



External Evaluation Memo

UIC CMSI Evaluation Project
Specialist Reflection Summary

Sara Hallman—University of Illinois Chicago
Sabrina Billings—University of Illinois Chicago

3/22/04

The conclusions drawn in this report reflect the viewpoint of the authors. While there are many potential viewpoints with respect to a given program, one way to facilitate improvement is through open discussions of such differing opinions within the context of data-based reporting.

This material is based upon work supported by
the National Science Foundation under grant No. 0085115

Data Brief

**UIC CMSI Evaluation Project
Specialist Reflection Summary**

**Sara Ray Hallman
Sabrina Billings**

March 22, 2004

Prepared for the CPS Office of Mathematics and Science
by the UIC CMSI Evaluation Project

At a February 27, 2004 meeting, CPS Intensive Support School Math and Science Specialists spent an hour responding in writing to several questions on a worksheet. This worksheet was administered and collected by the UIC CMSI Evaluation Project. Forty-three of the sixty-five Specialists who were present consented to take part in this evaluation and wrote responses. For each of the questions asked, this document provides a summary of the reflections written¹.

1. Below, in one to three sentences, please describe the way you are using the following practices:

a. Co-teaching (Describe planning, division of tasks between you and the teacher, etc.)

For most (26) respondents, planning of the co-teaching is a typical or crucial activity that occurs with the teacher at some time prior to the lesson. However, 11 report having difficulty in scheduling a pre-lesson planning meeting. Sometimes these meetings do not occur because of teachers' busy schedules or their resistance to being observed.

During the planning meetings, most (22) say that they formally divide up the lesson, deciding who will do what. Many (9) say that during these meetings they discuss or gather materials needed, and/or discuss the goals, structure, and/or flow of the lesson plan (9). Five report that they collaborate with the teacher to anticipate obstacles and develop solutions.

During the co-teaching itself, 12 specialists say that the division of tasks is informal, that they "play off each other" or "intervene when possible." For four, either they or the teacher works with small groups with special needs while the other stays with the rest of the class. Three respondents say that the teacher always is in charge of the class and that their job is to provide help however needed.

b. Classroom observations (When you visit a classroom, what are you looking for?)

The vast majority of respondents (38) report that during their classroom observations, they are student-focused--looking for evidence of "student learning," "student engagement," and "understanding." In terms of specific behaviors, 15 say that they pay attention to student questions, responses, conversation, and explanations, "to see if they're getting it." Eleven respondents look for evidence of student focus, listening, and staying on task, sometimes with regard to particular students. Other common points of focus are student collaboration (7) and use of manipulatives (7).

Many specialists also report that they pay attention to the teachers' performances. Some say they notice the quality of teachers' questions (7) and teacher/student interaction (4), as well as other aspects of the lesson, such as organization, pacing, following teachers' guide, teacher awareness of whether learning is taking place, and whether the teacher finishes the lesson (9). A few specialists (3) note that they are particularly interested in helping the teacher find ways to run the class more smoothly. Two say that the teacher tells them ahead of time what s/he wants the specialist to look for during a given observation.

¹ No systematic differences emerged in the responses of math versus science specialists and so their responses are summarized together.

c. Debriefing with teachers (Does the conversation occur immediately after the classroom visit or at a later time? Is it scheduled or unscheduled? How much time do you spend talking together? What is the focus?)

The predominant theme among these responses is that specialists must be flexible and have debriefings based on the teachers' own schedules and preferences. In terms of the scheduling of debriefings, about as many respondents say they tend to schedule these meetings (13) as those who say that they don't usually schedule them (10). Likewise, about as many respondents report that debriefing usually occurs immediately following the lesson, or even during the lesson while students are self-directed (11), as those who say it occurs before/after school or during prep time (10). The time spent debriefing ranges from "very short" to "a few hours," but 15 minutes is about the norm. Many specialists (about 10) note that finding time for debriefing in teachers' busy schedules is difficult, so they squeeze it in whenever and wherever they can (sometimes even in the hallway). Two say that because of time constraints debriefing is rare.

By far the most common single topic of debriefing is "student learning" and "student engagement" (12). In addition, respondents frequently report that they talk with the teachers about various aspects of the teachers' performance; several (4) say they discuss what the teacher thought of the lesson, while others (9) address topics such as deviation from teacher's guide; delivery, pacing, organization, and effectiveness of lesson; and spiraling.

d. Other (Is there another activity that takes a large portion of your time that is not listed? Please describe.)

Answers for this question were predictably quite scattered. The most common single answer given is professional development and other OMS meetings (5), and a few specialists express frustration with the frequency of these meetings: "It often seems like too much." The rest of the responses can be broken down into several broad categories. Most commonly, teachers frequently (13) cite other math and science activities, such as getting materials together for teachers, Family Math night, Lesson Lab, helping teachers with split-level classrooms, meeting with the principal or materials publishers. Other, non-math/science school duties or activities include discipline, lunch duty, tech coordination, ISAT training, and serving as school "problem solver" (11). In addition, four specialists report paperwork as time consuming, and two say that they spend a lot of time covering classrooms.

2. Describe the vision of CMSI and your role in its implementation. Has this changed over time? If so, why?

Most (24) who responded to this question describe the vision of the CMSI in terms of various combinations of elements in the following: improve math/science teaching and student learning, through the support of standards-, research-, and inquiry-based curricula, and through solid professional development. Six respondents explain the vision of the Initiative in terms of its ability to create coherence and/or equity throughout CPS math/science classrooms. Four specialists note the importance of the CMSI in building teachers as school math/science leaders.

With regard to their role in implementation, most describe their job in terms of supporting their teachers in becoming better at their jobs. Specifically, they list roles such as: "providing an extra set of hands," assisting teachers "who aren't math folk," "being a cheerleader for new materials," making sure materials are being used effectively, developing teams of teacher leaders, being a "sounding board" for teachers' ideas, and coordinating and providing professional development.

Some address this question in terms of changes to their role over the past school year. While five report not much change, another five say that their roles have become clearer. Two report that they have moved from being "materials managers" to supporting teachers in more meaningful ways.

Several specialists took this opportunity to express their assessment of the CMSI. Five report confusion, either in their own school or in the OMS, about what is going to happen next year, especially in terms of finances. Two Specialists convey their desire for better monitoring of the Initiative in their schools, in the interest of promoting accountability that will support the Specialist role in schools. “I believe the vision of CMSI of quality instruction combined with quality content will improve math knowledge for students as long as the program can be monitored to see that this is actually happening,” wrote one Specialist. “I would like to see CMSI insure that students are getting enough instructional time in math to really investigate and process. I don’t think this is being monitored adequately. But as a Specialist my hands are tied to enforce this and other requirements,” wrote another. There were also a few positive comments, such as “Most teachers doing pretty well!”, “Getting better day by day,” and “Everybody’s getting used to it.”

3. Reflect on the content PD you are receiving from OMS. What parts of it are most useful in your work with teachers? Please give examples.

Specialists were most thankful for the exchange of ideas, time to brainstorm and network with other Specialists (22). “Networking and talking with other specialists can be very useful,” one Specialist wrote. “It is helpful to find out things that are going on at other schools to help find ways to improve implementation at my own school”. Comments were made by some Math and Science Specialists that they wished they had more time to meet in Math and Science specific teams (10). Specialists also appreciated the chance to meet with Facilitators and OMS staff (17).

Respondents wrote positive comments on the training they had received to assist them in leadership skills. They felt that training had assisted them in developing a good rapport at their school (10). Training in coaching gave some Specialists more confidence in their mentoring skills (13). “Training has provided a better feel for the type of questions to ask teachers in post-classroom meetings,” one Specialist wrote. Similarly, Specialists were thankful for the articles and other materials on co-teaching, leadership, coaching, standards-based curriculum and family nights that they received in training sessions (13).

Specialists were generally very positive about the curriculum PD they have received (25). They noted as especially useful the learning of activities across grade levels and the previewing of lessons that teachers would be using soon in their school. “I like the fact that we engage in activities from units that the teachers have not covered so that we can better assist them when they get to them,” one Specialist wrote. On the other hand, several Specialists noted that the introduction of specific units or lessons from the curricula gave a good general feel, but was less useful for work with teachers because there just wasn’t enough time to cover enough lessons (11). In terms of suggestions for PD topics, Specialists wrote about the need for insights into how to prepare 1st wave teachers to assist with the second wave, and ways to convince teachers that the standards-based approach would lead to test score gains (7).

4. Describe your work and relationship with your OMS Facilitator. How often and in what ways do you work together? What support do you receive from her/him?

Specialists reported a range of type and quality of working relations with their OMS Facilitator. The amount of time Facilitators spent in schools was reported to range from “always available” (5) to once a week (7) to every other week (10) to once a month (13). In general, Specialists reported that in addition to regularly scheduled visits their OMS Facilitator was always available if there was a problem (28). “My OMS Facilitator sets a schedule for weekly school visits. But if I need or request [her/his] help with a problem [he/she] will gladly make adjustments to assist me,” one Specialist wrote.

About a quarter of respondents wrote that they had “limited” support from their Facilitator, either because “she is so busy” or because “the person is never around” (10). Five respondents were negative about their relationship with their OMS Facilitator. One stated, “The relationship between the Facilitator and I is not good. [He/she] is very pushy, never stops talking, doesn’t listen and knows everything. [He/she] is extremely unprofessional and has no leadership skills. This is the worst part of the program”.

Thirty respondents were very positive about their Facilitators. Facilitators were described as assisting with materials, “helping me to make sure things are prepared”, providing general support, encouraging the involvement of principals and teachers and providing a link to the OMS. Specialists also wrote that Facilitators visited classrooms and were involved with co-teaching with them, providing both support and accountability. “Together we visit classrooms and work together to support the teachers in the school. My Facilitator is helpful as a sounding board and source of advice,” one Specialist wrote. “[He/she] gives me back up—[he/she] may say the same thing to a teacher as I have been saying but coming from [her/him], it carries more weight,” wrote another.

Specialists also wrote that their Facilitator “lets me vent” and “keeps me calm”. One Specialist even noted that she had observed growth on the part of her Facilitator: “[He/she] is an expert. [He/she]’s very professional and when [he/she] speaks children and teachers listen. [He/she]’s precise and I believe [he/she] has grown a great deal. [He/she] tries to be of service whenever possible”.

5. Describe your work and relationship with your *principal*. How often and in what ways do you work together? What support do you receive from her/him?

Specialists reported that the nature and quality of relations with principals varied. About a third of respondents stated that they rarely met with the principal (14), about a third reported meeting or communicating with the principal a few times a month (13) and about a third stated that they touched base with the principal daily, frequently, or weekly (13). The quality of relations ranged from “indifferent” (6) to “mixed” (8) to “supportive” (10). Indifference translated into Specialists only meeting with the principal when initiated by the Specialist. Mixed support was described in two forms. In the first place, Specialists described Principals who sometimes seemed supportive and other times did not, for no apparent reason: “Sometimes [he/she] is supportive. Other times [he/she] is unapproachable. It is tough to manage sometimes”. In the second case, a group of Specialists described principals who were supportive but only to some of the goals of the CMSI: “[He/she] is supportive but some of [her/his] goals are different from OMS goals”.

Specialists who had particularly troubled relationships with their principal were reluctant to provide details, simply noting that relations were “difficult” or “I plead the fifth”. (6)

Those who reported that their principal was supportive were extremely positive about relations and approaches. “I have an excellent relationship with my principal, who is very supportive of the CMSI Initiative and my work in the school. We have very frequent meetings, often informally, to discuss various issues”. Several Specialists reported that their Principals were using teacher implementation of CMSI materials as part of performance evaluations (5).

6. Do you view yourself as a math/science leader in your school? Why or why not?

The vast majority of respondents wrote that they do view themselves as math/science leaders (37). Their reasons were based on their sense of their own growth, their training, their confidence and the response of teachers to them. “Yes, because I see growth in my own skills and as a result of my mentoring, I see a growth in the confidence and comfort of my teachers,” wrote one Specialist. “I love the curriculums and feel comfortable with them,” wrote another. Specialists saw openness of teachers to their mentoring as a sign that they were considered to be leaders: “Teachers are sharing their ideas with me and are not defensive,” wrote one Specialist. “The teachers trust me,” wrote another. Those who responded with uncertainty or a negative response to this question were either humble or frustrated (5). “I see myself as a teacher, just like other teachers in my building only I have been given the opportunity for additional training,” wrote one Specialist. “I can’t be considered a leader if no teachers will even take my advice,” wrote another.

7. Describe your relationship with other Specialists. Have your relationships with them changed over time? Why or why not? What structures would be helpful in preserving/improving these relationships?

Specialists were extremely positive about their relations with one another (39). They reported an appreciation for the opportunity to “collaborate, share, socialize and support”. Respondents expressed as positive the opportunity to share concerns (11), share ideas (10), work as a cohesive group (8) and develop support groups around common curricula (6). More than half of respondents wrote that they consider their fellow Specialists “friends” (25). “My relationship with my fellow specialists is friendship,” one Specialist wrote. “We are all completely comfortable with each other”. Other Specialists noted that these relationships have improved and deepened over time (12). “As we have gotten to know each other better, I feel my relationships with other Specialists have grown stronger and more valuable,” one Specialist wrote.

In terms of structures to support these relationships, Specialists were very positive about the continued monthly meetings (22). “The monthly Specialist meetings are an extremely important part of this job,” one Specialist wrote. “We share ideas, successes, failures and hopes”. Specialists also had suggestions of ways to alter or expand upon OMS structures to support Specialist relations. They reported a desire to have time in monthly meetings to meet together without a formal OMS agenda (10), more time to meet with Facilitators in small groups (7), more time to meet with Specialists in their Area (11) and the possibility of a weekend or summer retreat together (5).

8. What are your major concerns right now? What do you need to help bring resolution to these concerns?

Specialist concerns were largely focused on funding (39), CPS support (29), and issues related to scale-up (28). “A major concern I have, which I am unable to directly address or resolve,” one Specialist wrote, “is whether OMS will continue to receive the budgeting support to continue to support its schools fully”. Some Specialists expressed these concerns about budgeting in direct relation to their own role: “Will I have a job next year?” and “After two years, what will happen to Specialists?” wrote several Specialists (8). Others expressed more general concerns about the approaching of the end of two years of funding: “How can I keep the momentum in the program after the funding is gone?” wrote one Specialist.

Concerns about scale-up were focused on the readiness of first wave teachers, the scale-up of particularly large schools and the management of additional materials after scale-up. “First wave teachers are not prepared to lead the second wave,” wrote one Specialist. “My major concern right now is how am I going to bring the rest of our very large school on board. I am so busy now how will I possibly be able to accommodate 30+ more rooms?” wrote another. On materials: “I hope I have time to organize additional materials with more teachers coming on board. I am especially hoping they arrive in a more timely fashion than last year or it will be bad news”.

Additional concerns about the role of the Specialist were also expressed by respondents. There was concern about helping teachers to keep program pacing right (7) and not being able to get into classrooms enough to debrief (8). Several Specialists reported that they were teaching classes and that this took away from their time as Specialist (5). Clarity of job descriptions, effectiveness of the approach of the CMSI and hassles with materials, curriculum and live, were also mentioned (10).

Specialists are also concerned about what they can expect in terms of summer schedule (18).