Building Capacity in Greenlandic Schools: Assessing Expertise in Peer Coaches
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Indigenous education in the U.S. and abroad is undergoing massive curricular and pedagogical change through comprehensive educational reform. Reform leaders in indigenous contexts are overhauling their school systems in favor of models that are more culturally appropriate to the students they serve. Like reform in mainstream contexts, reform leaders in indigenous contexts must follow principles of successful reform, including building capacity to sustain change. Research indicates an integrated model of high quality professional development is the single most important aspect in successful reform, regardless of the context (Birman, et al., 2000). For many educational institutions, this requires a shift from activities that have typically been used to a more systematic approach (Garet et al., 2001). Traditional workshop methods for delivering new knowledge is ineffective in light of the immense changes that reform can have on schools (Little, 1993).

“Peer coaching” has been found to be a successful tool for assisting teachers with the implementation of new pedagogical strategies (Showers, 1984). Novice teachers are able to develop new pedagogical skills through coaching conversations conducted by an expert. These coaching conversations become a pathway for teachers to reflect on their goals and consider whether they were achieved by examining classroom evidence.

Only a few of the studies on peer coaching describe the design of the professional development program leading to teachers’ expertise. Typically, authors are vague about what methods were used in the professional development and how mastery was assessed before peer coaches were allowed to assist others. Some instructional strategies, such as the Instructional Conversation (IC), can take more than a year of intensive effort before
teachers are able to implement it effectively (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2007). Teachers interested in learning IC need practice and consistent feedback from an expert to learn the strategy. For this reason, it is important to assess teacher understanding and enactment for IC before they are allowed to assist others.

This study examines the extent to which instructional coaches in Greenland are able to understand and enact Instructional Conversation (IC) in their own practice prior to working as an instructional coach in Greenland’s nationwide educational reform. The IC is part of an integrated program on effective teaching and learning developed by the Center for Research, Education, and Diversity (CREDE). The IC encompasses all the other pedagogical methods used in the Standards for Effective Teaching and Learning and represents full understanding of the model.

The CREDE Standards for Effective Teaching and Learning

The Standards for Effective Teaching and Learning were developed through a synthesis of 30 years of research on effective instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Tharp et al., 2000). Although the Standards are good practices for all students, researchers developed the principles for work with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Tharp et al., 1999), who often do not fare as well as majority group peers in classrooms that are organized for more passive learning.

The Standards are (a) Joint Productive Activity, student and teacher collaboration on joint products; (b) Language and Literacy Development, support of language development across the curriculum; (c) Contextualization, making learning meaningful for students; (d) Complex Thinking, promotion of higher order thoughts and skills; (e) Instructional Conversation, instruction though dialogue; (f) Modeling, use of
observational learning; (g) *Self-Directed Activities*, student choice in curricular matters (Tharp et al., 2000).

The Standards derive from Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory which suggests that all higher psychological processes have their roots in social interaction. This theory suggests that when children interact with people more experienced, they eventually appropriate symbols, such as language, used in the interaction. By engaging in activity that is familiar, children internalize this cultural knowledge and develop sophisticated thought processes that further assist cognitive development. Over time, children need less assistance until eventually the learners are able to perform the activity on their own.

*Instructional Conversation.* Several studies have found higher enactment of the Standards is related to greater student achievement (Tharp et al., 2000). In particular, several studies conducted by Saunders and Goldenberg (1999a; b) have found the *Instructional Conversation* to be useful in assisting students’ thematic understanding of literature. When the *Instructional Conversation* was coupled with *Contextualization*, another CREDE Standard, there was an even greater effect for English Language Learners (ELL).

Research on the CREDE Standards indicates that high-level enactment for IC is difficult, despite teachers’ long-term participation in on-going professional development (Author, in preparation). One of the reasons for this difficulty is that enacting IC involves more aspects of instruction than any other Standard. To successfully enact an IC, teachers need to attend to both instructional and conversational elements while interacting with a small group of students. These conversations must be highly contextualized in students’
experience, yet linked to an abstract, academic goal. Teachers need to be attentive to student’s conceptual and linguistic abilities while simultaneously building higher levels of complex thought.

For example, a science teacher in Greenland could have an IC about day and night. The topic could be “Can there be a night if there is no darkness?” which would force students to test their understanding of night in a land that experiences 24 hours of sunshine for many months of the year. In this IC, teachers would model academic language in place of everyday language, rephrase students’ answers, and formulate responsive, open-ended questions. For teachers to develop all of the necessary skills to enact an IC requires consistent practice with the strategy and specific feedback from an IC expert.

Professional Development and the Peer Coaching Model

Peer coaching incorporates many features of other successful models of professional development. For example, it includes the opportunity for teachers to engage in active learning where new information is integrated into what they know or currently use (Garet et al., 2001). It includes teacher observations which facilitates new ways of conceptualizing how to implement new strategies (Willis, 2002). Peer coaching also assists teachers in developing sustained and ongoing communication with other teachers interested in changing their practice (Showers, 1982).

In the reciprocal teaching model, peers observe each other for their joint benefit of improved instruction. Showers (1984) encourages reciprocal teaching because it affords teachers the opportunity to observe others in action and reflect on their own practice in light of these observations. In expert coaching, coaches are trained in specific
instructional techniques and then return to the school to share their knowledge (Ackland, 1991). According to Showers (1984), either form of peer coaching has the potential to build capacity for instructional change and collegiality within organizations.

In the landmark study by Showers (1982), peer coaching was shown to be a valuable means for transferring new teaching and learning strategies through the coaching conversation. In a later study, Showers (1984) demonstrated that teachers who were coached, transferred skills to their students at higher rates than un-coached teachers, pointing to the effectiveness of the peer coaching model. Although participants in this study were not assessed for competency, Showers (1984) reported the peer coaches had a deep understanding of the instructional strategies before conducting coaching sessions. This study examines the extent to which Greenlandic peer coaches understand and can implement IC prior to becoming coaches in Greenland’s educational reform.

Method

Participants

Six Greenlandic teachers from various cities, towns, and settlements in Greenland participated in this study. One of the teachers was male (Vilhelm) and five were female (Naasunnguaq, Liili, Juliane, Malina, and Kirsten). At the time of this study, participants had an average of 13 years experience in teaching at the public school level. Two of the seven had 15 years of combined experience in teaching at the preschool level before becoming teachers.

All the teachers in this study participated in a three year program of professional development to become expert coaches. Teachers participated in three five-day sessions for three years. In these professional development sessions, participants studied theories
of cognitive development, effective pedagogical methods for indigenous students, and elements of the social context leading to Greenland’s educational reform. They also learned theoretical principles for life and instructional coaching and participated in over 30 hours of practice as part of their international certification.

During the third year of their coaching program, four of the six participants shadowed an expert teacher for three weeks. Together they provided professional development on CREDE’s principles of Effective Teaching and Learning to schools around Greenland. The other two participants shadowed coaches who are experts in CREDE pedagogy. These experts were hired from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) in U.S. to assist in building Greenland’s program of coach training.

**Rating of Teacher’s Videotaped Instruction**

After three years of professional development on coaching techniques and CREDE’s Standards for Effective Teaching and Learning, the teachers were videotaped in their classroom conducting an IC. Independent raters coded the tapes for implementation of the CREDE Standards for Effective Pedagogy using the Standards Performance Continuum (SPC), an instrument designed to measure implementation of the Standards (Hilberg, et al., 2004). SPC scores range from 0-4 (0, Not present; 1, Emerging; 2, Developing; 3, Enacting; and 4, Integrating).

The tapes were then transcribed and translated into English by a trilingual assistant fluent in Greenlandic, Danish, and English. Each tape was then analyzed and coded for instructional and conversational elements outlined by Saunders and Goldenberg (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999b).
References


