POWERFUL LEARNING: CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the response of one urban middle school to a major school reform initiative. Data were drawn from a larger research and evaluation study of this reform initiative in a large city in the southwestern United States. Funded schools invested heavily in high-quality professional development for teachers. Reformers believe that increasing teacher learning will improve student academic achievement. In the middle school presented here as a case study, administrators and teachers chose to focus on improving "regular" (nonmagnet) students' academic achievement by increasing opportunities for their teachers to participate in high-quality professional development. By engaging in their own powerful learning, teachers created a set of innovative curriculum programs targeted toward previously low-achieving or underachieving students. As a result of these new curriculum programs, student achievement over all socioeconomic and academic groups increased dramatically during the five-year reform effort.

T his article uses qualitative data to describe how administrators and teachers in one urban middle school, Woodsedge,[1] shared leadership tasks to develop an authentic learning community. This middle school, which serves a multiethnic student population representing extremes of the economic spectrum, was one of 88 schools participating in a school-based reform initiative in a major city in the southwestern United States. The reform focused dollars on high-quality professional development for administrators and teachers. By engaging in their own powerful learning, teachers at Woodsedge created a set of innovative curriculum programs focused on previously low-achieving or underachieving students or on blending students across socioeconomic, ethnic, and academic groups. As a result of these new curriculum programs, student achievement over all socioeconomic and academic groups increased dramatically during the five-year reform effort.

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[1]This school name is a pseudonym.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Creating a Learning Community

Often teachers believe that conventional district or campus training programs do not meet their needs. Traditional staff development offerings consist typically of "one-shot" presentations or workshops with little follow-up or support in which experts transmit knowledge to novices.[2] This training is inadequate for those participants requiring more challenging, advanced instruction. Researchers agree, judging most current staff development to be intellectually superficial, disconnected from deep issues of curriculum and learning, fragmented, and noncumulative.[3]

This traditional view of staff development is outdated and incompatible with the prevailing vision of school reform. Today's educational reformers expect teachers to help diverse student learners become competent and skilled. Schools are urged to connect with their communities. Reformers expect students to succeed in ways unprecedented in the history of U.S. public education.[4]

Today's educational reformers expect teachers to know meanings and connections, not just procedures and information. Teachers are required to connect ideas across disciplinary fields and to students' everyday lives. Teachers must understand children's interests and needs. Furthermore, teachers need to understand cultural differences, including differences in language, class, family, community, and gender. Ultimately, teachers have to expand their ideas about learning. Teachers must know pedagogy so that they can connect children effectively with content, adapting and shifting teaching modes in response to students. In effect, teachers are now expected to develop and adapt their teaching practices in response to their everyday classroom experiences.[5]

Gradually a concept of teacher *professional* development has emerged from the more limited notion of *staff* development. In order for teachers and schools to deliver excellent instruction that promotes high academic achievement for all students, sustained professional

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[2]J. P. Spillane, *District Leaders' Perceptions of Teacher Learning: CPRE Occasional Paper* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2000).

[3]D. L. Ball and D. K. Cohen, "Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Development," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, ed. L. Darling-Hammond and G. Sikes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

development is necessary. Some educators suggest that implementation of the new vision of professional development represents a paradigm shift. According to this new paradigm, teacher professional development occurs every day on the job among teams of teachers who share responsibility for high levels of learning for all students. Although this paradigm includes formal training programs, it also recognizes the power of informal learning. To implement this new paradigm, school leaders must change organizational structures to create new school cultures that foster experimentation, collaboration, and continuous improvement.[6]

Ball and Cohen have called the new paradigm "a pedagogy of professional development."[7] They have described it as a dynamic interaction between teachers, students, curriculum content, and environment. In this complex interaction, *teaching* is defined as what teachers do, say, and think *with* students, about curriculum content, using particular methods of instruction, in specific environments, over time. Researchers and master teachers see teaching as a collection of practices, including pedagogy, learning, instructional design, and managing instructional organization. Research also suggests that when teachers' knowledge, skills, and strategic actions are seen as resources, student achievement rises significantly.[8] Teachers learning from their day-to-day teaching practice constantly improvise, conjecture, experiment, and assess as they adapt and develop their practice.[9]

Schools participating in the reform initiative highlighted in this article support this emerging vision of educational reform. Administrators and teachers in these schools view professional development as necessary to maintain and refine implemented reforms. In this environment, professional development serves many functions, including orientation and training of new staff. Professional development also creates forums for teachers to have collegial conversations about

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[6]D. Sparks, "Foreword," in *Evaluating Professional Development*, T. R. Guskey (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2000).

[7]D. L. Ball and D. K. Cohen, "Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Development," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, ed. L. Darling-Hammond and G. Sikes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pp. 3–32.

[8]D. K. Cohen, S. W. Raudenbush, and D. L. Ball, *Resources, Instruction, and Research: A CTP Working Paper* (Seattle: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, 2000).

[9]D. L. Ball and D. K. Cohen, "Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Development," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice*, ed. L. Darling-Hammond and G. Sikes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pp. 3–32.

curriculum programs as well as instructional problems and solutions. Teachers participating in professional development gain a common knowledge base of reforms and their underlying philosophies. Teachers engage in active inquiry into current beliefs and practices. Finally, professional development keeps teachers current on district, regional, state, and national issues and guidelines. Teachers at schools implementing the reform initiative report that prior to this reform their greatest need was for intellectual and professional resources. Teachers say the reform funding has given them necessary role models, research literature, and collegial support to implement reforms.

An academically rich environment begins with teachers who are deeply knowledgeable about their discipline area, about how children learn, and about which pedagogical strategies best support student learning. This special teacher knowledge is called "pedagogical content knowledge"—a form of knowledge that combines subject matter (content) knowledge with an understanding of instruction, producing a highly specialized type of knowledge unique to teachers.[10]

As teachers in these reforming schools engage in professional development activities, they create peer networks within schools, between schools in the same district, and among schools in the region, state, and nation. Reform funding has enabled teachers to develop mechanisms that allow them to collaborate effectively with their peers. Through collaboration, teachers observe each other's classroom instruction, videotape lessons, analyze student needs, investigate teaching problems, and generate ideas for new teaching strategies.

Teachers in participating schools collaborate actively in critical friends groups,[11] literature study circles, professional academies, teacher writing groups, and teacher action research teams. Study groups read such literature as *What's Worth Fighting for in Your School, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, A Framework for Understanding Poverty, Nonfiction Matters, The First Day of School,* and *Strategies That Work.* Literature study groups enable faculties to engage in long-term literature studies. With ongoing groups, teachers have more time to be reflective about the topics, their own practice, and how to implement new approaches.

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[10]L. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 57 (Spring 1987): 1–22.

[11]Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a form of teacher-led study group that originated in 1995 at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University through a program entitled the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). In 2000 the NSRF moved to the Harmony School Education Center in Bloomington, IN. For more information see http://www.harmony.pvt.k12.in.us/.

Expert teachers emerge from these activities as peer leaders in roles such as coaches of critical friends groups, content specialists, and reading learning facilitators. Furthermore, a number of teachers have become certified as curriculum trainers in national programs, including the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) and the New Jersey Writing Project (NJWP).

Research details ways in which the professional community of teachers plays a vital role in school reform and improvement. Learning communities create "spaces" for teachers to form professional relationships, to share information, and to provide collegial support. The creation of small, collegial communities of practice contrasts sharply with the traditional approach to staff development. An extensive body of research supports the power of such learning communities.[12]

Additionally, teachers in reforming schools learn how to infuse art across the curriculum. When teachers integrate art into their teaching, they draw upon an emerging body of research that supports their efforts. Emerging research suggests that formal education systems have two purposes: expanding and deepening students' understanding and developing students' cognitive ability. In this view literacy is considered much more than simply reading and writing. Theorists conceptualize literacy as ways of constructing and communicating meaning. Students learn to read and write, but they also learn to communicate through poetry, music, visual art, and dance.[13]

By infusing art into the curriculum, teachers give students multiple opportunities to develop and perfect methods of expression. Furthermore, by drawing upon the arts, teachers expose students to complex processes not based upon specific rules or procedures. Consequently, students must develop the cognitive ability to judge quality or "rightness of fit."[14] To judge rightness of fit, students must pay attention to patterns and configurations and whole items or work products rather than discrete elements. These complex tasks help students develop sophisticated cognitive skills. Students use these well-developed cognitive skills to learn across the curriculum, and they also use them in their daily lives outside of school.

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[12]A. Lieberman (Ed.), *Building a Professional Culture in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988); J. W. Little, "Teachers' Professional Development in a Climate of Educational Reform," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 15 (Summer 1993): 129–151; M. McLaughlin, J. Talbert, and N. Bascia (Eds.), *The Contexts of Teaching in Secondary Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); J. Westheimer, *Among Schoolteachers: Community, Autonomy, and Ideology in Teachers' Work* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

[13]E. W. Eisner, *The Kind of Schools We Need: Personal Essays* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998).

[14]N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978).

THE LARGER RESEARCH STUDY

This article draws data from a large research and evaluation study in a major urban city in the southwestern United States. This city is one of 18 sites across the country that received dollars from a private foundation to serve as seed money for local initiatives based on the foundation's reform imperatives. Each project was implemented uniquely, based upon local conditions, funding, and politics. All 18 projects were expected to target public and private dollars toward three reform imperatives: enhancing teacher learning, reducing isolation within schools and between schools and communities, and personalizing the student learning environment. This article focuses on the response of one urban middle school to the local reform effort: enhancing teacher learning.

Data were collected from principal and teacher interviews, classroom observations, teacher focus groups, and reporting documentation.[15] Additionally, student work products, including student-authored anthologies, artwork, and skits, were examined.

SETTING

Woodsedge Middle School was one of 88 schools funded in this Southwestern city. Woodsedge, a 76-year-old public school, has educated many distinguished graduates, including some who have achieved national prominence. Woodsedge has had only 10 principals; turnover occurred mainly because of retirement or promotion to the district office. During its history, Woodsedge has evolved from a school located on the edge of a newly developing town to an inner-city school in the middle of one of the nation's largest cities.

In 1973 Woodsedge was designated a magnet school campus in a move designed to aid in desegregation of the city's public schools. Two-thirds of the school's current student population is enrolled in the magnet program. The remaining one-third of the student population is "zoned" to the school from surrounding neighborhoods. The Woodsedge school community is ethnically, socioeconomically, and academically diverse. During the 2001–02 school year, 45 percent of the students were white, 32 percent were Hispanic, 15 percent were African American, and 8 percent were Asian. Presently, 1,425 students are enrolled in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Approx-

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[15]As a school in the larger research project on which this article was based, Woodsedge Middle School was carefully examined as one of 12 case study schools. I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the case study research team as helpful in expanding my understanding of the school's history and in serving as validation of my independent findings.

imately 556 students (one-third) are enrolled as "regular" (nonmagnet) students.

Until 1998 the magnet students benefited most from the instructional programs and resources available at Woodsedge Middle School. With implementation of the reform initiative, Woodsedge administrators decided to focus on improving the "regular" (nonmagnet) students' academic achievement by addressing one of the three national reform imperatives: teacher learning.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are illustrated by vignettes of three innovative programs Woodsedge teachers developed as a result of participating in high-quality professional development largely funded by the reform initiative. Two language arts teachers participated actively in long-term study groups focused on previously low-achieving students. One history teacher created a program to develop student leaders—representing a cross-section of the student population—after visiting a model program in Canada. These teachers and programs contributed significantly to a dramatic improvement in student academic achievement across all student groups.

Teacher Study Groups

At Woodsedge Middle School, teachers participating in study groups have developed a number of impressive curriculum innovations. This school used reform dollars to hire university-based faculty to help them develop new instructional strategies. Several university faculty used study groups to engage teachers in the planning process. One faculty-led study group has evolved into a post-baccalaureate course focused on teaching reading in middle school. This group has studied *The Art of Teaching Reading* by Lucy Calkins, *Mosaic of Thought* by Ellin Keene, and *Strategic Reading* by Jeffrey Willhelm. In the two examples that follow, language arts teachers developed strategies for helping "reluctant readers" strengthen their literacy skills.

Imagining Classic Literature

The first example focuses on a 6th grade language arts teacher, Jennifer, and her class of regular students.[16] As she explained to me, many of these primarily Hispanic and African American students were reading below grade level when they entered her class. However, watching Jennifer and the students in action, no one would

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[16]All names are pseudonyms.

ever know that these were initially considered struggling or "reluctant" readers.

Jennifer—a young Anglo woman—threw herself into her teaching practice by using her considerable performing and fine arts talent to guide her students. Building upon her knowledge of Writer's Workshop and other strategies, she dramatically read aloud classic literature passages to the class while they followed along using their own copies. She began by guiding the students to consider "prompting" questions about the story. She wrote the questions on a dry-erase board surrounding two sides of the room.

As the story progressed, Jennifer encouraged students to draw images to illustrate what they imagined the story narrator was imagining. She provided the students with colored construction paper and chalk. Later she instructed the students to go back to the story and find the words or passage they were illustrating, cut out the words, and use the text as a caption for their illustration. The students used scissors and paste to finish the assignment.

The students (and the observers) were clearly captivated by the teacher's reading. As the students worked on the assignment, they appeared lost in their thoughts. The teacher selected a gory Edgar Allen Poe story, "The Tell Tale Heart," which was particularly appropriate to capture the attention and imagination of young adolescents. The students' resulting artwork focused in impressive graphic detail on elements of the tale and was eventually displayed in the classroom along with artwork from previous lessons.

By reading aloud, Jennifer modeled an enthusiastic reader. By using art, she engaged the students in the story. And by directing them back to the printed text, she connected their artwork directly to the literature. With her animated instructional style and student-centered work assignments, she demonstrated instructional practice more typically seen in magnet classes. She certainly did not treat the students as low-achieving academic performers. Rather, she demonstrated high expectations for the students and set high academic standards for their work. These high standards can be seen in the rubrics she developed for her regular, nonmagnet students.

Using standards established by the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP), Jennifer created a set of learning objectives for her regular students based on standards usually reserved for high-achieving magnet students. She designed and implemented this alternative assessment strategy by combining information from her long-term study group and her personal knowledge with the IBMYP standards. With this rubric she not only evaluated her students' work but also assessed the students during the process of doing the work.

Jennifer assessed student knowledge, skills, and critical thinking ability by using the rubric she created from nine IBMYP objectives:

1. Express a personal response to literature and demonstrate the ability to approach works in an independent fashion.

2. Demonstrate some awareness of the effects of style and techniques employed by authors (such as figures of speech, plot devices, and characterization).

3. Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the works studied.

4. Demonstrate the ability to comment on the language, content, structure, meaning, and significance of both familiar and unfamiliar pieces of writing.

5. Demonstrate the ability to express ideas with clarity and coherence in both oral and written communication.

6. Demonstrate the ability to use language to describe, analyze, explain, narrate, entertain, and express feelings.

7. Demonstrate a critical awareness of differing media of communication.

8. Demonstrate competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

9. Evaluate own writing and the writing of others.

The teacher used the rubric by measuring student progress on a scale of 0 to 8. She has clearly defined each criterion and provided descriptors of proficiency at each of the eight levels. The eight criteria are Writer's Notebook, Writing Process, Content of Writing, Mechanics of Writing, Genre Studies, Media/Visual Literacy, Approaches to Learning, and Evaluation/Reflection of Processes.

For instance, the teacher's rubric shows that a student demonstrating high achievement with the Writer's Notebook was assessed with the following standard:

The student's notebook is incorporated into his/her daily life in a way that demonstrates a truly personal response to life as a writer. It contains evidence of serious reflection, many writing strategies (personal responses to literature, narratives, observations, etc.), and a variety of media (mementos, photos, quotations, etc.). The student has maintained more than one notebook throughout the year.

Jennifer used a variety of assessment techniques to evaluate students' progress on the rubric. In addition to using running records, grades, and tests, she also reviewed student portfolios. Portfolios include Works in Progress folders, Pieces Completed folders, and Student Written Reflections. Her assessment approach was very labor intensive, but it enabled her to stay student-centered, focusing on the unique needs of each student.

Latino Boys Writing Group

Another language arts teacher at this middle school, Carlos, participated in several teacher study groups led by university faculty. A young Latino, he was especially concerned about adolescent Hispanic boys considered at high risk of dropping out of school. Using grant money, this 7th grade teacher developed a plan for an extracurricular writing group for boys. Initially intended for young Hispanic boys, the group quickly became known as the Latino Boys Writing Group. The program began as a summer experiment; when Carlos secured extra support, he continued the group throughout the year as an after-school program.

Carlos recruited a local Latino writer to work with him on the project. Together, they reached out to boys who might have felt disconnected from school. As mentors and teachers, they tried to connect the boys' experiences outside school with their writing experiences in the group. Carlos described the group:

We meet weekly for an hour or more. I always order a couple of pizzas, and the local pizza guy gives us a discount. If I don't have money for pizza, I'll buy some Popsicles or something, or bags of chips. We come in and we write. Sometimes we don't have anything to eat, which is OK, because the kids still come.

Mario and I always have a piece of our own writing, either a poem or a story. We read our work to them, and we talk about the work. Then the kids will try to write something similar. Or they'll write in their notebook and share that with the group, because we focus on writers' notebooks throughout middle school. We read aloud daily in class, and we've even published an anthology of class writings.

The goal with Latino boys is to draw them into the school community. The boys who participate in the Latino Boys Writing Group are those kids who sit in the back in the classroom, the ones who kind of fade into the background if you don't engage them. They are not necessarily on a sports team or in a club or the chosen leaders. But these kids are part of our school population. They're valuable. So we invite them to the Latino Boys Writing Group to connect them with the school setting, to make them a part of the school. I'll call the parents if I have any questions or concerns. They have my number, and they'll call me at home sometimes.

Sometimes we don't even get to writing or reading poetry in our Latino Boys Writing Group because we're talking about things that happen during the day. Or we are talking about making good choices. Mario and I always try to serve as springboards for their thinking about making good choices, thinking about their lives and the stories they can tell through their writing. There have also been times right before or after the holidays when only two boys come to the group. But Mario and I still meet with them because, you know, they came. We don't want to say, "No, we're not going to meet today because there's only two boys here." We want them to know that they are all important to us.

Carlos reaches out to students who in other urban middle schools might be ignored. As a result of the teacher's dedicated effort, obvious caring concern, and effective mentoring, these boys engage more with school in general and the writing process in particular. He encourages the boys to write from their own experiences, to write about things that matter to them. All writing is important, he tells them. Moreover, he helps them become more comfortable with reading aloud by having them read their work to the group. Everyone's work is honored and taken very seriously as he teaches the boys to respect themselves and each other. This group has published two anthologies, and some boys have read their work publicly in the community.

As shown in this example, Carlos contextualized learning by building upon students' pre-existing knowledge. He consciously used students' prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, language, and culture as a starting place for instruction. With contextualized instruction, teachers use familiar materials and illustrations to introduce students to new knowledge and to validate students' experiences as meaningful.

Developing Student Leaders

Teachers at this middle school also contextualize instruction by encouraging students to examine complex social issues. For example, one teacher, Elizabeth, trains students to serve as peer leaders in their guided advisory classes. This approach deliberately mixes magnet and regular students from across 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The magnet students are primarily white and middle class, whereas the regular students tend to be African American or first- or second-generation Mexican immigrants from working-class families.

Previously, the magnet and regular students rarely interacted or attended classes together. Woodsedge teachers learned of this innovative guided-advisory approach by visiting a Canadian school. Teachers thought this approach would not only help students get to know one another, but also provide a way for students from different grade levels to interact in a meaningful way. They devised a curricular design called Guidance Support Groups—commonly known as GSG. Administrators and teachers formed student groups composed of a mix of magnet and regular students from three grade levels. The GSGs, which substitute for the old "homeroom" concept, support all students through structured activities designed to build character, to develop leadership, and to increase world awareness.

Ninth-grade students—including regular and magnet students from all socioeconomic groups—are selected as GSG leaders. These student leaders are trained in facilitation skills and group activities.

Student-led group activities focus on complex social issues such as bigotry, stereotyping, and racism. These middle school students have shown a remarkable ability to openly discuss complicated issues.

While working with ethnically, economically, and academically diverse students, Elizabeth contextualizes instruction by devising lessons about prejudice and stereotyping. She described one lesson:

In this lesson I wanted students to become aware of things they see every day: people being made fun of because they are different, people not being accepted for who they are, prejudice, racism, bigotry, anti-Semitism. I ask the students to work in groups to come up with a basic definition of these terms describing prejudice. Then I give them a short amount of time to develop a skit to illustrate the word. Using a skit, the students present the information in a visual way. It's much more powerful than just talking about the words.

The students use their own ideas about prejudice based on what they've seen, heard, and experienced. After these student leaders become comfortable with the topic and the lesson, then they teach it to the other kids in their advisory class.

It was hard at the beginning to get our student leaders comfortable with the idea of talking about heavy topics. We started off small, talking about little things, things that make you happy and sad, things that are good in your life, things that are frustrating. Eventually, the students begin to bond since they see each other four days a week. But they also see each other in the halls, since their lockers are all together. There's constant interaction throughout the school day. It makes them become like a family.

DISCUSSION

The reform funders required participating schools to develop a unique theory of action to focus their school development work. According to their theory of action, Woodsedge's designated leaders decided to focus their reform effort on improving teacher learning for the express purpose of improving student learning. The leaders focused their reform even more closely upon the nonmagnet students. The principal, Jim, described their initial thinking about the disparity among student groups as a "notion of discomfort":

I would say there was a notion of discomfort regarding—not the big picture at Woodsedge; the big picture looked beautiful; it was wonderful; all of our VanGuard [magnet] students were doing great. But we began to talk a bit about the regular program, the five different socioeconomic groups, the economically disadvantaged.

And we talked about how there are different ways to learn. Forget the teaching aspect. To learn and get kids to maximize their potential in a way that's innovative, certainly rigorous, but very interesting to the kids. Now, heck, how do you get there?

With their early conversations, these reformers put the student at the center. However, they quickly realized that carrying out the plan of improving the regular students' academic achievement required a complex set of tasks involving many of the school's teachers. Thus, they decided to focus their reform dollars on helping the teachers develop new knowledge, skills, and practices.

Initially school leaders created a staff development plan for the teachers. As more teachers became involved in the staff development activities, the teachers developed stronger voices in the planning process. Eventually, teachers essentially took over the process of developing each year's plan. Ultimately, teacher learning occurred in a variety of ways, including departmental study groups, action research teams, and personal learning time.

Study Groups

As teachers took on leadership tasks, the principal, Jim, continued to be actively involved. He explained how they began with departmental study groups:

A small group collaborative comprised of three or four teachers, 6th grade regular teachers, talked about how challenging it was to bring reading alive in their classrooms. And they talked about how they could really reinforce their focus on developing reading stamina, just getting kids to read for X number of minutes.

And then they talked about the possibilities of going to New York, to Columbia Teachers College, for a reading workshop and a writing workshop, and how powerful that would be. My response was to tell them that I certainly encourage that possibility, and I applaud the fact that you guys have not been satisfied with the reading programs we've been using.

Now, by working together as a team, they've taken their 150 kids to a whole new level. They've got their kids putting sticky notes in their books and responding to what they read and trying to relate it to themselves and to the real world.

The current principal, Jim, who took the reform work forward, formerly served the school in a variety of roles including assistant principal, language arts magnet teacher, and in-school suspension center teacher. After he became principal he decided he needed to develop a more collaborative leadership style. He talked about creating a leadership team using his classroom knowledge as a starting point:

I say, "Now guys, don't think I don't know what you're going through. I was there, and I'm as guilty as the rest of you. But we've got to make it a priority. Now let's talk about how we're going to do that. Let's get a plan of action to shift this focus more to the classroom."

In this example of shared leadership, the principal clearly is not abdicating leadership responsibility. By creating a leadership team and guiding the team to develop a student-centered action plan, he is expanding the leadership role to include other administrators (assistant principals) and teachers. Furthermore, the principal models the leadership behaviors he wishes others to emulate, including how to share control.

I learned a lot as a new principal, because I'm quite controlling. Or, rather, I used to be. And I'm organized. But I've learned that some things are have-to-dos or non-negotiables on my plate. I've learned that change specific to the culture of a school cannot be mandated. You can't get it to happen in any way other than *you* modeling what it would look like and challenging teachers to change the dynamics, the culture of this school. Because we all feel there is room for improvement. And then, let's talk about how to go about doing it, and I'm going to provide you the support that I can, as well as a bit of pressure.

With this disclosure, the principal revealed that he, too, had to change his behavior as he continued to learn from his experiences as well as his own professional development.

Personal Learning Time

Woodsedge teachers have benefited significantly from a second type of individualized professional development they call "personal learning time." As a component of their reform theory of action, Woodsedge administrators and teachers decided to embed regular professional development time into the school day. Together, they made a commitment to dismiss students early on Friday afternoons. Students leave school at 1:15 p.m. every Friday, and teachers meet for professional development from 1:35 to 3:30 p.m.

Initially, this designated weekly time was devoted to group work such as study groups; typically, teachers could select from among a variety of options. As teachers participated more actively in decision making, they began to ask for individualized professional development time. The principal described the process:

We added a personal learning time on Friday afternoon, but we didn't really define it. I said, "That's your time to do what you think is important. But you must spend it on things other than lesson plans and grading papers." I told them, "This is not time for what you didn't get done earlier in the week, because you already had that time."

I would start the year with my thoughts regarding what personal learning ought to be or what I would envision mine as. And I'd share a bit with the teachers on what I'm doing. I'm not just sitting in some office. And give them some ideas like, "What are some things that you do well?" and then,

"What are some things you just do?" I did this to help give them an idea where to start.

Last year we took 10 Friday afternoons for the personal learning or small-group collaborative time. I would ask for a reflection, and I gave them a template. But I didn't require them to use the template. I told them, "Ramble if you want, but don't tell me what you did. I want to know what your learning meant to you. Where are you going next? And you may be going nowhere because you're confused. Just know that I don't have all the answers. But I'm happy to chat a bit to see if we can't come up with something."

Turning teacher learning over to the teachers clearly demonstrated the principal's level of trust with his staff. Through this trust, the principal also established accountability systems. He required the teachers to give him written reflections, although he didn't require a standardized form. In essence, he established a system for regular dialogue with each teacher focused on the teacher's individualized learning process. The principal rated the investment in professional development very highly:

From my perspective, this is what has changed our school community. The ownership the teachers have taken, the learning I have engaged in over the five years of the reform. We went from a model that was very isolated to one that was very meaningful to each person. How powerful this has been for us!

By examining these innovative curriculum programs, we see how leadership tasks in this school have been distributed or "spread over" individuals at Woodsedge Middle School. Initially, the official school leader, the principal, reported experiencing a persistent feeling of discomfort regarding student achievement. Because the magnet students represented two-thirds of the student population, their high academic performance masked the regular students' lower achievement. After disaggregating achievement data, the disparity between student groups became obvious.

The principal worked with his leadership team to create an action plan to address the student achievement disparity. This group understood that teachers were key actors in improving the regular students' academic achievement. Furthermore, the team understood that administrators and teachers needed more knowledge to achieve their goals. Thus, the leadership team focused reform dollars on investing in teacher learning. By investing in teachers, the formal school leaders began to share leadership tasks with teachers, and teachers began to assume leadership roles in creating innovative curriculum strategies.

Finally, this case study demonstrates how teachers and administrators took into account key factors of the environment. For example, Spillane and colleagues have suggested that environment incorporates not only the interactive set of actors but also tools, language, and organizational structures, including structures related to race, class, and gender.[17] Three aspects of Woodsedge's environment illustrate this dimension especially well.

First, Woodsedge's reform team focused their work on the regular students, who were separated from the magnet students in a number of critical ways. The regular students initially did not benefit from the magnet program's creative curriculum. Furthermore, this group was composed of primarily Hispanic or African American students from working-class families. As the guided-advisory teacher, Elizabeth, pointed out, the magnet students rarely interacted with the regular students before the new structure was put into place at Woodsedge.

A second defining characteristic of Woodsedge's environment is also sociocultural. Two of the three examples of innovative curriculum practices described in this article expressly address students' background and personal experiences. The Latino Boys Writing Project seeks to connect young boys to reading and writing by having them focus on experiences personally meaningful to them. In doing so, these boys understand that their teacher, Carlos, recognizes their culture as important, and he respects them and their families.

Similarly, the guided-advisory teacher, Elizabeth, facilitates students across socioeconomic and academic groups to consider complex issues of discrimination and prejudice. She helps students to understand different perspectives and to respect and care for each other. The 6th grade language arts teacher, Jennifer, also establishes a culturally responsive classroom while introducing students to multiple genres of literature. For example, her room is lined with culturally diverse young peoples' literature such as *Happy To Be Nappy* and *Bud, Not Buddy*. Additionally, she conducts extended lessons on cultural topics such as the Jazz Era using diverse music, literature, and art sources.

Third, as a Texas public school, Woodsedge is required to comply with the Texas Education Agency's accountability system. The Texas system, which has received a great deal of recent national attention, requires schools to disaggregate student achievement data by four socioeconomic groups: African American, Hispanic, white, and

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[17]James P. Spillane, Richard Halverson, John B. Diamond, "Towards a Theory of Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective" (working paper, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2002), p. 28.

economically disadvantaged. Prior to data disaggregation, the principal reported, Woodsedge's student achievement looked great. However, upon closer analysis, the gap between student groups became apparent. The principal described their data-examining process:

We have focused on data specific to every child in this school for the last three years now. We pick it apart so that we can know exactly how students are doing when they come to us, instead of not having a clue and not really being concerned because our 900 students (the magnet students) make everything look great.

And we focus on ways to effect kids' success at Woodsedge cognitively and affectively. Forget the magnet program. We look at every socioeconomic group, the economically disadvantaged group. We took the item analysis, and we went through the objectives. We looked at the items kids were getting wrong. We had department meetings and asked ourselves, "What does this mean?" And some teachers realized they hadn't taught the concept before the TAAS test was given in April. So it all comes down to what the state considers mastery. We've got to at least cover that. There's a whole heck of a lot more we want to do. But we do need to at least figure out how we can cover all the material in a meaningful way prior to the test. And so we disaggregate the data and look at longitudinal pieces as well just to see where our areas of weakness are, and some of this came down to teacher learning.

And now the student achievement scores have gone up dramatically in the last three years. I would say that is directly because of the teacher personal learning, the heightened awareness, and the work done in our departmental study groups. It's beyond organizational stuff, beyond pen and papers. Now the teachers never talk about the TAAS. To them it's just another genre.

Woodsedge students have, indeed, shown dramatic academic growth, especially in reading and mathematics achievement in the last three years. In 1999–2000, Woodsedge received an Acceptable rating from the Texas Education Agency, a rating indicating that at least 50 percent of all students passed each subject area (reading, mathematics, writing, science, and social studies) on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The following year, Woodsedge achieved a Recognized rating, meaning a minimum of 80 percent of all students passed each TAAS subject area. With the data for 2001–02, Woodsedge moved to the highest rating, Exemplary, demonstrating that 90 percent of all students passed each TAAS subject area.[18]

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[18]For more information about the accountability system, see the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Web site at http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/. TEA has recently revised the accountability system and developed a new testing standard, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The new system goes into effect in 2003.

As discussion of these aspects of Woodsedge's environment illustrates, the situation or context is crucially important in leadership practice. Context is a primary reason why prescriptive or "magic bullet" models of school reform rarely improve student achievement. Only when administrators and teachers take context into account can they create effective strategies for their unique circumstances. As with a theory of action, solutions must be built, not borrowed.

CONCLUSION

From this examination of leadership and instructional practice at Woodsedge Middle School, five key themes emerge: high-quality professional development, research-based literature, shared leadership, collaborative processes, and context. These key themes do not stand alone. Woven together, they represent processes and commitments of practitioners in an authentic learning community. Although this case study provides a model of school-based reform, the Woodsedge model cannot be transported to another setting. As the themes collectively demonstrate, effective school change requires customized design at the campus level. However, these themes can serve as a framework for schools interested in developing effective learning communities.

First, Woodsedge put improving teacher learning at the center of its reform work. Initially, the school's formal leaders created staff development plans. As teachers engaged more in the decision-making process, professional development became increasingly individualized. From the outset, these administrators and teachers believed in investing in high-quality professional development that enabled them to become reflective practitioners, to enrich their content knowledge, and to experiment with innovative instructional strategies.

Second, Woodsedge practitioners used research-based literature to guide their work. Woodsedge administrators and teachers were readers who actively sought new idea sources from empirical data. They sought out university faculty to facilitate their learning, to connect them to relevant literature, and to help them connect theory to practice.

Third, Woodsedge transformed into an authentic learning community because leadership was shared, or distributed, among formal and informal leaders. As teachers developed stronger decision-making voices, many took on leadership tasks. This shared leadership created a supportive learning environment in which teachers could experiment with innovative curriculum and instructional strategies. Collectively, they developed innovative programs that transformed student learning.

Fourth, Woodsedge administrators and teachers collaboratively developed and implemented their reform work. They did not work and make decisions in isolation. Teachers collaborated on leadership teams and in study groups. By collaborating, these practitioners offered each other professional and personal support. Additionally, administrators and teachers provided critical feedback on instructional practices as well as on individual learning plans.

Finally, Woodsedge practitioners considered the school context to be extremely important. They knew their student population well, and they deliberately created culturally relevant programs to make learning more meaningful. The entire Woodsedge reform plan was crafted around the school's circumstances and environment. Although the practitioners studied other curriculum models and strategies, they designed customized programs that suited Woodsedge Middle School students uniquely. Ultimately, I conclude that Woodsedge experienced successful outcomes because they shared leadership, focused on specific outcomes, and collaboratively created an authentic learning community for students and adults.

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Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. National Middle School Association. Â Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its best. Lanhan, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. This recent book not only provides a comprehensive description of professional learning communities and how they work, but also includes examples and case studies of professional learning communities in action. Â The strength of this small book lies in its comprehensive description of six powerful dimensions of a professional learning community. The dimensions outline the process of implementation from initiation to becoming an ingrained component of the workings of a school.