

RISE₂ Deeper Learning Model

Real-world Innovations = Systemic Enduring Engagement

SPECIAL EDUCATION IN RURAL EASTERN KENTUCKY

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Abstract

This article describes the impact of a state funded project in the rural schools of Eastern, Appalachian Kentucky. The project involved a partnership between the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (KVEC) and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). Through the partnership, grants were made available region-wide to focus on three areas in special education: transition, micro-credential development and new and emerging teachers. The project was designed to provide practitioner-based opportunities to innovate transition experiences for students, teacher-driven micro-credential development and address the burgeoning need of new and emerging special education teachers, particularly those on alternate academic degree plans. The results of the study indicated that faculty and staff believed that RISE₂ Deeper Learning had a positive impact on instructional effectiveness and ultimately student learning, student achievement, as well as overall teacher morale and satisfaction.

The professional literature is replete with examples of research initiatives and data for teachers to analyze who specialize in exceptional children, particularly on secondary transition ranging from teacher preparation programs (Alnahdi, 2014), evidence-based practices and predictors (Test, Bartholomew and Bethune, 2015) and interagency

collaboration models (Povenmire-Kirk, Diegelmann, Crump, Schnorr, Test, Flowers & Aspel, 2015) to data regarding low rates of post-school outcomes for students with moderate/severe intellectual disabilities and emotional and behavioral disabilities and gaps in research to practice (Bouck, 2012; Cheney, 2012; Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015). However, there is little-to-no practitioner-based evidence where teachers were the drivers of innovation. KVEC's RISE₂ Deeper Learning Initiative resulted in special education teachers conceptualizing, creating and implementing transition innovation projects—and in many instances—collaborating with their general education colleagues, which Pugach & Peck (2016) would describe as no small feat given the separate cultures of professional practice.

In the spring of 2019, a call went out to KVEC member districts inviting teachers to apply for 30 available transition innovation grants and 12 teacher-driven micro-credential development projects. Forty-five teachers from 14 districts participated in the Transition Innovation Project initiative. The projects were very diverse and creative. Numerous examples included entrepreneurial activities that students designed and implemented alongside their teachers. Other projects were very clever pedagogically, for example, teachers used manipulatives (puppets) to engage students in role playing through pair-share scenarios. Students who typically were reluctant to communicate, were at ease when using this format to work as a team to discuss and problem-solve the different tasks. Additional projects included the fields of Career and Technical Education, STEM, Home Economics, Agriculture and Life Skills. Teachers in the KVEC service region continue to demonstrate the talent and ability to be “Leaders, Learners and Makers,” which is KVEC's mantra, which is especially striking since research reveals that teachers lack knowledge regarding transition services and programming (Peper & McMaster, 2012). Moreover, teacher preparation programs are deficient in coursework and training in transition, and most teacher education programs do not require the content for licensure (Williams-Diehm, Rowe, Johnson & Guilmeus (2017).

Micro-credential development is still new, and the data is anecdotal. As such, KVEC has been at the leading edge of the movement over the past several years by hosting four national micro-credential summits and producing 21 micro-credentials-to-date. RISE₂ provided an opportunity for the development of 12 micro-credentials. Teachers worked alongside KVEC educational consultants on topics that ranged from Student-driven Inquiry in Math Using the Question Formulation Technique, Curriculum-based Measurement, and Interdisciplinary Literacy Practices to Using Direct Measures of Assessment in Progress Monitoring for Students with Disabilities and Developing Leadership Opportunities for Students with Disabilities.

The tremendous shortage of special educators has resulted in a large percentage of teachers on alternate programs without the training needed to be an effective classroom teacher. So concurrently, districts were notified that KVEC would launch a comprehensive, multi-faceted professional learning initiative for new and emerging special education teachers. Conferences were hosted in the fall, winter and spring (virtual) with topics that included Needs Assessment (Special Education Eligibility, Triangulation of Data and Present Levels of Education Performance, PLEP), Behavior (tiered interventions) and Assessment and Inclusion of Special Populations. Virtual trainings were also offered monthly through theholler.org, KVEC's social learning network and digital platform and topics included Individualized Education Program, IEP (Goal Writing, Kentucky Academic Standards, Progress Monitoring and Admission and Release Committee meetings, ARC), Explicit Instruction and Specially Designed Instruction, Co-Teaching Strategies, and Understanding Poverty. Aside from the training being driven by KVEC educational consultants, teachers throughout the region engaged in Professional Action Networks (PANS) also contributed to the content, particularly the monthly Zoom trainings.

Historically, traditional teacher preparation programs have focused on those skills delineated by professional organizations in their initial teacher preparation programs. These programs, while providing limited, closely supervised opportunities for direct interaction with students, are tied to the academic and theoretical aspects of the profession rather than the practical aspects. Many students leave those programs for their first jobs with high Praxis scores, but little competence. Competence is understanding and applying both the professional and social practices in a world of teachers and students. Competence as a teacher is acquired in the field by actually being a teacher and engaging in the roles and practices of a teacher. In essence, university teacher preparation programs and their associated professional organizations are interested in "truth". What their teacher education graduates, and their associated school districts are interested in is "what works", and "what works" is seldom universal. Rather, it is more closely tied to the "real world" of individual teachers and their school district.

An analogy to this situation would be expecting a person to become a competent baseball player by reading the rule book or watching a baseball game. This process would never develop a competent baseball player, as the only way to become competent as a baseball player is to actually play the game. Without this competence, one cannot even formulate the correct questions to ask about how to become competent. This is why first year teachers often feel frustrated in their jobs and burnout has always been a problem.

However, as one “plays baseball” coaches are available to correct mistakes, teach essential skills, and provide direction and support. This process aids the baseball player in growing as an athlete and developing greater competence in his role. Teachers could and do benefit from a similar process.

Teacher credentialing of individuals is important. But credentialing activities that produce competence is critical. The project described in this study is such a program and was conceived, developed, and implemented to achieve this goal.

Projects similar to the one in this study have been developed, organized and implemented to enhance the skills of professional educators and develop deeper teacher instructional capacity. However, these efforts were primarily reactive to state and federal initiatives and limited in scope. Frequently these projects were also limited in impact, being only district, city, or county-wide.

Some notable examples include Washington, Blackbourn, & Thomas (2011), which addressed a set of district-wide needs and personnel certification issues besetting the poorest county in Mississippi. The results of this project included raising the number of fully certified teachers from 73% to 91% by helping the majority of those teachers holding emergency certificates to move to full certification. In addition, the district’s performance on state mandated tests improved significantly, resulting in an improvement in the overall rating from At Risk for Failure to Adequate.

Additionally, Campbell, Thomas, & Blackbourn (2010), focused on the development of first year teachers in three separate, high poverty school districts with regular professional development activities targeting strategic instructional skills. At the end of the initial year of training, those teachers included in the project exhibited instructional success and more positive self-evaluations than first year teachers randomly drawn from three of the highest performing school districts in the region. While providing meaningful services and producing positive outcomes, these projects were limited in their impact because of being tied to single districts or single county areas. Extending the reach of a project, yet still maintaining the integrity of the services delivered, is the key to meaningful change. This was the goal of the RISE₂ Project.

Methodology

During the winter of 2019-20, Dr. Rocky Wallace and Dr. Will Kayatin observed and interviewed 40 of the 105 teachers and staff who participated in one or more of the RISE₂ Deeper Learning cadres. Leading up to the capstone event in late spring of 2020—Forging Innovation in Rural Education—teachers and staff who participated in the three cadres

were administered a 12-item survey using Qualtrics concerning their perceptions regarding the degree of the RISE₂ initiative's impact on their instruction, student learning and personal efficacy as a teacher. A seven-point Likert Scale was employed as the indicator of teacher and staff responses to the survey questions. The survey had a return rate of 67% for a total of 71 participants. The data obtained was aggregated by 4 dimensions: 1) Type of Teacher Cadre; 2) Content Specialization; 3) Years of Teaching Experience; and 4) Years at a School/District. A One-Way Analysis of Variance was employed as the means of analyzing the data collected. The data were organized across the different divisions embedded within each dimension, yielding a mean score for that specific group. F values were obtained between each group's mean score on the survey instrument and that group's mean within the dimension of interest.

Results

The results in this study indicated several positive and promising outcomes. While the number of participants was limited across several dimensions (i.e. a relatively small N; a preponderance of special education teachers, teachers with 10 or more years of experience, and secondary level teachers), the results show a positive impact on the participants and delineate possible future directions for successful professional development, micro-credentialing, and research.

First, the vast majority of the participants rated their satisfaction with the RISE₂ project as a positive or very positive experience. Most participants felt that it helped them improve their instructional, administrative, and leadership skills and would recommend it to other teachers and administrators. Those participants with fewer years of experience tended to give the RISE₂ higher ratings than those with more experience. Additionally, secondary teachers tended to give higher ratings to the project than elementary teachers.

These two factors concurrently support the notion that beginning teachers have a common need for ongoing training and support specific to those conditions they experience in their "real world" of teaching, practical and effective approaches that build their competence and confidence. An additional aspect of the participants responses suggest that elementary teachers look for means to facilitate positive development in their individual students, while secondary teachers look for methods that allow for content enhancement and instructional organization.

A second significant result on the survey was that the RISE₂ Project had a positive impact on the participants perceived administrative and leadership skills. This was true regardless of the content specialization, the years of experience, or the grade level taught associated with the participants. This finding is a significant positive aspect of the RISE₂

Project, in that leadership throughout and among all organizational members is a critical component of that organization's success. Building a cadre of young, skillful leaders within a school district only serves to strengthen it, expand its ability to deliver quality services, and respond to both the individual and collective needs of those they serve. Indeed, Covey (1998) states that, "Anyone can be a leader." Any one of us can take the initiative; it does not require that we be appointed as a leader, but it does require that we operate from moral authority.

Finally, a significant finding that relates to the overall effectiveness of the RISE₂ Project is the fact that participants responded almost unanimously that they would recommend the training to others. This finding speaks to the relevance and practical usage inherent in the components embedded in the structure and content of the RISE₂ Project. The participants felt that the training they were receiving was meaningful and relevant to their ability to provide exemplary instruction to their students. As professional educators, with a commitment to serve the common good, there was a desire on their part to share the skills and knowledge they obtained with their peers. Nothing could have been more significant than a recommendation to others regarding the high quality of the training in the RISE₂ Project.

Summary

Based on the analysis of the survey data using Qualtrics, which included an open-ended comment section, teachers and administrators who participated in one or more of the three cadres lauded the professional learning opportunities provided through KVEC's RISE₂ Deeper Learning Initiative. Overarching themes were also captured from the 40 interviews that were conducted, which included "real world" life skills training for students, greater, overall student engagement, micro-credential development germane to the professional development needs of individual schools and real-time professional learning for New and Emerging special educators.

Monty Hill, a welding instructor at the Lee County Area Technology Center (ATC) remarked that his students enjoyed pipe welding experiences through the Transition Innovation Grant (TIG), and ". . . not every program has this level of training" (M. Hill, personal communication, January 31, 2020). Michelle Combs, whose project involved a computerized accounting system at Lawrence County High School added that the TIG Grant made it possible for students to "master job skills," that may not be possible in their local, rural community given the limited number of employment opportunities (M. Combs, personal communication, February 10, 2020). Hannah Watts and her colleagues from Breathitt County Middle-High School engaged their students in a Reverse Job Fair. According to Ms. Watts, not only did the project enhance school-community

relationships, but resulted in students acquiring the “. . . knowledge, experience, and exposure about career pathways within our community” (H. Watts, February 27, 2020).

Examples of innovative micro-credential development include Letcher Central High School’s Emily Kincer and Tyler Branham from Pikeville Independent High School. Ms. Kincer employed the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) as a pedagogical strategy that enabled her to break down math concepts into greater detail, which increased student comprehension and engagement. The application of the QFT process also motivated her general education colleagues to “re-think” their teaching strategies. Mr. Branham developed a micro-credential that used Direct Measures of Assessment in Progress Monitoring for Students with Disabilities. He posited that “. . . appropriate data collection is imperative to effectively and accurately develop educational programs for students.” He further added that his colleagues who earn this micro-credential will enjoy a “hands-on experience in all aspects of the use and implementation of direct measures to collect accurate data which drives decision-making for this population” (E. Kincer, personal communication, February 25, 2020; T. Branham, personal communication, February 28, 2020).

Seventy percent of the teachers that participated in KVEC’s New and Emerging Special Education Teacher cadre identified as only having one to three years of teaching experience. Jeremy Hall at Highland Turner Elementary School in Breathitt County is an aberration. While he has been teaching for 16 years, this past year was his first in special education. For Mr. Hall, he could “. . . bring things back and implement right away.” (J. Hall, personal communication, February 12, 2020). Justin Combs from Breathitt County Middle-High School is another example of a relatively new teacher who is benefiting from the professional learning opportunities through KVEC. He has found the co-teaching strategies very useful, given that he co-teaches with a Science teacher. As such, students, all of whom have different learning styles, “. . . are benefiting from split-class, station teaching versus parallel or team teaching.” He and his colleague also switch stations, so that students benefit from both teachers and their pedagogical style (J. Combs, personal communication, February 12, 2020).

Lastly, there is Ashley Patrick at Magoffin County High School, who is truly emblematic of the circumstances school districts face given the shortage of special educators. She enrolled in an alternative certification program and started teaching in December of 2019. Ms. Patrick expressed that the professional learning through KVEC will prove to be invaluable, because she is receiving pedagogical and classroom management strategies in real-time (A. Patrick, personal communication, January 9, 2020).

The high overall ratings and positive comments given by the participants may, in fact, be due at least in part to the difference between what is normally provided as professional development and the practical and effective training delivered in the RISE₂ project. It is quite possible that the high-quality training and support provided within the parameters of the RISE₂ Project was superior to most of the professional development the participants had previously experienced. Meaningful professional development combined with micro-credentialing that is targeted to teachers' needs would certainly have the potential to be positively perceived.

For the capstone event, Forging Innovation in Rural Education (FIRE Summit), please go to: <https://www.theholler.org/live/>

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