Supporting Collaborative Teacher Inquiry

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The Need for Teacher Collaboration

There is emerging evidence that teacher professional development (PD) performed collaboratively and grounded in "the work teachers do" can be effective in challenging existing beliefs about content, learners, and teaching (Borko, 2004; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). PD of this kind can also make use of classroom-based data to reflect on, and possibly change, instructional practice (Kazemi and Franke, 2004; Little, 2003). However, in our work with teachers and school administrators, we are finding that teachers need an enormous amount of support in enacting this kind of PD, and that the nature of these supports can be both hard to identify and difficult to provide. In some cases, a *reculturation* (Fullan, 2001) is needed that goes beyond mere changes to the structures of the classroom, school, and district contexts, but works toward a fundamental change in the ways in which teachers and administrators interrelate, work, and even think.

While the metaphor of a teacher's classroom being an island of practice is far from new (Lortie, 1975), what can be overlooked is that teachers often make excursions to islands of professional development. These are usually devoid of social interaction that might include challenges to teachers' beliefs about teaching or insights into what is possible (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon, 2001), leaving teachers with little time to inquire about and reflect on their *own* instructional practice, or on their students' work. Until recently, in the districts we have observed, the majority of the professional development initiatives lacked social interaction and could be classified as curricular alignment activity, training on a specific curriculum or instructional technique, or content knowledge development. But while many schools and districts are now enacting

collaborative inquiry practices, the teachers' need for support seems to have increased, and the nature of support has become harder to identify and provide.

A Discussion of Support

Slavit, Nelson, and Kennedy (2009) describe supported collaborative teacher inquiry (SCTI) as professional development in which teacher teams build collaborative structures for the purpose of inquiring into aspects of their own instructional practice, with access to relevant and usable supports. A primary function of SCTI should be to stimulate a quest for knowledge through a close examination of classroom practices and student-based data (including observations) that ultimately leads to change. In this work, we described three broad kinds of support as critical to SCTI:

1. Support for the collaborative teacher *inquiry process*, and

2. Enhancing the *interface* between the teacher inquiry and broader educational contexts.

3. Nurturing an *inquiry stance* toward teaching.

Common vision is a pathway to collective intentions. When present in SCTI, buy-in, passion, and authentic conversation can emerge. Perhaps more importantly, when SCTI is teacher-initiated and a shared sense of wonder (Wells, 1999) or inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Jaworksi, 2006) are developed, dissonance, questions, and knowledge about practice can surface that can advance the individually- and collectively-constructed vision of high quality learning and teaching present in the teacher group (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Kazemi and Franke, 2004). Yet, teacher talk commonly centers on the particulars of a classroom event, complaints about administrative actions or policies, or tales of the challenges presented by particular

students (Grossman et al., 2001; Wilson and Berne, 1999); seldom do teachers engage in critical, data-based examinations of teaching and learning. As a facilitation expert with whom we work has said, "teachers often don't know how to ask the curious questions."

If teachers are to successfully engage in activities and discussions that build on, or disrupt, their perspectives about practice and student learning, specific characteristics for supporting such actions must be identified. Specifically, we see *support for the inquiry process*, *enhancing the interface between the teacher inquiry and broader educational contexts,* and *nurturing an inquiry stance toward teaching* as key to professional development of this kind.

Support for the Collaborative Inquiry Process

Teachers who wish to collaboratively inquire into their practice often need support 1) in coalescing as a professional research group and 2) with the technical skills associated with designing and enacting educational research. Targeted professional development can support these needs, and principals and other leaders are also capable of providing intellectual, material, and emotional resources in moving SCTI forward. However, we have found that facilitators, when present, play a key role in providing support of this kind.

A facilitator can directly support the inquiry process by providing resources that build teachers' skills in framing an inquiry focus, helping to identify data that will inform their question, and enriching teachers' understandings of data analysis. Facilitators can also play a crucial role by asking questions or raising issues that teachers might otherwise avoid, fail to see, or be afraid to make explicit. Effective team development requires attention to the interactions of each group member, and a skillful facilitator can help the

group coalesce, encourage risk taking, enhance inquiry and advocacy skills, and improve motivation (Bondy and Williamson, 2009). Such interactions are what truly attack a teaching culture that reaffirms the privatization of practice.

For two years, we observed a facilitator working with a group of secondary mathematics teachers who wanted to incorporate rich mathematical problem-solving tasks into their curriculum and instruction. The facilitator, a district mathematics specialist, helped the teachers build norms for positive collaboration and spent several weeks helping the group identify and refine their focus. Technical research support was also provided, including identification of data collection timeline, support in developing a problem-solving rubric for use in data analysis, and the use of protocols for holding discussions about student work on the mathematical tasks. When the teachers were engaged in these discussions of students' work, the facilitator pushed the group to go beyond their own characterizations and "come to agreement" on how the student work would be interpreted via the rubric. The latter support proved critical in moving the group forward in their overall interpretations of the student data, and even on their general understandings of data and research. Although the teachers would have obtained results on their own, the facilitator clearly provided important and specific supports to the teachers' inquiry process. As one teacher stated:

> Our facilitator was so empowering for that part and she started with me and I felt her influence in very tactful ways. She first started off in saying, "What is your cycle that you're going to go through? What are these meetings? What is it about that you're meeting? What is going on?" And we've kind of developed a cycle within this meeting structure. And then she moved it further

and said, "Where's your evidence of this work going on in the classroom?" So we started looking at observations and then she said, "Okay, what's your evidence of students' growth?" and we started looking at student work . . . So this is the process that we went through and it was nice to have a process that we could relatively center our meetings around. And then she would say, "So what are you talking about when you talk about these tasks?" And she would keep pushing me further, "What is the mathematics?" I'm like, oh, yeah, that would be a good question to ask.

Of course, not every teacher inquiry group has a facilitator or supportive leader. In these situations, the teacher community is forced to perform all aspects of the inquiry with whatever time and resources (intellectual and material) they bring to the process. Unless strong leadership and research skills are present in one or more of the teachers, our work with numerous teacher groups suggests that this often leads to less than satisfying results.

Enhancing the Interface between Teacher Inquiry and Broader Educational Contexts

The second kind of support we view as critical to SCTI involves relationships between the immediate teacher inquiry environment and other, usually broader, educational contexts. McLaughin and Talbert (2006) state:

Even the best-designed professional development resources will fall short, and the most robust professional community will dissolve, when other elements in teachers' professional context ignore, frustrate, or work at cross-purposes with the learning and change they intend. (p. 79)

These authors identify four sets of individuals prominent in these broader contexts: school administrators, teachers' organizations, professional developers, and parents and community members. Perhaps hidden in this list, we have also found university faculty providing research and other data-based information, professional organizations providing forums for teachers to engage in professional dialogue, and state and federal agencies introducing broad initiatives and mandates to play important and direct roles inside the teacher group. While we must be cognizant that teachers need to be both aware of and reactive to forces in these broader contexts, in our own work we have attempted to give equal emphasis to the teachers' ability to enter into and participate in these venues in a proactive manner. In other words, we see the interface between the teachers' work and the broader contexts as a two-way street in which teachers are both influencing and are influenced by the forces therein.

A facilitator can have both leader and membership status and is often in a unique position of being both "in" and "out" of a collaborative teacher inquiry group. Such a unique position can be important for providing supports that bridge contexts. She or he can play an important role in seeking connections between the teachers' inquiry focus and existing department, school, or district goals, as well as advocating for a public valuing of the work of the teachers. While school administrators can provide support by structuring time within the working day for teacher groups to meet, it is also important that they explicitly value collaborative work in communications with other faculty and co-participate in the process of sharing the vision and work of the teacher group, particularly with district administrators. In those cases when an external facilitator is not available, the principal emerges as an even more crucial source of support for teachers

engaging in collaborative inquiry (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006; Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001; Nelson & Sassi, 2005). But some administrators may lack the time, commitment, or ability to fully understand or become involved in the teachers' collaborative inquiry.

In a middle school with which we recently worked, a group of science teachers decided to collaboratively focus on their students' abilities to write scientific conclusions that met state standards. To establish baseline data on students' conclusion writing skills, the teachers analyzed results from a district-level assessment. As the year progressed, additional student data was collected, but a district-level summative assessment scheduled for March was cancelled that would have provided another data point for the teachers in their assessment of student growth. The group became concerned that they would not be able to draw any conclusions regarding their students' development. One of the teachers decided to ask the principal to directly intervene, using her position of authority, and encourage the group to proceed with the summative assessment despite the district cancellation. This principal had previously provided both support and commitment to the teacher group through the provision of professional development time and verbal school-wide recognition. The previous summer, the principal published a brief article in a district-wide publication acknowledging and praising the work of this teacher group. Because this teacher group was viewed as an exemplar of collaborative inquiry, it was important to the principal that they have evidence of the impact of their work on student learning. When the teacher group next met, the principal suggested the implementation of one final science conclusion writing assessment, couching this in terms of "bringing closure to their inquiry," and offered to provide further resources in

support of this process. This principal not only provided direct support to the teachers'

inquiry process, she also successfully linked the teachers' work to the broader school

(and even state) educational contexts, expanding the potential importance and impact of

the teachers' work.

Nurturing an Inquiry Stance

The third kind of support we view as important to SCTI involves the nurturing of

an inquiry stance amongst the teacher participants. To discuss this support, we make use

of Jaworski's (2006) notions of *inquiry as a tool* and *inquiry as a way of being* to clarify

our meaning of inquiry stance. In nearly all cases, collaborative inquiry groups seek

various data collection and analytic techniques in constructing a path through a given

inquiry cycle. Often this path is quite useful for identifying and addressing various

problems and dilemmas important in the teachers' individual or collective contexts.

Hence, inquiry can be a tool used by teachers to better understand learners, practice,

curriculum, or other important educational dimensions. However, Jaworski also discusses

the notion of inquiry in ways that transcend its use as a tool. Specifically, inquiry as a

way of being incorporates the notion of inquiry into the very essence of teachers as

professional educators, often manifested by an inherent desire to question and better

understand. This disposition to ponder and seek transformation underlies the essence of

an inquiry stance.

In a collaborative setting, an inquiry stance can be established or enhanced

through interactions amongst the teacher participants. In these settings, teachers can

display "a willingness to wonder, to ask questions, and to seek to understand by

collaborating with others in the attempt to make answers to them" (Wells, 1999, p. 121).

Unlike instances where teachers either reject or accept at face value ideas from others, an inquiry stance promotes knowledge negotiation (Nelson, 2005) that stimulates the examination of alternate perspectives and the questioning of one's own knowledge and beliefs in an effort to co-construct meaning.

The previously discussed example of a mathematics specialist serving as facilitator provides a rich example where modeling the questioning process and offering a genuine curiosity toward the work of the teacher group nurtured many teachers toward an inquiry stance. However, we do not imply that simply modeling an inquiry stance is sufficient support for teachers in making a transformation in their way of being, or even in expanding on a developing stance toward inquiry. In addition, we have experienced many teachers enter into an SCTI setting with an established inquiry stance, while we have witnessed others develop one over time. Further, teachers who would not be described as possessing an inquiry stance can be excellent teachers and professional educators. However, we have found the possession of an inquiry stance to be quite important to the inquiry work for either an individual or teacher group.

Summary

Collectively, these three kinds of supports are crucial to the work of teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry. Further, these three supports provide researchers with a theoretical framework for examining the notion of support. The remaining chapters of this book provide case studies that examine the nature and impact of supports in various SCTI contexts using this theoretical lens.

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