

Getting at the Core of Literacy Improvement: A Case Study of an Urban Secondary School

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Abstract

Although national trends of urban adolescent reading underachievement suggest that schools are unable to adequately support this population's reading development, some studies have demonstrated that urban schools can operate to raise student achievement, thereby disrupting national trends. In this study, the author investigates one such school that capitalized on instructional leadership, time and space, and teacher agency to both raise teacher capacity and youths' reading achievement. It appears that an inter-relationship among these features were critical in creating change at the school. Findings from this study hold important implications for future investigations on literacy instruction in urban schools.

Keywords

school improvement, urban education, literacy, accountability

Given the national trends of urban adolescent reading underachievement, research has documented the many reasons why schools are unable to adequately support this population's reading development. Recent results from

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the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that 79% of eighth graders in large cities in the United States are reading below proficient levels (National Center of Education Statistics, 2010). Some scholars point to a disjuncture between the school culture and the students' own culture, often affecting educators' beliefs about student capacity (Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 1998; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Oakes, 2005). Researchers on urban school reform contend that schools engaged in instructional improvement efforts often disregard the technical craft of teaching and learning, and instead focus on peripheral, but not fundamental changes (Elmore, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Payne, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Furthermore, scholars suggest that adolescents underperform in reading because secondary school educators tend to prioritize students' content knowledge over learners' access to content (Chall, 1983; Jetton & Dole, 2004). These multiple perspectives outline the major challenges facing urban schools in supporting the reading development of adolescents.

Some studies have demonstrated how urban schools can operate to raise student achievement and in turn disrupt national trends. In a series of insightful studies on successful urban schools, for example, Langer (2002, 2004) showed how the effectiveness of schools' professional contexts positively affected students' reading performance. Furthermore, the *Time to Act* (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010) report highlighted the role of data-driven decision making, targeted interventions for struggling readers, and a culture of literacy in exemplary schools. Findings in these studies corroborate the recommendations put forth in *Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), a report that described the state of adolescent readers and suggested action plans to combat the "crisis" in adolescent literacy. Biancarosa and Snow prescribed that comprehensive and coordinated schoolwide efforts were more critical to supporting adolescent readers than individual classroom interventions. This line of research has provided us with an understanding of the features necessary to influence reading achievement. However, scant research documents how sites that were once unsuccessful in reading achievement have organized for improvement. Such research can provide the tools necessary to bring about real change for urban youth in schools.

This study seeks to unpack the mechanisms that influenced reading achievement in one urban secondary school. In 2001, Grant Street Secondary School,¹ a 6th- through 12th-grade school in New York City, began to implement instructional changes in Humanities classes designed to improve students' reading achievement. This effort had the dual goals of developing teachers' capacity to teach literacy and improving reading comprehension among its students, most of whom were struggling readers.² Consequently,

the school improved in literacy in two key areas. First, students' standardized reading test scores were higher than before the reform (Steinberg, 2007). For example, from 2001 to 2007, the number of middle school students reading at "Level 1" (far below grade level) declined from more than 30% to 2.9% (Steinberg, 2007). In addition, on average, Grant Street's high school students achieved at higher rates on the English Language Arts Regents³ than their peers citywide (New York City Department of Education, 2008). Second, teachers and administrators describe the school as exhibiting a "culture of reading." This case study is intended to document this improvement effort.

I first discuss literature that describes the important role of the instructional core in literacy-focused instructional improvement efforts. Next, I describe my research methods, specifically interviews conducted with staff members and focus groups with Grant Street students. Following this section, I present three major findings that illustrate how the school organized itself around improvement. Finally, I conclude the study with implications for practice to improve literacy instruction and implications for further research.

Conceptualizing Efforts to Influence the Core of Reading Instruction and Learning

Improvement Targeting the Instructional Core

Theorists on instructional change propose that schools exhibit the greatest capacity for improvement when the various elements of the organization cohere to the instructional core (Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006; Elmore, 2007). The instructional core—the interrelationship among the student, the teacher, and the content—represents the technical craft of teaching and learning (Cohen & Ball, 1999). Researchers on urban school organizations have long observed that school actors have, willingly or not, avoided genuine impact on the instructional core (Lortie, 1975; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Payne, 2008). But studies of successful schools show that educators are capable of moving past the patterns common to traditional schooling and instead organize themselves for real instructional improvement (Langer, 2002, 2004; Pressley, Raphael, Gallagher, & DiBella, 2004). These studies show that urban school leaders simultaneously attend to *technical* (i.e., funding, schedules, structures, etc.) and *cultural* features (i.e., beliefs, expectations, relationships, assumptions, etc.) to effect change in teaching and learning.

These studies demonstrate how effective improvement efforts necessitate the synergy of multiple organizational components and the work of actors

capable of cultivating improvement. For instance, Childress et al. (2006) suggest that the structure of a school—how people are organized, who has responsibility and accountability for results, who makes and influences decisions at the school—all affect the school's technical capacity for improvement. Furthermore, the school's systems, such as the processes that shape the work, organizational learning, and accountability to shared understandings and knowledge, also influence the technical aspects of how schools advance learning. Furthermore, studies show that schools rely on strong instructional leaders to marshal the school's structures and systems to improve teaching and learning. In such schools, instructional leaders engage in numerous tasks: (a) prioritizing learning and instruction; (b) actively understanding, monitoring, and communicating the instructional vision of the school; (c) spending significant time observing teaching and learning and providing feedback to teachers; (d) mobilizing resources such as time, professional development, and money to support the instructional core, (e) setting high expectations for teaching and learning; and (f) supporting teachers by encouraging them to share reflections and ideas about class- and school-level instructional practice (Elmore, 2007; Gronn, 2003; Halverson, 2007; Murphy, 2004; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Ultimately, instructional leaders connect their everyday work to classroom practice, thus setting the tone for how adults perceive and enact their roles in the instructional core.

Research indicates that a school's cultural features—discourse, beliefs and attitudes toward children, social support, content expertise, accountability, and so on—are equally important as technical features to a school that focuses on the instructional core. Scholars posit that it is easy enough to create schedules where teachers can meet to discuss student learning and instruction, but it is critical to ask what happens when they come together: Do adults share an instructional vision and expectations for student learning? Do they collaborate on classroom practices, curriculum development, and assessments? Do teachers come together to examine, monitor, and propose solutions for the learning of each child? (Cohen & Ball, 1999; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Little, 2007). These questions frame the work that staff can do to target the instructional core.

One cultural feature that emerges as vital to the work of a coherent organization in the literature and integral to the findings in this article is that teachers, both individually and collectively, possess a sense of agency and responsibility toward student learning. When teachers exhibit agency, they have the expectation that their teaching can influence students to learn and, thus, believe they have both power and responsibilities to do so. This belief enables them to engage thoughtfully in professional development, evaluate

student work to inform lesson planning, and change their current practice to make it better. Teacher agency is a crucial concept to examine in urban schools comprised largely of Black and Latino students, as research has shown that in such settings teachers tend to have lower expectations of their students' performance (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Ferguson, 1998). Such low expectations consequently minimize teachers' sense of responsibility for student performance. Ultimately, the role of agency means finding a balance between institutional needs and the individual needs of teachers.

The Sociocultural Context of Reading

As noted earlier, although research on urban school improvement posits a theory of how organizations should improve, we know little about the actual classroom practices that reflect the improvement. As this study's focus is on literacy, theories in reading comprehension and engagement can add to a deeper understanding of how school organizations contextualize individual reading experiences in classrooms. Sociocultural perspectives on reading are influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, positing that learning and development occur when children interact with their sociocultural environment. In applying this theory to literacy learning, research tells us that comprehension happens as the reader, text, and activity simultaneously interact with each other and with the sociocultural context (RAND, 2002). This theory suggests that reading comprehension and its outcomes—engagement attitudes toward reading—are variable across activities, within and across readers, and across different kinds of texts. That is, this theory proposes that the contexts of reading, influencing the relationship among the activities, readers, and texts, play a significant role in the reading experience of a child (Galda & Beach, 2001; Gaskins, 2003; RAND, 2002).

Although reading researchers agree that the sociocultural context of reading comprehension is critical to a reader's development, they also contend that our understanding of *context* is both complex and vague. Indeed, in a review of major reading research journals, Rex, Green, and Dixon (1998) found that scholars consistently asserted that context made a difference in children's reading experiences, yet the articles rarely defined the term. Rex et al. warn that without an explicit understanding of the context in which reading occurs, not only do researchers leave readers with an ambiguous grasp of the meaning of "context," but they also leave those wanting to improve children's reading experiences ill-equipped with tangible ways to improve the sociocultural context.

The Sociocultural Context in the Classroom

Since Rex et al.'s (1998) analysis, scholarship has begun to demystify the sociocultural context of reading, defining it as a place (e.g., home, school, or the classroom), as constituted by numerous variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, cultural values, language, classroom instruction), and as the accumulation of social interactions. Most commonly, research describes the sociocultural context as a *physical place* where literacy learning occurs, often defining that place as a classroom. Gaskins (2003) states that classroom context variables include teacher knowledge, classroom culture, and instruction. These variables influence youths' reading experience because "instructional practices enacted by the teacher serve to set the agenda for a class, guiding not only how students respond, but also how they read" (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 66). Research has enumerated classroom practices that positively affect students' performance at the classroom level: explicit instruction on comprehension strategies (Brown, Armbruster, & Baker, 1986; Palincsar, 2003), time for daily independent reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Keene, 2002), and using information from informal and formal assessments (Snow, 2003). Educators' explicit knowledge in these areas can positively affect students' reading comprehension and overall literacy experience in the classroom.

The Instructional Core and Adolescent Literacy

Studies on urban schools that target the instructional core frame this study's specific focus on literacy-focused instructional improvement. Researchers who investigate professional development on adolescent literacy find that teachers of middle and high school students tend to possess greater knowledge on content instead of supporting students' *access* to content (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Chall, 1983). Therefore, secondary schools need to provide teachers ongoing opportunities to gain expertise on the foundations of reading on basic skills, including basic comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Furthermore, school leaders need to organize their time in ways that support teachers in applying new knowledge in literacy to instructional practice. Finally, schools must design coherent and coordinated efforts related to literacy instruction and learning (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005).

Research has also elaborated on the qualities of organizations that have the capacity for improvement. For example, schools that undergo improvement efforts targeted at the instructional core have the ability to enable and sustain change. To sustain change, schools strategically focus on medium-range goals and are able to adapt incrementally. Such organizations can also effectively

confront both resistance and failure (Evans, 2001; Louis, 2006). Capacity for change means that schools are engaged in ongoing work and that it is an additional feature integral to schools that intend to improve their instructional practices. Guided by the frameworks discussed in this section, this study seeks to address the following questions: How did Grant Street staff implement a school-wide literacy program? How were teachers supported in this effort? What were staff members' perceptions of the improvement effort?

Research Design and Methods

School Site and Participants

Grant Street Secondary School is a small, public high school that serves students in 6th through 12th grades. At the time of the study, the school served approximately 537 students, 65% of whom were Latino, 26% were black, and 11% were white or Asian. Seventy-nine percent of the students were considered economically disadvantaged,⁴ 30% had individualized educational plans, and 7% were Limited English Proficient. Among the 44 staff members, 27 had fewer than 3 years of experience, and the turnover rate of all teachers was 26% (New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting Tool, 2008).

Most students who entered Grant Street in the middle school were classified as struggling readers; they did not meet learning standards in reading according to the state's English Language Arts Test. Most students performed below grade level in seventh and eighth grade as well. Yet when students took the English exit exam in 11th grade, achievement data reveal that the majority of them met or exceeded learning standards, and on average, outperformed their peers in the city. This remarkable level of success makes Grant Street an ideal site for a study on organizational capacity and reading instruction. More knowledge about how school-wide professional practices affected teachers' knowledge of the teaching of reading could have useful implications for other schools who serve similar populations.

Indeed, this school was particularly appropriate for this study because it engaged in a school-wide improvement effort aimed at improving students' reading achievement. Yin (2003) argues that the single-setting case study allows the researcher to "trace the sequence of interpersonal events over time" (p. 4). Therefore, this investigation is revelatory in that it opens the opportunity to "analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to social science inquiry" (p. 4). Although numerous studies have described the organizational

culture of schools, rarely do these studies incorporate literacy practice and learning as a particular focus within these individual contexts.

As a small school, Grant Street staff valued the efforts they made at building strong relationships with its students and families. Indeed, staff commented that they felt that they were part of a “community”—facilitated by an advisory system, small classes, and block scheduling. At the core of the school’s community was staff’s commitment to teach content based on their own educational interests, values, and personal expertise. As a result, Humanities teachers designed a curriculum that was focused on history content and included literature to help facilitate students’ understanding of specific historical topics. Mona Shai described teaching at Grant Street early on as “teaching history the way I wanted to teach it, the way I believed it should be taught. . . .” Although teachers acknowledged that the curriculum appeared stimulating and challenging, they admitted that they did little to support the majority of their students who entered Grant Street with their reading below grade level. Veronica Fannan, the school’s literacy coach was an eighth-grade Humanities teacher when she first came to Grant Street. When she first began teaching there, she observed, “We weren’t teaching reading. We were providing time to read and we were ‘reading whole class novels’. We weren’t teaching them any sense of how to become a better reader.” Fannan also admitted that even when she could sense that students struggled with reading, all she could do was note it but she did not know how to diagnose or address reading problems. At the time, it was hardly a goal for Grant Street teachers to support students adequately in reading comprehension. Jack Steinberg, a new principal at the start of the school’s reading reform effort, admitted, “At first we didn’t recognize how inaccessible the actual reading was . . . there was a critical slant that got kids involved . . . so that was effective, but students weren’t really reading.” As a result, students who entered reading below grade level often continued in this vain throughout their time at Grant Street, confirming theories that struggling readers remain in a permanent cycle of underperformance (Stanovich, 1986).

For this study, I wanted to understand how Grant Street, once a school where the students “weren’t really reading” evolved into a school where participants now describe it as having a “culture of literacy.” To document the reform and describe the school’s current experiences with literacy learning and teaching, I interviewed staff members who could speak to both the classroom- and school-level aspects of literacy instruction at the school. Thus, my criteria for selecting practitioners to interview were grade level taught, length of years working at Grant Street, and position. These criteria

allowed for heterogeneity across the teaching staff. Using these criteria, I identified three teachers, the literacy coach, and the school principal. The staff interview protocol was designed to capture how staff members perceived their experiences before the reform, motivations for undergoing the reform, and their current experiences.

Analytic Methods

To code and analyze the interviews, I conducted a grounded theory analysis coupled with constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theorists state that this process will yield thematic codes and the research questions that originally framed the study may change. Yet I preferred a strategy that would address my overall research question of understanding how the school implemented changes and what the current school context looked like. Thus, I first selected excerpts from the transcripts that seemed to describe perceptions about the way the school organization changed, currently operated, and supported students' reading achievement. Then, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of those excerpts, and followed this stage by developing focused codes, always keeping my research questions in mind. Constant comparative analysis allowed me to examine both intra- and inter-transcript recurring themes that were either similar or contradictory. For example, when I noticed that one respondent continually commented on the *creation of time and space* as an important feature of the school, I examined the ways this theme was used throughout that transcript and then how it was used in the other transcripts. This process revealed that the structure of time and space was important for numerous reasons but mainly because it was a structure that allowed for the staff to collectively engage in growing expertise in literacy practice. During this process, several themes emerged, but here I focus on the ones that featured prominently in participants' responses: *time and space*, *examples of teacher agency*, and *literacy leadership*.

I also wrote memos to organize my analysis. These memos related to the major findings, and in writing them I attempted to find how different respondents articulated different themes. I shared parts of these memos with the staff at Grant Street to articulate to them how they viewed their work at the school. As a final process, I reorganized the data into thematic bins by identifying significant experts pertinent to a specific theme. During this process, I found that excerpts did not all fall into distinct categories, but instead informed one another. Indeed, this was a finding in itself—that improvement at Grant Street was a matter of overlapping, interrelated mechanisms at work.

Controlling for Researcher Bias and Threats to Validity

Grant Street's schoolwide efforts to improve reading instruction and learning are both unique and revelatory to the fields of adolescent literacy and school improvement. As a former teacher there, having easy access to such a site provided an ideal opportunity to uncover phenomena in practice that are rarely described in the literature. However, researcher bias and threats to validity—typical concerns in any research study—bear significant weight in my study since I am a former teacher at the school and several participants are my friends and former students. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) warn that “backyard” research such as the current study may compromise validity or reveal bias in data interpretation. Thus, I took a few important steps to mitigate the effects of bias and validity threats. First, in interviewing both teachers and administrators I aimed to yield a holistic understanding of participants' experiences at the school from multiple perspectives. Seidman (2006) suggests that this approach allows the interviewer to connect and check one person's experiences and comments against another. Second, by sending my major analytic findings to the participants for review, I sought respondent validation, an approach that allows for participants to provide feedback and clarification in any misinterpretation during the analytic process (Maxwell, 2005). Finally, instead of discarding responses that did not corroborate the majority of comments, I included discrepant and contradictory evidence in my findings in an effort to comprehensively portray Grant Street's practices (Davies & Harre, 1990; Maxwell, 2005).

Findings: Improving the Instructional Core of Literacy

Becoming a Literacy Leader: From Learning About Instruction to Reading Young Adult Books

Staff interviews reveal that Jack Steinberg, the school principal, engaged in numerous efforts to strengthen literacy teaching and learning. In this section, I explore the multiple factors that seemed to give way to reading instructional improvement. First, Steinberg's major goal during this time was to grow teachers' technical expertise in literacy instruction. During his interview, Steinberg stated that teachers' technical expertise improved in part because of the many opportunities for professional development at Grant Street. To Steinberg, professional development was meant to be frequent, shared, and focused on what adults could do differently to influence student learning.

Building off of this definition, he envisioned one form of professional development as “pushing people in the same room, having them read the same article, or having a discussion around student work.” He added that teachers needed to see themselves in a constant state of developing themselves, instead of resting on a fixed goal of effective teaching.

Professional development sessions at Grant Street gave way to the staff acknowledging, however, that they did not have sufficient expertise to support their students in reading. As a result, Steinberg provided funding for all Humanities teachers and some content area teachers to attend the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) summer institute. The summer institutes were intensive courses for teachers on reading and writing instructional methods. Teachers learned about the foundations of adolescent reading. They also learned the foundations of workshop instruction. Under the TCRWP mini lesson design teachers focused on a single, daily objective (e.g., how to track a character’s traits throughout the book), followed by teacher modeling, student guided practice, and independent practice. That is, TCRWP curricula aimed to *apprentice* students in the everyday tasks that good readers and writers do. TCRWP is targeted toward younger students, and over the course of the year, the middle school teachers segment the curriculum into 4- to 6-week units on reading habits, character study, interpretation, inferring, and other elements of reading comprehension and analysis. This approach builds on research that asserts the importance of authentic reading and writing experiences, volume in reading, and student-centered learning.

Though Grant Street staff partnered with an external organization to learn how to teach students basic reading skills and strategies, participation in the institutes still aligned with Steinberg’s vision of professional development. First, staff attended the courses together, opening up formal and informal opportunities to discuss Grant Street classroom practices. Truly, the staff’s attendance at TCRWP institutes influenced Grant Street’s technical knowledge by developing their collective understanding of reading and writing instructional methods, thereby increasing the school’s technical capacity for improvement. Furthermore, Steinberg attended the courses with teachers, thereby positioning himself as an instructional leader committed to learning about literacy instruction and learning.

Communicating Explicit and Individual Expectations

Staff confirmed that creating a community where learning happened collectively validated the way he monitored reading instruction after the TCRWP

institutes. Farah Roy, a seventh-grade Humanities teacher, remembered Steinberg's presence in overseeing some of the major overhauls of literacy instruction: "I had Jack in the classroom, asking me for my conferencing notes, looking over them and checking in with the students." She continued that these efforts pressured her to grow more accountable about what she did in her classroom. Steinberg described his effort to monitor progress, stating that at the beginning of implementing the school's literacy program, he

was in classrooms almost daily, getting to know what kids were reading, and their habits, and monitoring . . . how many books kids were reading, and how long were the books they were reading. And getting a sense, were they on level? Keeping reading records. So just collecting some of this data first hand myself, to get a sense of a broad picture of the reading program of the school. That allowed me to see which teachers needed help, and helping them, or putting them with a partner or getting some other teacher involved in supporting them.

Steinberg's participation in the TCRWP institutes with teachers provided him with a lens through which he could observe progress in literacy practices. His participation also gave him the language with which he could communicate expectations for the craft of reading instruction. These actions created an opportunity for him to provide targeted support to individual teachers, get to know his students as readers, and assert himself as an instructional leader.

Interview responses suggest that Steinberg also communicated his expectations for supporting reading through his personal conversations he had with his staff. In describing how they changed their focus toward literacy instruction, each teacher I interviewed recalled having individual conversations with Steinberg that affected their original stance toward teaching literacy. For example, Alicia Byrne, an 11th-grade Humanities teacher at Grant Street who entered the school in 2003, recalled that when Steinberg informed her about the expectation to start each class with 30 minutes of independent reading, she was resistant:

At that point the kids were taking both the English and U.S. History Regents Exams in the eleventh grade and there was just a ton of curriculum we had to get through in the year. I had come from a school where we had independent reading, but it was a joke. And as far as I was concerned I didn't want to give up class time to something I didn't think was going to be worth it.

In describing the story, Byrne remembered that despite her opposition to creating a time for independent reading, Steinberg told her that creating a daily time for independent reading was a “nonnegotiable” responsibility of a Grant Street Humanities teacher. Byrne felt that this conversation left her little choice but to make time for independent reading in her classroom. Once she did, she recalled that she “was amazed by how seriously kids took independent reading.” Her students had become used to participating in independent reading in their previous grades at Grant Street, and by this point, students looked forward to this time in class. After observing her students’ level of engagement in independent reading, Byrne became more willing to create a daily space for it in her Humanities classes.

Byrne’s anecdote illuminates one important process that enabled an evolving literacy pedagogy at Grant Street: First, Steinberg’s conversations with individual teachers about their responsibilities for supporting reading became a catalyst for making instructional changes. These conversations reflect the intentions of an instructional leader committed to holding teachers accountable to the shared systems of learning throughout the school. These conversations were followed by teachers implementing a new practice and then observing student engagement. Finally, a teacher assumed a change in responsibilities for supporting students’ literacy experiences. This process sheds light on how Grant Street’s structures around reading instruction was sustained. Though Steinberg often initiated conversations with teachers, the teachers themselves carried out the school’s expectations by observing success in student learning. Steinberg corroborated the importance of this process and stated that these conversations happened constantly. He described,

talking with teachers individually, just making sure that . . . everyone was on board. Really stressing that this was a priority and a bottom line for our school was that our kids were struggling readers . . . they needed to be in books that they could read . . . and we needed to be honest with ourselves about their level of reading.

Individual communication with Steinberg about expectations for supporting reading became an essential process of the school’s shifting stance on literacy.

In addition to evolving into a literacy practitioner, Steinberg also communicated who he was as a reader. For example, during the time of the school’s improvement effort, Steinberg created a library for students in his office. It boasted hundreds of young adult titles, organized on bookshelves lining the

walls into genres of interest to adolescents, and was similar to a library one might find in middle or high school classroom. Steinberg created this library

so that teachers could see that I wanted to have the books more accessible. I wanted to symbolize to the school, and to the students, and to parents that this was the most important thing. That if the principal had a library in his office, you could spend your time to get books out, to get young adult fiction out.

Indeed, the library, as a main feature in his office, symbolized Steinberg's efforts to change the way the school community viewed the importance of literacy. Yet creating the library unintentionally fulfilled other goals that had an impact on the school's improvement efforts. First, in addition to maintaining the library, Steinberg began to read more young adult fiction, exposing himself to range of topics and interests of adolescent readers. Second, as it became another space in the school—in addition to the school library and the classroom libraries—for students to find books, he observed that the nature of his relationships with students changed. He reflected that “putting myself in a position where I was recommending books, and talking to students about books, and just being a . . . very active member of the reading community” transformed his interactions with students and the way students used his office.

Using Time and Space to Increase Accountability and Influence the Instructional Core

In the previous section, Steinberg stated that creating the time and space for teachers to talk about their practice was a critical aspect of improving it. The way staff's weekly schedule was designed addressed each aspect of the instructional core allowed for collaboration in planning curriculum, learning new instructional methods, and identifying and strategizing around individual student strengths and weaknesses. During the time of the interviews, in a given week, teachers met twice in grade academic team meetings to design lessons, units, and assessments; counselors and administrators joined teachers in grade meetings to discuss administrative details and individual student progress; and teachers who taught the same content area from 6th to 12th grade met in vertical teams to address instructional issues for each content area. Furthermore, Steinberg convened whole-school meetings with twice-monthly and yearly overnight retreats to identify and assess whole-school

priorities for the year. These technical components fostered opportunities for constant interaction to discuss classroom practice.

Creating a Space for Collaboration in Literacy Instruction

Teachers remarked that the way they used common planning time—the twice-weekly 90-minute meetings for teachers of a similar grade and subject to come together to plan curriculum—allowed for constant opportunities to grow and establish common expectations for classroom practice. Farah Roy, the seventh-grade Humanities teacher, walked through a typical planning meeting:

We set an agenda, and part of that agenda is, how are things going now? So what's going on with writing workshop, where are we with the projects, and what are our next few lessons? And if the planning is going well, those few lessons will have already been planned, we'll touch base about supplies, and who's going to make xeroxes.

After teachers check in, Roy explained that they touched base about whether or not the pacing of the lessons was working well for students. If the pacing was not working well, they spent extra time reviewing lessons. If the pacing was working, they continued to plan more lessons together.

If we're planning a mini-lesson, we're talking it out. So I'm saying what I would say to the kids to Keena [my planning partner], and she'll say . . . things that I might not say. And we're going over exactly what we're going to write on the board.

These steps mirror an integral component of lesson study—the collaborative process of designing and refining lessons that address learning goals (Lewis, 2002). Roy justified that walking through the lessons so intensively was essential in providing all students the same experience and ensuring that no teacher was isolated in developing and teaching curriculum.

Other teachers agreed with Roy's appreciation of common planning time. Mona Shai, the ninth-grade Humanities teacher, asserted that at Grant Street, "We believed that no curriculum is gonna be everything it could be without collaboration." Moreover, Veronica Fannan, the literacy coach and former eighth-grade Humanities teacher, added that the collaboration that emerged from common planning time improved her own teaching. She reflected that the time was "as structured as a class was, was really important, and it just

forces improvement in a positive way. There would be no way to do that and not get better. I think it's a nonthreatening and organic way to push teachers forward."

Creating a Space to Create Accountability

As common planning time allowed for teachers to address the daily practices in the classroom, Steinberg and teachers also asserted that whole-school meetings and retreats, as well as vertical meetings, fostered opportunities for staff to become aware of their shortcomings and make incremental changes to the literacy program. Steinberg recalled that the decision for the whole class to commit to independent reading—one of the earliest changes in the reading program—happened at an annual whole-school retreat. Prior to the meeting, a few teachers throughout the school created a time for students to participate in independent reading for 10 to 20 minutes daily, and teachers created small classroom libraries to support independent reading. After hearing how these teachers had experimented with independent reading, Steinberg featured the role of independent reading at the upcoming annual retreat. As teachers discussed the potential for independent reading, the staff decided that to commit "the first twenty minutes of every [Humanities] class to independent reading." Experimenting allowed a few teachers to establish a shared practice, and having the space at a whole-school meeting to discuss the practice enabled a wider commitment among the staff.

Implementing independent reading was an important first step, but continued conversations during the staff's professional development paved the way to even more improvement in reading instruction. When I asked her how and when the school decided to make changes to its literacy program, Farah Roy, the seventh-grade Humanities teacher, described that at a vertical meeting, "Teachers were looking at the portfolio[s], and looking back at their teaching and reflecting, and it just came out. Teachers were disappointed by their roundtables . . . when their kid had to read their cover letter and couldn't do it well." She described that moment as a "reality check of where we were." Opportunities such as these to come together to assess growth—and lack of growth—allowed the staff to be honest about classroom practice and consider opportunities to improve what they were doing. In turn, Roy recalled that staff became more receptive to the idea of changing their practice.

Indeed, teachers seemed to believe that opportunities to plan together encouraged accountability across the school. Roy also asserted that whole school and vertical meetings not only encouraged common practices but also

raised accountability among teachers. Roy provided a recent example of what teachers would do in a vertical meeting on reading instruction:

Let's say we all learn decoding and we learn how . . . to do it, and Gina's [a TCRWP consultant] there, she teaches us . . . now everybody learns it, and then you walk into your room the next day and you don't try it? How come everybody else is trying it, and how come everybody else is coming up with ideas and questions and you're just doing the same old thing you were doing?

She continued, "People are expecting me to come through with my results. If I don't come through . . . how will the scaffold ever work? So those meetings really show how connected I am to everybody else." Roy's comment shows that space and time, as technical aspects of the organization, allow for change, but they also allowed for *sustaining* change that happens among Humanities and English teachers.

Responses indicate that the structure of time and space was an essential part of allowing for improvement, sustainability, and standardization of classroom literacy instructional practices. It appears that Steinberg's definition of professional development—an internal, consistent, and collective opportunity to focus on teacher practice, student progress, and instructional content—framed what teachers did during their common meeting time. Responses also articulate that through this time and space, teachers developed an increasing awareness of their responsibility for teaching literacy instruction at Grant Street.

Neither Bottom Up Nor Top Down, but Both: Changes in Teacher Responsibility, Expectations, and Agency

When I asked teachers about schoolwide changes in the literacy program, they described how they situated themselves in the context of the reform effort. At times, teachers talked about individual changes they made that they felt responsible for and capable of, but at other moments teachers described feeling a pressure from colleagues, from Steinberg, and from Teachers College staff to change their practices. Thus, instead of one linear process that supported change, responses reveal that multiple processes all related to teacher agency gave rise to changes in classroom practice—a combination of

bottom-up and top-down initiatives. These somewhat contradictory forms of agency emerged from each of the interviews, but here I will focus specifically on the responses of Farah Roy, the seventh-grade Humanities teacher, because she provided an in-depth illustration of the different forms of agency at work that enabled opportunities for changes in her practice. While I focus on her responses, her account is representative of her colleagues' stories.

Bottom-Up Changes: Individual Agency Driving School-Wide Progress

When I asked Roy to describe how the school underwent changes in the literacy program, she relayed a particular classroom incident that made her realize that she needed to change her practice to better support students' literacy skills. At that point, she was a ninth-grade Humanities teacher and felt quite confident in her prowess at teaching history. During a lesson, a student approached her with the class handouts and whispered in her ear, "I can't read this." She responded to him, "Well I'm not a reading teacher, I'm a Humanities teacher." And he blew up. He lost his mind on me. And he got really upset. And I didn't know why." She recalled talking to the school's dean about the student's reaction, and complaining, "What am I supposed to do, I'm supposed to sit and teach him how to read? It's ninth grade!" And then I was told, "Yeah, you're gonna have to teach him how to read."

After this conversation, she reflected,

If I'm gonna have to teach him how to read, I'm going to have to get trained on that, because I don't have the background for that. And then the next year, I just told Jack that I'm not doing that again, I'm not teaching history. I'm teaching reading and writing. The basics. Because most of my students couldn't even retain the information I taught them because they had been struggling with reading all year.

Given that Roy had a planning partner—Mona Shai, another ninth-grade Humanities teacher—the two collaborated to change their curriculum to better support students' reading needs. "So that was a decision we made, Mona and I, that we were gonna hold up on the history, and just teach reading and writing." She attributed these decisions to changes in school-wide responsibilities to support students' literacy skills. "And I think as a school we all kind of fell in line with that . . . I didn't want to be that ignorant again in the classroom." In this anecdote, Roy articulates a particular process with regard to agency. She first describes having a sense of individual agency by telling

Steinberg that she was going to teach reading and writing. This influenced a sense of shared agency evidenced by the collective decision between Shai and Roy to “hold up on the history” to teach more reading and writing. These two efforts, Roy indicated, then gave way to a school-wide change in responsibilities for teaching literacy.

Top-Down Changes: School-Wide Expectations Driving Individual Responsibility

Later on in the interview, Roy reported that after Grant Street partnered with Teachers College, the process of changing her responsibilities for committing to teach literacy continued, but what provoked these continued changes seem to be in contrast to the process she outlined above. She described, “I was given some intense TC [Teachers College] stuff. And I was expected to learn it, know it, apply it, and get those kids moved up.” She also recalled that Steinberg checked in with her constantly about students’ reading progress, and a TC coach regularly observed her classroom,

asking me why I had let a student just sit there, reading books he can’t read. And telling this teacher, “I don’t know what to do.” And her giving me some approaches. And just generally the mood of the school becoming, “it’s not okay to let a kid just flounder in your room. You have to deal with them, and you have to make a lot of other people aware that they’re there.” So I felt the pressure and I reacted to it.

In this instance, her own sense of agency appeared to be thwarted by the pressures from Steinberg, the TCRWP coach, and Grant Street expectations. Despite lower levels of individual agency here, these pressures still achieved a similar result described in the previous incident, by creating a need to improve her practice and in turn better support student learning her classroom.

Contradictory Forms of Agency Resulting in Change

These two anecdotes reveal processes that are somewhat contradictory in enabling changes of teacher responsibility for better supporting students’ literacy skills. In the first incident, Roy describes being proactive in changing curriculum and realizing that despite how good she felt about teaching history, her efforts did not adequately support students’ needs. Yet the latter incident appears more reactive; she did not seem to have as much control as in the earlier instance and, instead, she responded to a school-wide expectation

to change her practice. Indeed, one person can recount completely different ways that change occurred at the school, and these contradictory ways of explaining how change happened provide a deeper, more complex sense of understanding how the school enabled and sustained improvement. It appears that certain moments of the reform effort lent themselves to certain forms of agency. Roy's comments suggest that teachers needed to feel a sense that they could make changes to affect classroom practice even while pressures mounted at the school for them to do so. These different processes may not be at odds with one another; rather, they seem to operate simultaneously as necessary mechanisms that foster an environment conducive of improvement.

The School Organization as Focused on the Instructional Core: Implications for Practice and Research

The findings concerning how Grant Street enabled and sustained a change in its reading program, together with findings on how the school's students and staff describe its sociocultural context of reading, are at once illuminating and unsatisfying. The findings are illuminating because teachers, Steinberg, and students unveiled the complex mechanisms at work in an organization that tries to commit itself to constant improvement. Like much of the literature has suggested, some of the organization's movement begins at the helm, with its leadership. Steinberg became an agent of change in the organization whose efforts were strongly tied to teaching and learning in the classroom. Students and staff viewed him as an active member of the reading community, as he attended professional development with staff and students saw him engaged in young adult texts. Becoming a literacy practitioner in this way seems to have validated his constant push to improve teacher practice and expertise with regard to literacy.

As he became a literacy practitioner, Steinberg manipulated structures at the school—namely time and space—to support his prioritization of literacy instruction. His leadership, along with time and space, allowed teachers to come together in genuine ways to focus on improvement in classroom practice. These findings have important implications. In many ways, it might help school leaders deprioritize activities that detract from a focus on the classroom and emphasize the work that may have a true impact on teaching and learning.

Literacy leadership and school structures gave way to evolving beliefs among teachers in the organization. Staff indicated that the balance between

finding their own place to make changes in instruction, along with adhering to school-wide expectations for practice, plays an integral role in allowing for constant improvement. These beliefs seemed to frame how teachers viewed their role in cultivating a context of reading for students. Their responsibility for supporting students to read ultimately became larger than just what happened during reading activities in class each day. Rather, they viewed their responsibilities as supporting students to read critically, deeply, and passionately so that they could be better prepared for literacy activities in life.

Although these findings shed light on a school organization designed to support students' reading experiences, they are also unsatisfying. Practitioners aspiring to change their schools in the hopes of improving students' reading experiences might be hard-pressed to identify the one or few elements, or the one or few processes of change, that they can take from this study and apply to their own school sites. Rather, it appears that each of these elements—instructional leadership, teacher agency, time and space, and a commitment to constant improvement—operated in a complex, interdependent relationship to affect improvement in school practices and also necessitated a significant commitment to instructional improvement. The robust presence of professional development at Grant Street countered common trends at most American schools; whereas Grant Street teachers engaged in collaborative lesson planning for about 3 hours a week, most U.S. teachers reported on the 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey that they typically engaged in such practices for about 16 hours a year (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). This underlies the significance of viewing Grant Street change process not just as an innovative amalgamation of structures but also as a transformation of beliefs about improving literacy instructional practice.

Furthermore, the underperformance in adolescent students' reading achievement is an issue that warrants immediate focus and schools cannot necessarily afford the amount of time it took—at least 6 years—for Grant Street to reform its practice and yield results visible in students' reading achievement. Moreover, the pressures of high-stakes testing in reading that emphasize short, decontextualized passages and questions are both antithetical to Grant Street's reading program and too immediate to be addressed by a slow transformation in school reading practices.

Yet instead of feeling wary about the prospect of change, scholarship recognizes that finding the way to start improvement is as important as the improvement itself. Elmore (2007) recommends that school leaders "teach people in the organization how to think and act around learning for continuous improvement" (p. 80). In doing so, he argues that schools need not tackle everything all at once, but instead identify one area, organize teachers around

improving it, and focus on this area until progress is recognizable. In turn, school staff can monitor and support similar efforts in other areas of instructional weakness.

Responses from Grant Street staff indicate that the school took a different path to improvement than traditional plans that include regularly assessing students on reading abilities and targeting instructional interventions to specific areas of weaknesses (Corrin et al., 2008). Despite the prevalence of comprehension instruction at the school—occurring almost daily from sixth through ninth grade—staff and students' responses gravitated toward their experiences with independent reading. It is shortsighted to infer from this trend that independent reading was the most successful aspect of Grant Street's reading program and, thus, the only feature accounting for improvements in reading at Grant Street. Rather, it is possible that the emphasis on independent reading among interview responses mirrors the way teachers and students position it in relation to comprehension instruction and reading improvement. That is, students and teachers might regard explicit instruction as a lever to promote students' engagement with texts instead of viewing it as a component of class isolated from, and beneficial without, independent reading. This hypothesis is supported by evidence of students' reading improvement occurring only after the school implemented direct instruction, despite independent reading's presence at Grant Street for at least 3 years prior.

This research points in a promising direction for future studies that look to illustrate instructional improvement in literacy. It appears from this research that not one factor supports genuine change. Rather, the relationship among school structures, leadership, and agency—all targeting the instructional core—operate interdependently to build and sustain improvement. These school features reflect a vision for what is possible in schools that serve urban adolescents.

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1. The school's and participants' names are pseudonyms.
2. I define struggling readers as those students who are reading below grade level as defined by the state's English Language Arts test.

3. The English Language Arts Regents is one of New York State's high school exit exams.
4. Economically disadvantaged status is determined by students whose families qualify for the Title 1 Free Lunch Status (New York City Department of Education, 2008).

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