

“I’m Not a Bystander”:

Developing Teacher Leadership in a Rural School-University Collaboration

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Rural teachers need ongoing, flexible professional development designed to encourage collaboration and curriculum development. Furthermore, rural school reform requires successful collaborations between schools and colleges to create leaders within schools. Therefore, this case study is a program review that investigates how social studies teachers at Timberwood High School, a rural high school in the American southeast, are emerging as teacher leaders through a school-university partnership to improve their practice, mentor pre-service teachers, and generate reform. Interviews were conducted with members of the social studies department, all of whom were involved in the project. The findings indicate that the school-university partnership encouraged experimentation with new strategies, stimulated reflective practices and teacher growth, and created a more cohesive social studies department. However, while it was evident that teacher leadership did develop through the process, traditional school norms of egalitarianism and structural hierarchy prevented teachers from fully embracing their roles as teacher leaders. Study findings suggest that rural administrators and rural school-university partnerships must focus on developing teacher leaders to initiate school reform and grow professionally.

Key Words: Rural education, teacher leadership, school-university partnerships, social studies.

Since the early 1980s, teachers at Timberwood High School, a small rural school in the American southeast, have mentored pre-service teachers attending nearby Madison College, a small private liberal arts college.³ However, in recent years the social studies teachers at the high school, feeling that they were being “used,” began expressing frustration in hosting field experience students. As a result, Dr. Miller, the education department chair, and Mr. Jones, the social studies department chair, began discussing how to transform the field experience program into a professional development program for in-service social studies teachers. Babione (2010) concluded that rural teachers need professional development that is flexible ongoing and encourages collaboration and curriculum development. In addition, Warren and Peel (2005) found that collaboration between schools and colleges that creates leaders within schools is central to rural school reform. Therefore, strengthened ties between the Timberwood High School and Madison College could develop teacher leadership, encourage collaboration within the social studies department, and serve as a step toward reform.

The purpose of this article is to present a program overview examining the initial impact of the

redesigned field experience program on in-service teachers. Two questions guided evaluation of the first phase of the program. First, to what extent were the social studies teachers at Timberwood High School developing a greater sense of experimentation with new instructional strategies as a result of the collaboration with Madison College? Second, in what ways was the school-university partnership between Timberwood High School and Madison College increasing the confidence of the social studies teachers to become teacher leaders? This study serves to connect the research on school-university partnerships and teacher leadership using rural teachers as the linchpin. While the goal is not to generalize the findings, this study should offer new insight into an under-researched area in teacher leadership, school-university partnerships, and rural education.

Dempsey’s (1992) theory of teacher leadership images was used to conceptualize this study. Dempsey concluded that teacher leaders are characterized by four images: *Teacher as fully functioning person*, *teacher as reflective practitioner*, *teacher as scholar*, and *teacher as partner in learning*. Teacher leaders fulfill the *teacher as fully functioning person* image when they focus on professional development and growth. Likewise, teacher leaders embody the *teacher as reflective practitioner* image when they reflect for the purpose of professional growth. In addition, teacher leaders exemplify the *teacher as scholar* image when they engage in the learning of new knowledge and

³ All proper names are pseudonyms. This applies to institutions, stakeholders, and participants. This was done to protect the identity of the participants. The process for pseudonym assignment is discussed in the research methods section of the article.

instructional methods. Finally, teacher leaders demonstrate the teacher *as partner in learning* image when they encourage collaboration among individual teachers.

Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership, a concept that has entered academic conversations over the last three decades, is frequently used, yet has a broad range of definitions. In a review of teacher leadership, York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that it was difficult to define “teacher leadership” as researchers use many criteria in establishing the boundaries of their research. Rogus (1988) noted in an early conceptual piece that teacher leaders are those who pursue professional development, empower their peers, create a vision for education, communicate the vision to their peers, and generate trust among their peers. In a general sense, Katzmanmeyer and Moller (2001) defined teacher leaders as teachers who “lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice” (p. 5). York-Barr and Duke (2004) observed that teacher leaders are successful practitioners, lead their peers in professional development, and participate in pre-service teacher education. Thus, defining teacher leadership is complex, yet the focus is on teachers leading the improvement of education for students by mentoring, conducting professional development, creating policy, and developing curriculum.

School University-Partnerships

Although speaking specifically of Professional Development Schools (PDS), Kirschner, Dickinson, and Blosser (1996) defined school-university partnerships as collaborations between school-based and university-based educators through which in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, and professors develop in a reciprocal relationship. To develop and sustain a reciprocal school-university partnership all stakeholders – teachers, administrators, school boards, professors, and teacher advocacy groups – must be united in implementing and sustaining a PDS (Cozza, 2007; Lefever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007). Teacher leadership is important in this because, as York-Barr and Duke (2004) concluded, teacher leaders build relationships with college and universities. In addition, a strong school-university partnership is essential to constructing a unified and continual system of teacher development (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Mentoring

The mentoring of pre-service teachers by in-service teachers further connects teacher leadership and school-university partnerships. York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that teacher leaders often assume the role of mentor. The promise of a PDS is that mentor teachers grow professionally as a result of a reciprocal system. Because mentor teachers are mostly used to the advantage of universities and colleges in one-sided relationships, it is the responsibility of the teacher education programs to empower mentor teachers by increasing their involvement in the program (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). Russell and Russell (2011) determined that strong programs encourage mentors to conceptualize themselves as role models. It can then be decided that teachers who view themselves as role models will emerge as teacher leaders.

Although much has been written on school-university partnerships and teacher leadership, a gap exists in the research on how the two intersect in rural schools. While studies of leadership in rural schools exist, often studies focus on leadership theories among both administrators and teachers (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Studying distributed leadership in a rural school, Anderson (2008) determined that the teacher leaders successfully transformed the school and experienced high student achievement both in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities. Anderson observed that, to accomplish such transformation, the school organizational structure focused on committees of teachers to oversee curriculum development, athletics, and community outreach. York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that teacher leaders often assume the role of mentor and forge relationships with local colleges for the purpose of professional development. Yet, research on rural education indicates that, because few opportunities exist for teachers to collaborate on curriculum, professional development should be tailored to the needs of rural teachers (Babione, 2010). In rural school-university partnerships, research focuses on developing collaborations to improve the leadership skills of administrators (Myron, Sanzo, & Clayton, 2011; Warren & Peel, 2005). However, this focus on administrators is consistent with research on the professional development needs of rural school administrators (Salazar, 2007).

Context

Timberwood High School is situated between a cow pasture and a tract of forest. Driving to the school on an autumn morning, deer stands can be

seen in fields along the two-lane country roads, an indicator of the community's passion for hunting and fishing. On the same morning, the smell of pulp from a nearby plywood factory fills the air around the school. The community, which boasts a history of cotton production, remains largely agricultural as the economy has shifted to a focus on beef, poultry, eggs, and timber. Timberwood High School draws students from three communities with populations of 179, 255, and 1180 respectively, and from the isolated areas in between. The communities of Timberwood High School merge into one for high school football, as barrel-sized grills hitched to pick-up trucks hold hamburgers, hotdogs, and spare ribs. Designated a rural school by the National Center for Education Statistics, 727 students attend Timberwood High School. Enrollment at the time of this study was 66% white, 28% Black, 5.5% Hispanic, 0.5% American Indian and Asian, and 43% free or reduced lunch recipients.

Timberwood High School Social Studies Department

At the time of this study, the social studies department at the high school comprised six teachers. Four were female and two were male. One teacher worked part time. While there was a second-year teacher and a veteran of 34 years, the majority of the department were mid-career with seven to ten years of experience. Five of the six teachers had master's degrees. Two teachers were National Board Certified. All of the teachers served as mentors to pre-service teachers either in the current project or in the past. Only one teacher – the department chair – served the school in a formalized leadership capacity.

Methods

This case study used qualitative methodology. Data were collected by individual interviews with social studies department faculty. Although I (the researcher) am no longer on the faculty at Timberwood High School, I was a member of the social studies department at the time of the study. I interviewed the five other social studies teachers individually during a two-week timeframe near the end of the first semester in which this project was initiated. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Teachers were asked the same questions. However, because Ms. Allen was also the methods instructor, her interview lasted an hour and a half and she was asked an additional set of questions. At the onset of the interview, teachers were informed that, to provide anonymity, the schools and teachers would be assigned pseudonyms. The pseudonyms for the

teachers were randomly selected from a list of the most common surnames in the nation (United States Census Bureau, 2000).

During the interviewing and coding process, as the researcher, I carefully considered my biases. The relationships I had with the teachers, however, allowed the teachers to feel comfortable discussing the issues related to the project. Answers to questions were recorded in field notes. At times, participants were asked to repeat answers to ensure accurate recording of their statements. After each interview session, the field notes of the interview were transcribed and coded based on the goals of the project, which centered on teacher leadership and expanding the instructional repertoire of the social studies teachers. The interview data was reexamined for additional themes. Finally, in order to ensure that I understood the teachers' perspectives, I regularly shared my emerging findings with the teachers.

The Rationale for Initiating the School-University Social Studies Mentoring Project

Dr. Miller and Mr. Jones were professional colleagues for five years prior to developing the mentoring project. While discussing the state of the program, the two noted several areas of concern. First, the pre-service teachers enrolled in field experience were not regular in their attendance, which created inconsistency in observing and working at the placement. Second, the pre-service teachers taught two 20-minute lessons and received little if any feedback from the mentor teacher. Another concern centered on pre-service teachers having to adjust to teaching a 90-minute lesson when they entered their internship. Third, as the pre-service teachers began their internships in subsequent semesters, they entered with relatively little understanding of how to use state standards and Common Core State Standards to guide instruction, creating an area of weakness in the field experience.

Likewise, Dr. Miller and Mr. Jones discussed the lack of reciprocity between the school and college and how partnership could improve the social studies department at the school. First, mentors for the pre-service teachers felt that they were not truly mentoring and, thus, that the college was simply using their classroom as a "practice field." Second, the social studies department lacked a pedagogical focus and, similarly, a spirit of experimentation with new strategies. Third, recognizing the need for teacher leadership in reforming education, the purpose of working closely with the college should be to improve and develop teacher leadership among the members of the social studies department. Both parties felt that the relationship between Madison

College and Timberwood High School had the potential to improve practice and leadership among in-service teachers, but the current structure did not allow for this.

The Development of the Project

Having determined the areas required for improvement, Dr. Miller and Mr. Jones created a program that would work to better develop Madison College's pre-service teachers and empower Timberwood High School's in-service teachers. Dr. Miller and Mr. Jones met with Timberwood High School's principal to explain the goals and benefits of the project. With the support of the principal, the project moved forward. While the principal was supportive, the program ran with little input from the principal beyond the initial meeting with Dr. Miller and Mr. Jones. The principal's level of involvement by design, placed the onus of leadership on the teachers.

To begin the collaboration, Dr. Miller and Mr. Jones turned to Ms. Allen, a social studies teacher at Timberwood High School. While Ms. Allen remained a full-time teacher at high school, Madison College hired her as an adjunct instructor for the social studies methods course. Although teaching the course at the high school campus was considered, due to scheduling conflicts the course was taught at the college. The college then placed all of the social studies pre-service teachers at the high school for the field experience. However, to avoid a conflict of interest, a pre-service teacher was not placed with Ms. Allen. By this action, the pre-service teachers' professor would be on campus at all times and accessible to all of the mentor teachers. As such, the professor and mentor teachers could more easily discuss the growth of the pre-service teachers because they were colleagues at the high school. The goal was for the pre-service teachers to receive more individualized instruction based on strong and consistent feedback the mentor teachers while the in-service teachers become empowered as mentors and collaborators with the college.

The first layer of the program involved improving the quality of the field experience at the placement. Pre-service teachers were required to teach two 45-minute lessons and one 90-minute lesson to better prepare them for their full-time student teaching internship. In addition, the mentor teachers were required to document the lesson using an observation form and provide feedback to the pre-service teachers and to Ms. Allen. In the feedback, the mentor teacher guided the field experience student in a reflective discussion about the lesson. The goal was for both the pre-service and in-service teachers to become

more engaged in the field experience process and more reflective in their practice.

The second layer of the program involved using the mentor teachers as models of best practices. Each teacher received a copy of Ms. Allen's syllabus for the methods course and agreed to model the strategies that Ms. Allen would be teaching during a particular week. For example, if Ms. Allen taught about the use of role play as a strategy during the first week of October, then the teachers integrated role play into their lessons that week. Thus, the pre-service teachers observed a strategy at their placement and then discussed it in class, giving them both practical and theoretical experiences using social studies strategies. The goal was to prompt the social studies teachers to integrate new strategies into their repertoire, ultimately encouraging experimentation with new methods.

The third layer of the program was that the partnership between the school and college would serve as a basis of professional development for the social studies teachers. An assignment was created in the methods course for the pre-service teachers to conduct research on their mentor teachers. The pre-service teachers generated a research question related to state standards and/or Common Core State Standards and developed a mode of evaluation based on the question, assessed the social studies teachers, and reported their findings to the social studies department. The findings determined instructional strengths and weakness, pointing to areas that needed improvement. For example, the field experience students found that the teachers could improve the diversity of their writing prompts. To improve, all teachers agreed to attend professional development and present their learning to the department, becoming teacher leaders in the process as they assumed the role of instructional leaders for their peers. For example, one social studies teacher attended a workshop conducted by Cris Tovoni, a literacy specialist, and demonstrated the strategies learned from the workshop to the department.

Findings

The findings of this study are divided into two parts. The first part is a narrative of Ms. Allen's experience teaching the methods course at the Madison College and tracks her growth as a teacher and teacher leader. The second part is a narrative of the Timberwood High School social studies department's participation with the field experience program and how the school-university partnership affected the department.

Ms. Allen's Growth and Development: Becoming a Methods Teacher

In June 2012, Ms. Allen was offered the opportunity to teach the social studies methods course at Madison College during the fall 2012 semester. In addition to having a master's degree in education, Ms. Allen was selected for her creativity in the classroom, her knowledge of pedagogy, and her work as a past mentor for pre-service teachers. Ms. Allen expressed a mixture of excitement and concern regarding teaching the methods course. Ms. Allen noted, *I was hesitant because of the time, alluding to managing a schedule that would include teaching the methods course one night per week while teaching at the high school and being a mother of two young children. However, she agreed to teach the methods course because she thought that it would be easy. I teach social studies all the time. I can teach a course on it.* Yet, while organizing the course using the previous instructor's materials as a foundation, Ms. Allen began to reflect on the responsibility of teaching pre-service teachers. As Ms. Allen wondered, *Did I know enough to teach these students? I wasn't sure. So, I started buying every methods book I could find on Amazon and reading a lot.* By questioning her existing knowledge and taking active steps to increase it, Allen was establishing a path for growth – growth for her methods students, growth for her high school students, and growth for herself. At the same time, Ms. Allen was embodying Dempsey's (1992) *teacher as fully functioning person* image as she sought to better understand the nature of schooling, instructional strategies, and the challenges teachers face.

For Ms. Allen, learning to teach the methods course can best be described as a learning curve. As Ms. Allen put it, *I thought I could plan less because... it would be like teaching peers. I ended up planning more than I thought. . . . [Pre-service teachers] are much more relatable to my high school seniors than my peers.* As a result, Ms. Allen reached out to others in the education department at the college and to her colleagues in the social studies department to help her plan for the methods course, thus exhibiting teacher leadership characteristics of collaboration and reflection (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). As she evolved as a methods instructor, she began to focus on more than teaching strategies. Teaching the pre-service teachers to understand the depth of thinking required of a teacher to plan lessons was a challenge. As Ms. Allen stated, *Getting them to understand the maturity needed as a teacher is challenging. They are not seeing the reason behind their work, why it is important for a classroom*

setting. However, the redeveloped field experience program made this concept easier to explain and discuss as the semester progressed. *With more classroom observations,* Ms. Allen noted, *the more [the pre-service teachers] could relate to real [high school student] behavior.* Although teaching the course was a struggle at times, it was not a negative experience: *I would do it again, although it makes for longer days. I would like to change things next time.* While preconceptions about college students proved an initial challenge, they did not deter Ms. Allen from moving forward to reshape the course.

Growing as a Teacher. An important goal of the collaboration between Madison College and Timberwood High School was the growth and development of the social studies teachers at the high school. Discussing this, Ms. Allen stated that, *I've read a lot more about social studies methods... and the importance of literacy and inquiry. I've learned more about teaching various social studies subjects and what works for grades six through twelve.* This was important, she felt, because her daily work for last seven years centered on teaching Government and Psychology to high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors, although mostly seniors. Ms. Allen also noted that attending the state social studies conference as part of the program's professional development requirement contributed to her growth. *I'm isolated here as the only government teacher,* Ms. Allen began. *However, talking with the guy who wrote the state standards and support documents was incredible. . . . It was eye-opening to understand the progression and flow of the standards.* When asked to explain why this was important to her growth, Ms. Allen explained, *I've sometimes thought that my class is terrible. But I now see what others are doing and I realize I'm doing things right. I feel more confident.* In preparing to teach the methods course and attending professional development, Ms. Allen acknowledged that she had grown as a teacher in terms of knowledge, perspective, and confidence.

While discussing her growth, Ms. Allen noted how teaching the methods course prompted her to use new strategies, thus affecting her classroom instruction at the high school. At first, using new strategies was done to prepare for teaching the methods course. As Ms. Allen recalled, *I am not going to tell [the pre-service teachers] to do something without doing it myself.* However, as Ms. Allen continued to grow in her knowledge, trying a particular method in preparation for teaching the pre-service teachers became secondary to trying new methods to teach her high school students. Ms. Allen pointed out that, *It... has changed the way I do some things in my own classroom. . . . I have a binder of*

lesson plans. *This year, I have not used it much. I am putting the focus back on my students.* While breaking out of the instructional rut was important, more significant to Ms. Allen was how her growth and development as a result of teaching the methods course prompted her to think more deeply about her government and psychology courses at Timberwood High School. *Sometimes I feel that I did things to fill time,* Ms. Allen confessed. *[This experience] has caused me to think about the over-arching, long-term goals of my classes. . . . It has made me a stronger teacher.* While developing as a methods instructor, Ms. Allen was motivated to enhance her instruction as a high school teacher, making her feel more successful. At the same time, this level of reflection is indicative of Dempsey's (1992) *teacher as reflective practitioner* image of teacher leadership.

Emerging as a teacher leader. Because she was connected to the college and growing instructionally, Ms. Allen began to emerge as a teacher leader in the school and district. This process began with a sense of empowerment resulting from her role as the methods instructor. Reflecting on this, Ms. Allen explained, *I am more confident in my ability to teach my students and methods students. I am a more well-rounded teacher. . . . I feel more confident talking with my peers and colleagues.* Indeed, during the 2012-2013 school year, Ms. Allen was asked by the district to organize and lead professional development sessions on adopting the Common Core State Standards. *I have never done that until this year,* Ms. Allen observed. *If we're going to be here for hours in [school- or district-based] professional development, I want it to be useful. Now, I can pick and choose topics that can help others in our district.* Ms. Allen's confidence, combined with both the insights from developing pre-service teachers and thinking broadly about social studies instruction, developed within her the desire to use professional development to encourage reform. As Ms. Allen explained, *As teachers, we need to discuss what is right and wrong in the district. These are important conversations for us to have if we want change in the district.*

During the project, Ms. Allen displayed characteristics of a teacher leader, such as being instructionally sound, involved in the professional development of her peers, and dedicated to curricular improvement. Indeed, Ms. Allen's actions demonstrated that she possesses "the strong intellectual underpinning required for teaching... that combine[s] both subject and pedagogical expertise" (Dempsey, 1992, p. 117), and, as a result, represents the *teacher as scholar* image of teacher leadership.

However, when asked directly if she sees herself as a leader, she responded:

Maybe. I feel I have more authority now. I feel like I have something to say. But sometimes I do not feel that I have an opportunity to speak up. . . . I mean, I'm the person who is asked to plan a pep rally but not present on something.

Ms. Allen knows she has grown, knows she has a new confidence, knows she has a voice, yet does not think of herself as a teacher leader because of how her school-level administrators continue to view her.

Social Studies Teachers Reflect on the Program: Assessing the Field Experience

The social studies department was informed of the collaboration between Timberwood High School and Madison College at the onset of the 2012-2013 school year. All department members were enthusiastic and supportive of the project. Reflecting on the initiative, Ms. Clark stated, *It is designed to be mutually beneficial for both.* While the relationship with the college has always been strong, it has also been one-side. Ms. Roberts concurred, stating, *I think it is a good plan. It is the first time incorporating the field experience into [our] school.* In addition, the critique of the social studies department by the pre-service teachers was intended to aid the in-service teachers. This was important because, as Ms. Clark pointed out, the pre-service teachers *will tell us our strengths and weaknesses. It has never been done before. It is an objective and outside view at what we are doing.* Indeed, the members of the department welcomed the idea of being assessed by the pre-service teachers from the methods course. In addition, the component of having all of the pre-service teachers in the methods course at the high school seemed to reiterate the importance of the program. Mr. Lewis observed that, *having them here is an advantage. There is always [a pre-service teacher] in the hallways. I do not remember that last year. They need our help. And it helps us.* From the beginning, the teachers felt that they were taking part in partnership that would improve them as professional educators and they embraced the new structure of the partnership.

One of the goals of the project was to increase the accountability of the pre-service teachers during their field experience. One of the new requirements in the methods course was for the pre-service teachers to teach two 45-minute lessons and one 90-minute lesson, an increase from the previous requirement of teaching two 20-minute lessons. Mr. Lewis voiced his support for this change by stating, *The number of lessons they teach is good... It is an improvement.* In fact the pre-service teachers were more involved in

developing their lessons and taking part in the everyday tasks of teaching. As Ms. Allen observed, *They are doing more. They're not just sitting in the room. I peek in [classrooms] sometimes and see them working with students, passing out papers, grading work.* The consensus among the social studies teachers was that the pre-service teachers were far more engaged in the work of a teacher. This sentiment was best stated by Ms. Clark who said, *They are not passive learners... It is like an apprenticeship program.* The mentor teachers believed that the accountability measures of requiring greater involvement in the field experience placement through teaching more and longer lessons and becoming participants in the classroom duties were successful.

Although the teachers in the social studies department were consistent in their attitudes toward the increased requirements for the pre-service teachers, the teachers were less consistent with their views on the effectiveness of having the methods professor on campus at all times. When asked about what aspect of the project should be sustained, Ms. Roberts, whose pre-service teacher had not been to the placement by the first week of November, did not hesitate: *"Having [Ms. Allen] here helps a lot. I can go directly to their professor and say [the pre-service teacher] did not show up."* For Ms. Roberts, having direct and open contact with the methods instructor increased the accountability. Ms. Jackson took the positive support for this aspect of the project further:

I like that the methods teacher is here. It is good for [the pre-service teachers] to see her around. It is added pressure to do well in front of an authority figure. You cannot come in shorts because your professor will see you!

Although the mentor teachers were consistent and adamant in their belief that having Ms. Allen as the methods instructor was successful, Ms. Allen herself was less positive. *I thought I would get more feedback from the department,"* stated Ms. Allen. *I was hoping the communication would be better. Like when they missed a class, I would know right away.* Though the mentors felt they were conveying adequate feedback on the performance of the methods students, Ms. Allen felt that the mentor teachers were not meeting her expectations and, consequently, not giving this component of the project its intended strength.

Despite the disagreement over the success of having the professor on campus, social studies teachers embraced and valued their role as mentors. Mr. Lewis, who was apprehensive about working with his first pre-service teacher at the beginning of the process, noted in the interview, *I am more comfortable [being a mentor] than I thought. . . . It*

just came easy to me to look over lesson plans and give feedback. Indeed, he was enthusiastic about his experience as a mentor. *Being a mentor is rewarding and I did not realize I was being rewarded,* Mr. Lewis claimed. *I think it heightened the level of excitement in my classroom because I don't want to display [to the pre-service teacher] any negativity, no matter what type of day I am having."* Although nervous about taking on a field experience early in the process, Mr. Lewis clearly saw the importance of working with a pre-service teacher. Likewise, teachers who had previous experience mentoring accepted the responsibility of nurturing pre-service teachers. Ms. Jackson said, *I've been a mentor a few times. Mostly, she [the pre-service teacher] stays and we talk. I want to talk to them in my planning period. We learn from conversation.* Yet, in valuing her role as a mentor, Ms. Jackson pointed to a larger issue: the professionalism of the pre-service teachers. As Ms. Jackson stated, *Yes, professionalism is often lacking, but I need to be proactive in helping [the pre-service teacher]. Hearing it from us [the mentor teachers] and Ms. Allen, they are more inclined to behave professionally."* With this statement, it is clear that she viewed herself equally responsible for increasing the professionalism of the pre-service teachers. Thus, the obligation of professionalizing the pre-service students rests with both the college and the mentors.

Becoming a community of learners. Another goal of the project was to cultivate a sense of experimentation in the social studies department in terms of using new instructional strategies. One approach to accomplishing this was to provide the teachers with a copy of the syllabus for the methods course so that they could model strategies being discussed in class that week. On this issue, Ms. Allen concluded, *As far as the calendar and schedule for modeling lessons, I do not think people have gotten out of their comfort zones to do new things.* This observation resulted from discussing the strategies with the pre-service teachers in the methods course. In contrast, the mentor teachers felt that the project was prompting them to develop a more extensive repertoire or revisit dormant strategies. As Ms. Jackson noted:

I am a young teacher, but I forgot engaging ideas from college. I knew that [the pre-service teachers] were watching and I needed to show examples of creative lessons. I started looking up creative lessons and using some that I had not used in some time.

The trend of researching new strategies was evident in Mr. Lewis's interview. [The pre-service teachers] *are getting exposure to good teaching*

strategies, he claimed. *Personally, I have been über-prepared... to model what they need. They need to see it.* Both teachers felt that they were expanding their repertoires to demonstrate best practices to the pre-service teachers. While having the pre-service teachers observing and researching their practice might have spurred an immediate interest in using more strategies, the teachers acknowledged that the project itself was having an impact on their practice.

So that in-service teachers would develop a wider range of strategies for the purpose of both modeling for pre-service teachers and improving instruction in the social studies department, one goal of the project was increase the amount of professional development to which all of the teachers in the department were exposed. Ms. Jackson, who has experience teaching in two districts, observed:

Usually districts send the same people out for professional development. There's no opportunity for the 'little people' – new teachers or new to the district – who have to earn their keep before going to professional development. We are trying to change that.

Indeed there was general sense among the teachers that the approach to professional development prompted by the project was more equitable. Included in the process of attending professional development was the expectation that teachers present their learning to the department and share how they were using it with their students, giving each teacher an opportunity to be a leader within the department. As Ms. Roberts noted, *What we are doing is... meeting as a department to plan and brainstorm how to make ourselves better. Department meetings are more productive.* When discussing this issue, Mr. Lewis said, *It is a conscious effort to get everyone as much professional development as possible. I mean, it is November and half of the department has been out of district for professional development.* However, this sentiment was perhaps best stated by Ms. Allen: *Department meetings are now about how to become stronger teachers. Meetings are more about methods we are using and conferences we are attending and less about school policies. Department meetings are professional development meetings.* While the social studies teachers placed value in pursuing quality professional development, concern existed that the administration was not entirely supportive of the plan. Citing an inability to attend a state conference earlier in the year, Ms. Jackson said, *We have a focus on exposing all to professional development, but do not have the support from above to make it happen for all.* Given the support that administrators expressed for the school-university collaboration and for helping the social studies teachers grow

professionally through conference and workshop attendance, this comment stood out. Yet, the consensus of the teachers was that they were growing as a result of the project and the new emphasis on professional development; in this case building internal capacity within the department for professional development.

Unifying as a department. A surprising finding that emerged from the interviews was that, through the process of working with pre-service teachers and working together to grow professionally, the teachers believed that they are becoming more unified as a department. As Ms. Allen put it, *We were isolated. But now there is more discussion about what we are doing, discussions about getting better. We have a common goal for growth.* While the project gave the teachers a shared vision for improvement, it was evident from the interviews the teachers used the mentoring of pre-service teachers to reflect on their own practice and the practice of their peers. As Ms. Roberts noted, *We are now a truly collaborative group... In a lot of schools that does not happen... The more you share with one another, the more you support one another.* With this reflection, the teachers in the department represent *the teacher as partner in learning* image of teacher leadership as they felt open “to speak their own word and create their own... transformation” (Dempsey, 1992, p. 118) within the department. Indeed, the teachers were clear in their belief that the focus on mentoring pre-service teachers, seeking professional development, and reflecting with each other caused a greater sense of unity in the department. To this end, Mr. Lewis said:

It is a step up from last year. I don't recall talking about professional development last year. When we did, it was mostly about what one or two people did. . . . I think that everyone feels part of a team. We are stronger and closer as a department.

The unity that the teachers felt was a consistent theme. The teachers felt that they were more than a department: they were, indeed, a collaborative team of educators.

Conveying parting thoughts. Finally, the teachers experienced an increased sense of professionalism and confidence through their involvement in the project. Aside from the sense of being involved in equitable professional development strategy, there was a sense that they experienced an increase in confidence in their abilities and pride about their profession. *It has made me feel better about being a teacher,* Mr. Lewis said. *The way [my field experience student] cares and listens. There is someone in the room that is learning more from me*

than Economics. It is inspiring. In fact, observing the growth of both the pre-service teachers and the discussions among the social studies teachers, Ms. Clark took a more poignant approach as she stated, *It made me wish I was teaching full time to be more a part of it.* Clearly there was a sense of pride and recognition that the work being done was significant. In addition, one teacher looked at the project as a means of generating professionalism by addressing a common stereotype about social studies teachers. Ms. Roberts stated, *We are dispelling the belief that social studies teachers are only a bunch of coaches by showing that we are professional teachers who want to teach.* Although there is no evidence in this research to indicate that this group of teachers was viewed as “a bunch of coaches,” Roberts’ point is clear – these teachers are engaged in deep and collaborative professional development that she believes is characteristic of professional educators. Overall, however, the entire project improved their sense of professionalism, pride, and confidence by allowing them to be a part of an innovative system for both hosting pre-service teachers in a field experience and growing as educators. As Mr. Lewis stated, *I am involved. I feel like I am contributing and, on a personal level, it is good and positive. I’m not a bystander.*

Discussion

The purpose of this article is to examine the initial impact of the collaboration between the social studies department at Timberwood High School and the education division at Madison College. Because rural schools are characterized by fewer resources (Bryant, 2007) and school university partnerships in rural areas must recognize unique needs of rural schools (Warren & Peel, 2005), the case in the present study represents how a rural school used the partnership to meet professional development needs. The first area studied in this article was the impact of the project on the social studies teachers at Timberwood High School as they experimented with new instructional strategies. All of the teachers indicated that they were focused on using new strategies. The leading cause was the knowledge that the pre-service teachers were there to learn and that the pre-service teachers would be researching the practice of the teachers. Most of the teachers mentioned breaking out of instructional ruts. Given that most of the teachers had between seven and ten years of experience, engaging in new instructional experiences is significant. According to Huberman (1989), teachers with five to nineteen years of experience tend to express doubts about careers because experimentation wanes and frustration with

the school system sets in. In this case, the focus on using the field experience program as a means of professional development prompted a more cohesive pedagogical focus and resulted in improved teacher leadership. Dempsey (1992) noted that teacher leaders help create schools that are “communities of learning” (p.118) and teachers leaders must “forge these dynamic new partnerships” (p. 118) to create “open spaces for dialogue” (p.118) within schools. Also, several teachers mentioned that the goal was for all teachers to learn and experience professional development, not just one or two teachers. Lortie (1975/2002) noted that seniority is a cultural norm within schools that hinders change. Previously, in many cases, seniority has guided who received or directed professional development. However, this norm appears to be waning (Weiner, 2011); in this study, all teachers involved received professional development. The professional development in the present study, as recommended by Feiman-Nemser (2001), allowed teachers to access the wider discourses on pedagogy and to breakdown isolation through substantive discussion. In addition, the present study demonstrates, as other researchers have observed, the need for rural teachers to have access to a wide range of flexible and individualized professional development that includes time for collaboration (Babione, 2010; Blum, Yocom, Trent, & McLaughlin, 2005; Guenther & Weible, 1983). Through participation in this collaborative project, the in-service teachers developed a greater sense of experimentation with new instructional strategies as they worked collectively to develop pedagogical cohesion.

The second goal of this research was to observe the impact of the partnership between Timberwood High School and Madison College on the development of the social studies teachers as teacher leaders. The teacher leadership development in the program is consistent with Dempsey’s (1992) images of teacher leaders as *reflective practitioners* and *partners in learning* as the social studies teachers reflected and grew together. In addition, York-Barr and Duke (2004) characterized teacher leaders, in part, as teachers offering professional development to their peers, participating in school change, creating a community of learning, and focusing on improving curriculum. Although exhibiting all of these attributes, the responses of the teachers are vague in terms of their confidence in defining themselves as leaders. This could be a result of teachers not wanting to present themselves as leaders due to the cultural norms with schools, specifically that of egalitarianism (Lortie, 1975/2002). Because of the unique challenges rural schools face, rural schools need “leadership strategies that are flexible and

responsive to contextual circumstances, despite the countervailing forces that may exist in the school and broader environment” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 3). Thus, teacher leadership must be at the forefront of a rural school. In the present study, participants developed a sense of teacher leadership when they led professional development for their peers in the department, a finding consistent with research on teacher-conducted professional development in rural schools (Harris, 2005).

Though Ms. Allen felt stronger as a leader, she also felt that the school-level administration was not recognizing her growth as a teacher leader. However, Ms. Allen’s frustrations are not uncommon. Because schools have a century-long tradition of having a principal as the sole instructional leader of the institution (Lortie, 1975/2002) and many principals are not prepared to relinquish authority to teachers who are underneath them in the hierarchy (Weiner, 2011), principals and teachers have conflicting views of teacher leadership. Administrators may be reluctant to cede power to teachers. In this sense, the teachers in the project were experiencing growth, but were likely held back from experiencing their growth potential by the traditional school norms and hierarchy.

However, the teachers in this study were committed to the project and its goals. As Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) observed, “effective rural educational leaders utilize a variety of leadership practices to develop formal and informal linkages with multiple community sources to help accomplish their mission” (p. 15). In this case, the partnership between Timberwood High School and Madison College served as a formal link to meet the challenges facing rural schools. Teachers, such as Ms. Jackson and Mr. Lewis, felt a responsibility to assist the field experience students to grow instructionally and professionally. A sense of obligation to aid teachers in their growth is a common characteristic of teacher leaders (Smylie & Brownlee-Conyers, 1992; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In fact, the teachers in the present study spoke openly of a heightened sense of collaboration and becoming closer as a department. Given that isolation is a traditional norm that holds back change (Fullan, 1993; Lortie, 1975/2002) and that teacher leadership is a concept that is characterized by collaboration (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), it would appear that the teachers involved in the present study are beginning to dismantle school norms in the social studies department. So, while the teachers were reluctant to discuss leadership and felt that the administration was not recognizing their leadership qualities, they were also taking on the attributes of teacher leaders as part of the program by collaborating with each other.

Specific to Ms. Allen, the experience of working as the methods professor changed her; yet, she felt that the perceptions school-based administrators had of her did not change at the same pace and depth. As a result the findings are mixed when it comes to in-service teachers’ perceptions of the project’s impact on becoming teacher leaders.

Conclusion

The initial findings of the present study generate additional questions. As the social studies teachers at Timberwood High School continue to grow as a collaborative unit, how is their self-efficacy affected? In addition, how are high school students affected by the collaboration between the school and college? In what ways will the teachers further utilize the research conducted by the pre-service teachers in the field experience connected to the methods course? How did the pre-service teachers grow and develop as a result of the project? What further characteristics exist in this partnership that do not exist in urban or suburban partnerships? These are questions still to be answered within the project for future study. The significance of the current findings is that the voices of mentors – of rural teacher leaders – are heard. Mentoring, despite the attention it receives among professors, practitioners, and administrators, is largely overlooked (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). A goal of the project was to create a mentoring program that was substantive for practitioner growth, while empowering rural teachers by acknowledging and valuing their contributions.

Warren and Peel (2005) argued that rural school reform requires administrators willing to reach out to colleges and universities to form partnerships and lead their teachers into the process. However, Fullan (1993) explained that teachers, not administrative mandates, are the key to sustainable change and school reform. The mentoring program that is the focus of the present study shows the importance of involving teacher leaders in the development of rural school-university partnerships. In this study, teachers played a substantive role in the development of a field experience program for pre-service teachers. In the process, the teachers developed a stronger bond as a department, breaking out of isolation. They focused on attending and discussing professional development with the objective of implementing new strategies in their classroom. In addition, while the teachers grew as leaders, they were limited by school norms and felt little administrative support. The policy implications of the present study are best seen at the district level, where rural administrators need to allow for greater flexibility for teacher leaders to lead reform efforts in rural education.

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