

## Professional Development: Partnerships for Success

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**Abstract**

This article contributes to the discussion of teacher training and preparation. It presents the implementation of a professional development project conducted by two university professors in the northeastern part of the U.S. Participants included two middle school teachers and three pre-service teachers at an economically unstable Catholic diocesan school. The article begins with a statement of context and a review of literature that addresses the positive effects and need for teachers' professional learning. A theoretical framework is included to offer readers a generalized perspective on professional development initiatives. An implementation model and a summary of the instruction and outcomes follow. Findings include the positive effects of (a) university-based partnerships with local underserved schools, (b) skills-based learning and interdisciplinary professional development as a means for improving teachers' content knowledge; and (c) pre-service teachers' involvement in professional development as a part of their training.

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### **Background to the Study**

This article contributes to the discussion of teacher training and preparation. It presents the implementation of a professional development project for two middle school teachers at an economically unstable Catholic diocesan school in the northeastern part of the United States. It begins with a brief statement of context and presents a review of relevant literature that addresses the positive effects and need for teachers' professional learning. A theoretical framework is provided to offer readers a broad and generalized perspective of the project; a description of the implementation model follows, along with a detailed description of the professional development instruction and its outcomes. Lastly, the article offers analyses and discussion of self-reported data from the project's participants. Findings demonstrate the positive effects professional learning opportunities provide for teachers.

### **Literature Review**

I conducted this project in my role as a university professor of English Education at a four-year liberal arts university. It served as a pilot to test an implementation model and its theoretical framework. When pre-service teachers return to campus from field experience visits, they often comment on how much time teachers spend with students in the course of a day. "When do teachers get to meet and talk to each other?" they ask. The response is always the same: "You'll spend 95% of your time with your students, and the remaining 5 with fellow teachers. It's the nature of the job." Darling-Hammond (2011) found that 90% of U.S. teachers participate in workshops or conferences only one to two days in an academic year, and well under half get sustained professional development, mentoring and opportunities to observe other classrooms. As well, in 2004, only 17% of U.S. teachers reported cooperative exchange among colleagues. This percentage shrank to 15% in 2008 (Darling-Hammond, 2011).

This article addresses the overall need for teacher professional learning initiatives and the effectiveness of small-scale, university-based projects using content-specific training. There is much written on the general need for teachers' professional growth, especially large-scale initiatives. According to Snow-Geron (2004), professional development school partnerships create safe environments for dialogue among teachers that can lead to better instruction. These partnerships come in all shapes and sizes and are known by a variety of names.

Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen and Bolhuis (2009) refer to professional development as "reciprocal peer coaching," a "configuration of activities that a dyad of teachers can undertake in the workplace with the intention of supporting each other's teaching" (p. 244). "Teacher learning" is considered any "ongoing work-related process that leads to a change of cognition and/or behavior" (p. 246). "Teacher Inquiry" (Snow-Geron, 2004) and "collegial study groups" (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003) are other titles used for professional teacher training. School reform leaders' current efforts to increase student achievement and improve learning have resulted in focused national attention to teacher training and support initiatives. Organizations abound. The U.S.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We sought out well-established theories of adult learning to drive our instruction. Of primary importance was a strong theoretical basis for collaborative, constructivist and active learning. Because adults are challenged in ways adolescents are not, professional learning must be more socially balanced. While teachers of young children are more naturally viewed as leaders and authority figures, adult learning situations, even with facilitators delivering the instruction, invite a level of ambiguity requiring serious consideration. Age theorists remind us that the older we become, the more reflective and informed our learning decisions become (Trotter, 2006). Baxter Magolda and King (2004) report that “adult learning involves composing one's own reality in the context of one's relationships with others and the surrounding community.” It is socially situated and requires reflection on past experience so as to re-construct one's place within a learning community. Professional learning initiatives, therefore, must allow participants to make connections between new learning and whatever prior knowledge and experiences they bring to it.

### **Developing Partnerships**

We began the project by asking three questions: (a) What content instruction do teachers need? (b) What learning theories drive such work? and (c) Who needs it? In determining the latter question first, we considered our university's mission and strategic plan that includes the goal of “becoming a leading advocate for the poorest in our neighboring community” (2011). To align our work with this goal and our university's strategic plan, we built a professional learning partnership with our city's diocese that is located in one of the most economically disadvantaged cities in the U.S. Our meetings with the Secretary of Catholic Education, the Assistant Superintendent for Assessment and Instruction, and the Director of Professional Development helped formulate the initial design of the professional learning model. We agreed that the most important area of professional development for teachers in the Diocese is in content instruction, and particularly for teachers who have not been involved in recent professional learning.

### **The Instructors**

My work as lead instructor was a direct result of my involvement with our college's Long-Range Strategic Planning Committee. Chaired by our college president, a team of faculty and administrators were charged with developing a new mission statement and strategic plan. I aligned parts of this new plan with this project, including this language: “...Embrace our city by elevating synergies in its academic research and service programs to respond to the needs of our urban area to contribute to their development and advocate for their citizens.” I conducted the project with one university teaching colleague - a retired high school English teacher with 35 years of teaching experience and 20 years as a valued adjunct instructor in English and literacy at our university.

### **The Participating School**

Diocese administrators identified a regional elementary/intermediate school in an urban neighborhood where 3% of its 155 students are eligible for Title I services in the form of

reading and mathematics instruction from our local urban school district. Forty-nine percent of its students are eligible for free or reduced lunch prices. Four of the 11 classroom teachers are permanently certified. One has temporary certification; four are either not certified or have lapsed temporary certifications. Two are teaching out of their content areas.

### **The Participating Teachers**

We selected two teachers based on their level of interest and availability. Prior to the first session, they provided us with written responses to a few questions that offered insight into their professional lives. Jackson & Bruegmann (2009) found that peer learning among small groups of teachers is a powerful predictor of improved teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Our decision to work with such a small number was based on our need to closely examine teachers' professional lives, as well as to complete the project with tangible outcomes and recommendations for expanding to a larger and sustained initiative. The two teachers: Eleanor has been teaching in the Diocese for 20 years. Her tenure has included English Language Arts instruction in grades 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8. She has also taught math, science, religion and health. Eleanor received her BA in French in 1978 and MS in Reading/Education in 1988. A former teaching fellow with the National Writing Project, she has attended professional presentations in English Language Arts instruction. In our early discussions, she expressed interest in examining content first and instructional approaches second, citing grammar, nonfiction reading comprehension, interdisciplinary instruction and standardized testing preparation. Todd has taught in the Diocese for 23 years. He has a BA degree in Geography and state Certification in Social Studies, 7-12. He is currently working on an MA in Social Studies Education. Like Eleanor, Todd's teaching has included an array of subjects: social studies, science, religion, literature and health. He cited interdisciplinary approaches to teaching as an area in which he would welcome instruction and mentoring.

Our sessions on interdisciplinary instruction culminated in a four-week unit we called "The Wild West." Each year during the spring, eighth grade students study the transcontinental period in American history while reading and discussing literature from that era in Eleanor's English language arts class. In June, at the end of this unit, the students mount a pageant called "Wild West Day." The students dress in Wild West garb and perform skits and readings; they sing songs from the period and tell "tall tales" discovered in English class. The school's music and art teachers participate as well, and some parents attend the production. Though Todd is the main instigator for "Wild West Day," Eleanor welcomed the opportunity this year to develop an interdisciplinary approach, aligning her language arts activities more closely with the topics Todd was covering in his social studies class. Prior to the project, Eleanor and Todd had been aware of the potential their respective curricula offered for interdisciplinary instruction, and were somewhat aware that new state-mandated standards encouraged it, but they lacked the planning time and strategies needed to make cooperative efforts happen.

### **Results and Analysis: Outcomes of the Pilot Project**

The implementation and outcomes of this project serve us now as the tenets for future work in teacher learning initiatives. The outcomes of the project include:

1. Our university faculty developed a formal partnership with the local Catholic Diocese to blend resources and meet joint goals. This partnership included professional consultation with Diocesan personnel, including the Secretary for Education, Professional Development Coordinator, and Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment.
2. An implementation model was created for effective content-specific professional development for teachers at a school where 24% of its students are eligible for Title I Services in the form of reading and mathematics instruction from their neighboring city school district, a strong indicator of high risk economic and academic conditions.
3. Effective instruction in skills-based learning and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching was delivered to two teachers in social studies and literature, grades 7 and 8. Self-reported data from the teachers demonstrate positive responses to instruction in content-specific teaching skills, the opportunity to collaborate and construct ideas, and observe and collaborate with graduate pre-service teachers.

### **Analysis of Self-Reported Data from Participating Teacher**

Eleanor and Todd provide data that demonstrate the effectiveness of the project as stated in the third outcome. Of the protocol's five questions, responses to two have a direct impact on the quality of the instruction. The first, "Can you cite any adjustments to your teaching as a direct result of your participation in this project?" yielded rich responses. Todd reported that he better understands the role of literacy in his students' content learning and that he intends to collaborate with English Language Arts teachers, and particularly with Eleanor as a result of this project. "My students' learning revolves around literacy skills." "Too often," he reported, "teachers isolate themselves. They close their classroom doors and enter their own worlds of science or history; this is not the best way to approach a child's education." Eleanor recognized the value of exposing her students to more nonfiction prose, a result of the "Wild West" interdisciplinary work with Todd's history curriculum. "There are so many ways I can now approach nonfiction in ELA instruction that I hadn't considered before our work on this unit." Follow up data collected five months after the completion of the project demonstrate specific ways in which Eleanor and Todd have adjusted their teaching. Eleanor reports that her students are using graphic organizers like Venn diagrams, webs and timelines more effectively in their work with nonfiction reading comprehension. She also reports a stronger sense of how to engage state test preparation instruction without it altering her curriculum.

A second question, "If you were to continue participating in professional development, what instructional areas would you prefer to examine?" yields data that demonstrate the project's application to future teaching. Todd's response echoes his earlier comment about recognizing the role of literacy skills instruction in content courses; he reports his interest in completing a course in literacy instruction as a part of his Master's Degree



course work. This was a strong endorsement of our project, particularly given its pilot status. Eleanor reports her plans for focusing on reading and writing skills, along with “understanding and implementing the New Common Core Standards”, this a result of her work with instruction in state test preparation. For Eleanor, it is not only about implementing, rather, understanding – a level of her reflection that surfaced throughout this experience. These and other responses Todd and Eleanor offered to this protocol yield significant perspectives on today's teaching.

### **Discussion/Implications**

When the U.S. government announced priorities in its Race to the Top competition for states' funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, most assumed that new and innovative professional learning opportunities for teachers would naturally follow. In areas that are not economically challenged, this is occurring, but for those school districts that cannot afford the resources for professional training, the “race” has created significant pressure for teachers. As Wei, et al. (2010) report, “Without a strategic investment in high quality professional development, it is unlikely that any effort to improve teacher effectiveness or to turnaround low-performing schools will succeed” (p. 36). This project provides an implementation model, theoretical framework and specific outcomes for professional learning that can be used in both small and large-scale projects.

Wei, et al. (2010) report that for professional development to have a significant impact on teaching practice and student learning, it needs to be (a) intensive; (b) sustained over time; (c) embedded in teacher's day-to-day work in schools; (d) related directly with teachers' work with students; (e) focused on engaging teachers in active content learning; (f) related to district policies for curriculum; and (g) structured to regularly engage teachers in local professional learning communities where problems of practice are solved through collaboration (p.38). Our work with Eleanor and Todd fulfills all but the second goal. We need to continue to support Eleanor and Todd as they continue to implement the instruction we offered and the knowledge they gained from their excellent participation. They, like all teachers, need an audience that cares to listen and guide.

The partnerships that resulted from this study now serve as the basis for a sustained university professional learning program that will address instructional needs in our neighboring community and carry out our university's mission and strategic plan. Darling-Hammond (2011) reports “In European, Asian and other high achieving nations, teachers have 15-25 hours a week for collaboration plus 100 hours for professional learning. They engage regularly in lesson study, action research and peer observation and coaching to evaluate and improve practice.” (Darling-Hammond, 2011) Our teachers must be provided these same opportunities.

There is significant speculation about the usefulness of professional development projects that do not demonstrate improvement in student achievement. No doubt, improving our students' skills and lifelong learning is our educational system's ultimate goal. This study's findings demonstrate that teachers can benefit from small-scale

mentoring and instruction in order to affect change in their classroom teaching. Fishman, Marx, Best and Tal (2003) argue, "...a chief objective of professional development should be to foster changes in teachers' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, because these components of teaching cognition show a strong correlation to teachers' classroom practices" (Fishman, Marx, Best and Tal 2003, p.4). Further, the project offers data in the form of "opinionnaires" – teachers' self-reported responses to their involvement. No doubt a broader range of data is needed to assess the worth of professional development projects like this one; for the purposes of this project as a first-year project that tested an implementation model and theoretical framework, this data serves as an initial measure of its effectiveness.

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