of effective professional development in general (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Theme 2: Characteristics of effective professional development for literacy specialists (Kerns, 2011; ILA, 2015; Blachowicz, et al, 2010).


Using the three themes identified above, data was examined to see if they fell into clusters or groups within each theme and for any emerging patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Rural reading specialists identified many characteristics of professional development that are consistent with the literature. For example, professional development that involves active learning that increases a new skill or knowledge was clearly identified. Using the theory-building structure as presented in Yin (2009), an additional professional development characteristic emerged from the data, the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978). Represented in the table below are some exemplars, particularly noteworthy, are those comments that are italicized as they indicate a desire for professional development to include an MKO.

Table 1: Exemplars of Effective Professional Development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Effective PD</td>
<td>Exemplar 1: “Most useful, I think any time it can be a hands-on, or if you can observe modeled presentation of it. That's worth a lot.” Exemplar 2: “I find it more beneficial to go watch them, or talk to those teachers, or have a teacher from their comment, talk to our teachers.” Exemplar 3: “So, finding someone that has it already and has been implementing, it seems to actually help our teachers more.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Effective PD for Reading Specialists</td>
<td>Exemplar 1: “We are involved in the Striving Readers grant and we received a lot of training through them, and then I would come back to the teachers. So, the trainings were very useful, really help the teachers understand the importance of data.” Exemplar 2: “All of us coaches getting together, and we all actually went and saw other schools and other teachers and things like that.” Exemplar 3: “We found it much more beneficial once they had somebody come back and actually do a live teaching of this is what you can use and then we learned about charts that we could use for the entry part of it for the phonological awareness and phonics.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Unique Characteristics of PD for Reading Specialists</td>
<td>Exemplar 1: “Team building for coaches and having that connection.” Exemplar 2: “After we completed the first professional development, they did give us contact information from the trainers and presenters and invited us to reach out to them if questions arose.” Exemplar 3: “So each building has a coach and we meet monthly and if we need to meet more often, especially when there is a new adoption of a program, we will try to meet more often. So we can so we can help and work out kinks.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several of the exemplars in the table above connect to the theory of a more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978). The MKO is recognized here as a bridge between developing new skills or knowledge from professional development opportunities and implementation of the new knowledge for improved student learning. Reading specialists suggested that a MKO is a needed as both a model of the new knowledge or skill and as a scaffold for implementation in their own pedagogy. In all three instances of professional development, professional development for reading specialists, and for professional development for reading specialists in a rural setting, the social context of receiving assistance through a more knowledgeable other was identified as crucial. Social interaction, as well as sharing professional knowledge collectively were additional keys to success in rural reading specialists’ professional development.

**DISCUSSION**

Learning is situated in a social environment and is made possible through the assistance of a more capable other (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Further, Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development describes the “fundamental nexus of development and learning” (1978, p. 30). As learners move through zones of proximal development, the process of internalization begins. Although these conceptions of learning theory generally apply to learning in children, the significance can be applied in a PD model as well, because learning is social, regardless of the developmental level of the participant. In short, the concepts of a MKO and learning through a social environment are critical components in implementing effective PD in rural contexts.

Professional development for educators is varied in terms of mode of delivery, cost, and target participants. Across these variations there are characteristics of professional development that have been identified as optimal: content focused, active learning and job embedded practice, coherence, intense and sustained duration, and collaborative (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). The findings indicate professional development should include a MKO (Vygotsky, 1978); and the nature of the MKO and the professional development participant is multi-directional and dialogic. Participants emphasized the importance of certified trainers, as well the importance of observing the implementation of programs and skills by peers in educational settings. For example, one participant noted “Most useful, I think any time it can be a hands-on, or if you can observe modeled presentation of it. That's worth a lot.” (Focus Group, 23 Mar 2022). Another participant stated, “So, finding someone that has it already and has been implementing, it seems to actually help our teachers more than walking though the book” (Focus Group, 23 Mar 2022).

Interestingly, not found in the literature is the need for professional development to include opportunities for teachers to receive feedback on implementation of specific skill or subset of skills from an MKO. Participants in this research valued an MKO for leading professional development; however, observation of peers was equally valued. For rural literacy specialists, limited resources were a barrier frequently identified; however, close-knit collaboration and a sharing of a common goal was also important. Perseverance in the face of limited resources and resilience driven collaboration among rural literacy specialists were common themes that emerged from the data.
REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATIONS


Swanson, L. (n.d.). Montana: One State with Three Changing Regions (Part 1 of 3). *University of Montana: This is Montana*. https://www.umt.edu/this-is-montana/columns/stories/montana_regions_1of3.php