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Urban School Connections: A University-K-8 Partnership

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Urban schools in the United States are struggling. In this era of high-stakes testing, teacher accountability, and standards-based curriculum, there is more and more research showing that an achievement gap exists between White students and students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In large part, students of color attend urban schools where underfunding, low teacher retention, and the forces of community poverty pose significant challenges to effective, sustained classroom instruction (Borrero & Bird, 2009; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Nieto, 2002). Urban schools, and urban school teachers, are left to bear the brunt of the criticism from policy-makers, the media, and the public. More importantly, classroom teachers are left to bear the brunt of the tremendous challenge to serve the diverse needs of all of their students. Schooling in urban areas places added pressure on Catholic schools as well, as declining enrollment is forcing schools to close (Carpenter, 2008; Gragnani, 2006; McDonald & Schultz, 2009).

Schools and classroom teachers cannot be alone in the quest to improve classroom instruction for students of color in urban contexts. Universities, and particularly universities in urban areas, are in prime position to provide support to K-12 schools. Fundamentally, most universities in urban centers promote mission statements that declare their commitment to the local community. Practically, universities possess tremendous resources in the form of faculty and students that can provide direct support to local schools.

This paper describes a partnership between an alliance of nine urban Catholic schools and an urban university in San Francisco, California. The development of the partnership is described in part, but the details of the actual collaboration and involvement of university faculty with school leaders and teachers are the central foci. This collaboration is outlined to show how university community involvement can provide direct support to urban K-12 schools. Specifically, the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) is presented as a foundation upon which university-K-12 partnerships can be built. PLCs in schools are groups of teachers and staff members with a shared vision for improving student learning. PLC members

work collaboratively and hold one another accountable for results at their school sites (DuFour, 2004). Research-based, core elements of PLCs provide the framework through which the partnership in this paper is described. Along with the development of the PLCs, core elements of Catholic and Jesuit education are highlighted to illuminate the context in which this partnership was developed.

In the sections that follow, the practical and theoretical backgrounds to the partnership are outlined, the context is described, and existing research on the core elements of PLCs and their implementation is presented. Additionally, details of the PLCs and the professional development workshops from the partnership are described in relation to this research. In the final sections, I discuss the central ideas expressed by teachers throughout their participation in the PLCs and reflect on my own learning as a university faculty participant.

Addressing Urban School Closures through Community Collaboration

The partnership between the nine alliance schools and the San Francisco university was created both in response to the pressures facing urban Catholic schools and out of traditions in Catholic and Jesuit education. Additionally, the partnership sought to create direct collaboration and interaction between university faculty and school teachers via the development of PLCs at the schools. This section describes the realities of Catholic school closures in urban environments and then outlines the theoretical foundation of the partnership through tenets of Catholic education, Jesuit traditions, and the fundamentals of PLCs.

The State of Urban Catholic Schools

Catholic schools are closing. In fact, recent data show that in the last decade the total number of Catholic schools in the United States has dropped from 8,217 to 7,248 (McDonald & Schultz, 2009). In their report of Catholic schools across different geographic regions of the United States, McDonald and Schultz showed that there are fewer schools today than there were in 1999 in each of the 6 regions studied (New England, Mideast, Plains, Great Lakes, Southeast, West). Catholic schools in urban areas make up over 40% of the total number of Catholic schools in the country and provide services to students in some of America's most diverse and historically marginalized communities. Yet, urban Catholic schools are closing as well. The country's largest urban areas have seen 18.8% of their elementary schools close since 2003 (McDonald & Schultz, 2009).

Catholic schools are closing in large part because enrollment is dropping. Between 2000 and 2009, Catholic school enrollment dropped 17.4% across the country (McDonald & Schultz, 2009). When these statistics are placed alongside the steady growth of immigrant and other language and ethnic minority children in urban areas (August & Shanahan, 2006; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008), it is apparent that few students of color are attending Catholic schools. Although this trend is not occurring in all urban contexts (see, for example, O’Keefe et al., 2004), it is alarming considering the focus on community service in Catholic education and the significant role of Catholic schools in urban communities historically.

To combat declining enrollment and school closures, Catholic school educators in urban areas are looking for support from their surrounding communities (Gagnani, 2006). Universities, and in the case of the partnership described in this paper, a Jesuit university, are being called upon to help support urban youth in these schools and continue the legacy of Catholic education in urban communities.

Educational Excellence, Community, and Service in Catholic Education

The focus on academic excellence in Catholic education is certainly at the heart of the partnership and this paper. All teachers need to deliver quality instruction to all youth—providing them eventual access to higher education and the career opportunities they deserve. Beyond academic excellence, however, is the importance of community within Catholic education, and the idea that community is not just something that is taught in the classroom, but is lived in daily life. This encompasses what Pope John Paul II (1987) discussed as education within the wider community—education that takes place “in changing neighborhoods; it requires respect for cultural diversity, love for those of different ethnic backgrounds, service to those in need, without discrimination” (p. 18). Through this vision of the wider community, Catholic education stresses the need for schools to find effective ways to educate increasingly diverse communities and groups of students.

This sense of the wider community is directly in line with the tradition of service in Catholic education. There is service of God, service of the Church, service of each other, and service of the general community (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1972). For teachers, this vision of service means teaching with a specific focus on the development of youths’ sense of faith in everyday life—teaching students about “a spirit of solidarity with and service towards all other persons; a sensitivity for justice; a special awareness of being called to be positive agents of change in a society

that is undergoing continuous transformation” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, p. 20). These traditions of academic excellence, community, and service in Catholic education are at the heart of the vision to educate students in urban schools effectively, and are important foundations of the partnership described in this paper.

The Jesuit Focus on the Whole Person and Social Justice

One central pillar of Jesuit education is the notion of “educating the whole person” (Traub, 2008; University of San Francisco, 2008). This approach reaches beyond the intellectual components of teaching and learning, and works to integrate the moral, social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of being an individual. Of major importance in this approach is the use of reflection by the learner. Time for reflection is crucial to all learning, but especially when envisioning this holistic approach to learning, the time to reflect is often as important as the actual content one is processing. It is in this reflection phase that the learner can make connections between these different areas, and in these connections find greater knowledge.

Along with this approach to educating the whole person is the Jesuit focus on education for justice (Arrupe, 1973; Traub, 2008). Justice comes in many different forms in many different contexts, but for educators, justice entails the active pursuit of equity for students who are “prevented from fulfilling the divine purpose of full integration by oppressive social systems and unjust structural realities” (University of San Francisco Jesuit Foundation, 2009, p. 1). This confrontation of social inequities, especially for school-aged youth, is central to a vision for work in urban schools.

Learning by Doing in Professional Learning Communities

PLCs are small groups of like-minded professionals committed to similar objectives. PLCs are based on a sociocultural approach to learning (Nieto, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978) that stresses the notion of “learning by doing” (Dewey, 1938; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Teachers and their students learn through social interactions, and thus PLCs function to provide teachers time and space to interact with one another and share their best practices. In large part, PLCs are a mechanism through which teachers can collaborate and reflect on their professional practice with their colleagues. Through this structure, teachers generate their own learning in a group setting and then map this learning onto their classroom instruction (DuFour et al., 2006).

DuFour et al. (2006) outline six research-based elements that are key to all PLCs in schools: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture with a focus

on learning for all, collective inquiry into best practice, action orientation, a commitment to continuous improvement, and a results orientation. These elements rely on teachers and staff members to come together to create a school culture of collaboration and learning for all students. In a recent review of the empirical research on PLCs, Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) reported that classroom practice and school culture both benefited from PLCs. They highlighted the following common findings among studies documenting such PLCs: collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority, and continuous teacher learning. These four attributes collectively made a positive impact on the teaching culture at respective school sites. Specifically, Vescio et al. (2008) discussed the importance of collaboration that created space for teachers to share their practices and reflect on their efficacy. Embedded in this collaboration was a commitment to student learning that involved practices like creating innovative curriculum, focusing on low-achieving students, and promoting school-wide literacy. Their findings surrounding teacher authority centered on teachers' beliefs that they played an active role in the PLCs and that their work in PLCs would positively impact the school and their classroom practice. Finally, they found that PLCs helped teachers continue their own learning about topics of interest to them. Teachers were more active in furthering their own knowledge, researching new practices, and learning from one another.

The PLCs described in this paper were based on the research-based best practices promoted by DuFour et al. (2006), findings from scholarly research on the efficacy of PLCs in schools (Vescio et al., 2008), and specific instructional strategies that PLCs can promote. Namely, data-driven instruction (Bernhardt, 2004; Borrero & Bird, 2009), classroom-based assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998), differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) and backwards planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) are highlighted. The structure of the PLCs generated in the alliance of Catholic schools in San Francisco is described in more detail below as are the factors that brought the alliance of schools and the University of San Francisco (USF) together.

The Context: San Francisco Schools Coming Together

In the city of San Francisco, Catholic schools serve a tremendously diverse student population. Mirroring the states' demographics, students in these schools come from families of various ethnic, cultural, racial, economic, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. This diversity provides both challenges and opportunities for teachers and administrators as students come to school with different strengths and needs as learners (Borrero & Bird, 2009; Gifford

& Valdés, 2006). In San Francisco, many Catholic schools serve large numbers of students from immigrant families whose first language is not English. These students come to school with cultural assets as burgeoning bilingual students (Borrero, 2008; Nieto, 2002) and specific needs as English language learners (ELLs). These students attend classes with native English speakers and students from different educational backgrounds, so this diversity of students' backgrounds and needs creates significant challenges for teachers and administrators at these schools. Unfortunately, in many such schools, these challenges are not being met, and student enrollment is dropping (McDonald & Schultz, 2009). Parents are choosing to send their students to other schools (often public schools) that have the special education and ELL support to accommodate more students. In San Francisco, this has resulted in approximately four Catholic schools closing in the last decade, and others in jeopardy of having to do so (Carpenter, 2008).

In an attempt to occlude this trend in the city's Catholic schools by limiting the isolation of teachers and individual schools, administrators created a nine-school alliance in one of the city's highest immigrant communities. It was the goal of this alliance to bring cohesion and resources to the nine schools. Cohesion was seen as a major necessity for these schools, as most schools had only one teacher per grade level on staff. Thus, teachers were very isolated in their professional practice, and both collegiality and instruction suffered. The vision of the alliance was to bring schools together to build a sense of camaraderie and unity among teachers and staff in the quest toward effectively serving all students.

The Alliance Schools, the University, and My Role

In 2005, the alliance of nine urban Catholic schools in the city of San Francisco was formed through the Archdiocese of San Francisco. An administrative role of director of the alliance schools was created, and it became the director's job to focus on the best possible route toward providing the schools with the support and resources needed to create a sense of unity within the alliance. From the director's vision, a commitment to community involvement and community partnerships were immediate goals of the alliance. This goal of community partnerships is what initially sparked connections to USF.

USF is a private, Jesuit university located in the heart of the city. The university was founded in 1855, and the mission of the university stresses high academic standards along with a clear focus on social justice. More specifically, the university sees "diversity of perspectives, experiences and traditions as essential components of a quality education" (University of San

Francisco, 2008, ¶4). Additionally, the university is committed to serving the community and playing an active role in forming and maintaining community partnerships. With a specific focus on the local schools, the School of Education at USF promotes the mission of the university through a “commitment to prepare education and community leaders whose background and interests are reflective of, and responsive to, the cultural diversity of today’s world” (University of San Francisco, 2008). It is this vision for the promotion of social justice and a commitment to the local community that helped provide a natural connection between the alliance of Catholic schools and the School of Education at USF.

As a faculty member in the School of Education at USF, I was involved in this partnership from its early stages in 2007. I was a classroom teacher for 5 years and now my primary work at USF involves training K-12 teachers for urban public and Catholic schools (see Borrero, 2009). Given the fact that both the alliance and the USF partnership were in their infancy in 2007, there was no formal evaluation process involved in the development of the PLCs. The description of the partnership, the PLCs, and the professional development workshops comes from my own participation planning, facilitating, and reflecting on the entire process. This included monthly meetings with teachers, principals, USF faculty, and the director of the alliance schools; interactions with teachers during the workshops; verbal and written feedback from the teachers about the workshops; and personal reflections on and planning of the workshops. The description that follows, therefore, comes from a combination of participant feedback and reflection through the course of one academic year. This information is not presented to claim generalizability from this experience, but rather to provide an example for other schools and communities to consider.

The Partnership and a Focus on Professional Learning Communities

The first discussion of this partnership took place early in 2007. The initial conversation began within the leadership team at USF (president, provost, and deans) about a university-school partnership. The objective of this and ensuing conversations was to find ways to become more directly involved with local Catholic schools. Members of the leadership team then solicited faculty members from different schools within the university who had interests in Catholic education. There was a natural link with the School of Education, and more specifically with the Catholic Educational Leadership Program (CEL) within the school. CEL is a graduate program at USF that trains Catholic school leaders at the master’s and doctoral levels. The

program seeks to provide graduate students with a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge to be effective Catholic school leaders in the community. In 2007, the director of CEL had already begun conversations with the alliance director about other possible projects, so there was instant momentum behind a partnership between the alliance and USF. Faculty members from the School of Education met with members of the USF leadership team to determine possible next steps and levels of involvement that the university could offer.

In the spring of 2007 the director of CEL and the director of the alliance decided upon an initiative to provide direct support to teachers in the alliance schools. This support would focus on the goal of cohesion among the alliance schools through the pursuit of academic excellence for all students. The director of CEL solicited colleagues in the School of Education at USF who had experience with teacher training and professional development to participate in the collaboration.

In April of 2007, the director, teachers, and principals from the alliance schools, the director of CEL, and two members of the teacher education department at USF met to discuss the details of the partnership as it related to direct interaction with teachers in the alliance schools. Early in these planning meetings, PLCs were discussed and it was determined that a series of professional development workshops would be the most effective use of time and expertise. The workshops would occur monthly, and would be conducted at one of the alliance schools. These decisions were important first steps, as it was the goal of the partnership to involve university faculty in the educational contexts of the teachers in the schools. This is significant because all too often the university's distance (figuratively and literally) creates a divide between "theory" and "practice" so that faculty and classroom teachers have limited connections. The goal of this partnership was to bring a service (in this case, the expertise of university faculty) to the teachers in the schools during their workweek.

The thematic content and goals of the professional development workshops were discussed in collaboration with teachers and administrators of the alliance and university faculty, as it was a direct goal of the PLCs to provide cohesion and collaboration among alliance teachers while also promoting improved academic achievement for all students (DuFour et al., 2006). Focusing on these goals, the director of the alliance, alliance principals, a core group of alliance teachers, and the university faculty determined specific objectives for the foci of the PLCs. Given the Catholic schools' focus on academic excellence for all students and the student demographics of the alliance schools, it was determined that the PLCs were to focus on student

academic achievement with specific attention paid to English language learners (ELLs), students with special needs, and literacy. These topics were purposefully broad to harness the true potential of PLCs—teachers sharing their expertise (across grade levels and schools) to promote best practices (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008).

This plan for monthly professional development workshops was seen as the best way to develop PLCs among alliance schools, and was also emblematic of the goals of the partnership. As stated above, a main focus of PLCs is the allotment of time for teachers to work with one another. This time, however, needs to be structured in a way to create multiple PLCs. For the case of the alliance schools, PLCs were needed for grade-level teachers at different schools (for example, all of the fourth grade teachers at the nine different schools formed a Fourth Grade Alliance PLC), as well as grade cluster teachers at an individual school (for example, the third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers formed a Middle Elementary Grades School Site PLC at their individual schools). The alliance PLCs met once per month at the scheduled workshops, and the school site PLCs met three times per month (the other Mondays of the month). Again, the purpose of this structure reflects a major goal of PLCs—to utilize teachers' strengths by giving them the time to share best practices (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). In this sense, there was a true desire for “cross-pollination” in this model with the alliance schools, as teachers were given opportunities to attend professional development workshops and share practices with teachers from other schools *and* bring these practices to their own context and share them through their school site PLCs.

The university faculty envisioned these monthly workshops as a place to “plant a seed” of new knowledge for teachers to contemplate in the alliance PLCs, with the hopes of them then bringing the new knowledge to their school site meetings. The content of the workshops was structured in a way first to introduce the concept of PLCs, and then to work on a different topic each month to foster discussion/sharing of best practices for each group of teachers.

Planning the overarching goals and sequencing for the monthly professional development workshops was a collaborative effort between the alliance director and the USF School of Education faculty. The main goal guiding the content of the workshops was the improved academic achievement of students in the alliance schools. This goal drove all decisions about scheduling, personnel, and content for the workshops. The PLCs provided the structure and the need for allotted time during each meeting for groups to form and build cohesion. The content of each workshop, however, needed

to be directly connected to the desires, challenges, needs, and assets of the alliance schools. To determine some of these factors, the alliance director and School of Education faculty met with the nine principals of the alliance schools and a core group of teachers to brainstorm options for foci of the different workshops. Following this meeting, the faculty members met to generate a proposal of workshop titles to share with the alliance director, principals, and teachers. This proposal was accepted by all, and workshops began at the start of the school year in August 2007.

Monthly Professional Development in the Catholic Schools

The descriptions below highlight the content and goals of the monthly workshops as they occurred, in order, throughout the school year. The workshops are described in specific connection to the research-based best practices of PLCs as outlined by DuFour et al. (2006) and their found effectiveness in schools (Vescio et al., 2008). The goals of collaboration and student learning were central to all of the workshops, and it is important to note that all workshops reinforced these goals.

A New Culture: Creating Change through PLCs

The first professional development workshop had obvious goals of introducing PLCs and giving teachers time to meet one another. Collaboration and a focus on student learning were the main foci, and both are tenets of effective PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). More specifically, teachers were asked to rethink their goals and expectations for the school year with a focus on student achievement. With these goals in mind, the workshop time was divided in half. The workshop started with a description of the processes and goals of PLCs, and how they fit within the Catholic focus on academic excellence, community, and service. The second half of the workshop began a conversation around use of student data as a tool for focused collaboration. This talk about data was presented as a way to discuss academic achievement as something that teachers needed to think about critically (Borrero & Bird, 2009). For homework (in the month before the next workshop) teachers were given the assignment to bring three different pieces of student data to the next workshop.

“Complexifying” Data

The second workshop sought to unpack the term “data” and uncover ways for teachers to use data effectively in their classrooms instead of simply being afraid of the word itself (Borrero & Bird, 2009). Continued collaboration

among teachers and a focus on student learning were goals of the workshop (Vescio et al., 2008) along with a look into data as a way to discuss a “results orientation” for academic achievement (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 5). The workshop focused on getting teachers to think of the myriad forms of data they collect from students each day. For example, teachers were asked, “How do you know this was your best lesson?” “What data do you have to support this?” “Did your students learn what you expected them to learn during the lesson?” “How did you know?” Questions like these prompted teachers to think about all of the different ways they assess their students throughout the day, and how data inform their instruction (Bernhardt, 2004). This cycle of data determining instruction that then creates more data is important for helping teachers see that academic achievement is in their hands each day (Black & Wiliam, 1998). This process was further elucidated through a series of classroom examples of assessments, data, and data-driven instruction. At the end of the session, teachers were given the assignment to bring (and be ready to discuss) three pieces of student data that they were able to use to inform their instruction to the next workshop.

Effective Assessment for Effective Instruction

The third professional development workshop focused on “collective inquiry into best practice” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 4) via further discussions of data and assessment. Teachers were asked to reflect on the quality of the student data that they brought with them, and then talk about the assessments they were using in their classrooms to generate these data. The workshop then focused on assessment and classroom instruction, and, along with reviewing concepts like validity, reliability, and variability, asked teachers to write down the assessments that they used to create what they considered their most valid student data. PLCs were given the task of developing a common assessment (DuFour et al., 2006) that they would commit to developing and administering before the next workshop. The goal of common assessments within PLCs is very purposeful. Not only do teachers share their own practices and then together choose effective assessments based on their experiences, but they get a chance to create an assessment together. This is powerful because it enables them to use bits and pieces of one another’s ideas and have ownership of the assessment they create. This exercise reinforces the importance of teacher authority and collaboration in PLCs (Vescio et al., 2008).

Broadening Effective Assessment—Using Rubrics for Authentic Assessment

The goal of the fourth professional development workshop was to explore effective classroom assessment further by finding innovative ways to assess different types of student learning. This workshop specifically promoted the goal of continual teacher improvement and learning (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). With a specific focus on assessment, this meant looking beyond traditional tests, quizzes, and essays as the only ways to measure student learning. The main ideas of this part of the workshop focused on the use of standards-based objectives to determine what skills would be assessed via a rubric, and then the instruction that would need to be developed to meet these objectives. This cyclical look into data-driven instruction, or what some refer to as “backwards planning” or “understanding by design” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), was presented as a way for alliance PLCs to create a small unit of study that they, as a group, could develop and then measure through the use of a rubric. PLCs were then given the rest of the workshop time to develop this unit of study and rubric.

Using Assessment to Provide Quality Instruction to Diverse Groups of Students

The fifth workshop specifically focused on the diversity of students in the alliance schools, and the critical need for PLCs to promote learning for all students (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). This workshop addressed the challenges of teaching in heterogeneous classrooms (Cohen & Lotan, 2004) by presenting teaching strategies that all teachers could use to differentiate their instruction for students of different ability levels. The workshop was presented within the framework of effective assessment for two reasons: (a) the continued discussion of common assessment leading to effective instruction was central to all PLCs, and (b) assessment is at the heart of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiated instruction is a topic that goes far beyond the content of a single professional development workshop in scope, so the focus of this meeting was on specific classroom strategies to engage students with diverse needs. The session focused on the need for teachers to get to know the different learning styles of students (especially students with special needs) by giving varied assignments and assessments. At the end of the workshop, teachers were given the assignment to review the rubric that they had created, and use their student data to create their next unit of study with effective scaffolding in place for students who were likely to need additional help.

Engaging English Language Learners through Literacy Strategies

The primary goal of this professional development workshop was to equip teachers with specific strategies to use with their ELLs. Building off of the previous workshop's goal of reaching all students, this session also promoted the "action orientation" needed for effective PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006) by focusing on specific classroom strategies. The content flowed from the previous month's workshop on students with special needs by taking a specific look at language and the linguistic needs of students in the alliance schools. Instead of focusing on the standardized tests that showed how "far below grade level" students were reading, teachers were urged to consider the linguistic strengths that their bilingual youth possessed (Borrero & Bird, 2009). This was demonstrated through model assignments like having students create a map that traced their linguistic history as far back as they could research, or having a group of bilingual students help the teacher write a letter to parents in their home language inviting parents to an event at school. These types of assignments were used to get teachers to make connections between the types of assessments they were used to giving students, and the type of assessments they could give to students to find out more about their linguistic backgrounds. At the end of the workshop, teachers were given an assignment to try one assessment that would tap into the linguistic skills of all students, and ELLs in particular.

Reflection and Future Goals

The final professional development workshop served as a time for teachers to reflect on their homework assignment (an assessment that reflected their students' linguistic strengths) and discuss their work as a PLC around the issues of assessment. The goal of this workshop was to give teachers time to acknowledge the work that they had put in as an alliance PLC over the course of the school year and how this work in the PLC represented their continued commitment to learning (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio, 2008). The USF faculty member who facilitated the workshop reviewed the different foci of the seminars throughout the year and asked groups to discuss which workshops were most helpful to them and why. Groups were then asked to share their collective responses with the whole group. Not only did groups reflect on their work in the alliance PLCs, but they also discussed their work in their school site PLCs and how both impacted their teaching. As a further aspect of this reflection, teachers were asked to engage in a discussion around how the work from PLCs would be useful for them in their classroom into the future.

Reflections on the Potential Impact of PLCs on Teachers and Faculty

After one year of professional development workshops with the alliance schools, three interrelated topics continually arose during conversations with teachers, administrators, and university faculty: Teachers expressed a sense of camaraderie with their colleagues in their school site and alliance PLCs, teachers felt more connected to their schools, and teachers appreciated their role in the content of the workshops. These ideas speak to the goal of the PLCs providing cohesion and collegiality for alliance teachers, and are explored in more detail below. Additionally, the value of the partnership for university faculty is discussed.

There are definite limitations to this discussion. One key factor that is missing is any systematic analysis of the impact of PLCs (and the partnership as a whole) on the stated goals of improving student achievement. Academic achievement data were not made available as a part of the partnership, and are therefore not reported. Further, because there was no formal evaluation of the partnership itself, the ideas presented below are based on anecdotal and participatory information. An analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data from all of the different constituencies involved (teachers, school staff, administrators, and university faculty) in the partnership would yield a level of depth and rigor not available at this stage of the process. However, the combination of feedback from PLC members and participatory reflection from university faculty does provide valuable insight into the efficacy of the PLCs and the partnership itself.

Teacher Camaraderie, Connection, and Ownership

The most consistent comments shared by teachers about PLCs was their sense of collegiality with fellow teachers at their schools and in the alliance. This was the first time for many teachers in the alliance to meet other teachers from other Catholic schools in the city, so just the fact that they were able to connect with teachers who taught the same grade level, for example, was empowering. Teachers shared that they enjoyed the time together during the monthly workshops because they were beginning to build relationships with their PLC members. This sentiment was not surprising, as it is a key element of the structure of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006) and the Catholic school focus on community (USCCB, 1972), but is important in this context, where the alliance was a brand-new endeavor, and a main goal for forming the alliance was to provide teachers a support system and network to share their successes, challenges, and best practices.

Teachers also shared that they appreciated the time to hear, process, and discuss important issues that impacted their teaching (e.g., student data, students with special needs, ELLs) in a setting larger than their individual school site. This gave teachers a different perspective and oftentimes showed them that they were not alone in facing some of the challenges that teaching diverse groups of students entails.

There was definite sentiment that school site PLC meetings were helping to generate cohesion among teachers in the schools. Again, this camaraderie was an anticipated outcome of the PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006, Vescio, et al., 2008), but it was important that teachers were communicating this sense of solidarity at the alliance meetings. They were able to bring the successes and challenges that they were experiencing at their sites to their alliance PLCs and share best practices. It was this combination of the school site and alliance PLCs that made the desired “cross-pollination” possible across the nine alliance schools (DuFour et al., 2006).

Related to this idea of school solidarity came important discussions regarding student achievement data. Prior to the PLC workshops, conversations about data within and among the alliance schools seemed to focus entirely on the annual standardized test scores of individual schools administered to all students. This composite score came to identify schools, and even created a type of hierarchy among the nine schools—everyone knew where they stood in relation to other schools based on their school’s score, on this test. As the school year went on, there was less discussion of this test score, as the focus of PLCs expanded perceptions of student data and the different ways to collect and utilize data for instruction. Teachers spoke more about effective assessments and data collection in their own classrooms as a way of improving their instruction.

The underlying sentiment that seemed to give rise to much of the feedback about collegiality and solidarity was the teachers’ sense of ownership in the content of the PLCs. Teachers realized early in the year that the work they were asked to do during and between alliance PLC workshops was about their own practice. They brought their teaching experiences and expertise to each meeting and realized that they were expected to utilize and share it with their group members. This is the vision of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006) and is what makes time the most precious resource that PLCs offer. Teachers appreciated the time that they had to share and reflect upon their teaching practices in PLCs and learn through these interactions. In this sense, PLCs are simple—they provide the structure for teachers to generate content (e.g., common assessments, rubrics, teaching strategies) that works for each group. The monthly professional development workshops provided a general topic

and ideas for classroom practice, but the real work was done within PLCs where teachers got to focus on their specific grade level to generate content for their students. Teachers appreciated this autonomy and reflected this not only in their feedback about the workshops, but in the quality of the work they produced in their groups.

Faculty Collegiality and Growth

As a university faculty member I was involved in this partnership from the beginning. I was able to work closely with my colleagues in the CEL program, and together we were members of the early planning team, met regularly with the alliance director, had multiple meetings with the school principals and teachers, and we were both facilitators and participants in the monthly workshops. Additionally, I was able to work with members of different academic departments within the School of Education at USF to deliver what we thought to be quality professional development to teachers in urban Catholic schools. This heightened sense of collegiality—with each other and with educators in the community—was significant for me and was a sentiment shared by my colleagues. It forced us out of our “bubble” as academics, and brought us back to the local schools—where the most important work in education happens every day. For this, I feel that the partnership was crucial for helping my colleagues and me connect the theoretical world of university training with the practical world of classroom teaching in urban schools.

This connection was not easy, and was often nerve-racking—delivering a workshop on effective teaching strategies to a group of 100 classroom teachers who had just spent the entire day in their classrooms teaching is far different from discussing Vygotsky with a group of 15 graduate students who want to become teachers. The stakes are higher, and the audience is more focused on results. By the end of the year, I was thankful for this opportunity to test my own practice and to keep me connected to classroom teachers.

The feedback my colleagues and I received from teachers and the conversations I had with both teachers and administrators were invaluable. Teachers teach because they love kids, so when teachers are struggling to help their students learn, they feel like they are failing. I was thankful to receive feedback from teachers that the PLCs were helping them with their instruction, and in turn helping their students. This (indirect) connection to students in classrooms made the monthly workshops, and the partnership as a whole, a great success for me as an educator.

Discussion and Future Work: Partnering for Urban Youth

Given the topics presented in the previous section, it is important to note that this partnership had its challenges and limitations. One fact of this partnership between USF and the alliance schools was that the interaction between faculty and classroom teachers took place in a “traditional” professional development context. Teachers were required to attend workshops, and workshops took place after school on Mondays. The reality that this professional development time occurred after school provided a big challenge—teachers were often tired, had other things on their minds, and showed that they had prior experiences with mediocre professional development.

Additionally, it is important that the sense of teacher camaraderie, school solidarity, and teacher control reported above not be generalized, nor glorified, for the entire group of 100 teachers in the monthly workshops. Some PLCs worked better together than others, some individuals formed closer bonds with others within a PLC, and not everyone got along all the time in their PLCs. From my perspective, this is obvious (given the number of teachers in the group) but important, because part of the goal of PLCs is to foster discussion and collaboration within groups (DuFour et al., 2006). This aspect of PLCs does not come with the expectation that everyone within each PLC will always form close bonds with one another. Instead, the point is that teachers get a chance to feel a part of a group and share important features of their professional practice.

It must also be noted that all teachers from all of the different schools did not reflect a heightened solidarity and vision of student data. In my work with different groups from month to month, I could see that there was variability between and within groups of teachers at each school. Similarly, some teachers never seemed to let go of the assumed hierarchy of schools based on standardized test scores—the results of this ranged from a perceived sense of elitism and “I have nothing to learn from these other teachers because my scores are high and, therefore, I am a good teacher,” to a complacency about “never getting all of our students up to grade level.”

Not all teachers approached the PLCs with the rigor and focus that was hoped for, and, naturally, some teachers were more excited about certain topics than others (e.g., teachers with few ELLs found the related workshop less helpful). However, in general, teachers were thankful for the time to reflect on their own practice and share with other teachers. This notion of collaboration, and a schedule that purposefully provided time for teachers to reflect and share, proved to have the single most positive impact on teachers’ development.

This was an important aspect of the PLCs because teacher isolation is all too prominent in schools (DuFour et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). Teachers need to feel supported, but they also need to know that their struggles are not entirely unique to their classroom, and that other teachers have experiences (and instructional practices) from which they can learn. Service as a tenet of Catholic education (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982) and the Jesuit focus on social justice (Traub, 2008) rely on this support and the belief that all students can succeed.

PLCs and University-Driven Partnerships

The partnership between USF and the alliance of Catholic schools in San Francisco was formed out of a commitment to community from both parties. Community is a foundation of Catholic education, and community involvement is stated in the mission of USF and is a pillar of Jesuit tradition (University of San Francisco, 2008). The action that was taken to form the bond between the university and the alliance was, in large part, the result of the vision of administrators from the Archdiocese and USF to find meaningful connections within the city. The work of the actual connection between teachers and faculty members was a joint effort by all involved, and centered on the collective passion to educate all children. This vision for social justice through academic excellence was at the core of the partnership and the PLCs because the priority throughout development of the partnership never wavered—students were what mattered most.

The PLCs proved to be an effective way to harness the knowledge, skill, and dedication of everyone who was a part of the professional development workshops. There are many different ways to implement PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006), but the structure of the alliance PLCs and the school site PLCs was one way to create a sense of community within the alliance while still focusing on school collegiality and classroom instruction. Teachers know their students best, and, therefore, they need to play an active role in all professional development (Borrero & Bird, 2009; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Teachers shared that they felt connected to their work in PLCs because they were generating the results, and bringing new practices to the classroom.

It is this direct impact on students and instruction in urban schools that made this partnership worthwhile. No matter the political climate, the acronym for the latest standardized test, or the media coverage of our urban schools, the fact remains that teachers teach students in classrooms across the country each day. These teachers need support, and they need time to work with one another and reflect on their practice to educate their students best.

The partnership between the alliance of Catholic schools in San Francisco and USF provided this type of support for teachers, and in so doing forged a community connection that will continue. This partnership shows that urban universities are in prime position to work with local schools and can make a difference for teachers in the community. The details of the PLCs and professional development workshops from this partnership are described in this paper to provide an example for others to reflect upon, modify, elaborate on, and utilize. This type of partnership needs to be cultivated in more communities, as we all need to find ways to partner with our urban teachers and students.

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