The Unlikely Faces of Professional Development in Urban Schools: Preparing At-Risk Students and Colleges for One Another

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Higher education scholars who participate in grant-funded activities at a junior high school recognize that huge gaps exist between their work world and that of junior high teachers and students—"at risk" and otherwise. One way of overcoming the gap is deeply embedding professional development in schools; such collaboration takes extra time, effort, and patience and demands different rules. In this paper we interpret focus-group data about our work as college professors meeting once a week with teams of teachers and administrators in a junior high school. In local terminology, we are "cluster consultants" working with "clusters." The research is autoethnographic: we are analyzing cultural data that we ourselves have created about our own experiences (Reed-Dahaney 1997) and action research in that our primary goal is to use data to reflect on and improve our work in our own institutions. Toward this end, we discuss our changing roles and the effects of our participation, both on Ravine Junior High School (a pseudonym) and on our own pedagogies in the university.

Ravine Junior High School and GEAR-UP

As other articles in this issue detail, the goal of the GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant is simply a significant increase in low-income students prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. At Ravine Junior High School (RJH), the reforms associated with GEAR-UP have been grounded

in the strengths and needs of the students as recognized by teachers and administrators and as further researched via literature reviews and action research projects (Fullan, Bennett, and Rolheiser-Bennett 1990; Bernauer 2002). Through this process, the school has left behind its junior high structure and moved to a more collaborative structure involving clusters of students and teachers. Cluster consultants (university faculty) were identified for each cluster. Without a preconceived idea of exactly what a cluster consultant would be or do, the RJH site co-coordinators (Fischer and Hamer) reasoned that bringing junior high teachers and administrators and university professors together over an extended period and during regularly scheduled cluster meetings would prove productive.

Job-Embedded Professional Development

After identifying many faulty assumptions about traditional professional development for teachers, researchers have suggested replacing one-shot, one-way programs with long-term, collegial work (Hixson and Tinzmann 1990; Sparks and Hirsh 1997; Stronge 2002; Wood and Thompson 1993; Zimmerman and May 2003).

In three years of venturing into the school once a week as cluster consultants, we have come to new understandings that result in a model we call Deeply Embedded Professional Development (DEPD). DEPD of the sort we advocate requires commitment over time, an entry stance of active listening, and a dedication to transforming teachers and ourselves into significant partners and equals in professional development. Ultimately, perhaps, our own professional development has been one of the most unexpected results of this effort. We are faced with the following question: if our teacher-colleagues are successful in preparing their at-risk urban students for high school graduation and postsecondary education, are our universities prepared for the presence—and the success—of those students? The unlikely faces of professional development in an urban school have been present at every turn, in classrooms and corridors, and in the mirrors of our own minds. In these faces

we find struggle, antagonism, ambivalence, and purpose. The following narratives both describe the role of cluster consultants and reflect on the impact the DEPD seems to be having.

Julie's Story: Building Institutional Collaboration

For the past two years, I have worked with three different clusters at RJH. During the first year, I worked with two different clusters. The first cluster was made up of teachers from the special areas—art, music, home economics, physical education, and health. Because I have met longer with this cluster, my role has evolved from that of a listener to a more active member. For example, when the cluster was developing an interdisciplinary unit on recycling, I helped gather curriculum resources on the topic and information about potential grants. The cluster meetings have been helpful in my work as a university methods instructor: I am able to provide my students with specific, concrete examples of how the teachers develop and implement interdisciplinary units.

Every year we place several methods students at RJH for firsthand experience in an emerging middle school with high-risk students. To provide the methods students with some experience with the students at RJH and to provide RJH students with a positive introduction to a college campus, each semester our methods students host RJH's eighth-grade clusters when they visit the university campus. The methods students create mini-lessons based on a theme, such as "law and order," requested by each cluster's teachers. Members of my cluster also visited the university to talk to middle childhood methods students about inclusion, teaming, and developing a standards-based, interdisciplinary unit. I believe the pre-service teachers in the methods courses have benefited even more than those in the clusters. The partnership has definitely enhanced the teacher-preparation program.

Lucy's Story: "Uncool" Subject Matter to Cool Kids

My consultancy focused on helping teachers incorporate information on Appalachia in their classes in order to develop students' appreciation and respect for that culture—a heritage the students frequently deride. My sixth-grade daughter summed up their initial response to the idea of teaching dulcimer as a way to learn heritage: "dorky" and uncool. I thus approached this project knowing that the subject matter itself might meet some resistance. And since my emphasis was on content rather than teaching strategies, my consultancy slowly evolved into three roles: resource, teaching partner, and classroom aide.

As a resource, I offered information on Appalachian culture and music, my own skills at performing Appalachian music, and most important, a perspective on the subject that contextualized the arts in specif-

ic cultural histories, world views, and circumstances. We would need to place those traditions in a larger framework in order to make them relevant—and not "dorky"—to students. For the instrument to make sense, it had to be taught within the culture it represented—Appalachia's history, natural landscape, and social-cultural background. I selected several themes I thought the students would understand: feeling "outside" mainstream America, a need for individual resourcefulness, and a closeness to nature. The students responded well to this approach, and the final concert was a success.

As a teaching partner, I worked with a seventh-grade general music class once or twice a week. Managing the classroom was also a partnership—the teacher's presence maintained discipline, enabling me to focus on developing the students' skills and understanding of the material.

My role as a classroom aide may have been the most appreciated. It gave at least one teacher the space to work with students as individuals. I think, too, that it modeled to the other teachers how a working partnership could contribute to the students' learning skills and facts while they gained a perspective to understand cultures and human behaviors, including their own.

John's Story: Mentoring Each Other

I began visiting my cluster during the first year of the GEAR-UP grant at RJH. My cluster is an academic core cluster composed of five teachers. That first year, I thought they were going to look at me and say, "Oh yeah, you know all about curriculum. . . . Help us do this." But it didn't happen the first year, although I tried to raise issues of curriculum. I was rather frustrated.

At cluster meetings I did not record detailed notes that might be viewed as evaluating the teachers' efforts. Instead, I tried to record what was happening in the cluster so I could track what I might be asked to do and in fact come to know what was happening in the cluster.

A secondary role emerged as well. On a regular basis, the cluster leader asked me to sit down and talk about how the meeting went. These sessions developed into one-on-one mentoring with the cluster leader. Now I'm asked questions as I walk in and "Do you have a few seconds before you go?" as I leave.

My work at the junior high school became much more reflective about my work at the university. The cluster and the teachers who make it up have become internal checks on my thinking. The time I spent with them was linked to issues back on campus. Everything I talk about in my pre-service teacher education classes—the impact of teaming, ways of dealing with young adolescents, curriculum and instruction practices with middle-grade classrooms—now appears connected to its reflec-

tions in my cluster. The RJH teachers have become the voice in my ear, for better or worse.

Lynne's Story: Consultant as Learner

At the beginning, I believed I would serve primarily as a folklorist helping teachers make curriculum more relevant to students and helping students develop research skills; secondarily, as a qualitative researcher, I would document what I observed as I also participated in the cultural life of the cluster. Neither role proved immediately useful; the most valuable aspect of working with that first core cluster was recognizing how little I actually practiced collaborative work at the university and how challenging curriculum alignment was.

In my second year I was reassigned as consultant to a special education cluster. Here the gap widened between competing ideas of a useful role for me. For instance, one day my contribution to the cluster was arranging for buses and pizza on a visit to a local community college (instead of the university campus, as the other clusters did). Later that day, I mentioned my day's assignment to my fellow cluster consultants. One commented, "If your service doesn't have an academic scholarship component to it, then you shouldn't be doing it."

The remark was troublesome in two ways: first, although I believed that the special education students should be able to visit the university just like the other students, my lack of background in special education had intimidated me from speaking out in the cluster. Second, arranging for buses and pizza neither used nor contributed to my scholarship. Yet probably few teachers consider making logistical arrangements a full use of their expertise. Besides, by going on the field trip, I learned much about community colleges' appeal and something about how it feels to be a tracked student.

Working with the special education cluster gave me some firsthand knowledge about such students and how they could participate in a college class like mine. RJH's needs have pushed me to find out about my own institution's Office of Accessibility—both its services and its philosophy. Recently, through that connection I was asked, "What are you doing at the university toward full inclusion?" The question remains to be answered.

Alexander's Story: Relationships Are the Core

I began my work as a consultant by asking teachers how I could be helpful. The cluster leader replied, "Help us to find some money." Nevertheless, at the next meeting I presented a yearlong strategy for developing integrated curriculum themes. The teachers' reactions were negative, so for the remainder of the year I concentrated on purely prac-

tical tasks, such as looking for class speakers, organizing a campus tour for students, and building a Web site. However inappropriate such work may have seemed for my professional development, demonstrating my usefulness and readiness to do a fair share of the work helped me penetrate the network of informal relationships among the teachers.

Most of the second year was structured around another seemingly inappropriate job: applying for grants. The time spent on writing and rewriting could, again, hardly be justified by the modest amounts eventually received. Yet that work provided teachers with an opportunity to clarify their own professional priorities, establish goals, and translate informal, "indigenous" teacher knowledge into the formal language of educational buzzwords and grant-making conventions.

Teachers now realize that I am more useful in such a role than in scheduling buses or negotiating with a caterer. And the definition of "usefulness" has expanded to include extracting additional resources, presenting the cluster in the most positive light, and helping organize teachers' own ideas into better, more logical, and more appealing forms. One more function I serve is witnessing much teacher work that otherwise might remain unnoticed and unappreciated.

In practical terms, my cluster was able to conduct a large curricular project funded by a local agency. All students received a free copy of a book by a well-known author (for many of the kids, the first book they owned). They met with the author, took a tour of the neighborhood to boost their knowledge of local history, interviewed some seniors from a community center, and ultimately published their own book of stories, poems, and family recipes. This year, we are engrossed in a new project that involves building a large greenhouse in the school's atrium. In our new patterns of collaboration, the teachers have the burden of practical tasks, while I search for more resources and represent the cluster to the outside world.

Judy's Story: Time and Leadership Can Work Wonders

As a former principal and superintendent with research interests in collaborative decision-making and continuous-improvement planning, I was drawn to work as a resource consultant with the principal of RJH. My participation provides valuable insights for me to share with my students about the daily life of a building principal and how the culture of a building can impact restructuring efforts.

I do not work with teachers directly. Instead, I have been placed with the administrative cluster, where my experience gives me credibility as a "sounding board" for the principal. I have also "shadowed" the principal during her daily interactions with students, teachers, and other staff members.

The principal believes that GEAR-UP can potentially benefit everyone at her school, especially the children, who will be given "an opportunity to dream." However, she struggles to empower her teachers without losing her own power as the leader. The principal also needs assurance, in this strong union district, that decisions will not be made just to accommodate the teachers.

One role I fulfill is providing background and conversation on current professional scholarship. For example, we have discussed how what leaders think, do, and say not only affects the performance of an organization but also determines whether it is collaborative. Therefore, I have emphasized to her the importance of attending cluster-leader meetings for two reasons: 1) demonstrating that she supports risk-taking among the faculty, and 2) modeling collaboration and sharing in decision-making.

Redesigning the master schedule to arrange common planning time has been the principal's major focus. For teachers to believe that collaboration time is valuable, it must be structured and produce results. The principal and I will try to ensure that.

Art's Story: Deconstructing Professional Hierarchies

When I started as a consultant in September 2001, my main goal was to generate enrollment for a proposed weather-and-climate workshop. Frankly, I had no idea what it meant to be a consultant, because my background is as an atmospheric scientist. I assumed that my primary contribution as a consultant would be sharing scientific content that the teachers could ultimately introduce to their classrooms.

I quickly realized that my assumption was faulty. For starters, the first cluster I worked with, which consisted of "specials" teachers, was not a good fit. After the school year, I was reassigned to an academic core cluster. Some of this cluster's teachers had been the first to take my workshop. We had all worked very hard to develop and integrate a weather-and-climate unit into their curriculum.

In the new cluster I began to feel like a "consultant," rather than a university visitor advising teachers on science content. I became a "conduit" between the cluster and GEAR-UP to keep the teachers apprised of developments with the grant and keep GEAR-UP up-to-date about cluster concerns. So perhaps "consultant" is the wrong word to describe what we do, if the term means someone who is paid to go to a place and help solve problems.

When I presented the workshop the second time, I had a much better understanding of teacher backgrounds and sensitivity to individual teacher sensibilities. As a result, I was able to work with the teachers in ways that I would never have considered had I been dealing with traditional undergraduate and graduate students. I asked many questions, lis-

tened to complaints, smiled, and then coaxed them to meet my expectations. I always treated the teachers as equals in the classroom, even though I was the "professor" and they were the "students." I had much to learn from the teachers about strategies that enhance student learning. I didn't pretend that I was a trained middle or secondary school teacher, and the teachers didn't pretend that they were research scientists—so we appreciated each other's skills.

The Roles of Our Consultancies

Faculty consultants need time to engage in the effort and to position their professional and personal identities within the complex, evolving social relationships of each cluster. This ability to reposition, or role flexibility, is one of the "rules" for a successful consultancy program, as discussed below. Although recognizing that roles are flexible and emergent, some particular types of roles emerge from the narrative data presented:

good citizen—meeting the desire to "give back" to the K–12 system;
conduit—facilitating the flow of information between grant administrators and junior high staff;
witness—fulfilling teachers' need to have other professionals observe, recognize, and report their skills and challenges to the larger world;
external sounding board—serving as a knowledgeable and empathetic professional colleague with both internal and external connections;
translator—making the important work that goes on in the school intelligible to outsiders (especially journalists and grantors);
institutional innovator—remaking university and junior high programs so that they are mutually supportive;
disciplinary expert—providing disciplinary expertise and theoretical frameworks toward integrating curriculum, exploring new understanding, and modeling scholarship;
cultural critic—pursuing a shared understanding of culture and human behaviors, including the teachers' and our own;
teacher for student success—participating in pedagogical changes that create spaces for student achievement.

The variety of roles is neither an accident nor evidence of disorganization. Rather, the multiplicity of the engagement forms guarantees that the process of professional development is sustained through a multitude of overlapping channels. Like any other enduring human relationship, teacher-professor collaboration involves multiple forms of interaction, the sum of which provides for "triangulation" of a sort. In other words, trust is possible only when people know each other in

more than one role. If we were to write a list of roles the teachers have played in our collaboration, it would be as long and as varied.

The "Rules" for a Successful Consultancy

We put quotation marks around the word "rules" because the same way roles emerged as we went along, we made up—or perhaps recognized—these rules as we went along: we realize and emphasize that each consultancy is going to be different. But we also predict that in successfully creating collaborative, mutually embedded, and enriching experiences such as the ones we have described, the following will be present:

Role flexibility and negotiation. Roles need to emerge and change over time rather than be imposed from outside.

Trust. This is built over time and provides the consultant with a sense of belonging and the cluster teachers with assurance that the consultant is on their side. It is important to show that we are not developing any exit strategies; rather, we are looking for other ways of staying.

Mutuality. Consultants and teachers gain new respect for each other's work, recognizing that each can learn from the other.

Capacity building. This involves nurturing talents among staff members so that they can, when the grant ends, carry on some of the work that their university consultants have provided, especially in curriculum development and grant writing.

Conclusion: DEPD

By definition, job-embedded professional development must be finely attuned to the realities of teachers' everyday experiences and the practical tasks they face. However, it is one thing to understand that intellectually and quite another to break with professional beliefs about the nature of teacher education. What we have learned in this experience is that successful collaboration between schools and universities occurs through personal transformative experiences rather than through well-developed plans and programs.

Reflecting on the process of developing and conducting the consultancies, we recognize that we have resisted the teachers' entering into our own work worlds; that is, our work has not been truly collaborative and will be strengthened to the extent that it becomes more truly collaborative. For instance, although teachers decided whether to have consultants in their cluster, they have not participated in selecting consultants, assigning and reassigning consultants, or in making ongoing sense of consultants' roles. In various venues teachers have commented that the university should consult them about undergraduate teacher preparation, but there has been no follow-up on their suggestions. Furthermore, although we as university folk dare to enter into discus-

sions about how best to educate at-risk junior high school students, we have not seriously considered how we will educate them once (assuming the GEAR-UP program's success) they enter the university world as students. We certainly have not yet asked our junior high school colleagues to help us assess our programs and pedagogies. However, we hope to be doing so soon.

The project has been a success judging by the engagement both groups in this effort—junior high school staff and university faculty—have brought to DEPD. In each other's faces, and in the faces of the students we encounter as we leave RJH each morning, we see the problem and the promise of urban education. By sitting together we have started to make a difference for both of our institutions: school and university.

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