

The Journey to Implementing Best Practices: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

The author discusses teacher preparation in the context of the increasing diversity in public school settings. A brief review of the literature on teacher preparation and student demographics is provided and highlights the challenges associated with teacher preparation. The author then presents a study of two teachers, at the same school, who are at different stages in their teaching careers. The study is presented as a means to highlight the need for improved teacher training and professional development as well as to highlight the school's attempt to implement research-based strategies to improve rigor and relevance in daily instruction. The school's struggle to implement programs with fidelity, along with the turnover in leadership, is indicative of nationwide issues. The article concludes with lessons learned in the attempt to make a system-wide change to improve academic outcomes for all learners.

1. Introduction

Although classroom diversity in general education is increasing, many teachers are not properly trained to educate students who are culturally, linguistically, or intellectually diverse. In regard to diversity, schools focus their professional development resources on two areas: special education, which uses the Response to Intervention (RtI) model, and English Language Learners (ELLs), as special education students and English Language Learners are being increasingly taught in general education settings.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), there are 55.5 million school-aged children; of whom 11.2 million speak a language other than English at home and 5.8 million were identified as needing services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). Among students whose first language is not English, 8 million are Spanish speakers. In special education, of the students served under IDEA in 2011, 3 million are White or Caucasian, 1.3 million are Hispanic/Latino, and 1 million are Black or African American.

To further breakdown the statistics, students in special education spend, on average, 80% of the school day in full-inclusion environments (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2008). English Language Learners' (ELLs) enrollment in public schools has grown by 64% between 1994 and 2010, whereas total school enrollment has increased by 4% overall (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). These changing student demographics are not reflected in the demographics of the teachers who are entering the profession.

The most current demographic statistics of teachers in the United States show that, of the 3.3 million public school teachers, 82% are White or Caucasian, 7% are Black or African American, and 7% are Hispanic/Latino. Along gender lines, 72% are female, and the age range is closely distributed between 30 and 59 years old (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013). Of the teachers surveyed by Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2008), 90.3% indicated that they have little or no training in how to teach linguistically diverse students. Further, 78% of these teachers indicated that have taught ELLs during their teaching careers.

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In general education, as it pertains to the use of the RtI model (a multi-tiered instructional framework), when teachers respond to surveys, they tend to self-report their lowest knowledge level as related to providing services and assessments using differentiated instruction for special education students (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2011; Vaughn & Schumm, 1995). Fewer than one-third of the participants in Spear-Swerling and Cheesman's (2011) study had experience working within an RtI framework. Given that the multi-tiered instructional framework, often referenced as RtI, has been part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) legislation since 2004, teachers should have more experience with the model. In view of these findings, it is not surprising that schools struggle with improving the academic achievement of all students.

Currently, there are approximately 3.3 million teachers employed by school districts in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The most common route into the teaching profession, used by 80% of all new teachers, is a traditional four-year university setting (National Research Council, 2010). The American Federation of Teachers (2012), in a survey of new teachers (1-3 year post-graduation), found that one in three reported that they were not prepared to teach. In particular, the teachers felt that their training lacked a "real-world" connection to what the teachers face during the school day. The American Federation of Teachers also surveyed teachers who entered the profession through alternative certification training programs and found that these teachers felt even less prepared to teach than did their traditionally trained colleagues (42% prepared to teach vs. 72% prepared to teach, respectively).

When schools are faced with teachers who do not feel adequately prepared to handle the demands of teaching, schools turn to consultants. Consultants, who generally are experts in a particular area, have been assisting school systems for over 60 years (e.g., Ellingson & Jarvie, 1941). Generally, the consultant, who is sought out for a specific purpose, conducts a needs assessment and provides tangible solutions for the problems identified through the needs assessment. This paper presents the journey of one consultant who worked with two English Language Arts (ELA) teachers to improve student success through revisions to both planning and teaching.

2. Narrative

This is an account of one middle school in a rural setting to improve academic performance. The Willow School District² has seen an increase in student diversity and a decrease in academic performance in the middle grades (sixth through eighth). Further, although there was little change in the teaching staff, there was considerable turnover among district administrators. The district, upon hiring a new administrator, also hired a new instructional coach to work with all teachers in the district in an effort to improve academic success.

One area identified by the instructional coach as in need of attention was the growing diversity in the district. Because this particular middle school showed the largest decline on both state and commercially available standardized assessments, the training was targeted to this school. Two consultant companies were hired to work directly with the teachers, one group was trained in the SIOP model (see below for details) and the other group was CORE (see below for details). All teachers in the district were invited to the training, but only the middle school teachers were required to attend.

The first consultant group was responsible for training teachers to work most effectively with ELLs. The consultants, trained by the researchers who developed the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol Model (SIOP; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008), provided professional development to all the teachers. The SIOP model provides focused lesson planning to ensure that the delivery of the content reaches all students, with particular emphasis on ELLs. If teachers fully implement the lesson plan, academic rigor, and relevance increases for all learners.

All teachers attended the comprehensive training provided by the trainers, received the materials, and agreed to implement Lesson Plan Two from Appendix B of the SIOP book. The lesson plan has a few different templates but all the lessons focused on vocabulary and guided instruction. Materials are copyright protected but can be reviewed through the SIOP website or the books that are available at major bookstores on line.

Toward the end of the fall semester, it became clear to the teachers that the principal was not returning. During this semester, the principal neither conducted fidelity checks nor set expectations for the goals and objectives of the professional development sessions. This failure to conduct the fidelity checks along with frequent absences led to the suspicions by the teachers that the principal was job searching. Further, the principal never stated that lesson plans were essential to improving academic performance and, thus, teachers did not complete the lesson plans.

² All names have been changed.

The instructional coach suggested to central administration that hiring the second consulting company mentioned would be more beneficial as the focus of the consulting was on teaching behaviors during lesson delivery. In this case, the coach felt this approach might be more effective as the control for change would be with the teachers and not so closely tied to administrators. The suggestion stemmed from past experience that the coach had with Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE) at another school district. The goal of CORE is to show teachers, through professional development and guided practice, how to improve teaching styles to ensure that the teachers reach all students in the classroom. Teachers develop lesson plans by observing consultants as they deliver model lessons. Consultants built upon the strengths of the teachers by having the teachers use research-based teaching strategies during each lesson delivery.

The district hired two consultants from CORE, one in Math and one in English Language Arts (ELA), for one week each month for four months, starting in the spring semester. The consultants worked with the teachers on how the two series of professional development, SIOp and CORE, complemented rather than competed with each other. To accomplish this, the ELA consultant modified the SIOp lesson plan to show how the elements of the CORE practices (Figure 1) were easily integrated into the districts use of the SIOp lesson plan.

CORE conducted monthly observations in both content areas, Math and ELA. This paper, however, focuses on the ELA classroom teachers. The observation forms were tied directly to the features of planning and instructional delivery found in the lesson plan template in Figure 1. All items were linked to both the SIOp and CORE materials in which the teachers received training during professional development.

Figure 1. Modified SIOp lesson plan.

| SIOp Lesson Area | Example or Thought Organizer for Completing Each SIOp Lesson Area |
|--|---|
| <p>Content Objectives * are measurable, focus on the knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn during the course of a lesson, and are written in terms that students can understand.</p> | <p>Students will be able to ___ (behavioral verb) ___ their knowledge of ___ (concept or skill) ___ by completing ___ (demonstration of learning/product) ___.</p> |
| <p>Language Objectives *address the <i>language</i> needed to engage with the academic content, perform classroom tasks, and achieve the content objectives.</p> | <p>Students will ___ (behavioral verb for reading, writing, or speaking) about ___(concept or skill) ___ in (setting: small group, partner, independently) ___.</p> |
| <p>State Standards * are specific to the objectives listed above, not just the blanket standard.</p> | <p>EXAMPLE: Standard: When reading <i>literature</i>, a proficient student: • analyzes text for a central theme, its development over the course of the text, and its relationship to story elements (character, setting, and plot); cites relevant and sufficient textual evidence to support literal and inferential interpretations; and provides accurate summaries. EXAMPLE: Specific to Lesson: Day 1: The day's lesson may just focus on analyzing text for a theme. Day 2: The next day may focus on the development of the theme and its relation to story elements.</p> |
| <p>Bell Ringer/Warm-up</p> | <p>A quick activity to set the tone and pace of the daily lesson. It should be related to the content objective and not take more than 3-5 minutes, on average.</p> |
| <p>Vocabulary List key vocabulary and strategy used to teach the vocabulary.</p> | <p>SIOp Feature 9 (pages 58-68 in SIOp book) CORE Sourcebook Section V, pages 405-606.</p> |

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| Building Background | SIOF Chapter 3 CORE Sourcebook refers to this as World Knowledge (also see Comprehension Section, which starts on page 607). |
| Instructional Strategy | <i>I Do</i> portion of the Instructional Routine (CORE Sourcebook). Teach content using Continuum of Strategies (page 97 SIOF) to be able to reach all students. |
| Check for Understanding *Include checks for understanding throughout the instructional strategy, e.g., fist to five, thumbs up, white boards. | As you teach content using strategies, how are you stopping to check to make sure the students understand the information? |
| Grouping/Interaction-guided Practice | <i>We Do</i> portion of the Instructional Routine (CORE Sourcebook). This portion is where you provide practice/application opportunities for students and scaffold instruction as needed (SIOF Chapter 7). Students should be interacting with each other and should be expected to use a variety of response formats instead of only responding to teacher-directed questions. |
| Check for Understanding *Roam around the room to check for accountability and individual understanding. | How are you stopping to make sure that the students understand the information? |
| Independent Practice * Ensure students are practicing the exercises correctly; monitor struggling students more closely. | <i>You Do</i> portion of the Instructional Routine (CORE Sourcebook). |
| Closure/Formative Assessment (Exit ticket directly related to the content objective.) | Has to be tied directly to the content objective. Can be called Determination of Learning (DOL). Does not have to be a written response. Short, approximately 1-3 minutes. |
| Personal Reflections on the Lesson | |

2.2 Teachers

2.2.1 Mrs. Taylor. Mrs. Taylor had been a middle school ELA teacher for six years. She attended a state university, where she earned a bachelor's in education, and then earned a master's in reading from an online-only institute. Mrs. Taylor was observed at least one time per class session over the course of one week. Observations followed the protocol described in the preceding paragraph. Mrs. Taylor also observed the consultant deliver a model lesson that demonstrated how to incorporate multiple reading strategies and differentiated instruction into a 50-minute classroom period. After each observation and model lesson, Mrs. Taylor went through a debriefing process, whereby each aspect of the lesson was reviewed.

2.2.1.1 Observations. Mrs. Taylor spent an average of 80% of her instructional time talking to and reading to the students. Her teaching style was such that her students, who were passive learners, did not have to spend much time reading on their own, discussing the content in their own words, or writing responses. The consultant observed Mrs. Taylor during three different classes in one week. The lesson plan (Figure 1) served as the basis for the observation. The lesson plan contains 12 distinct areas and, on average, Mrs. Taylor incorporated four of the 12 areas, with two items, the state standards and building background (albeit not a strong foundation for background) knowledge being incorporated consistently.

Over the course of two months, Mrs. Taylor went from consistently incorporating two items to incorporating six. The biggest growth came after Mrs. Taylor observed a model lesson that incorporated multiple opportunities for students to be active participants in the learning process. Even with the model lesson and professional development, Mrs. Taylor still had a difficult time incorporating a more academically engaging teaching style into her repertoire.

2.2.1.2 Model lesson. The consultant reviewed the model lesson plan (a sample plan based on the model lesson is presented in Figure 2) with Mrs. Taylor prior to the delivery of the lesson. The instructional coach and the district administrator were invited to observe the lesson, although only the instructional coach came to the lesson. The purpose of the lesson was to have students identify and summarize the main idea of a reading. Because this was the first time that the students encountered this strategy, a short, three-paragraph informational text was used. The students were taught to use the paragraph shrinking strategy that stipulates that students use ten words or less to ensure that only the key ideas were included (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000).

Figure 2. Sample lesson plan for summarization.

| SIOPI Lesson Area | Example or Thought Organizer for Completing Each SIOPI Lesson Area |
|--|--|
| Content Objectives * are measurable, focus on the knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn during the course of a lesson, and are written in terms that students can understand. | Students will be able to identify and summarize the main idea of a paragraph with 90% accuracy by completing the summarization strategy. |
| Language Objectives *address the <i>language</i> needed to engage with the academic content, perform classroom tasks, and achieve the content objectives. | Students will read "The Greenhouse Effect" during partner reading and, using precision of language, summarize each paragraph in ten words or less in a whole-group setting. |
| State Standards * are specific to the objectives listed above, not just the blanket standard. | EXAMPLE: Standard: CCS: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments. |
| Bell Ringer/Warm-up | Respond to the following statement on the back of the paper on your desk: "Define summary, contribute, and redundant." |
| Vocabulary List key vocabulary and strategy used to teach the vocabulary. | Summary, contribute, and redundant. Strategy: Use syllabication; student definitions, then confirm with dictionary definition; parts of speech. |
| Building Background | Discuss the greenhouse effect in general. Discuss the vocabulary |
| Instructional Strategy | <i>I Do:</i> Discuss the steps to paragraph shrinking; student's choral read first paragraph and teacher summarizes, using strategy on PowerPoint. |
| Check for Understanding *Include checks for understanding throughout the instructional strategy, e.g., fist to five, thumbs up, white boards. | As the lesson is conducted, ask students to respond via cold calls and by providing thumbs up/down to questions. |
| Grouping/Interaction-guided Practice | <i>We Do:</i> Student partners read paragraph 2 and complete the summary on PowerPoint. |
| Check for Understanding *Roam around the room to check for accountability and individual understanding. | As the students read, circulate the room, listening for errors. As students write, circulate the room, looking for work completion and opportunities to scaffold and provide individual feedback. |
| Independent Practice * Ensure students are practicing the exercises correctly; monitor struggling students more closely. | <i>You Do:</i> Students read final paragraphs independently and complete the summary of paragraph 3 on PowerPoint. |
| Closure/ Formative Assessment (Exit ticket directly related to the content objective.) | Closure: Summarize whole passage by combining the three main idea statements. DOL: Write out the three steps to paragraph shrinking. |

The lesson started with a review of the objectives and a warm-up to introduce students to key vocabulary words needed to be successful during the lesson. Students then were asked to discuss their general knowledge of the topic of the text and to think about what information they already knew prior to reading. Students conducted a choral read of the first paragraph and the group completed the summarization statement. Then the students' partners read the second paragraph and, in the pair settings, completed the summarization strategy and then shared their responses with their partner and then the whole group. During this time, the teacher walked around the room to check for individual understanding of the content as well as took the time to provide scaffolded instruction and corrective feedback. A few students struggled with summarizing key ideas without extra details but, when guided by questions from the teacher, were able to focus the summary to the key ideas.

Finally, the students were asked to independently read the last two paragraphs and to summarize on their own. When the students finished the third paragraph on their own, they were instructed to check their work with a seat partner. As a check for understanding, the students were asked to complete a determination of learning prior to leaving the class. The final check involved the students' summarizing the main idea of the entire passage. This took the entire class period, from bell to bell, and, overall, the students were successful.

During the debriefing session at the end of the school day, Mrs. Taylor indicated that the observation was helpful in terms of her conceptualizing how the various items of the lesson plan fit together in a way that did not feel segmented. Up to this point, she had never seen a video or been instructed on how to conduct partner reading. A lengthy discussion of the different methods for using partner reading, and how it encouraged academic engagement of all students, was held during the debriefing session. Also reviewed was the importance of the students' reading independently, which the teacher had not previously allowed for in her instruction.

The ability to see the lesson delivered firsthand and the active engagement of the students enabled Mrs. Taylor to move forward to provide instruction that included more rigor and relevance in terms of the state standards. She indicated that she was pleasantly surprised at the level at which all students participated, given the range of reading abilities in her classroom. The key to the success of the strategy was the use of a short, below-grade-level passage, so that the level of reading ability did not interfere with the learning of the strategy. The strategy can be taught in early elementary school and then reinforced as the students move up in grade level.

2.2.2 Mrs. Rose. Mrs. Rose was a veteran teacher who had a strong and positive presence in her classroom. She had taught ELA for over 25 years and held a master's in reading. Her background included various professional development trainings from which she has successfully incorporated certain strategies into her daily teaching routine. Nevertheless, two main areas of her instructional delivery, rigor and differentiated instruction, needed attention.

2.2.2.1 Observations. Mrs. Rose was observed over three classroom periods, and, of the 12 areas on the observation form, she addressed an average of seven areas. While this average appears to be better than that of Mrs. Taylor, Mrs. Rose's students were presented with relatively easy reading materials that did not present the students with the rigor and relevance needed to be successful on the state assessments or on the more challenging materials encountered in high school. For example, students would spend the entire class period reading articles from *SCOPE*® magazine without receiving any strategy instruction on building vocabulary and comprehension skills to assist them with more challenging text. Students did, however, spend the majority (65%) of their instructional time on reading, with the remaining time split between teacher-led question-and-answer sessions and independent work time.

2.2.2.2 Model lesson. The consultant reviewed the model lesson plan with Mrs. Rose prior to the delivery of the lesson. The instructional coach was present during the model lesson, and, again, the administrator was invited but declined to attend. The purpose of the lesson was for students to learn how to answer factual, inferential, and evaluative questions using the Question-Answer Relationship strategy (QAR; Raphael & Pearson, 1985).

The lesson started with a review of the vocabulary required to complete the QAR strategy. The class read the first two paragraphs aloud, and then the students answered text-based questions as a whole group. Next, students read the following two paragraphs with a partner and responded to the next set of QAR questions. The lesson ended with the students' completing the rest of passage and QAR questions on their own.

Although three types of reading were incorporated into the lesson, it is not necessary to use all three types every day. However, for demonstration purposes, it was necessary to show the teachers that a variety of strategies can be employed within one instructional setting. During the lesson, the teacher was able to observe a variety of checks for understanding and opportunities for scaffolding, as needed.

This lesson also required bell-to-bell instruction and, to ensure a focus on learning the strategy, the teacher used a short reading passage that was one grade level below the students' grade level. Teachers can use this strategy over one to three days, depending on text difficulty and student response to learning the strategy.

During the debrief session at the end of the school day, Mrs. Rose noted what she saw as the positive aspects of the model and the challenges that she thought that it might present during her implementation of it. A PowerPoint presentation was used during the model lesson, and Mrs. Rose stated that this was something with which she felt she would have the most difficulty. She noted that a few tweaks to the PowerPoint would be helpful in alleviating her concerns about using the technology to enhance the lesson. The tweaks included adding a few more slides to eliminate having to move back and forth between slides, thus eliminating the need to learn animation in the short term. This tweak also would make it easier for the students to follow the lesson. The instructional coach offered to assist in the setting up of animation to make the slide show easier to view for the students.

Mrs. Rose noted that the students struggled with the higher-order questions. After discussing the lesson with the consultant and the instructional coach, she determined that she did not typically ask questions that delved into ideas that were not readily present in the text. Mrs. Rose already had several strategies in place that encouraged participation, but, after the model lesson, she was able to identify areas in which she could improve to increase her previous expectations of learning.

2.3 Moving Forward

In setting up the new academic year to ensure student success, the new administrative team needed to determine the key areas of focus and the means to achieve success in these areas. When schools look toward a new start, this is often an overlooked area. Consultants are brought in, as was the case with this school, without a clear action plan on the part of the school personnel. Without this step, it is too easy to add areas of focus without proper evidence of what is needed, and why, to improve academic success.

The development of a team environment is crucial to the success of any endeavor to improve academic achievement. Such an environment enables participants to discuss, in a scholarly manner, what, in the past, has worked (or not) and why. For Willow, the key concerns were to (a) define the goals to be met during the academic year, (b) develop expectations of the teachers and the administrative team, and (c) design an accountability program that clearly articulated the roles and responsibilities of the teachers, coaches, and administrators. One positive aspect was that the new principal was an internal hire and brought with him both an understanding of the school and good rapport with the teachers.

4. Lessons Learned

4.1 Purpose

When school personnel need to implement school-wide initiatives, the first step in the process is to determine whether the academic plan supplants or supports the existing curriculum, procedures, or expectations. While there is a great deal of research in the area of school change (also referred to as systems change; see Cohen & Ball, 1999), this author, through her experience of working with the schools, finds that schools and consultants seldom ask or answer this fundamental question prior to starting a new initiative. Failing to answer this question is akin to not having a lesson plan prior to teaching.

It is useful to look at other professionals who develop a clearly defined product and how these experts work toward their goals. For example, an architect strives to design an optimal building that meets the needs of those who will use it. The architect receives guidelines from his or her client, and, in return, the client wants to see the architect's plans to ensure that they meet the client's needs. The architect supplies blueprints and makes modifications as warranted by a variety of factors, mostly out of the control of the architect, that, nonetheless, need to be addressed.

In terms of education, schools have a set of standards of which students must demonstrate mastery each year. To achieve the goal of students' acquiring the information set forth by the state curriculum, the teachers must have a blueprint. Schools provide materials to teach the curriculum, and teachers must develop lesson plans, which provide a means for students to learn the state standards as the year progresses.

Just like the experience of the architect, there are a variety of factors that require modifications to the blueprint, and these modifications are easier to accomplish with a well-written plan that is ready prior to the delivery of the lesson.

4.2 Fidelity

Another important, but often overlooked, aspect of implementation is the allocation of time needed to ensure that teachers and administrators achieve and maintain fidelity. Time should be built into the weekly schedule for co-planning and reflection sessions. Qualitative studies show that, when given shared planning time, particularly enough time to allow for sharing of feedback and suggestions, teachers report reduced stress levels (Santi, York, Foorman, & Francis, 2010). Further, such planning time provides a sense of community for teachers who spend most of their time within the confines of their own classroom (Millner, Santi, Held, & Moss, 2006).

Another way to maintain fidelity is to encourage teachers to videotape instructional delivery and to reflect on what worked and what did not. It is useful for teachers to see the nuances of delivery and student responses when not under pressure to deliver the lesson. The videos do not have to be shared with other teachers; nevertheless, it is not easy for teachers to watch themselves teach. However, the tape allows teachers to take a step back and to analyze their delivery in a way that cannot be done under normal teaching conditions.

4.3 Alignment

Finally, teachers and administrators need to work on aligning any new plan for improvement of academic success with what is already in place. If the idea of the new plan is to supplant existing plans, teachers and administrators should at least consider whether there are aspects of the former plan that are still valuable.

In the case of Willow, the SIOP model provided a solid base for lesson plan development within the school district, while the routines and strategy instruction from CORE provided enhancements to increase rigor and active student engagement. Sometimes different programs have a common base, and, through professional development and planning time by all parties involved, aligning materials can be beneficial. The involvement of all parties in the planning process can alleviate concerns about the new program and increase willingness to participate and fully implement the new model.

5. Discussion

Administrators need to make attending professional development sessions a priority. It is essential that they hear the same message that teachers hear and demonstrate their commitment to the success of all students. Everyone's top priority should be to work to improve educational outcomes for all students. For administrators, this includes working with the teaching staff on a regular basis.

It is essential for administrators to conduct classroom observations and then discuss their observations with teachers. These observations do not have to be formal; they can involve a ten-minute stop in the classroom. Administrators should have a fidelity checklist that can be used during these observations. Any fidelity checklist used should be developed directly from the program that the school is implementing to ensure that the goals and objectives of the program are being met to the standards set forth by the authors. At team meetings or school meetings, administrators need to allot time to share the goals and objectives for the new academic year. Teachers need the opportunity to discuss what is and is not working well. By using this time to discuss potential barriers to implementation and how to work around them, the administrators can build a team approach to problem solving.

Success takes a team effort, collaboration, and make changes along the way. Further, professional development needs to occur throughout the year, not just during the summer session. This narrative has provided valuable lessons that can be applied to how both teachers and administrators are trained to work in a school system with increasingly diverse students.

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