Literacy Learning Communities in Partnership

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ABSTRACT: This article describes how a literacy learning community model was developed between two high school partnership sites and a large southern public university, and how teacher collaboration and shared learning across content areas in the first year impacted teachers' learning about literacy instruction and their school's vision for literacy. Specifically, teachers' learning was analyzed using multiple data: in-depth teacher interviews, surveys and inventories, teachers' coursework and portfolios, and classroom artifacts. Findings indicate that embedded staff development characterized by collaborative approaches to teachers' learning located in professional learning communities is effective especially with respect to teaching content area reading; teacher collaboration that honors continuous professional learning, either in a school-university partnership or within a wider group at the school or district level, offers rich possibilities for generating viable literacy learning communities.

Seven teachers of varying disciplines from two rural high schools sit around a table on a Saturday morning. The focus of discussion is adolescent literacy and test scores. Frustrated teachers ask questions like "How can I get my students to read assigned texts? How can I get them to comprehend what they read in the text? How can I get my students to improve their vocabulary?" As they continue to swap stories and share what is not working in their classrooms, the university facilitator suggests that they try to understand their students' reading processes and practices, as well as interrogate their own thinking about instruction. They agree on a common goal to find out about their students' reading habits and their metacognitive awareness strategies. At the next meeting, the teachers bring student data based on reading inventories provided by the facilitator. Amid pleas for "quick fixes" and misgivings about what can be done to help their students, they come to a shared understanding of how they will problem solve together and locate resources for improving their students' literate lives. They come to learn about what is happening in classrooms other than their own. Although they do not explicitly discuss the supports behind the constructive shifts at this meeting, it is clear that they are coming to realize how their partnership enables them to participate in larger conversations about their school's concern with student achievement.

This short vignette illuminates key characteristics of professional learning communities. In such communities, teachers engage in mutual collaboration as they establish shared goals designed to motivate and support student learning. In the instance described above, one of their common goals was to develop shared resources for helping students acquire effective reading skills and strategies. Regrettably, teacher learning communities like the one depicted above rarely exist in secondary schools faced with inherent challenges to teacher collaboration.

Historically, high schools were organized according to the factory model (Steiny, 2007) that resulted in segmented curriculum and organizational norms that seemed incompatible with a culture of collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Until recently, little attention was given to how teachers learned, as it was customary for districts to schedule "one shot" in-service sessions featuring high profile speakers. Accordingly, teachers were mandated to gain in-service credit; they received *training* that was often disconnected from daily instructional

practice, and subsequently returned to their classrooms no better equipped to serve their students and without being asked to document how they were implementing these "best practice" skills they had just been spoon-fed.

Over time, staff development has "morphed from a passive saturation of information to interactive communication in the form of professional learning communities" (Lent, 2007, p. ix). According to recent research, what distinguishes professional learning communities from other staff development models is their scope beyond the individual and a *deep coherence* that includes:

- Connection to something larger
- Coordinated perspectives, discourse and actions
- Shared resources to address recurring problems of practice
- Making visible tacit knowledge of learning (NCTE, 2011, p. 15–16).

Researchers also confirm that teacher collaboration is critical to professional learning. "The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student leaning and professional morale in virtually any setting" (Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002, p. xii). Researchers concur that high quality professional development with embedded support positively affects student learning and improves standardized test scores (Fullan, Hill & Crevola, 2006; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Thompson, Gregg & Niska, 2004).

Essentially, Professional Development Schools (PDSs) embrace inquiry-based teaching and learning that utilizes teacher collaboration within the context of a site-based professional learning community, either with a partner such as a university or within a larger group at the school or district level. PDS partnerships between school districts and universities have the potential for continuing staff development efforts that attempt to blend theory and practice (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001). At the heart of a PDS partnership is the practice of "[c]arefully deter-

mining mutually meaningful relevant and essential joint work to serve children, families and communities. . .[because] [w]hen stakeholders share a vision, they eagerly embrace responsibility for action" (Hoffman, Dahlman & Zierdt, 2009). The purpose of this article is to describe specifically three results of our implementation of a learning community model in our PDS: 1) how a literacy learning community model was developed within two "partnership sites," 2) how the model was significant in deepening school-university partnerships over time, and 3) how teacher collaboration and shared learning in the first year was instrumental in arousing teacher confidence and instilling responsibility for teaching content area reading, as well as providing the impetus for the development of each school's collective vision for literacy.

Project RAISSE

We conceived Project RAISSE (Reading Assistance Initiative for Secondary School Educators), a professional development literacy initiative adapted from the literacy coaching model (Clary, 2008), in partnership with two rural high schools both based in low socio-economic environments, and likewise concerned with students' low performance on tests. Project RAISSE was based at the University of South Carolina where we teach graduates in content literacy, and funded over two years at a total cost of $150,000 by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation.

We designed Project RAISSE to facilitate secondary teachers' understanding of content area reading and to expand teachers' knowledge about adolescent literacy through inquiry into the theory and practice of teaching reading. While Project RAISSE served to strengthen school partnerships in secondary schools, it utilized literacy and collaborative approaches to support content area instruction in the context of embedded staff development. Consistent with current thinking about literacy education and teachers' learning, the theoretical framework for Project RAISSE was grounded in

constructivist and adult learning principles (Lent, 2007). Teachers enrolled in three modules—"Literacy Graduate Study," "Collegial Study Groups," and "Teacher Professional Development"—which were led by instructors in the College of Education. The Literacy Graduate Study and Collegial Study Groups modules were intended to stimulate interrogation of teachers' attitudes about reading and their current instructional practices. The Teacher Professional Development module attempted to challenge static views of high school culture by opening up possibilities for fostering teachers' ongoing collaborative professional learning through cross-disciplinary study groups. At the heart of Project RAISSE was professional learning aimed at preparing teachers to lead site-based, cross-content area study groups (small teacher learning communities consisting of 6–8 teachers), serving in roles similar to the now common literacy coach. Ultimately, the project anticipated serving 48 teachers over two years (2006–2008).

PDS at the University of South Carolina

The University of South Carolina (USC) offers two models for envisioning school-university partnerships: "partnership sites" and Professional Development Schools (PDS). Each model requires different levels of support from both the schools and the university, but both models require a shared commitment by all parties to improve teaching and learning for all constituents. Partnership sites and professional development schools are identified through discussions between university and school district personnel, with the following criteria serving as the basis for selection:

- The school should have an instructional staff which is interested in working with teacher candidates and which understands the requirements of doing so.
- The school should have well-qualified faculty who employ effective teaching techniques.

- The school should be sensitive to multicultural concerns in its curriculum and programs.
- The school should be innovative and progressive in its policies and practices, with faculty willing to allow USC candidates to try a variety of teaching practices.
- The school should have adequate physical facilities and up-to-date instructional equipment and materials.
- The school should have a curriculum that includes optimum educational experiences for both pupils and teacher candidates.
- The school should have a well-organized in-service program to stimulate professional growth of the instructional staff.

Partnership sites are P-12 schools interested in providing clinical placements for teacher candidates and may include whole schools (typically at the elementary level) or departments within a school (a possibility particularly relevant to high schools). University-based faculty visit partnership sites regularly to supervise advanced practicum students and teaching interns. Partnership sites provide opportunities for teacher candidates to work with P-12 students to develop their teaching skills and meet university course requirements, as appropriate for each candidate's level in the program. While there is variability across schools regarding academic requirements and practices, teachers working with candidates in partnership sites support these pre-service teachers in testing "new ideas" that these novice educators have typically learned about in their education coursework.

Like partnership sites, professional development schools (PDS) in the USC model also provide quality placements for teacher candidates. However, PDS sites move beyond this one element of collaboration by agreeing to a three-year commitment to the following:

- a demonstrated emphasis on inquiry-based teaching and learning;
- the presence of a critical mass of faculty working with USC teacher candidates throughout their programs;

- a faculty-wide examination of the National Network for Educational Renewal's Agenda for Education in a Democracy;
- completion of at least one research or demonstration project in collaboration with USC faculty over the course of the three-year relationship;
- the hosting, whenever possible, of pre-service courses on-site;
- active participation in the governance of the PDS Initiative within USC's School University Partnership Network;
- the provision of a dedicated physical space within the school for use by a USC Liaison and district remuneration of 50% of the USC Liaison's annual salary; and
- the assignment of a P-12 faculty member or administrator as the site's Clinical Adjunct responsible for collaborating with the USC Liaison in guiding PDS initiatives, and district remuneration of 50% of the Clinical Adjunct's annual stipend.

Research Purpose and Design

The purpose of our inquiry was twofold. We first wanted to explore in-service teachers' initial perceptions about reading, including their willingness and ability to teach reading, at the entry into this embedded professional development project, and then examine subsequent changes to their thinking as a result of their first year of Project RAISSE experiences that were designed to modify teachers' thinking about literacy learning and classroom practice. We also wanted to evaluate the professional learning community model developed within the framework of a PDS partnership, how relationships between key stakeholders developed, and the impact of new learning on the teachers and their respective schools.

In this inquiry, we employed a practitioner-researcher design that enabled us to serve as the course instructors and researchers, respectively (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Three key questions guided our research:

- To what extent do secondary teachers' perceptions about literacy instruction shift following participation in job-embedded pro-

fessional development that utilizes study groups, and how does new learning about content literacy grow their responsibility for teaching literacy?
- How do collaborative approaches such as teachers working together in professional learning communities support teachers' new knowledge about instructional practices and research, with a particular focus on content literacy?
- What new understandings does Project RAISSE afford about teachers' professional learning supported by rich school-university partnerships?

Participation

Seven secondary teachers participated in this study. Most had earned masters degrees in their teaching content area or in education. Two teachers taught social studies; two taught English; two taught science; and one taught math. They ranged in teaching experience from two to fifteen years.

Our sample was bound by a caveat that included teachers already identified by their schools as potential leaders for literacy coaching positions. One ELA participant recalled in a scheduled interview the tenor of an early conversation with the school's administration:

> When the whole thing first started, I met with the principal . . . to talk about who would be best to be in this project because we wanted people who were enthusiastic. We wanted people who were going to stay there. We really thought it out before we even went and asked anybody, and of the three people we asked initially, two of them said yes. . . . I think it was because the administration was excited that people wanted to join.

In the first year, the participants were enrolled in six hours of graduate study taught at alternating partnership school sites. The goal of the six hours of coursework was to build foundational knowledge in the teaching of reading and writing congruent with current literacy teacher education theories and practices. Aligned with constructivist principles, the courses involved participants in a variety of

literacy engagements designed to build their meaning-making around reading and address any perceived lack of confidence and confusion about reading. Consistent with the tenets of a professional learning community (Lent, 2007), the curriculum, engagements, and projects were negotiated with the participants. Initial classroom engagements drew on their own understandings of reading processes including crafting a literacy memoir and sharing personal artifacts from their reading lives. During graduate study, the participants were immersed in young adult literature and picture books through instructional practices such as read alouds, book clubs, and book passes. Teachers prepared read alouds, enjoyed time for independent reading, and learned how to build professional and classroom libraries with the assistance of grant funds. Informed by current research about what adolescent students need, "workshopping" strategies on comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking were systematically built into group meetings.

The participants also tested out literacy strategies in their classrooms and shared these with the wider group; they also shared their learning through attendance at professional literacy experiences outside the course. Several classroom projects were planned to connect literacy theory with classroom practices; these included a Reader's Profile that described and documented the world of two struggling adolescent readers, a unit plan taught and supported by the creation of a text set, and a Teachers' Portfolio submitted at mid- and end-points of the year. All of the course experiences were designed to position the participants to lead study groups and present learning at teacher conferences in the second year of the project.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the purposes of this study, data was collected over the first year of the project. As Yin (2009) suggests is necessary, multiple sources of evidence/data were collected including interviews, documents, surveys, and observation. Structured in-depth interviews (see Appendix) with the seven participants were conducted at the end of the first year (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Course-related documents were also collected. For example, at the first class meeting, the teachers were asked to define "reading" in an Admit Slip. To provide some means of comparison, the teachers were asked again to define "reading" at the end of the first year of graduate study. To gather insights about participants' thinking during graduate study, teachers completed exit slips at each meeting and wrote mid-point and end-point reflective narratives. To document what was happening in their content area classrooms, teachers kept a portfolio of artifacts including assignments, plans, materials, and resources. To foster reflection about their own reading processes and provide another source of data, teachers completed surveys such as a Burke Reading Interview (1987), a literacy profile, and a metacognitive awareness of reading inventory (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). The university instructor took observational notes during course meetings.

To understand and make sense of the data, we used various analytic procedures such as locating patterns within data sets, developing case descriptions, and finding patterns across case descriptions. The project instructor, director, and co-director analyzed data initially by data sets at monthly research team meetings. We had the advantage of each others' analyses of the data and achieved triangulation across both researchers and data sources as we analyzed the same data sets and compared analyses. Our study was designed to make sense of the teachers' lived experiences. Following the initial analysis by data sets, we organized data chronologically by case (Stake, 1995). In this way, we followed an individual teacher across the year using the patterns and themes established in the analysis phase. We then searched for categories within and across each case. For example, data seemed to easily fall into categories related to teachers' changing beliefs about reading and instructional practices related to content literacy and their disposition toward literacy leadership and responsibility, as well as revelations about teachers' lived experience in a

professional learning community (in many cases, for the first time) during the project's implementation.

From these categories, we developed several themes that we share here. We used an open-coding system to develop these themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that were related to teachers' perceived notions about literacy and their ability to teach reading. We confirmed our themes by revisiting the data systematically at our monthly research meetings; we checked in with our participants to validate our themes. For example, the notion that secondary teachers do not have to teach reading and that it is someone else's responsibility was consistent across the teachers' initial data. These teachers repeatedly expressed their lack of confidence and expertise in taking responsibility for literacy instruction; their theoretical orientation was steeped in the behaviorist tradition that was incompatible with evidence-based reading instruction. Over the course of a year, multiple data were able to confirm that most teachers' views about the importance of content area reading and their responsibility for teaching literacy started to shift with encouraging results from their students. The inductive analytic process suggested that the emerging themes were grounded more in the data than in the research literature.

Findings

As we analyzed the data, we uncovered three key themes that represent secondary teachers' learning about content literacy, located within the context of a professional learning community that afforded productive collaboration and joint cooperation. In the subsequent section, we expand on the following three themes:

- shifting theoretical orientation towards reading and beliefs about instructional practice and teaching content
- changing thinking about adolescents and adolescent literacy
- growing responsibility for teaching literacy and demonstration of literacy leadership

Shifting Theoretical Orientation Towards Reading and Beliefs about Instructional Practice and Teaching Content

We found that none of the teachers began this professional learning experience with a deep understanding of the reading process; none of the teachers taught explicit strategies when reading text. A science teacher with five years' teaching experience wrote: "When I think of teaching reading in the science classroom, I think of teaching them how to dissect their reading...I try to get them to read for content, little bitty pieces of information instead of the huge picture." Midway through the project, we observed a gradual shift in some teachers' understanding about reading as a socio-linguistic process that is not defined and taught in "pieces and parts"; this shift was evidenced in teachers' talk in class meetings and artifacts such as reflective narratives and exit slips.

Consistent with their training and qualifications, secondary content teachers including English language arts (ELA) teachers are not expected to teach reading. The teachers identified for this professional learning did not perceive their roles to include teaching reading. A typical response came from a social studies teacher: "Teachers do not include reading because they believe it is not their jobs." Neither were these teachers prepared to teach reading. An ELA teacher opined: "I came fresh out of my bachelor's degree and realized that I didn't know how to teach children to read and I had lots of students who did not know how to read." She continued:

> I was kind of struggling with my own philosophy about it because I really never thought I was going to have to figure out what to do with kids at such low levels. Then after ten years, I went back to school and got a master's in elementary education and that has been the most helpful education I've had, really, when working with English students. I...become more familiar with adolescent literature that would help me accommodate these children.

Finding ways to implement content area literacy in their classrooms was not easy as the

teachers navigated systemic and institutional demands located in the high school culture. They nursed pre-existing notions about content standards and curriculum mandates. For example, they continually felt constrained by coverage of content, rigorous adherence to content standards, and insufficient time to include new strategies as well as testing. These teachers privileged the teaching of content fixated primarily on reading textbooks, writing essays and summaries, testing content, answering questions, and completing projects. A creative science teacher who encouraged her students to use non-print and print sources resorted to conventional assessment—taking tests, answering questions, and completing projects.

These teachers attempted to incorporate best practices in reading within their pre-existing instructional practices, in most cases, with some challenges. For example, the science teacher acknowledged her biggest challenge in an exit slip:

> Teaching all of my standards in an interesting way. I think I am able to work in the standards through inquiry when given the opportunity – that's the only approach I can take. You must do the best with what you are given as well as the guidelines set out. Do I have to teach all my standards – yes. Is the end of the course test going away – no. I can just try to make my students interested while keeping the administration happy.

She later reflected that her teaching "became more relaxed and more focused on the students, not the standards" and that her students were "more open to new experiences and activities." She related that her students were "the most prepared they have ever been for testing."

As the university-school partnership deepened, we found that the teachers' beliefs and practices about literacy began to shift as they started to synthesize and apply new learning. We observed that they were better prepared to meet the challenge of transitioning to teaching that makes connections between the literacy skills students learn in the classroom and the skills required of them to function in the real-world. Notably, a math teacher used book clubs to

access content in geometry. She acknowledged: "It's worked so good. . . When I have used these reading strategies my students have responded well. These students have improved over last year's students' scores."

It became apparent early on in the project that these teachers lacked agency, deferring to "other people" to make decisions about their instruction. A novice teacher justified: "There are other people making up the rules for me that I have to go by . . . I can use whatever means necessary, you know, like a read aloud . . .but I am still kinda restricted to, you have to teach this." Although external demands initially appeared to constrain these teachers' sense of agency, in an uncanny way the challenge of these demands fostered their development of agency as teachers of literacy.

Changing Thinking about Adolescents and Adolescent Literacy

These teachers entered the project with a deficit view of adolescent literacy and of their students. Initially, these teachers harbored perceptions of their students' reading grounded in unconstructive attitudes toward their students. For example, a social studies teacher recounted: "It seems like the high school students that I've had the last 12 years, many of them **don't want** to read, and they **don't want** to write. . ..They won't read it. They'll go home. They'll play on the video games; they'll talk on the phone; they'll do anything but their work." An ELA teacher also captured this prevailing view: "Our students do not read or are expected to read nearly as much as they should be. They see it as a form of punishment, not as a form of escapism or relaxation."

These teachers could not concede that they ought to play a role in helping students become literate citizens in today's world. An experienced social studies teacher declared: "It was somebody else's job to teach them how to read. Why should I be teaching them how to read in high school?" They asserted that students deemed as struggling learners could not be helped. The same teacher rationalized, "a lot of high school kids that do have literacy problems have found

ways to mask their problems in high school." When asked how they would help a struggling reader, we discovered that few teachers possessed appropriate strategies to help students. Responses ranged from "look it up," "find the appropriate person to help them learn to read better," "skip it," "sound it out," "ask someone," "dictionary always near," to "I'd ask an English teacher." We were not surprised by these responses. As expected, these teachers lacked a deep understanding about a struggling reader's world. Nonetheless, this finding was disturbing.

As the university-school partnership deepened, however, we noticed how a steady shift in teachers' beliefs about adolescent literacy altered their instructional practices. As the teachers gradually grew in their commitment to academic literacy and improving instructional practices, so too did their conviction that students benefitted from metacognitive strategic instruction. As the teachers' own learning increased their cognizance of students' personalities, strengths, and literate needs, there emerged some insight into the genuine plight of adolescent literacy. As one teacher reflected, "I don't think that I ever actually considered adolescent literacy before this class." We ask: would teachers' gradual realization about adolescent literacy have occurred in any professional learning setting? And we posit: when a partnership promotes a professional learning experience that juxtaposes teachers' instructional practice with some theory, and fosters stakeholders' collaboration and investment in the goals and expected outcomes of the professional learning experience, then there is every possibility that teachers, supported by their administrators, will embrace new learning that challenges instructional norms and promises to raise students' academic achievement.

Growing Responsibility for Teaching Literacy and Showing Literacy Leadership

Following completion of the graduate study module, we learned that each teacher had been nudged, in some way, toward rethinking literacy learning and instruction and how it applies to their classroom. We wanted to know, after one year's embedded professional learning, whether these teachers were convinced of their responsibility for teaching literacy in their content areas, and if they were ready to enact the role of helping students understand the reading process which, in turn, would help them to discover how to become "effective readers, learners, and thinkers" (Feathers, 2004). It was disconcerting to learn that, after one year of this embedded professional learning project, one social studies teacher was not convinced that he should be a teacher of reading: "Is it my responsibility? Is it my responsibility as a high school teacher, to do this now?" On the other hand, the other six teachers were convinced. An ELA teacher who believed that "content teachers need more strategies" saw herself as a role model for other teachers and held aspirations for moving into a school role as a literacy leader: "People are going to be looking to me for a model of what they are supposed to be doing in their classroom."

As the teachers began to enact new beliefs and experiment with new practices over time, some began to embrace the notion of literacy leadership that was steadily felt by some colleagues on their hall. In particular, the math teacher caught our eye. As she continued to witness changes both in her teaching and in her students' learning, so too did she realize how teacher transformation can influence her peers and the wider school vision for literacy:

> When students try one of my new strategies they do much better with that change if they have already tried one of these strategies in another teacher's class. I think this is a useful point. The more teachers that we can get to change the way they teach, then the more change that we can create when pushing for change.

We were ambitious to hope that a growing responsibility for teaching literacy and showing literacy leadership would manifest in all teachers. Nevertheless, we observed that the teachers' learning journeys collectively provided the impetus for each school to continue its two-fold mission of building capacity and sustaining

professional learning about literacy knowledge and instructional practice.

Guiding and Sustaining Successful School-University Partnerships

Our experiences with this collaborative professional development model, focused on literacy learning, yielded salient understandings about implementing ongoing, embedded, site-based professional learning that explores possibilities for connecting theory to teachers' experience and instructional practices, and is nurtured by successful school-university partnerships. We think, therefore, that the following elements are important in guiding and sustaining a successful school-university partnership: enlisting the leadership and cooperation of the school principal in instilling goals for professional learning; assessing an individual school's needs; structuring effective partnerships between the high school, district, and the university; scaffolding structures to sustain ongoing professional development at the school and district level; and building capacity for a school-wide literacy learning community. We briefly discuss each of these elements below.

Enlisting the Leadership and Cooperation of the School Principal in Instilling Goals for Professional Learning

The collaborative professional development model adopted by Project RAISSE emphasizes the necessity for the promotion of mutual goals and collaboration by the university partner, but it also depends on principal leadership and cooperation. The degree of leadership and enthusiasm demonstrated by the two participating school principals about the project's possibilities was noticeably inconsistent in the first year. In one high school, the principal recognized the need for improved test scores; subsequently, she saw the potential of Project RAISSE as a tool to improve student achievement across the content areas. This principal tapped into the collective leadership potential of the three participating teacher-leaders and

delegated the leadership of the school's approaching professional development program—to be embedded in collegial study groups—to these three teachers. The principal's decision to involve the entire faculty in collegial study groups was accompanied by supplemental funds to extend the reach of the project. In the other high school, the principal, not a hands-on administrator, gave token support to the project in its first year. By contrast, the newly appointed principal in the subsequent year provided the necessary direction for the school's teacher-leaders and brought enhanced commitment to the project.

Assessing an Individual School's Needs

It seems critical that the university providing the professional learning collaborate with partners on the professional needs of the school's community. Project funds were expended to support district professional development that meshed with university-project priorities for literacy. Although graduate study courses were already in place at the university, it was deemed important to customize the curriculum to fit the needs of content teachers at these specific school sites. Accommodating teachers' professional and family schedules for site-based professional learning was important in forming a sound basis for a workable partnership.

Structuring Effective Partnerships Between the High School, District, and the University

At the start, we recognized that the successful implementation of the professional development model relied on an effective partnership between the local high schools, the school district, and the state university. Ongoing communication between the university and key facilitators at the school and district level kept the stakeholders apprised of developments in Project RAISSE. The partnership benefitted from project funds allocated to provide district-wide professional development. Funds were also allocated for teachers' graduate study facilitated by Arts and Sciences university faculty

in collaboration with the teacher-leaders. As a measure of support for what the project was doing for the school, one high school committed funds to expand the number of participants in the Study Group module in the second year. We conclude that reciprocity can play an important part in developing deep relationships with stakeholders.

Scaffolding Structures to Sustain Ongoing Professional Development at the School and District Level

It seems important that structures are put in place or that existing structures are utilized to guarantee sustainability over time such as utilizing district/school professional development days. Project RAISSE, for example, funded the "Teachers as Professional Leaders" module that provided the teacher-leaders with opportunities to showcase their new learning at state forums and attend best practice seminars. There was an expectation that schools would continue to sponsor and make these opportunities available to faculty.

Building Capacity for a School-Wide Literacy Learning Community

Over two years, Project RAISSE impacted over 51 teachers across the two high schools. One instance deserves special mention in demonstrating the power of literacy learning communities in partnership with content area teachers. Partway through graduate study, three teacher-leaders of varying disciplines in one high school announced: "We are more connected to one another as a result of RAISSE." Project RAISSE "didn't force us to do anything. It's allowed us or encouraged us, provoked us to collaborate."

Closing Thoughts

Our inquiry suggests that a collaborative model that honors continuous professional learning, either in a school-university partnership or within a wider group at the school or district level, offers untapped possibilities for creating literacy learning communities that allow teachers space and time to examine literacy beliefs and instructional practices, and build and apply new knowledge. Our inquiry shows that inter-disciplinary collaborative groups can grow content area teachers' learning, and that embedded staff development, by its ongoing nature, has the capacity to boost teachers' confidence to integrate literacy strategies into content instruction.

Within the context of a reciprocal partnership, we contend that the RAISSE model is within reach of most secondary schools, since it fulfills a need for the process and practices requisite for implementing a school's mission for building capacity and sustaining professional learning that leads to improved instructional practice and student achievement. But our inquiry also suggests that the RAISSE model has wider application beyond literacy learning. As schools and universities look for bipartisan ways to improve teaching and learning that leads to higher graduation rates, professional development schools might invest in infrastructure afforded by a school-university partnership as a means for establishing professional learning communities, either within or across content areas, to which teachers bring their own knowledge and experience and collaborate on an agreed learning agenda, supported by new understandings about instructional practice and research facilitated by university faculty. SUP

Appendix

Project RAISSE: Teacher Interview Questions

1. Talk to me about your current beliefs and values about reading.

2. What are your thoughts about teaching literacy to high school students today?

3. Have you changed your view about teaching literacy since you started Project RAISSE? If so, how? If not, what is your view?

4. Tell me about your current classroom practice. Do you think that it has changed or not as a result of the Project RAISSE initiative? Why or why not? If so, how? Explain in detail.

5. Have you noticed any changes in your students' performances and/or attitudes since your participation in Project RAISSE? If so, what are they? Can you explain?

6. Describe your relations with the faculty and administration at your school since your involvement with Project RAISSE.

7. Describe the culture of your school. Has it changed?   If so, how? If not, why not?

8. What challenges and/or concerns do you have about Project RAISSE? How can these be addressed?

9. Explain your reaction to the following:

   a. school-based graduate study (e.g. courses you have taken as part of your involvement with Project RAISSE)
   b. professional development opportunities (e.g. state literacy conference, Best Practice Seminars)
   c. facilitating study groups
   d. Project website (e.g. resources, Blogging)

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

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