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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PRACTITIONERS WORKING WITH ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH LIMITED LITERACY

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1   Introduction

The population of English language learners in adult education programs in the United States is significant – nearly half of the adults enrolled in adult education programs are learning English as a second language. For example, in Program Year 2004-2005, over one million adults of various ages, nationalities, native languages, and English proficiency levels were enrolled in federally funded, state-administered ESL programs, and over 70 percent were of Hispanic or Latino origin (Pane, n.d.). (This number does not include adults enrolled in private programs, such as community-based, faith-based, workplace-based, and volunteer programs that do not receive federal funding.)

Approximately half of the students in federally funded adult education programs test at the two lowest levels in the National Reporting System (NRS), used by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Adult and Vocational Education, to determine students' English language and literacy levels. For example, in Program Year 2003-2004, approximately 50 percent tested at the two lowest levels at the time, Beginning ESL Literacy and Beginning ESL (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a). (In July 2006, the two lowest levels were changed to ESL Beginning Literacy and ESL Low Beginning.) This means, according to the NRS skill level descriptions related to Basic Reading and Writing used that program year, that they had "no or minimal reading or writing skills in any language. [They] may have little or no comprehension of how print corresponds to spoken language and may have difficulty using a writing instrument" (Beginning ESL Literacy), or they may be able to "recognize, read, and write numbers and letters, but have limited understanding of connected prose and may need frequent re-reading; can write a limited number of basic sight words and familiar words and phrases; [and] may be able to write simple sentences or phrases, including very simple messages" (Beginning ESL) (U.S. Department of Education, 2006b). (It should be noted, however, that states use various instruments to test English language and literacy levels for NRS reporting, some testing for oral proficiency and some for literacy; they do not test literacy

in the native language. Therefore, NRS scores do not represent the complete picture of a student's language and literacy proficiency, and programs use alternative means to get a more complete picture for placement and other purposes.)

Practitioners (teachers, other instructional staff, and program administrators) working with students at beginning ESL literacy levels need guidance and support to be able to work with them effectively. They need to know the backgrounds and skills of the learners in their programs – their countries of origin, cultural backgrounds, native languages, levels of literacy in their native language as well as in English, prior education experiences, and goals for being in the program. They need to know the principles of second language acquisition and literacy development, research-based strategies for working with second language learners with limited literacy, materials that are appropriate for use with this population, and ways to structure and deliver instruction. Administrators need to know program designs, assessment instruments and procedures, staffing patterns, and professional development opportunities that will result in effective instruction for and education and workforce success of learners (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2003).

There are a number of challenges to meeting these needs. Solid data on learner populations and on their language proficiency are not always available to practitioners. Professional development for adult education teachers and administrators does not always focus on second language learners or on learners with limited literacy but rather is more general in focus. Teachers are often part-time and so do not have the time or support to participate in professional development. Ongoing technical assistance is rarely available to teachers and administrators. Teacher turnover in many parts of the country is high. Finally, structures and leadership are not in place in many states to plan, sustain, and formalize high quality, sustained professional development for teachers of adult English language learners. In the midst of these challenges, professional development is sorely needed, and effective professional development systems must be established.

2   *Building Professional Development Systems*

This paper describes a professional development process that the Center for Applied Linguistics, in Washington, DC, is conducting through one project, the Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA). CAELA staff and partners (Judy Alamprese, Abt Associates, and Andy Nash, World Education) are working with planning teams from 24 states to develop professional development systems to improve the effectiveness of adult ESL practitioners. Participating states include those that have experienced recent increases in immigrant populations. Many of

the new immigrant groups being served in these states have limited literacy in their native language and in English.

The purpose of this project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, is to develop capacity within the participating states to provide professional development for teachers and program administrators who are working with adult English language learners. The goal is to develop an effective practitioner workforce that is prepared to improve programs and instruction, so that adults learning English as a second language have the education and tools to succeed in this country and achieve their goals.

2.1 *The Professional Development Process*

The research on professional development in adult education, and particularly in the education of adult English language learners, is limited. However, Dorothy Strickland and colleagues (Duffy, 2004; Strickland & Kamil, 2004; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007), in reviews of the research literature on professional development for teachers in early literacy programs, outline professional development components that are relevant for CAELA's work with states. Their work shows that effective professional development

- Has a well-articulated purpose that is clear to all participants.
- Focuses on the actual content to be taught, the curriculum to be used, and the content areas in which teachers need knowledge and skills.
- Is consistent in message – draws from the same research base and sources of information about best practice.
- Is implemented and sustained over time.
- Provides participants with a variety of experiences that include small-group and individualized support with opportunities for discussion, analysis, reflection, and evaluation.
- Includes mechanisms for measuring changes that occur in teacher practice and in student performance.

The importance of these components is supported in work done by researchers in adult education (e.g., Crandall, 1993, 1994; Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003). One point is clear: The professional development process must be cyclical, ongoing, and sustained. It begins with planning and moves through implementation and into evaluation. In the evaluation phase, changes are considered and made that are then considered during subsequent planning, and the process continues. (See Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, forthcoming, for a detailed description of this process.)

2.2   Components of the Process

The professional development process includes a set of critical components, which are discussed here in turn:
-    Analysis of data on learners and teachers
-    Analysis of the context in which the professional development process takes place
-    Selection of the practitioner groups that need professional development
-    Selection of activities, follow-up, and resources needed
-    Documentation of outcomes
-    Institutionalization of the process

With each component, a set of questions is given that professional development planners can ask to help them 1) understand the needs of practitioners working with second language learners with limited literacy and 2) develop approaches and systems that will meet their needs. An example from a hypothetical state is then given.

2.2.1   Analyze Data on Learners and Teachers

The first step in developing effective professional development is to understand the students and teachers involved. Looking at demographic data in a state, region, or program, and data on teacher background and needs, the following questions can be addressed:
-    What is the population of second language learners?

-    What are their levels of language and literacy in their native language and in English? (In the United States, federally funded programs use data collected for the National Reporting System (NRS) to answer this question; see discussion in Kenyon & Van Duzer, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2006b.)

-    Are second language learners with limited literacy concentrated in specific areas or programs?
-    What do NRS levels indicate about the progress the learners are making?
-    Are the teachers working with them equipped to work with this population? Do they have adequate educational preparation, teaching experience, training, knowledge, and skills? (The states that CAELA is working with are using a teacher background survey to collect this information.)
-    What additional knowledge and skills do teachers need and want to work with these populations? (The states that CAELA is working with are using a teacher needs assessment to collect this information.)

For example, in a given state, the population of second language learners might include many different groups. A small number might be highly literate in their native language and simply need to learn English in order to succeed in work-related positions they are seeking. However, on intake assessments focused on English language and literacy, a significant number of learners have scored very low, and program experience with them shows that their literacy knowledge and skills are low overall, and that they have had limited opportunities in their countries for literacy development in their native language because of a variety of factors. These learners are concentrated in programs in one region of the state, and the teachers working with them have been working entirely with intermediate and advanced level English learners who are literate in their native language.

2.2.2   Analyze the Context in which the Process Takes Place

Many situational factors at the national, state, and local levels can affect the ability of practitioners to develop and implement effective professional development activities and systems. Questions like the following can guide an analysis of these factors.

- Have there been recent changes in learner populations in terms of numbers, countries of origin, native languages, cultures, and prior educational and literacy levels? Do these changes include an increase in the numbers or diversity of those with limited literacy?
- Have there been changes in the teacher workforce that have an impact on program effectiveness, including learner outcomes?
- What policies and initiatives are having an impact on teachers, programs, and learners?
- What funding is available for professional development of teachers working with these populations?
- What leadership and structures are in place to facilitate the professional development needed?

For example, in the state described above, the learners with limited literacy are new immigrant and refugee groups that have recently arrived. Some have come as refugees seeking a safe haven in the United States; others have been brought in by a local business to work in manufacturing plants. New classes must be established to serve them, and teachers and program administrators have no experience working with these groups (from a language and literacy or cultural perspective). Because the teachers in the programs involved are experienced adult ESL teachers, little professional development has been provided in that region of the state in the past several years, and program administrators have been happy with

the programs they have in place for the populations they have been serving.

2.2.3   *Select the Practitioner Groups that Need Professional Development*

When an analysis has been done of learner populations, teacher backgrounds and needs, and situational factors, specific groups of practitioners that need professional development can be identified, and the following questions asked:
- What background, training, knowledge, and skills do these teachers have?
- What content knowledge and skills do they need?
- Are they asking for specific information and training that might be provided?

In our example state, state-level personnel might decide that a professional development process must be put in place for the teachers and administrators in the programs described above. The teachers and administrators have basic knowledge about and experience with working with adult English language learners, but they need information about the language and cultural backgrounds of the new immigrant and refugee groups, about variations in types and levels of native language literacy that can affect English literacy development, and about teaching reading and writing to students with limited reading and writing skills.

2.2.4   *Select Activities, Follow-up, and Resources Needed to Work with these*
          Groups

At this point actual professional development can begin, and the identified groups of teachers and administrators can go through a process of workshops, follow-up study circles, mentoring, peer observation, and feedback that will develop their content knowledge and skills so they can work effectively with the learners in their classes and programs.

In our example state, the state planning group decides to work with a known expert on second language learners with limited literacy to hold a series of one-day workshops (e.g., to be held once a week or several times a month). The workshops focus on information about the language and cultural background of the groups involved (using information from the Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics), research on reading development of adults learning English (e.g., Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; Burt & Peyton, 2003; Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005) and on working with literacy level learners (e.g., Holt, 1995; Florez & Terrill, 2003), lesson planning, materials selection and use, instructional strategies, and out-of-program learning opportunities in the area for this student population. During the workshops, teacher pairs are

set up. These teacher pairs observe each others' classes at least three times, followed each time by a half-hour discussion of what transpired in class. The pairs then attend a weekly study circle (e.g., two hours a week for four weeks) and read and discuss articles on literacy development in the second language (including some of those listed above).

Administrator pairs are set up as well. Program administrators work together to consider the basic features of their programs using program standards (e.g., Peyton, 2005; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003), make plans for program improvement, and meet with the teacher study groups when determined appropriate.

If the state planning group believes, at the end of this process, that this group of teachers and administrators is ready to work effectively with these students and that a new group of teachers (and possibly administrators) needs to go through the process, it can be repeated. A new group of teachers and administrators is selected, and those who have completed the process are paired with the new group to serve as mentors to them. Working in this way, teachers and administrators not only develop the knowledge and skills they need, but they are also able to support others who are working with this student population.

2.2.5   Document the Outcomes

Most professional development efforts collect information about whether the planned events actually took place, were attended, and were well received. Thus, data are collected routinely on number of workshops, study groups, and other activities held; attendance at those events; and participant evaluations of the events (to answer the questions: Did we do what we had planned, reach the practitioner groups we planned to reach, and meet their expectations?). (See Guskey, 2002, for discussion.) Even more significant, however, are answers to questions about impact: What impact have these activities had on the practitioners involved?

-   Do the participants in this professional development process know, and are they able to do, what was intended as a result of participation?
-   Did they implement what was determined they would be able to implement?
-   Do they believe they have learned and are successful?
-   How do we know?

If desired, questions about impact on students can also be asked:

-   Did learners accomplish their goals?
-   Is there improvement in learners' English language and literacy?
-   Are there measurable improvements in other areas?
-   How do we know?

For example, to answer the questions above, the state planning team might collect data on practitioner knowledge and performance and on student performance. Data collected might include :

- Lessons plans that teachers have developed for specific groups of second language learners with limited literacy, at specific places in their development (e.g., at the beginning, middle, and end of a course).
- Lessons that these teachers teach, observed by a mentor or peer who uses an observation form or rubric with critical features of the lesson to be observed.
- Teacher descriptions of the knowledge and skills they have attained, reflections on their own practice, or critiques of their progress in a log or journal.
- Measures of learner progress. These should include the measures that the country, state, or region use to determine program success.

Planning for evaluation is complex and can be time consuming. Observation forms and rubrics need to be developed, classroom observations conducted, and staff selected to conduct observations, review lesson plans and reflection logs, and write analyses. Feedback processes, and improvement plans following feedback, also need to be developed. This planning and evaluation process must reflect input from all of the stakeholders (e.g., the teachers themselves, the administrators of their programs, mentors and advisors, and the state-level staff planning the process and conducting the evaluations).

2.2.6   Institutionalize the Process

The ultimate goal is that professional development is a consistent, regularly occurring process, in which all practitioners are involved. At this point, we look beyond the practitioners and activities themselves to the entire system in which professional development takes place. As Alamprese (1999) points out, when seeking program improvement, we often focus solely on professional development of teachers and quality of instruction and do not look at the larger picture, to consider the systems and resources needed to support instruction. We also often offer brief, one-shot workshops with little or no follow-up. However, research suggests that the duration of professional development activities and follow-up have an impact on the depth of teacher change (Shields, March, & Adelman, 1998; Weiss, Montgomery, Ridgway, & Bond, 1998). Finally, we have done very little in the way of long-term planning for sustained professional development and teacher quality. This seems to be especially true in adult education and, until recently (through the LESLLA Forum), in the education of adult English language learners with limited literacy.

As a result of the need to focus on, develop, maintain, and evaluate an entire professional development system, CAELA staff are developing a way to examine and support sustainable professional development systems (Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, forthcoming). Any such system needs to be aligned with learner and teacher needs; cyclical, sustained, ongoing, and informed by research on teacher change; and informed by the literature on building professional development systems in adult education, K-12 education, and business (e.g., the Association of Adult Literacy Professional Developers, 2005; Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001; McLendon, 2000; Reynolds, Murrill, & Whitt, 2006; Senge, 1990).

Effective professional development systems consist of the following major areas:

- A *structure* that includes a mission and guiding principles, strong leadership, and collaboration and partnership among education entities
- A *decision-making process* that represents shared vision among key stakeholders and collaborative analysis and use of data for planning
- *Scope and content* that is responsive to teacher and student characteristics and needs, aligned with state and federal directives, and makes effective use of leadership monies
- *Support for professional development* that includes follow-up to initial activities, incentives, and release time for practitioner involvement
- *Evaluation* of the professional development process, quality of opportunities, and outcomes

Going through the components of this tool as a state, regional, or program team will help those involved determine the areas they need to focus on, those that are strong, those they can change, and those they do not have the power or resources to change (at least in the short term). This process provides a way for different organizations and entities to collaborate and coordinate approaches across programs or regions within a state, across states, or across the country. It might also provide guidance for stronger states, regions, or programs to mentor and help weaker ones.

3   *Factors That Can Help and Hinder the Process*

In our experience working with 24 states in the United States, we have identified a number of factors that can hinder or help the process of developing sustainable, high quality professional development. Factors that can hinder include the following:

- There is no mission statement to shape and guide professional development efforts.
- No goals and objectives are articulated.
- There is a weak organizational structure, and professional development efforts are decentralized and haphazard.
- Turnover within the planning team is high.
- There is weak or no leadership to support the work of the planning team.
- There is lack of coordination among initiatives and sectors within the state or region.
- New ideas crop up and are accepted with no analysis of how they fit into the whole picture or how they respond to needs identified by analysis of data.

At the same time, a number of factors can promote progress:

- The state, region, or program has a mission statement, clearly articulated goals and objectives, and an organizational structure.
- A stable planning team, with experience with adult English language learners, is in place.
- Strong, committed leadership promotes the work and facilitates the expected outcomes of the planning team.
- Strong connections and coordination exist across state and program initiatives and education sectors and organizations.
- Resources are devoted to carrying out professional development on the content and skills that teachers need.
- New ideas and initiatives are evaluated within the context of a well organized and well articulated plan.

4   Conclusion

Professional development for adult education practitioners has always been of prime importance, but it is often neglected or haphazard. The CAELA capacity building process for professional development provides an opportunity to think carefully about what a high quality, sustainable professional development system must include. It is critical that this process be implemented broadly so that second language learners with limited literacy are able to succeed in the United States and in other countries.

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