

*School/University partnerships and teacher leadership teams:
Three studies in three states*

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This collective case study illuminates the school/university partnership implementation process by presenting data from three grant supported projects examining the impact of teacher leadership teams on teacher quality and student learning. The three projects involved seven teacher teams from various school settings: 1) eight members from a Pennsylvania K-12 alternative education program with students who were expelled or who had significant behavioral challenges; 2) fifteen participants from two rural North Carolina elementary schools with high populations of second language learner; and 3) thirty-one teachers from three schools in southeastern Virginia with high populations of students with disabilities. Findings revealed increases in participants accepting formal leadership roles, redefined frameworks for professional development, and the emergence of specific participant dispositions.

Purpose

The purpose of this empirical study was to chronicle three grant funded university/school partnerships connected by their approach to implementing school reform. Leadership teams were formed to facilitate school improvement based on the needs of each school. Although each project had different foci (i.e., inclusion of students with disabilities (SWD), literacy strategies for SWD and English as a Second Language (ESL), differentiated instruction for students with behavioral needs), leadership teams in collaboration with the faculty from institutions of higher education (IHE) conducted needs assessments to determine the scope of professional development activities related to the project issues.

Three overarching questions guided the research: 1) To what extent did teacher leadership emerge as a result of participating in the projects; 2) To what extent did these projects impact professional development opportunities; and 3) What dispositions characterized the type of educators who participated?

Framework

True school/university partnerships veer away from traditional teacher preparation practices in that relationships are formed between IHE and PK-12 schools. This relationship forms a multifaceted collaborative environment graying traditional institutional boundaries of IHE and schools in order “to identify students’ needs, support candidate learning, and determine their professional development agenda” (NCATE, n.d., Illustrations of PDS Work section, ¶2). Within this collaboration, partners focus on shared decision-making, shared problem-solving, and continuous feedback for improvement.

Research and current literature support teacher quality as the most significant influence on student learning (Klingner, 2004; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). High quality professional development is essential in increasing knowledge, skills, and dispositions of educators in order to enable higher levels of learning for all students. Professional development is most effective when embedded in the classroom with practices that are results-oriented, data driven, and utilizing adult-learning principles (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998) and constructivism (Sandholtz, 2002).

What is well documented in the literature is that the “one-shot” workshop approach to professional development is ineffectual, at best (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2005; Deshler, Schumaker, Lenz, Bulgren, Hock, Knight, et al., 2001; Hadden & Pianta, 2006; Klingner, 2004; Lieberman & Wilkins, 2006). According to Deshler and colleagues, in order to have student success education personnel need validated interventions (i.e., evidence-based practices), appropriate service delivery systems, and effective, sustaining, supportive professional development. Successful professional development is based on adult-learning principles including self-directed activities, creativity, and experimentation (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998).

Unfortunately, most professional development in today’s schools resembles a traditional deficit model of inservice training, whereas administrator selected topics based on the needs of the system are lectured to teachers by outside ‘experts’ with little interaction or active participation with participants (Sandholtz, 2002). School/university partnerships offer different perspectives to professional development by providing opportunities for inservice and preservice teachers to interact and collaborate, evaluate and reflect on their instructional practices, and expand their existing knowledge so that they are able brainstorm new ideas to use in their classrooms with their students.

According to Warren and Peel (2005), “teachers receive a greater sense of unity, greater sense of empowerment, a higher sense of responsibility for their school’s destiny, and an increased level of pride” as a result of successful partnerships between schools and universities (p. 351). NCATE recognizes that school/university partnerships have the impending power to support continuous learning and improvement for both schools and IHE (Levine & Trachtman, 2005; NCATE, n.d.). These partnerships have become prominent in school reform efforts. IHE personnel not only work with teachers and school administrators in the area of professional development, but also to assist with other tasks such as grant writing, technical assistance, and mentoring.

Methods

This qualitative study followed three grant funded leadership team projects in three different states (i.e., Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Virginia) that involved school/university partnerships. Because the study defined leadership in schools from a more contemporary viewpoint (opposed to the traditional top-down management style with which these schools were familiar), the bounding of this study was consistent with exploratory case study research (Creswell, 2003). This study was bound by time (funding periods) and by cases (three

school/university partnerships). According to Stake (2000), in a collective case study, “A researcher may jointly study a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon” (p. 437). This study investigated three grant funded projects (cases) in their quest to utilize teacher leadership teams to improve their schools (phenomenon).

Although the settings for all three leadership team projects were purposively selected based on low state standardized assessments, high special education populations, cultural diversity, and the districts’ willingness to participate, maximum variation sampling was used in order to “yield detailed descriptions of each case, in addition to identifying shared patterns that cut across cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 172). The success of the leadership teams was measured differently for each project; however, all highlighted teacher empowerment and collegial leadership as necessary vehicles for improving schools and guiding the quality of professional development implemented at each site.

Data Sources

Data was collected from a variety of sources including both structured and semi-structured focus groups, individual interviews, participant reflections, team self-evaluations and permanent products (e.g., school improvement plans, team action/implementation plans, e-mentoring blogs, team meeting agendas and minutes). Field observations were used to verify information gleaned from focus groups, interviews, reflections, and self evaluations. Observations allowed the researchers to enter classrooms and document strategies being implemented from professional development (e.g., workshops, conferences) connected to site implementation plans, and informally discuss progress of leadership teams with teachers – both members and non-members. The researchers used triangulation during all stages of data collection and member checking during data analysis to verify accuracy and increase internal validity of the study (Creswell, 2003, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000). Data were analyzed independently, and then analyses for all cases were conducted using Nvivo⁷ (QSR International, 2006) to maintain a trail for data management including code lists, reports for source materials, and links between categories and codes and each research question.

Results

The interactive and constant comparative methods of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) allowed the researchers to confidently provide overall results. The following represent a “snapshot” of findings and are documented via research questions.

Research Question #1: Teacher Leadership

Paralleling definitions in current literature (e.g., Elmore, 2002, Murphy, 2005), the researchers defined teacher leadership as *the ability of professionals to forge a sense of community and share a commitment for increasing student achievement; engaging the faculty and staff; and enhancing the school climate with an overarching goal of building a capacity for change*. For those teachers who participated in these projects, many reported that they have engaged in “*more leadership responsibilities*” since the inception of their leadership team. Although the majority of the teachers expressed their roles as “*informal leaders*” through

mentoring less experienced teachers, presenting at workshops and inservice activities, or directing parental involvement activities, 35.2% have accepted formal leadership roles within their schools or districts. These positions include assistant principals, lead teachers or department chairpersons, and central office coordinators. Barth (2001) stated, “When teachers lead, principals extend their own capacity, students enjoy a democratic community of learners, and schools benefit from better decisions” (p. 445).

Research Question #2: Professional Development

The members of these teams, like many respected educational researchers and practitioners (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2005; Elmore, 2004; Klingner, 2004) recognized that traditional ‘one-shot’ workshops with little or no follow-up were ineffective. The action/implementation plans developed by the teams in these projects indicated that there was a desire to incorporate practical professional development activities for the entire faculty. Hence, the framework of professional development changed. Instead of central offices mandating topics for district-wide teacher training, these teams initiated plans geared toward meeting the specific needs of teachers at their site and, in some cases, presented their plans to their board of education for permission to implement site-based activities. The presenters of these professional development workshops included their colleagues who were available onsite to answer any questions that surfaced. This afforded teachers opportunities to become better equipped to serve the students in their classrooms. Although the researchers cannot attribute increases in state and district standardized test scores solely on the efforts of these leadership teams, preliminary data indicate a positive impact on student achievement.

Research Question #3: Dispositions

According to Levine (2002), dispositions are attitudes and personal qualities or attributes that teachers hold toward the teaching and learning processes, working with students, and simply being involved in the education profession. As classroom observations provided support of teachers implementing project activities, a gap in the self-reported performance also surfaced. Data from interviews, focus groups, and observations revealed three types of participants: investors, detractors, and fence-sitters. Although most of the participants fit into one of these categories, 14.8% (n=8) of participants did not.

The *investors* and *detractors* were easily identifiable. *Investors* were teachers exhibited caring attitudes and held commitments for teaching. They were sensitive to student differences. During classroom visits, these teachers clearly stated standards for student behavior and instruction was focused with effective questioning techniques and a variety of assessment strategies employed. During the interviews and focus group sessions, *investors* provided reflective feedback. The *investors* consisted of 33.3% (n=18) of the leadership team. These teachers always participated and genuinely wanted to improve their school for the sake of the students and reflected on their work, “*I have definitely learned from this experience and am glad that my students will benefit from this*” or “*We stopped teaching in isolation. We helped one another*”.

Conversely, *detractors* held personal agendas and implicitly (and some explicitly) admitted that they were concerned with their own needs over student needs. During observations,

detractors held low expectations for students and shared multiple reasons why strategies would not work for their classes. The *detractors* did not follow through with tasks nor did they engage in activities during professional development. This group consisted of 22.2% (n=12) of the participants. One *detractor* stated, “I’m only here for the [grant incentives],” while others seemed to just want to know what was happening as to not be left out. Other comments included, “Things were not so horrible, but the timing was a poor time for me” and “I don’t think there was a realistic expectation for teachers who are very busy.”

The last group consisted of 29.6% (n=16) team members. These participants were not easily identifiable. Because they seemed to know how to “play the game,” during interviews and focus group sessions the *fence-sitters* appeared as *investors*, providing positive feedback, but lacking sincerity. These teachers said they were implementing strategies; however, observations revealed no indication of strategies being attempted. This generated gaps between self-reported information and observations. Further, the *fence-sitters* would explain how they were going to use strategies but never reached the acting stage. *Fence-sitters* sometimes followed through with team assignments, but with little to no effort. One fence-sitter shared, “If our schools were in better communication we would have had a better overall conclusion.”

Educational Importance

This study adds to the current literature and research in the areas of school leadership, educational reform, teacher education, school/university partnerships, and professional development. Additionally, the researchers present several implications for research, policy, and practice guide future studies. The authors are confident that the full, manuscript-length version of this proposal provides significant contributions to educational research and to the field of education, in general.

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