

**Liberating Reading Instruction:
Professional Development for Content Area Teachers at a
School for Incarcerated Youth**

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Abstract

In this article, the professional development activities at a school for incarcerated youth are described through a format that incorporates multiple voices of participants. Based upon input from the director and the teachers at the school, a professional development initiative included (a) specific strategies for word identification, including phonics, for students who were adolescent or adult beginning readers; (b) informal diagnostic assessment techniques; (c) teaching reading comprehension and writing; (d) metacognition for both word identification and comprehension; and (e) the professional concepts/language of literacy instruction, such as authentic assessment, miscue analysis, levels of reading and readability of texts. Outcomes of the project included the development of knowledge related to adopting literacy assessment and instruction for this special population and setting, new perspectives and empowerment of the teachers, and a sense of urgency to teach reading.

The school is a one-story red brick building, 1950's vintage, linked to the surrounding barbed wire enclosure by sidewalks. The sidewalks extend to the outside of the prison and to the receiving office guardhouse where I was patted down, searched, and x-rayed. After coming here for the first two weeks of a semester-long course that I taught to the teachers at the prison school, I learned from observing others who entered that a transparent backpack on wheels was a necessity—all of my teaching materials had to be visible as I walked from my ordinary life into the life of the prison.

During my professional development work with teachers at the prison school, I realized that transparency as control seemed to be pervasive, but that transparency in terms of instruction was less available. In this article, I hope to clarify what teachers in the prison school believed about literacy instruction and what they reported that they did in their varied content classrooms as a result of a professional development experience involving a class that I taught them. Several questions inspired me to learn with and teach the teachers including: What is happening at this school in terms of reading and writing instruction? How does this school compare to other high schools relative to teacher development and adolescent literacy learning in the content areas? What other questions are the teachers asking about literacy instruction for their particular students? Through their questions, these teachers made evident what they knew and did not know about literacy development and assessment and what they specifically wanted to learn that would apply to the needs of their students.

Thus, the primary purpose of this article is to describe teachers' developing viewpoints and applications of knowledge about literacy teaching for troubled adolescents. I also describe the professional development offerings that I presented to these teachers after soliciting their specific requests. Throughout, the voices of professionals and the students with whom they work are evident. This article provides details about the second of two courses that were offered to teachers; it also refers to follow-up visits that I made to observe their teaching during the school day.

I brought a certain context to my work at Maple Knoll (pseudonyms for all identifying information are used throughout) because I started my professional life as a teacher of eighth graders, half of whom were children of the prison guards and half of whom were children of the prisoners at a state prison (in a far distant state). Subsequently, I have taught children of prisoners, prisoners themselves, or teachers of prisoners. Teaching reading and writing is what I have done for thirty years, primarily with adolescents. For the past 14 years, I have been a teacher educator working as a full-time faculty member responsible for graduate reading courses. Working with teachers at Maple Knoll School was a new challenge but not so different from the public schools in which I taught or observed.

The organization of this narrative is as follows: After providing a description of the school, its director (who initiated the project) speaks about her vision of how this professional development experience for literacy education is aligned with objectives for student achievement. She makes reference to the management of this school in relation to external mandates for assessment and for curricula. Next, a science teacher explains what she has learned as a result of being part of this project that allowed her to better enhance students' reading skills. At this juncture, students at the school describe their encounters with text in classes taught by the participants in this project. Finally, my voice as a reading specialist and teacher educator again comes forth as I describe the framework of the professional development for these prison teachers and offer connections to literacy research.

As the project unfolded, I found that the written or oral reflections of many of the teacher participants divulged key concepts about literacy teaching and learning. Thus, this descriptive study emphasizes the knowledge that emerged from an emic perspective—rather than a pre-established etic approach with research questions and categories of data from an outside observer. Our (the teachers, administrator, students, and me) personal voices as “insiders” emerged from our voluntary oral participation in class, from notes that we wrote to each other in person or via e-mail, and from the artifacts of the class. Literacy content knowledge of the teachers was assessed via a pretest and posttest questionnaire (see Appendix A). Consent for all work represented in this article was obtained and confidentiality has been protected. Analysis from the multiple perspectives produced some themes that are discussed later in this article.

These themes are linked in the discussion section to theoretical frameworks and the research of others.

Where and Who and What

The Site

The school, known as Maple Knoll School, is an on-site educational facility for youth who are detained (awaiting trial) or committed (sentenced) because of criminal behavior. The school functions for four hours per day, Monday through Friday. It has a history of inadequate materials and substandard facilities. The youth services staff that oversees security is not the subject of this article. Rather, it focuses on the teachers who are employed by the school system to teach at this school within the prison walls. During the last five years, under the direction of a court-appointed director who worked alongside the principal, overall functioning of the school has improved. Facilities had been upgraded including computer access and a new library, new materials had been purchased, and the professional development of the faculty had been made a priority.

The Teachers

The teachers at Maple Knoll School were, for the most part, experienced. Their teaching experience ranged from novice to more than thirty years experience, with most having at least five years of teaching experience. As a group, the teachers varied in terms of preparation and pedagogical skill. Like many middle schools and high schools, most teachers' expertise was aligned with particular content disciplines— music, math, English, health, etc. On staff, also, were special educators who were focused on the challenging learning needs of these young people.

The Students

The vast majority of students at Maple Knoll School qualified for special education services. Students ranged from 12 to 21 years of age. Many schools that serve migrant or urban populations are familiar with high transience, but students at prison facilities are even more transient; it is remarkable if they participate in any coherent course of study. Those that are detained stayed at the school from a few days to a few weeks or, at most, a few months. Yet, even if they were on the premises, students were frequently absent from class due to institution-wide issues such as disciplinary actions. Students who were "committed" stayed longer. In some cases, they stayed for an entire year and were especially prized by teachers because their attendance was more consistent. In the past several years, honor roll, GED completions, and the celebration of students who have gone on to college have been commemorated in the hallways of the school with plaques, certificates, and banners.

Laying the Groundwork for Teachers' Professional Development

When Maple Knoll's director and I first met, we discussed the needs of the students and the conjoined needs of the faculty. We planned a professional development experience comprised of two graduate level literacy courses. During the first semester, a traditional Master's level course focused on reading across the content areas was delivered to the teachers by one of my colleagues. The course was well received (according to comments by the teachers and the director) and teachers reported in writing, when asked about the course on content area reading, that they gained new knowledge about how to implement specific strategies for teaching vocabulary and comprehension.

The second course was taught by me and was different from the first in that the teachers helped design the course. In addition to providing a general focus on improving students' motivation to read and reading content texts with improved understanding, course content evolved as we learned together. I visited a school faculty meeting and sought specific teacher input about what the faculty wanted to study with me. They suggested the following areas and our syllabus was written accordingly: (a) Specific strategies for word identification, including phonics, for students who were adolescent or adult beginning readers; (b) informal diagnostic assessment techniques; (c) teaching reading comprehension and writing; and (d) metacognition for both word identification and comprehension. I added the *lingua franca*, the language of teaching reading, which served as an important new tool for these secondary teachers. For example, we discussed such terms and concepts as authentic assessment, miscue analysis, levels of reading, and readability of texts.

I modeled certain teaching and learning strategies in class, then teachers practiced them in pairs or small groups. Many of these strategies were also detailed in their course reading assignments. Additionally, teachers were asked to implement these activities in their classrooms prior to our next meeting. While these activities are well-known to most elementary teachers, most were new to many of these secondary teachers. Appendix B describes some activities including Making Words (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992), Word Sorts, and onset-rime/phonograms. There was much discussion about phonics, supplemented by a thorough use of the course textbook (Heilman, 2002) and linked to the activities for assessment and instruction. In the following sections, brief descriptions detail how we addressed the course objectives and results that were discovered. We focused on issues about word identification, assessment techniques, teaching writing, and student metacognition. In addition, we discussed working toward fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension.

A Vision for Professional Development: The Voice of the Director

For five years, I have been the Executive Director at Maple Knoll School, a public school, located on the grounds of a residential facility for incarcerated middle and high school-aged students who have committed crimes in the jurisdiction of this Mid-Atlantic city. I have always known that quality education for our students was the gateway to their self-respect, job opportunities, and a second chance at life. As it was for me and many other poor urban youth, a solid, rigorous, and focused education is an equalizer in a technology-driven world that has little patience and few opportunities for those without money, self-motivation, skills, talents, and dreams. It did not take long to realize that most of the students who came to Maple Knoll School had talent, many if not most had dreams, but far too many were lagging behind in the basic skills of reading, mathematical computations, and functional skills. These skills are essential for them to realize their talents or dreams. These skill gaps are not because our students are deficient intellectually but because so many of them have been turned off, have given up on educational programming that does not stimulate their intellect and for which they cannot see the relevance or usefulness in their lives.

Reading is an essential “key” to opening the door to educational proficiency and success in all subjects. To the staff’s surprise, the students informed us that the ability to read determined the level of respect students received in their housing units. Poor readers were “ribbed and teased” by other students. The student who won the most respect on campus was called “Professor.” He could read, write, and speak on the level of a college student. Whenever he spoke, all the students listened. This hierarchy and status, based on one’s ability to read, explained why our poor readers refused to participate in oral reading or refused in-classroom support from their teachers. I saw the urgency of increasing the reading proficiency of students for whom the ability to read was a matter of not only educational and economic urgency but a road to establish self respect. Therefore, it was important that teachers in every subject area, both regular and special education, possess the attitudes and master the skills that would allow them to diagnose learning problems that prohibited students from reading. It was also important that they master techniques that would allow them to match those diagnoses with multiple strategies to teach reading. In January and September of 2004, Maple Knoll School teachers, along with instructional, clerical, support, and administrative staff enrolled in two reading courses with Towson University, as a result of a grant awarded by the school district.

Our teachers now see reading as part of their daily lesson planning. Staff can better differentiate between students’ reading problems— in some cases students have deficiencies in particular skills, but sometimes motivation is the issue. Teachers now have numerous avenues to diagnose reading problems. They have the ability to identify and incorporate reading skills and strategies as a normal part of teaching their subject content. More important, our students better understand the benefits of reading in their

lives and they have an increased belief in the ability of our teachers and staff to help them become proficient readers.

Thoughts on Reading in the Content Areas: The Voice of the Science Teacher

Reading Different Types of Texts

If we reflect back to our elementary and secondary schooling some of us were good in math and science, others may have preferred English and foreign languages, and still others may have excelled at earth science but not physical science or even biology (of course, there was always the student who could do it all). Perhaps our “best subjects” were driven by the type of reading we preferred to do or at least what we felt more comfortable doing. There is a difference between reading a science textbook and reading novels for English class in both the text structures and in the processes the reader needs. Teaching students how to read different types of texts is crucial for both the science teacher and the English teacher. That was a key premise of the two courses offered to teachers and staff at Maple Knoll School.

The View from Science Class

I have found that in Science class students learn new knowledge about content and about how to access that content....and that enhances their self-confidence. In many cases, it seems that learning how to read science material gives the student access to possible new arenas for jobs, everyday life enhancement, and worldview.

I have found that the discourse of science is unique and students need to be taught this discourse. In my science classes I often hear the cry, “I don’t like science.” When questioned, students’ usual response is, “I just don’t get it!” Further discussions among the students revealed that either the vocabulary is too hard or too different from other words that they know, or they do not understand what the text is saying.

Many educators respond with an eagerness to put students who have these types of reactions in a hands-on science program. Although experiential curricula are great for building interest and some skill in science, without the benefits of science literacy these students’ intellectual development is stymied. Hands-on science does offer the avenue to construct meaning about tangible science concepts but the concepts, vocabulary, and general knowledge of science may never be secured without reading and writing science.

General science information is reinforced from elementary level through middle school. It is assumed that by high school this information can be recalled and used to further understand a specific science which, when taken again in college, will be covered at a more complex level of understanding adding on to the bank of knowledge accrued. For example, the middle school Life Science course is almost like the high

school Biology class. The amount of information needed to be covered by the high school course is possible because the fundamentals have been taught and assumed learned in the middle school course. One builds on the other so when the college freshman is asked to take the college Biology 101, it is assumed certain fundamentals have been acquired. To my students, I try to explain the need for the building blocks of understanding science. When I begin a new unit, such as genetics, I emphasize that we need to learn the language of genetics to talk about it.

I realize that today most educators de-emphasize the textbook. I certainly believe we must be reading science in the newspaper, magazines, journals, etc. However, the reality is that many students need the fundamental information provided by a textbook because it is condensed in one resource. Science texts usually have a reference section, including a glossary. Students learn important basics by utilizing the textbook, so I teach about the different parts of their textbook and about the actual format of a chapter. It seems that teaching a student how to read a textbook is valuable and relevant; it is even more crucial if the student is college bound. Next, I explain to students that we need to learn the language of science in order to communicate about science. My students receive a list of Latin and Greek prefixes, roots, and suffixes, such as “bio,” “anti,” and “ology.”

Science reading is more, though, than breaking words apart. It is also putting words back into sentences within the natural discourse of science. In a textbook for science class, when a new word or concept is used, it is usually defined in that sentence or somewhere in the paragraph. Teaching the cues to locating the definition of a new vocabulary word is an essential instructional strategy because when students know the techniques of using context, they begin to feel that reading science texts is not so tiresome. When students don't use the actual context in their science books to understand the meaning of a word, they often think that all they have to do is go to the dictionary for a definition...unfortunately, the dictionary definition frequently doesn't fit the content, resulting in failure to understand even after this effort. I stress recognizing clue words or phrases such as “is called,” “such as,” “known as,” etc. when finding definitions. Once strategies for using context clues are practiced using the textbook, I ask students to try them in newspaper or magazine articles about science topics. The students find that it works there because that is the typical format of most science text.

In addition to definitional cues, I talk about the headings in bold in the text to help guide the major understandings of the topic. And, finally, I spend considerable time trying to have students really learn what the questions in the book are asking.

The Voice of the Students

In some cases, students were asked directly what they thought of learning how to read specific texts. One student, when queried about reading science texts, said:

Before [I learned some text reading strategies], I don't understand science. It seemed too difficult... the words and the phrases don't make sense it was like reading Chinese without knowing how to speak it. But, when you think about the different things in science they begin to make sense. Now, I understand it better, what the question is really asking you. It has helped me out a lot in science because I don't work my brain anymore on figuring what something means. Most of the time the answer is right there to a question but the thing is to understand what the question asks. It's not like math when you have to work a problem. Questions for science really have to do with common sense and understanding of science terms and understanding of the basics.

A different student, who also experienced the direct teaching of vocabulary and reading comprehension in science class, responded in this way:

If I don't know a word and it has prefixes and suffixes it can give me an idea of what kind a word it is. Learning how the text is organized gives you an idea what the text is trying to tell you or wants you to do.

Another student used writing to express more general themes about literacy in the prison school setting. His English class produced a school newsletter in which this poem was published:

*Behind these four walls:
We have time to think,
We read and write
We have time to rehabilitate
We pray to God to forgive the crimes we committed
We have time to find our true selves
We gain respect for others and ourselves
When the time comes we will have learned from our
Past mistakes and gained self control
BEHIND THESE FOUR WALLS.*

Theoretical and Personal Frameworks: The Voice of the Teacher Educator

Science and English teachers were active participants in our professional development initiative, as well as teachers who spent their days teaching health, math, music, social science, and Special Education. As a group, we set our sights on improving teachers' instruction in word study, reading comprehension, and writing. As described below, these goals were developed in a grassroots fashion by the school director and the teachers. Besides following the general framework of a syllabus, I developed each week's session based on what the teachers voiced the previous week. As such, I could model one of my teaching goals, which was to demonstrate responsive

teaching and ways to engage learners. The teachers often asked questions in class discussion that revealed what they were missing in their repertoire as teachers of reading or writing. I noted what the teachers said and adjusted my teaching accordingly. Even with the administrators as participants in the class, teachers felt comfortable explaining what they were lacking. Every attempt was made to provide a risk-free environment for them to expand their theoretical and practical base for teaching reading and writing.

Theoretical Perspectives

I brought to my work the influences of certain theorists and researchers. Three specific perspectives offer a foundation for this project: critical pedagogy in teaching and teacher development; reading and writing as linked, constructive processes; and dynamic assessment.

The fields of anthropology and critical pedagogy provide a framework of teaching with due respect for the participants and tips the balance away from prescribed curricula toward ongoing, dynamic assessment leading to more reflective teaching. Resulting instruction and the curricula allow learners to be their own agents within the learning process, often leading to students who direct their own learning (Deshler, Palincsar, Biancarosa & Nair, 2007; Fecho, 1998). Thus, the professional development approach featured in this study included continuous input from the teachers related to their specific needs (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005). I see teaching and teacher development as deeply and constantly reflective. For me and for the teachers with whom I worked throughout this professional development experience, I often looked for the sparkle of a “critical incident”—some episode that so changes one’s thinking that one’s practice as a teacher is transformed (Tripp, 1993).

Understanding the reading process as dynamic and constructive (Braunger & Lewis, 2001) is central and explicit in my teaching. Reading and writing are reciprocal processes, the development of one enhances the development of the other. Because Maple Knoll School reflects the traditional content area divisions typical of a secondary school, during class discussions we talked about whether texts and assignments encouraged students to assume aesthetic or efferent stances while reading (Rosenblatt, 1974, 1994). Furthermore, we discussed how our purposes for reading (artistic appreciation, enjoyment, or to derive information) often shift over time even while reading one document. Purposes for reading are something that a reader can become conscious of (metacognitive) and can affect how we approach the reading task. For example, should we read fast or slow, with surface-level or deep comprehension?

Finally, as a reading specialist I see the dynamic, recursive, and on-going process of assessment as essential in directing appropriate instruction. Assessment should focus on students’ strengths, rather than deficits, in relation to stages of literacy development (Braunger & Lewis, 2001).

Prison School in an Era of Mandates.

In some schools, reading instruction is mandated and not well-matched to its specific population (Wilson & Wiltz, 2006). In fact, it could be said that students in many schools are imprisoned by the curriculum (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Wilson, Martens & Arya, 2005). Boys studied by Smith and Wilhelm, in fact, claimed that public school was like “a prison” (p. 110). In our study, we found that students at Maple Knoll School had many difficult life experiences but, for many, their school reading and writing was a liberating experience, as evidenced by the poem *Behind These Four Walls*. When the teachers explained the purpose of each assignment, students often found relevance between their literacy learning and their literacy needs. When the purpose was authentic—to write to a judge, create a job resume, or read a sentencing document—these young people had strong motivation to engage in the lesson. Because of the particular nature of Maple Knoll School, the mandates from the school district were not impressed upon this school as they would be at other schools in the district.

Project Outcomes

The outcomes of this professional development project are presented as a narrative, occasionally supplemented by the descriptive statistics of the pre- and post-questionnaire. Outcomes related to beginning reading, assessment linked with instruction, writing, and critical pedagogy are described within the following sections.

Beginning Reading for Adolescents

Besides the typical work of teaching reading strategies for adolescents who can manage middle and high school level work, the faculty and administrators requested specific help with how to teach beginning reading to some of the adolescents. I addressed the issue of beginning readers over multiple sessions and through a variety of assignments. First, we considered the research suggesting that 18 hours of direct instruction in phonics is optimal for young children (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and why some of these adolescents may need this skill instruction (e.g. missed instruction, poor instruction, specific learning disabilities). Keeping in mind that phonics instruction should be limited and within the context of reading instruction that focuses on comprehension as the goal of reading, we learned about phonemes (distinct sounds spoken in any language) using the Heilman (2002) book as a reference. Phonics (sound-symbol correspondences) became demystified for these secondary-level teachers allowing them to consider how to incorporate word identification strategies as integrated teaching options within their content areas. Increases in phonics knowledge were confirmed by comparing teachers' answers to specific questions on the end-of-course questionnaire (Appendix A) with answers provided on the same questionnaire during the first session of the class. Improvement was measured in aggregate ($n = 28$) by percentage of knowledge growth. For each question the actual growth of the teachers on that topic was calculated versus the

possible amount of growth. The percentages listed are the actual growth over the possible growth. In all topics, the teachers gained knowledge word identification 62%, short vowels 94%, long vowels 83%, consonant digraphs 92%, vowel teams and digraphs 96%, diphthongs 93%, and ways to assess word identification 73%.

Secondly and most importantly, a case method approach in which we discussed the real cases of students was central to illustrating concepts of teaching literacy. Talking about the profiles of real students in the teachers' classrooms seemed to help them assimilate a new body of professional knowledge. They began to understand that diagnosis of students' specific needs and tailoring instruction to those needs can be highly effective and can lead to student success. In one particular case, we discussed a student named Jeremiah who his teacher, Ms. Smith, reported was a "non-reader." After a class discussion focused on a developmental framework for reading, including the stages of emergent literacy, beginning reading, and getting to fluency (Gillet, Temple & Crawford, 2008), Ms. Smith volunteered that she no longer regarded Jeremiah as a non-reader but determined that he was beyond the emergent stage of reading and was definitely a beginning reader. I suggested that Ms. Smith conduct more informal assessments (some of which are described in the next section). She subsequently documented that Jeremiah employed many decoding strategies and could consistently identify about 30 sight words. He demonstrated mastery on the Concepts of Print assessment (Clay, 2005), including knowledge of how English books are sequenced with print from left to right, the alphabet, and an awareness of most phonemes. Additionally, he used phonics-based strategies consistently. Jeremiah sometimes, but less consistently, used context clues for decoding and clearly needed to improve his reading fluency. With all of these assessment findings in mind, I suggested that instead of teaching Jeremiah more phonics-based strategies as Ms. Smith originally planned, he needed to broaden the strategies that he presently used for decoding. We discussed how Jeremiah needed to use syntax (grammar) and semantics (meaning-based) while identifying words, not just graphophonics (letters-sounds). Thus, we suggested that Ms. Smith try CLOZE passages (see Appendix B) with Jeremiah. Furthermore, in order to enhance his reading fluency, Ms. Smith used the reader's theatre approach which allowed him to practice oral reading for public performance. Over the course of the semester, Ms. Smith reported that Jeremiah demonstrated a greater comfort level with reading and comprehending more difficult and longer texts. Related to reading fluency, his pace of reading improved dramatically. His writing improved in terms of quantity and spelling accuracy. He made fewer miscues (unexpected responses a reader makes while reading) when reading (Goodman & Goodman, 1994) and became more proficient in integrating language cues [i.e., syntactic (grammatical), both semantic (meaning-based) and graphophonic (phonics)]. Most importantly, Jeremiah was enthusiastic about his progress and was interested in reading more books.

Assessment Intertwined With Instruction

During one class session I introduced miscue analysis (Goodman & Goodman, 1994), a powerful tool for teachers to analyze the strategies that students use to decode. Miscue analysis involves listening to an adolescent read and attending to the miscues or observed responses that do not match what the person listening to the reading expects to hear. For example, one teacher brought in his copy of text that a student read aloud:

<p><u>careful</u></p> <p>The St. Louis Cardinals had a colorful year.</p>

In discussing the strengths and needs of this student's oral reading, we noted that he had substituted a word that was syntactically correct and graphically and phonemically similar. The reader, however, made a miscue by substituting a word that did not make sense within the context of the passage. I asked, "What kind of instruction would this student benefit from?" This query sparked a lively discussion about reading comprehension. Teachers decided that comprehension must always be the hub of reading and that it is up to teachers to demonstrate how making meaning from text is "what good readers do." Think aloud strategies (the reader verbalizes what she or he is thinking while reading) were modeled for the teachers using content area texts. Teachers then practiced think aloud strategies and reviewed other comprehension strategies that they had learned in previous coursework.

Assessment and Writing

During our professional development classes, we spent considerable time discussing informal or classroom-based assessments such as the developmental spelling inventories featured in *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2007). Teachers brought in samples of student writing, and I explained how conventional and unconventional writing were a treasure trove of information about their students' competencies. For example, in analyzing one particular piece of student writing, we discovered that one student never wrote blends (e.g., *bl*, *gr*, *st*). It was decided that this student could use some instruction in this phonic element. Another student never used punctuation nor articles (e.g., *a*, *an*, *the*); this was a signal of needed instruction. Ms. Vee, an English teacher, shared with the class how she used the spelling assessment from our textbook *Words Their Way* (Bear, et al., 2007) with her students. She immediately noted that her students needed some direct instruction in the "ight" word pattern. When she subsequently asked her students for an example of a word that contained that word pattern, the first boy to respond said "kite," rather than a word that followed the "ight" spelling pattern. We laughed to hear this story and then launched into a conversation about the linguistics of English. We talked about how the

word “beef” came from the French language, but the synonym for beef, “meat,” came from German.

Another teacher used a similar assessment and relayed how the spelling assessments of her students highly correlated with students’ writing and participation in class instruction. It also reinforced this English teacher’s concept about how much more difficult expressive language, such as writing, is than receptive language such as reading. The topic of correct spelling resulted in many conversations about which literacy skills to teach first and which later. This type of questioning will be further explored in the discussion below in *Critical Pedagogy*.

Comprehension and Metacognition

Mr. Black, the health teacher, spoke of the need for students to become more active mentally when reading or listening. This was an ideal opening for our discussions of metacognitive knowledge, experiences, and strategies (Garner, 1987; Griffith & Ruan, 2005). I described how readers must be aware of not knowing as well as knowing. Furthermore, the best readers know many fix-up strategies to use when they become aware that they are lacking comprehension. Good readers, for example, re-read, read on to subsequent text, activate their background knowledge, look up essential vocabulary in the glossary or dictionary, etc. (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2002) This prompted Mr. Black to describe, in graphic vernacular, how he teaches his students to constantly monitor their interpersonal communication when dating. He explained how he used the analogy of interpersonal communication for helping students monitor both their decoding and comprehension of texts. Mr. Black talked about how a guy has to keep checking in with his date to make sure that they understand each other.

The growth in knowledge of metacognition and comprehension was captured by the post-questionnaire when compared with the pre-questionnaire. Again, for each item the total points gained by the participants in aggregate ($n=28$) was compared to the points that could possibly be gained. Participants increased their knowledge by 100% on the query about metacognition and had similar growth on the questions about pre-reading instruction (100%), how to teach vocabulary (100%), and how to help students gain fluency (96%).

Writing and More Writing

Throughout the course, a strand of thought and discussion emerged concerning how best to teach writing. Teachers offered repeated, spontaneous comments about the links between reading and writing. I shared a video focusing on special writing projects in prisons and we noted that the students at Maple Knoll School certainly didn’t need prompts for writing since they had so many life experiences worthy of focus in their

written expression. Mr. Till, a veteran English teacher, shared a humorous anecdote about the power of authentic writing. He said,

If I had taught the *descriptive essay* (to my students) instead of the *persuasive essay*, my young student, Ms. D., who wrote a letter to her judge, might still be incarcerated! She wrote such a persuasive essay that the judge let her out of prison!

Mr. Till's comment was an indication that writing instruction was less workshop-oriented (Atwell, 1998) and more directed by the teacher. By the end of the semester, there seemed to be a groundswell of interest in examining writing instruction in more depth within future professional development experiences.

Critical Pedagogy

After many contributions to class discussion on the topic of writing, Ms. Wams, a special education curriculum specialist, sparked our thinking with this probing question, "Does spelling really matter?" The teachers began to question what they did and why they did it. This kind of critical pedagogy (Wink, 2005) was one unexpected, but major, outcome of the coursework for teachers. They began to think about real-life student outcomes that linked to their teaching goals and practices, considering question such as, "Did the reading assignments and texts that they chose to use with students engage and motivate them to read more?"

Furthermore, the teachers started speaking openly about the contextual issues that surround literacy instruction, such as the kinds of discourse/talk that is privileged by the students and by the larger society. We discussed the best ways to help students know how to speak and write appropriately, aligned with various situations. In other words, the difference between street language versus academic language; the kinds of text (digital, expository, narrative, etc.), and how reading instruction could address different tasks and texts was another topic that bubbled up in class. Furthermore, we discussed and modeled different kinds of teaching—teacher-directed versus student-centered, for example—that facilitate the development of independent readers.

An important final finding of the professional development experience was that teachers started to reflect on the significance of their work. Mr. Khan, a special educator, noted that the importance of reading skills acquisition, especially for incarcerated youth, cannot be underestimated. In his written reflections, he emphasized the fact that a majority of individuals who comprise the prison population are illiterate or barely functionally literate. For boys who were students at Maple Knoll School, reading might not be a "hoop through which to jump" in a class, but the very catalyst that could potentially lead to life-transformational change. If students are perpetually frustrated when reading and feel socially ostracized or suffer low self-esteem as a result, it is entirely possible that they will "act out" inappropriately, and in doing so with great

frequency and intensity, might be diagnosed with a behavior disorder, the root cause of which might be as “simple” as a reading difficulty.

Finally, particular questions arose in discussions among all of the Maple Knoll participants in the professional development course. They included the following: What are our goals for instruction in reading and writing? What aptitudes and attitudes are we promoting through our current instructional approaches? What do we want students to be able to accomplish as readers and writers? How do we want students to feel about their engagement in reading and writing, and is our instruction promoting those feelings? This degree of reflection on their practice showed a critical edge developing in the teachers.

Discussion

Across the varying teacher perspectives, there are several recurring themes that link with our original questions: What is happening at this school in terms of reading and writing instruction? How does this school compare to other high schools relative to teacher development and adolescent literacy learning in the content areas? What other questions are the teachers asking about literacy instruction for their particular students? First, the special population and setting exclusive to this study are discussed. Second, the perspectives of teachers are examined through their own voices. Related to this is the professional development process in which teachers were free to ask any question about literacy learning and discuss openly their concerns. Third, a final discussion focuses on the findings associated with assessment and literacy instruction.

The setting for this project offered a context that was both similar to and different from other secondary schools. Underlying the processes of learning and teaching literacy is the context of correctional education. In a place in which students are incarcerated, there are certain anomalies. For example, the validity of assessments can be affected by lockdowns, threats of violence, and other issues that produce anxiety. In one study, reading tests administered during prison intake yielded scores that were significantly lower than equivalent test scores derived after students had settled into prison life (Piccone, 2006). Multiple affective issues impact the learning of adolescents in prison, but such students also are likely to have attentional and cognitive deficits that significantly affect their literacy learning (O'Brien, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Shelley-Tremblay, 2007). The data from our study show an appreciation by faculty and staff members for concerns such as these that impact incarcerated youth.

The setting for this study may be partly responsible for the sense of urgency about teaching reading at Maple Knoll. The School Director spoke about the social context of education when she explained that the best reader among the students was called “Professor” and had high status among his peers. Poor readers, in fact, refused to participate in oral reading or refused in-classroom support from their teachers. In class, teachers talked about how some students wanted help to improve their reading.

Other teachers voiced concern for students' economic survival if they were not proficient readers. On the part of the teachers and some of the students there was a passionate desire to read effectively, efficiently, and increasingly more difficult material. Thus, at Maple Knoll, motivation to improve literacy seemed very high. This finding is similar to the research on the advantages of intrinsic motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). These students did not need external rewards (e.g., pizza parties) to prompt them to read. Within their lives they saw the benefits of literacy so they were highly motivated to be proficient in literacy.

Second, teachers felt empowered to make a difference at Maple Knoll. They were reinforced in their perspective that there is an essential place for teachers and good teaching in literacy development. This belief contrasts with less empowered views held by some teachers in regular public school settings in which scripted reading programs have become more prominent. Key to teachers' empowerment was the fact that the professional development experience featured in this study was initiated at the request of faculty members and administrators. This represents an interactive model of professional development rather than a top-down model. Each class meeting brimmed with teacher-generated questions. Thoughtful discussion was the norm of each class session during most weeks, many teachers implemented new approaches and reported back to colleagues during subsequent class meetings.

Santa (2006) described the importance of relationships in teaching and learning literacy. This professional development experience reflects two layers of relationship. First, relationships were quick to develop between the teachers and their adolescent students. Second, a strong relationship was built between prison school faculty members and the teacher educator who visited them. I was honored to be brought into the teaching world of these educators and often visited them during the school day, not just during our scheduled class times. I used the profiles of their students to illustrate lessons that I was teaching. This, it seemed, encouraged the teachers to reveal more about their concerns and their own limitations. As they voiced their desires for new professional knowledge, I altered my lessons. In this reciprocal way, our relationships related to literacy learning were strengthened.

Third, these teachers, like many teachers in secondary schools, at first knew little about assessing and addressing the needs of adolescents who read below grade level, especially students who are not fluent readers. Because assessment can be linked directly to good reading behaviors (Caldwell, 2008), a specific course of professional development experiences was designed to help teachers gain assessment expertise. Within this course, attention to strategies for teaching decoding and fluency was included. Appendix B describes in detail the activities that were discussed and modeled such as Making Words and Word Sorts. Teachers were also provided with background instruction in basic phonics (including a focus on consonant blends, digraphs, diphthongs, short and long vowels, and onset and rime). They began to see that diagnosis of students' specific needs and tailoring of instruction for those needs is

productive. For example, if individual students needed instruction in basic phonics, teachers were now armed with the knowledge to teach those skills. Research has confirmed that one-size-fits-all instruction does not benefit students in the way that individually designed instruction for beginning readers does (Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Schatschneider, & Underwood, 2007).

Adolescents need continuous reading instruction with attention to individual differences and a focus on teaching strategies students can use when reading independently (Conley & Hinchman, 2004). The school director provided evidence of how the social context of learning propelled students to become more proficient readers. The science teacher, on the other hand, implied that reading for understanding was often overlooked in favor of hands-on learning by some content teachers. She called for explicit teaching related to the reading of textbooks and other print materials. In other “beat the odds” schools, high demands were placed on students with good results. Students were also “organized and goal-oriented, knowing why they are being asked to do a task, how the task builds on prior schoolwork, and how it might be expected to lay a foundation for future work” (Snow, et al., 2005, p.158). The Maple Knoll professional development initiative seemed to reinforce, if not convince, the teachers that they were the necessary ingredient in making the difference in students’ lives. Only with assessment and appropriately linked explicit instruction would all of the students—including those who were beginning readers—make progress. For example, teachers began using a quick spelling assessment to make some initial judgments about students’ phonics knowledge. These teachers learned how to accurately assess what students could do as readers. Furthermore, teachers were able to explicitly demonstrate what good readers do to read a variety of texts effectively, including reading fluently (Rasinski & Padak, 2004; Rasinski, et al., 2005). Another important focus of this professional development linked reading and writing as reciprocal processes and as developmental in nature (Gillet, et al., 2008; Kucer, 2005). It seemed to be helpful to the teachers to view reading and writing as stages of development for all of these learners, rather than seeing the learners as deficient.

Relative to many K-12 school sites, Maple Knoll School was surprisingly free of mandated curricula. Even though the students had core high school coursework in English, Math, Social Studies, Science, and Spanish, teachers and school-based curriculum specialists seemed to have more latitude in choosing the actual texts and specific approaches used in the classrooms. This reality is important, especially in this prison setting, considering that choice is a mechanism for accommodating children’s needs and their interests (Roller, 1996). Choice gave students at Maple Knoll School the option of reading newspapers and other authentic texts and writing for real purposes (such as writing to the judge). In contrast, school reading and writing is sometimes considered a straight jacket for students (Altwerger et al., 2004). Instead of providing students with a choice of texts and the freedom to express what is central to their responses to the text, students are often asked to respond to “canned” questions. Similarly, at many schools, writing to prompts has replaced writing about what is

important and authentic to students. Maple Knoll was different from these schools in that there was more freedom to choose texts and to select approaches to teaching. This seemed to be a strength of this school as lessons or classroom activities could be chosen that engaged this particular population of students.

Furthermore, tensions among the content disciplines seemed to melt away, at least in our class. Like all secondary teachers, these professionals were loyal to their chosen subject discipline and were committed to teaching their content. Still, there was cohesiveness among the faculty, probably because most shared an intense, authentic desire to help these students move forward with basic literacy. Whether they were using science texts, novels, or health handouts, teachers began to view weaknesses as opportunities for teaching that could be synergistic in that they could benefit students across the content areas.

Conclusions

Although the focus of this article was to describe a professional development experience for a group of teachers of incarcerated youth, qualities of this experience are applicable to other secondary schools. An important quality of this professional development experience represented a sustained effort, rather than a one-time workshop (Snow, et al., 2005). The format of the sessions was dynamic so that the concerns and challenges of the actual students in the school were addressed. The teachers increasingly integrated literacy instruction into their content disciplines in a blended, informal way. Additionally, teachers learned specific techniques for literacy assessment and literacy instruction. These procedures were demonstrated, practiced, and applied in their classroom settings. As the professional development experience concluded, all of the teachers were more active in determining the specific strengths and needs of their students. Whatever their content discipline, they furthered their capacity to teach students to use decoding and vocabulary techniques effectively, write for different purposes, and utilize reading strategies (e.g., predicting, visualizing) with a consistent focus on constructing meaning. The teachers confirmed their observations that adolescent literacy is a complex, multi-dimensional and developmental process, just as adolescent identity is complex, shifting, and varied (Bean & Harper, 2004).

Most importantly, as teachers learned more about literacy, the links between continual, authentic assessment and instructional activities selected to address students' needs became more apparent. Like the transparent backpack on wheels described in the introduction that teachers used to most efficiently traverse the outside world and the prison, having more transparency in instruction and curriculum resulted in more effective and efficient teaching. Seeing more clearly what students knew and didn't know and how instruction can be fine-tuned was one outcome of this professional development experience. Within the school, students offered many clues about their needs. Teachers began to distinguish these clues more clearly. They continually re-

examined students' reading and writing behaviors and these "transparent" assessments were what steered instruction in a forward direction.

More crucial, it seems, than a modern school building or even a stable student population, is a faculty that believes in, is not afraid to, and knows how to teach reading and writing. For many of the teachers at this school, a critical pedagogical perspective fit their needs well. Instead of just talking about what they had learned, they quickly implemented what they gleaned. As these teachers learned to question what they were doing and why they were doing it, they gained ways to free their thinking, made clear their purposes for teaching, and liberated their instructional approaches.

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Appendix A

Basic Reading Instruction QUESTIONNAIRE

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1. For word identification, what else, beside phonics, must a fluent reader use? (list at least 3)

2. Write 5 words that contain the most common “short” vowel phonemes in English (each word representing a different short vowel phoneme) _____
3. Write 5 words that contain the most common “long” vowel phonemes in English (each word representing a different long vowel phoneme) _____
4. Write 2 words with different consonant digraphs _____
5. Write 2 words with different vowel teams (vowel digraphs) _____
6. Write 2 words with different diphthongs _____
7. Describe with a phrase or sentence at least 1 way to assess student word identification competencies. _____
8. Describe the Making Words teaching strategy. _____
9. Describe 1 pre-reading strategy. _____
10. Describe 1 strategy for comprehending while reading. _____
11. Describe 1 vocabulary strategy. _____
12. Explain metacognition. Give one real life example of metacognitive knowledge and one real life example of metacognitive experience. _____
13. Phonics can be taught in analytic (embedded) or synthetic fashion. Which way would you first attempt to use and why? _____
14. Name 1 instructional strategy that assists with getting to fluency. _____
15. What is meant by structural analysis? _____

Appendix B

Teaching-Learning Strategies

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
<p>Making Words</p>	<p>A guided spelling strategy that can be used in both individual and group instruction. Students are given letter cards with which they build real words. They begin with two-letter words and continue with three-letter, four-letter, five-letter, and longer words until the final big word is made. The final word (a six-, seven-, or eight-letter word) always includes all the letters they have that day. Making Words is an active, hands-on, manipulative activity in which students discover sound-letter relationships and learn how to look for patterns in words. They also learn that changing one letter or even the</p>	<p>Word Recognition, including phonological processing</p>	<p>There is a strong correlation between early spelling ability and the development of phonological awareness which in turn leads to the ability to decode words in reading (Adams, 1990; Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992; Cunningham, 2004; Eldredge, 1999; Rasinski & Padak, 2001; Savage, 2004)</p>	<p>Preparation: Choose a final word for the lesson. Choose a word that is relevant to your curriculum or interests of the students. Make a list of shorter words that can be made from the letters in the final word. Include: (a) words that you can sort for the pattern(s) you want to emphasize; (b) little words and big words to make a multilevel lesson; (c) words that can be made with the same letters in different places (e.g., stop, spot) so students see that the order of the letters is crucial; and (d) a proper name or two to remind them where we use capital letters. Store the cards in an envelope. Write on the envelope the words in order and the patterns you will sort for at the end.</p> <p>Instruction: Demonstrate to the entire class on white board or overhead. Distribute</p>

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
	<p>sequence of letters changes the whole word. Specific words can be selected that directly promote word identification for a current text that is being studied. Content area teachers are encouraged to use vocabulary words from the current unit being studied.</p>			<p>all of the letters n (but do not tell them what the word is). Start with just two letters, asking students to make one or more words from those two letters. Ask the students to use the word in a sentence after they discover it. Confirm the spelling by writing it on the overhead projector (or have a student do this). Encourage anyone who did not make the word correctly at first to fix the word when they see it made correctly. Continue having students make more and more complex words, erasing and changing the number on the board to indicate the number of letters needed. Cue them as to whether they are just changing one letter, changing letters around, or taking all their letters out to make a word from scratch. Cue them when the word you want them to make is a proper name. Before telling them the last word, ask "Has anyone figured out what word we can make with all the</p>

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
				<p>letters?" If so, congratulate them. Once all the words have been made, take the index cards on which you have written the words, and place them one at a time along the chalk ledge. Have students say and spell the words with you as you do this. Use these words for sorting and pointing out patterns. Pick a word and point out a particular spelling pattern, and ask students to find the others with that same pattern. Line these words up so that the pattern is visible. To get maximum transfer to reading and writing, have the children use the patterns they have sorted to spell a few new words that you say.</p>
<p>Onset Rimes/ Phonograms</p>	<p>The ONSET is the initial part of a word—usually one or two letters—that is before the vowel-bearing part of the word. The RIME (phonogram) is a cluster of letters that includes the</p>	<p>Word recognition</p>	<p>Heilman, 2002; Fox, 1996.</p>	<p>Preparation: After deciding on the format, create colored cards of rimes and onsets; or create a cardboard double wheel of onsets (on the outside, larger wheel) and rimes (the inside, smaller wheel). Better yet, have the</p>

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
	<p>vowel sound part of the word. For example, in the word cat, c is the onset and at is the rime/phonogram. All syllables have a rime, but may not have an onset. When the most common rimes are combined with onsets, they can make hundreds of single syllable, high frequency words. Decoding errors occur more frequently in the vowels and in the final consonants than the initial consonants.</p>			<p>students create these practice tools. Instruction: Students can be shown an array of developmentally appropriate rime cards, displayed in a vertical column. The student takes one onset card at a time and places it beside each rime card, blending the onset and rime together to make various real and nonsense words.</p>
Word Sorts	<p>The object of a Word Sort is to categorize a group of words according to some shared feature. This activity can be used either before reading as a way to activate background knowledge, or after reading as a way of extending understanding.</p>	<p>Word Recognition or Vocabulary Building</p>	<p>(Bear, et al., 2007).</p>	<p>In Closed Word Sorts, the teacher predetermines the categories for the students; these are often used for word identification practice. For example, all the words that have the same ending are grouped together. In Open Word Sorts, there are not predetermined categories, so students—either individually, in pairs, or in small</p>

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
				groups—decide and then explain to the teacher and class what shared features they grouped together.
CLOZE	An assessment or activity that evaluates and enhances readers' syntactic and semantic knowledge. This task requires students to fill in blanks with words left out of text, usually a paragraph or more in length, but at least one sentence. This requires readers to build an internal representation of the text, and to put the words together in a meaningful way, so that they will be able to interpolate what words belong in the blanks. Students learn to rely on meaning, syntax, and grapho-phonetic knowledge.	Word Recognition—particularly students who are not using the context of the sentence	(Gipe, 1978-1979; Temple, Ogle, Crawford, & Freppon, 2005)	See http://www.edhelper.com/cloze.htm http://home.earthlink.net/~eslstudent/read/cloze.html
Reader's Theater and	Readers' Theatre is an interpretative reading of a	Fluent instead of choppy	(Keehn, 2003; Rasinski &	Students can create Readers' Theatre from events in history or

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
<p>other performance activities</p>	<p>text in which students bring characters to life through voice, simple gesture, and facial expression. No sets, costumes, or memorized lines are required. Rather than a focus on a production for an audience, Readers' Theatre offers a group of students the chance to choose text, transform text into a read aloud activity, gain fluency in oral reading, consider nuance in narrative language, use vocal expression to convey meaning, and have fun while reading. Poetry Race, Poetry Club or Rap Club is a vehicle for getting students to practice a passage of text several times with the goal of becoming fluent. Students often will eagerly practice</p>	<p>reading; oral reading with expression; focus on meaning</p>	<p>Padak, 2004; Walker, 2008)</p>	<p>current events, dynamic science phenomena (e.g. components of a cell), poetry, folktales, scenes from favorite books, etc. In the beginning, the narrator should introduce the characters, the setting, and any needed background to understand the scene. The characters address each other by name initially until the identities are clearly established. At the end, the narrator can give a summary or provocative question to close the scene.</p>

Strategy	Description	For Students who Need...	Supporting Theory, Research, or Resources	Preparation and How to Do It
	when they feel the rhythm, hear the rhyme, and resonate with the repetition of a poem...they have even more impetus when they know that they will be asked to perform it in front of their peers.			

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