Collaborative Learning Communities: Building Leadership in a High School English Department

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Teachers and administrators in districts identified as low income and underperforming by the NCLB litmus test are often made to feel deeply inadequate, aware of all we don't know and have not taught our students. Our voices are often overlooked in favor of best-practice approaches that ignore the situated knowledge of the local professional community. Yet our voices should be heard. We are a part of the system that we are asked to change. As Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert put it, "The path to change in the classroom core lies within and through teachers' professional communities: learning communities which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment, and change" (18). If school reform efforts do not value the local teachers and building administrators, it is unlikely and unrealistic to think that school leaders will in turn create rigorous school environments and develop ways of teaching that provide children in urban schools with a full range of opportunities to participate and succeed in society.

The Trenton Public School District, where we work, is in an area of concentrated poverty situated in a wealthy county in one of the wealthiest states in the nation. More than 60 percent of Trenton students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Fewer than one-third of Trenton students pass the New Jersey State secondary mathematics exam and only two-thirds pass the state English exam. Trenton is one of the thirty districts in New Jersey designated as an Abbott District. In 1997 and 1998 the New Jersey State Supreme Court ordered the New Jersey Department of Education to increase funding to the neediest districts in the state to address the inequities in the state's funding of poor urban and rural districts. Referred to as the "Abbott" measures, the courts required Abbott schools to implement whole-school reform and supplemental programs to redress disadvantages (Appelbaum and Latta).

Yet, in Trenton, the district has not opted for a one-size-fits-all school reform model or district mandates with narrowly defined learning outcomes that ignore the unique cultural experiences, strengths, and learning goals of its population. Instead, it recognizes the importance of the local context and the essential role teachers and administrators must play in making sustainable educational improvements. Helping Trenton educators to be systematically reflective about teaching and learning and to see themselves collectively as agents of change in the interest of academic quality and excellence is a key element in the district's promotion of professional learning communities. The superintendent, in a recent speech to teacher network leaders, stated, "It is my belief that unless teachers experience themselves as learners and provide opportunities for students to see themselves as learners, we will not see changes in student achievement" (Lytle).

Researchers such as Betty Achinstein, Judith Warren Little, McLaughlin and Talbert, and others make the case that conditions for improving teaching and learning are strengthened when teachers continually engage in inquiry about effective teaching practices, rethink what is happening in their classrooms and schools, understand and respond to differences between school and community, and support collegial learning and professional growth.

Andy Hargreaves suggests in *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity*

that there is a parallel between the kind of intellectual community developed among teachers and the kind of learning experiences offered to students. The guiding idea is that teachers who reflect on and explore the nature of learning, engage in collegial learning, draw on research and assessment data, and engage in collective decision making will be able to create similar environments for their students.

Over the past year at Trenton Central High School, a collaborative learning team (six English teachers, a school administrator, and two Educational Testing Service [ETS] literacy consultants) has been working to meet the challenge of improving student learning. Building on teacher networks developed with funding support from Lucent Technologies Foundation, which promotes the use of collaborative processes, we have met regularly to look at student work, reflect on our experiences teaching students how to write using standard English, review research on grammar and composition, and analyze the results of department final exams across all grade levels. After the term was completed, our community met to review the final exam results. Our findings and discussions were shared with the members of the department to expand the conversation and build a spirit of collaboration and inquiry. Based on our reading and analysis of many sets of exams, we observed that students' writing had improved. Our ninth-grade students' writing was clearer, more fluent, and more developed than in previous years, although most students still struggled with grammar. In general, students were able to write about works of literature in clear and detailed ways. Some were able to analyze these works in terms of universal themes.

However, what was most surprising to us was that students did not seem able to understand poetry. Why was that? When our state dropped poetry from the mandatory graduation test, had our department colleagues stopped teaching it? Learning that many had, in fact, and were not giving adequate attention to this genre, our team decided to develop learning experiences to encourage each other and our colleagues to improve students' abilities to interpret poetry.

Using Poetry Month as a springboard, our team developed a common poetry task and a weekly poetry-responding competition for April. A poetry theme replaced our regularly scheduled potpourri of interdisciplinary offerings at our ETS-supported Family Literacy Night. Students, teachers, and administrators read and performed their favorite poems for an audience of interested parents, staff, students, and community leaders. We also recruited faculty from the department to offer professional development workshops on poetry during the district's professional development day. We have grown to recognize the importance of teachers taking control of their learning and serving as agents of staff development.

Roger and Mary Ellen reported that, as a result of our collaborative inquiries, they not only made changes in their assignments but also changed the supports they provided to students. In fact, their student work revealed considerable improvement as a result of explicit interventions that assisted students in writing and analyzing poetry. Both Roger's and Mary Ellen's pupils also made favorable comments about their teaching and recorded their perspectives in their reflective logs.

Through participation in our collaborative learning community, we were becoming more effective professionals. Carol Ann shared that she still gets "goose bumps" just thinking about the influence our work together has had on her classroom practice. She wrote in a journal reflection, "My participation in this community has encouraged me to raise questions and seek help from colleagues. I am borrowing and adapting ideas and strategies—infusing new insights making my lessons worthy of my students' time and efforts." Our collaborative community has made all of us more self-reflective and aware of the need for professional communities that support the ongoing work of teachers and expand our conceptions of what's possible. Mary Waters expressed it best when she commented that our work and our thinking have evolved over time, shaped by our changing expectations of students as well as of ourselves.

Through inquiry-driven collaborative learning, we engaged in a research-based process of addressing hard questions about student learning and achievement. By using teacher-developed exams to assess students' progress and collectively engaging in a principled analysis of students' performance, we were able to identify the ways in which our English program was not meeting student needs.

Based on this understanding, we created new learning experiences for students and professional development to better support teachers in their work with students. Thus, through the creation of collaborative learning communities, we engaged in a process of self-development that built on the unique strengths of students and teachers at Trenton Central High School.

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