



## IN THE COMPANY OF COLLEAGUES: AN INTERIM REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEARNERS

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**Abstract**—This article reports on a professional development project that sought to establish a community of learners among high school teachers. Teachers from the English and history departments at a large urban high school met twice a month for two-and-a-half years. Project activities included reading and discussing pieces of fiction and history, developing an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum, and video-taping and viewing classroom instruction. Initial findings point to an enhanced collegiality among faculty within and across departments; reduced teacher isolation; and the development of an intellectual community for teachers within the high school. However, teachers at different points in their career trajectory were differentially affected by this project. Based on our preliminary findings, we offer implications for teacher induction and socialization, and on-going professional development. © 1998 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

American education is awash in a flood tide of reform initiatives unmatched since the 1920s. The scope of these proposals stretches from the transformation of school culture to efforts aimed at the transformation of individual teachers. At the heart of many initiatives lies the notion that teachers should establish “communities of learners” in their classrooms, where students, under the guidance of their teachers, explore challenging subject matter in depth. But where are teachers to find their own intellectual nourishment in such transformed schools? What will fuel their explorations of subject matter so that they can model for students the practice and habits of inquiry?

As compelling as the idea of a community of learners may be, it will forever remain a fragile entity if no parallel community exists among teachers. As Seymour Sarason has noted, “It is virtually impossible to create and sustain over time conditions for productive learning for students when they do not exist for teachers” (Sarason, 1990, p. 45). Particularly in high schools, few mechanisms exist for creating and sustaining intellectual communities among

teachers (Wineburg & Grossman, in press). The following report describes one effort to establish a community of learners among teachers.

In the United States, many high school teachers view their subject matter department as their professional community. One enduring reform from the first quarter of this century was the division of high school faculty into subject matter departments, where teachers are grouped by subject matter specialty, typically with a senior faculty member as chair. As the primary reference group for high school teachers, the department gives shape and direction to day-to-day practice. Departments influence “the selection, supervision and evaluation of staff; course definition and sequencing; tracking; curriculum development; textbook selection; and the assignment of teachers to courses and students to classes” (Johnson, 1990, p.171). McLaughlin (1993) has observed that departments vary widely, even within a single building. In some cases, “teachers who work literally across the hall from one another but work in different departments experience their workplace in critically different ways” (p.92). It is within these

varied departments that norms of practice, attitudes toward teaching and students and even epistemological understandings are established (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995).

Although the department has become a central organizational feature, essentially part of the grammar of the American high school (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), it has been virtually ignored as a venue for professional development. Typical models of in-service professional development serve individual teachers and are built around one-day workshops or two-week summer institutes. In the former, teachers might select from a menu of offerings at the district, regional or state level. Since these workshops attract teachers from many buildings and districts, they may have little bearing on the interests and needs of specific departments. Yet teachers are expected to return to their buildings and departments and share their newly acquired "expertise" with their colleagues by giving brief reports at the next departmental meeting. Ultimately, such activities have little lasting effect (Miller & Lord, 1995).

Extended workshops held during the summer offer a more rigorous alternative. In the humanities, teachers typically travel to a university campus for a two- or three-week workshop on current literary or historiographic trends. Although these programs create a "hot-house" environment for individual teacher learning, those who enjoy this transformative experience will return to schools and departments that remain unchanged. Such models may be convenient from an organizational and political point of view, but they do little to establish, enhance or sustain an intellectual community within the department or school. Moreover, this notion of professional development flies in the face of research on teacher change as well as common sense, by assuming that a "changed" individual can withstand the forces of the workplace that work to draw that individual back to the status quo.

Contrasting with initiatives aimed at individual teachers are reforms that target an entire school's culture. At this level, reformers must negotiate the complex social and political world of the comprehensive high school. Competing constituencies that include departments, teacher unions, building and central administrators, parents, school boards, students

and even voters constrain the nature and range of school reform. Situated between the organizational inertia that plagues school restructuring and the atomized character of typical in-service training, professional development aimed at the department offers a fresh alternative. Clearly, if our intent is to rethink the experience that students have with English, math, science or history during their high school career, then the department serves as a key point of intervention.

What follows is one example of a department-based approach. Although still in the initial stages of our analysis, we consider in this article how teachers at various points along their career paths experience the project. Finally, we consider some of the promises and pitfalls presented when teachers seek to form a community of learners.

### The Project

Funded by the James S. McDonnell Foundation, the *Community of Learners Project* is based on the simple premise that if schools are going to be intellectually exciting places for students they must first be intellectually stimulating places for teachers (Wineburg & Grossman, in press). In the spirit of a design experiment (Brown, 1992), we have attempted to simultaneously construct and study a model of professional development. Rather than opting for the level of control available in a laboratory setting or the tightly structured field experiment, we entered the complex environment of an urban high school with a model of professional development that has as its goal teachers' ongoing intellectual development.

The Community of Learners Project incorporates three features:

1. a department-based model of professional development;
2. distributed expertise; and
3. multiple corridors to teacher development and cognitive change.

#### *Department-Based Model of Professional Development*

Working at a large, multiethnic, urban high school, the Community of Learners Project has

drawn together members of the history and English departments to read books, design an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum, and discuss teaching and learning. For the past two years, teachers have met twice a month, once for an entire day and once after school. The grant allowed us to pay substitutes for the all-day meetings. These meetings were held away from school, usually at the university.

Our goal has been to forge a community of teacher learners that included the full range of teachers, from student interns to department chairs. The natural affinity of these disciplines, a recognized tradition of collaboration between English and history teachers, and our own expertise in these subject matter areas contributed to the decision to locate this project in these subject matter departments. More importantly, by asking English teachers to read history and history teachers to read literature, we “leveled the playing field” and made it more safe for teachers to assume the stance of learners. A history teacher who might be reluctant to display a gap in historical knowledge (especially with the department chair present) could enter a discussion of literature on equal footing with other history teachers. The same held true for English teachers immersed in a discussion of a piece of history.

Although the departments have offered a point of entry into the school as well as a boundary for the project, the notion of a *community* of learners stands as an alternative model for professional relationships. In this case, we conceptualize community as going beyond a shared context or history. As noted above, departments are an artifact of the formal organization of schools. Consequently, specific functions, such as department chair, may be defined by contract. Even the membership of a department may be regulated by the state certification requirements. Sergiovanni (1994) concludes such structural features are one means by which our professional relationships are “constructed for us by others and become codified into a system of hierarchies, roles, and role expectations” (p. 217). In contrast to an organizational model that rests largely on structural relationships is the model of community in which individuals are bound to each other through common commitments. “Communities are defined by their centers of values, sentiments, and beliefs that

provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of *we* from a collection of *I*'s (Sergiovanni, 1994, p.217). In our project the common commitments were the beliefs that we all had something to learn, we all had something to share with the rest of the group and we all wanted what was best for students. While these commitments were shared by most of the group, people differed in their specific understandings of these beliefs and their expectations of the project. Such differences insured that conflict would also be a dimension of community.

### *Distributed Expertise*

Rather than envisioning professional development as an individual effort, our project has worked to establish and sustain a community of diverse learners. A central feature of this project, the concept of distributed expertise, portrays thinking not as the product of an individual mind but as emerging from the discourse and dynamics of a group (Brown, 1992; Gallimore and Tharp, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). Distributed expertise represents more than a simple aggregate of individual understandings. Rather, the forum of group discussions provides the means by which individual contributions are taken to levels that no group member could attain individually. The individual teachers in our group bring with them very different areas of expertise; some are extremely knowledgeable about the subject matter, whereas others bring specialized knowledge of students, including linguistic minority students and students enrolled in special education programs. Teachers also bring different pedagogical understandings and expertise to the group discussions. By drawing on each individual's private understandings, which represent these different degrees of pedagogical and disciplinary expertise, the collective understanding of the group is thus advanced.

In addition to the nine initial members from the English department and the five initial members from history, our project included four student teachers, a special education teacher, a teacher of English as a Second Language, the librarian and a team of five university researchers. Ultimately the group included 11 of the 12 members of the English department while only one additional history teacher joined the project. Through the public and shared

discourse around texts, curriculum and teaching, the emerging community tapped into the strengths and talents of all its members. While our discussions of texts and curricula often revealed deep and consistent disciplinary differences, they also have offered the occasion to talk about students, teaching, and the politics of educational reform.

*Multiple Corridors to Teacher Development and Cognitive Change*

Over the past two years, teachers in the project have met, on average, twice a month. Meetings have been structured around three activities—reading books together, developing an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum, and an initial effort at video-clubs, where teachers watched and reflected on each others' classroom practice through video.

First, for part of these meetings the participants functioned much like a book club where a group of readers meets once a month in a member's living room to discuss an agreed-upon book. In our project, teachers discussed works of fiction, memoirs, and history. Texts were proposed and selected by the participants as exemplars of particular genres or for the issues of teaching and learning they brought to the surface. On occasion the thematic orientation of the curricular work prompted the selection of a particular text.

Second, throughout the life of the project, teachers have worked in groups ranging in size from two to a dozen to develop an interdisciplinary curriculum. Although these groups produced relatively few curricular materials, the activity provided an extended opportunity for teachers to work with colleagues across the boundaries of department and grade. Moreover, the discussions surrounding curriculum development forced teachers to be explicit with each other regarding their long-held assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning. A number of texts and ideas that were addressed in our discussions of curriculum found their way into classroom activities. At least one unit, a comparison of the American and Vietnamese revolutions, was developed and taught by two project teachers.

Finally, in an effort to have teachers examine questions of practice and student understanding

in their own classrooms, we initiated a video-club activity. This activity involved teachers being video-taped in class by a member of the research team. Every teacher then presented and discussed a five to ten minute clip of their class in a small group of three or four colleagues.

Each of these activities, as well as the diverse experience the teachers bring to the group, present multiple opportunities for teacher learning. Our research agenda is guided by the following questions:

1. How does intellectual community form among high school teachers?
2. How does the formation of a community of learners provide opportunities for teachers' learning of subject matter, pedagogical content knowledge, student understanding and curriculum development?
3. How do teachers learn from colleagues?
4. What do teachers at different stages of their career take from participation in a community of learners?

In examining these questions we have relied on a diverse array of data sources. These include (a) interviews with teachers held at regular intervals throughout the project, (b) think-aloud protocols of individual teachers as they engage in textual analyses, (c) full transcripts of project meetings, (d) written self-reports, (e) records of e-mail correspondence among participants and (f) ethnographic fieldnotes.

While each research question addresses a critical issue regarding the professional development of teachers as members in a community of learners, our initial analysis has focused on the fourth question above. Admittedly, our present analysis does not reflect either as systematic or thorough a treatment of the data as what we ultimately intend. We have already begun systematic discourse analyses of the book club discussions to see how teachers co-construct understandings, and how different individuals contribute their own expertise to shape the collective understanding of the group. For this article, we have engaged in preliminary analyses of interview transcripts, questionnaires and surveys, and other written documents for a subset of teachers with differing levels of experience. We focused particularly on what they reported learning from their participation in the project.

We then used our fieldnotes and conceptual memos from group meetings to look for confirming and disconfirming evidence for these self-report data. Over the past two years issues and patterns have emerged that have shaped our thinking about the role of community in the professional lives of teachers. In what follows, we provide an overview of what we have learned with respect to the question: What do teachers, at different points along a career trajectory and with differing degrees of expertise, gain from participating in a community of learners with their peers?

We begin with a discussion of teachers with more than 10 years of experience. For contrast we next examine the experience of teachers who joined the project during their first or second year of teaching. Our attention then turns to the distinct perspective of specialists, especially that of the special education teacher. We then consider the participation of student teachers in the project and conclude with observations about our own participation.

### Experienced Teachers

For experienced teachers the subtle and tightly woven interplay between one's intellectual history, curiosity, and workplace context gives shape and direction to a teacher's own understanding of teaching and professional development (Huberman, 1989). In the United States, the individualistic orientation of professional development and the isolation and independence teachers typically experience in their work further complicate efforts at more collaborative approaches to professional development. The constraints imposed by the professional culture are well documented. Jackson (1968) and Lortie (1975) identified organizational features of schools that produce the norms of privacy and noninterference that shape teachers' work. In her review of teachers' professional relations, Little (1990) identifies a continuum of collegial relations that runs from independence (such as sharing stories in the faculty room) to interdependence (engaging in joint work).

While the notion of joint work has been popular, it relies on truly collaborative tasks where teachers assume shared responsibility, initiative and leadership. Little (1990) notes that oppor-

tunities for creating such interdependencies are rare and that "the most common configurations of teacher-to-teacher interaction may do more to bolster isolation than to diminish it" (p. 511).

For American high schools McLaughlin (1993) found the department to be the locus for establishing professional norms of practice and collegiality. Teachers in highly collegial settings reported "a high level of innovativeness, high levels of energy and enthusiasm, *and support for personal growth and learning*" (p. 94, emphasis added). In settings exhibiting strong norms of privacy and low collegiality, teachers reported that "they see their job as routine, their workplace setting as highly bureaucratized, and their subject matter as static or unchanging" (p. 94).

When the Community of Learners project started, Columbia High School (pseudonyms are used for all proper names) was typical of many schools: teachers had little opportunity to meet with each other, department meetings were clerical at best, and teachers knew about each others' teaching only by way of student report. If shared notions of professional growth (other than a dislike for district-mandated programs) and teacher learning existed, they were not readily apparent to us or to the teachers themselves. As one experienced teacher remarked, "it's very, very difficult to get people of different personalities and different perspectives on teaching into some sort of harmonious agreement." Two years into the project, there is the recognition by all that establishing a learning culture among teachers involves more than individual initiative and interest. Rather, it rests on forms of social and intellectual organization new to the secondary school setting. Comments from several experienced teachers point to the challenges presented by the status quo.

Barbara, a 20 year veteran of the classroom, transferred to Columbia High School two years before the Community of Learners Project began. When she arrived, she perceived that recent turnover in the English department, especially the departure of a charismatic department chair, had diminished levels of collegiality. But there was neither the time nor the space for coming together. Department meetings were minimal, and even casual meetings inspired by Friday afternoon conviviality—not an uncommon occurrence in some schools—did not happen. As a result, Barbara barely knew teachers in her

department, much less teachers from other departments.

For Chuck, an experienced English teacher, the limiting factor was time. Committee work associated with site-based management, extra-curricular activities, and the time spent on reading papers dampened his willingness and ability to work with others. Steven, a 30 year veteran teacher in the history department, was more direct in his observations: “In this building, in all frankness, as in most buildings, we’re closeted, compartmented, both within and between departments. I don’t know what goes on up on the third floor, the math department.” Steven’s comments imply a separation that goes beyond the physical. Words such as *closeted* and *compartmented* suggest both a disciplinary and psychological separation that is maintained by organizational factors. If teachers do develop a professional community in such an environment, it is typically an intimate, ad hoc meeting of like minds.

It has been difficult to predict how project activities such as reading texts together or working on curriculum would affect individuals at different points along their career paths. Yet for many of the project’s experienced teachers, the opportunity to engage in substantive, intellectual discussions with peers during the past two years has produced unanticipated benefits. As one teacher a dozen years shy of retirement stated, it “might be just the thing... to make it survivable.”

Barbara, an experienced English teacher, attributed the positive shift in her attitude to being part of a community:

I’m just struck again, again, and again [by] how much more I’ve felt connected to my colleagues than I ever felt before... I feel more connected to my job because of this for a number of reasons, but I suppose connecting to colleagues outside the department, getting to know people like Mary, and Olivia, and Steven that I never could possibly have gotten to know. Normally, in a building it never would have happened.

Beyond knowing other teachers in the school, Barbara has found the chance to meet with colleagues and “chew on texts” to be the single most significant benefit of the project—an experience that frequently spills over into her classroom.

Steven, an experienced history teacher, noted how this experience stands in contrast to how

teachers are typically treated. He found it refreshing “to have these discussions and be treated professionally... many of us feel that we frequently are not treated as professionally as we should be treated.” The notion of professionalism in Steven’s comments reflects the need to publicly discuss questions of subject matter and practice with peers. For Steven, the Community of Learners Project reaffirmed “the need to teach in manners that engage students and fosters in them questioning and skepticism.”

The experienced teachers were also sensitive to the personal and endemic limits of reform initiatives. Unlike novice and student teachers who have not been fully socialized to the norms of privacy, the experienced teachers have the most at stake—both to gain and to lose. Chuck commented that the group has provided a mirror for reflection:

I can cast all these illusions when I’m alone... You kind of exist in that personal world of teaching... mainly a world of self-congratulation if you’re able to do that. And I think most teachers have to do that. And this group kind of breaks that down. For me, you know, it makes me look at me a little harder, makes me realize that my perceptions aren’t as astute as I once thought they were.

Chuck’s comments point to what it means, not only to be a reflective practitioner, but to engage in this reflection in a public forum. This goes to the heart of the norms of privacy and isolation in teaching. Although most of the experienced teachers acknowledge the learning opportunities offered by the project, several of them also experienced personal and professional conflict within the project.

A continuing issue throughout the first year of meetings was the nature of reading in history compared to literature. Often these discussions exposed pedagogical rifts. Like strike-slip faults that lie quiet for centuries but suddenly come to life with a burst of tectonic activity, long dormant tensions within the faculty were suddenly awakened. In some instances, such as our discussion of Nathan McCall’s (1994) *Make Me Wanna Holler*, these tensions were rooted deep in school politics and the interpersonal history of the teachers involved. In other instances, such as our discussion of Lisa Delpit’s (1988) “The Silenced Dialogue,” they emerged from differences in perspectives teachers held as subject matter specialists.

In response, several teachers took brief respites from project activities. A few withdrew from the project. Although their decision to drop out is suggestive of an *elective individualism* (Hargreaves, 1993)—where teachers eventually determine that working alone is the preferred work mode—we believe their decision underscores the fact that collaboration invariably engenders conflict. If anything, *community* provides a venue where pre-existing conflicts can be enacted in a public forum. The norms of privacy and non-interference typically limit the opportunities, if not the incentive, for teachers to experience fundamental differences in their beliefs about teaching and learning. The Community of Learners project has allowed the group the necessary time to become sensitive to these differences and to explore how such differences are to be negotiated.

The project's influence on curriculum was also strongest among the experienced teachers. Over the life of the project at least seven experienced teachers have used all or part of project texts in their classrooms. Additionally, the unit comparing the American and Vietnamese revolutions was developed by two senior members of the group. Although we are not able at this time to fully detail how the discussion within their classrooms has been affected, it is clear that the project has influenced the content of that discussion.

Finally, we have been struck by the renewed political activism of the experienced teachers. As the project concluded its second year, the group often considered ways to promote similar learning activities among the other faculty as well as how to continue the project beyond the life of the grant. Both efforts were led by experienced teachers. Most notable have been their efforts to use the project as a political base in an attempt to reform the school's schedule. Here their goal has been to move towards fewer but longer periods as well as building time for continued project meetings into the yearly calendar. While no final decision has been reached by the school on these issues, it seems clear that the teachers involved with the project see their community of learners as an emerging political actor within the school.

### New Teachers

The workplace conditions and professional socialization of new teachers has consistently

drawn the attention of researchers (Lortie, 1975; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Bullough, 1989; Grossman, 1990). A recurring theme in this research is the overwhelming isolation faced by new teachers. Lortie (1975) observed that the structural organization of schools, indeed their very architecture, constrained the frequency and nature of collegial interaction. New teachers are given limited supervision, minimal contact with colleagues and immediately assume the same complex set of responsibilities and tasks as experienced teachers. In the absence of a supportive professional culture, the first year of teaching is often an ordeal to be endured.

Indeed, prior to joining this project, the new teachers in the group viewed their experience at Columbia in this way. As first year teachers they felt isolated and even somewhat anonymous to other staff. Helen, an English teacher in her second year of teaching when the project started, described her first year:

I felt abandoned and frightened, like I was really on my own. There was no camaraderie that really developed with my colleagues, my older colleagues. There was another first year teacher right next to me and we bonded. But we didn't have much choice ... there were actually people on the faculty that I was afraid of.

Rarely do new teachers enter a lively and supportive professional community of practice, where talented mentors guide novices through the troubled waters of their newly chosen profession. Feiman-Nemser (1983) noted that while such isolation "leaves room for self-expression... it also narrows the range of alternatives that will be tried and increases the likelihood that the novice will misinterpret successes and failures" (p.153).

In contrast to the isolation of the first year of teaching, participation in the project has provided new teachers with a community that extends beyond the 'other new teacher next door.' In her second and third years of teaching, Helen found herself in a community of teachers where her questions of practice and theory were addressed as concerns common to everyone in the group. While Helen expected a clear hierarchy in the group's structure and process, what she found was a growing willingness for everyone to draw on the collective understandings that emerged through shared discourse. Moreover,

she began to see her own participation as making a positive contribution:

It's exciting to me that I've been able to learn from people that I work with and I think that they've learned some things from me ... it puts our whole relationship on a different level.

Less socialized than the experienced teachers to the norms of privacy and isolation common to schools (Little, 1990), the new teachers have actively sought the collegiality provided by the project. For Helen, this has also spilled over into her interactions with colleagues outside of the project, pushing her to develop a broader range of professional relationships within the school.

New teachers typically focus on the pressing concerns of classroom management and day-to-day planning. Participation in the Community of Learners has widened Helen's vision beyond these immediate concerns. She has assumed a degree of leadership and has become a strong voice for the incorporation of this model of professional development into the school calendar. Typically the isolation and marginalization of new teachers deny them a voice in the shaping of local reforms. In this case, these factors have been mediated by the developing community.

### Specialists

As the comprehensive high school in America has come to serve a broader student population through mainstreaming special needs and non-English speaking students, specialists in these areas have increasingly become part of school faculties. Often lacking a subject matter specialty and a large departmental home, they may seem neither fish nor fowl. Frequently these teachers are itinerant workers, moving period by period to whatever classroom is available (social studies in the home economics room this period, anger management in the photography studio the next) and even traveling to different schools throughout the day or week. Without the organizational and political support a large subject matter department provides, these teachers may come to feel distant from the heart of the school's academic agenda. By including special education and ESL teachers in our project, our intent was to bring together the full range of teachers working within a content area.

Participation in the community of learners has allowed these teachers to take part in the broader discourse within the school and to heighten the awareness of the special needs students among all teachers. English and history teachers have confronted their own preconceptions of the function these specialists serve. Typically, communication between departmental teachers and those serving special needs students might focus on a specific student or even specific content (as when the special education teacher interested in conducting more formal discussions in her classes sought out the debate coach for specific activities). Two years of project meetings have not only reshaped the nature and level of collegiality between the specialists and the regular teachers, but also created a more permeable boundary between the learning activities of the project and what transpires in the specialists' classrooms.

As the project participants have worked to define the norms of discourse among themselves, Mary, the special education teacher, has worked to establish those same norms within her classroom. When asked how this experience with colleagues has affected her teaching, Mary pointed to her classroom walls:

The kinds of things that I've posted around the room about supporting claims with evidence, we talked about these things very specifically, about listening, about building on others' comments, about questioning each other, and getting credit for listening to someone and then asking them a question or making a direct comment about what they've said, and really giving people credit for that kind of thing.

Mary does not see her participation in the project as a one-way street. Her participation and that of the ESL teacher have put the needs of marginal students on everyone's agenda. The result is a shared concern for students she teaches:

Barbara and David [two experienced members of the English department], for example, both of them teach honors classes, which wouldn't seem to be very compatible with the kids that I teach. We might not have a lot to share in terms of curriculum and students ... On the contrary, both of them are really sympathetic with the needs of special education students, welcome them into their classes, are eager to support their efforts ... Some of the things that I started doing a little over a year ago ... David got wind of and was really interested in, ordered the book and started doing some of the same things in his classes.



Mary and David also found themselves working together in promoting opportunities to strengthen collegial bonds beyond those teachers in the project. They initiated a book club activity open to all teachers and staff in the school. As a result, upwards of 20 teachers and staff from foreign language, business and the nurse's office started meeting one Friday afternoon a month to talk about Doris Kerns Goodwin's (1994) *No Ordinary Time* or Robert Owen Butler's (1992) *A Good Scent From A Strange Mountain*. Mary commented that "there really is a hunger I think for engaging intellectually with one's peers." The creation of a learning community among 16 teachers in the school has awakened intellectual needs among the other faculty—needs these faculty may not have recognized since they were students themselves.

### Student Teachers

The student teaching experience stands as the culminating activity of nearly all teacher education programs. Depending on the program, teaching candidates will have had varying degrees of observation time in classrooms, but it is the final and extended period of practice teaching that offers potential teachers their closest approximation of teaching. While student teaching is a formative experience for teachers, it holds a number of pitfalls (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1985). One frequently noted by teachers themselves is that learning to teach occurs in two distinct venues: the university teacher education program and the classroom. The 'two worlds' often clash; student teachers became dismayed when they realized that little of the current thinking about learning has found its way into the field. Often they are explicitly told by experienced teachers to forget the "theory" of the academy.

The gulf between the academy and the school can extend beyond educational theory. The collegial discourse and the life of the mind that shape interactions at the university have few parallels in the hurried life and do-it-now culture of schools. When she entered the teacher education program, Wendy, a student teacher in English, expected schools to offer intellectual community. She was quickly disabused of this expectation during her first observation at a

different secondary school within the same district as Columbia:

I was absolutely amazed and so crushed to discover that teachers didn't seem to ... connect as people who had a passion for the same subject. I was so crushed that people weren't reading. These are teachers! Why aren't they reading?

What Wendy anticipated was a learning-enriched culture where teachers viewed learning, and learning to teach, as continuing intellectual endeavors:

I thought somehow it would feel more like an intellectual environment—and this is, I'm sure, very idealistic—in that there would be talk about literature and film in some significant way. You know, over lunch in the lunchroom. And forgetting, of course, I mean it's a work place and there's the usual gossip and politics and just day-to-day stuff.

Rhonda, a student teacher in history, viewed the tendency towards isolation and privatism as reflective of broader social dynamics:

One of the things that's just been most striking to me about the teachers is how defensive they are, which they should be. I mean teachers get blamed for everything that's wrong in the schools, and they're low paid, and overworked ... you can't blame them for being, just sort of shutting the doors and not wanting to deal with additional problems with their colleagues.

Rhonda's observations point to the roots of privatism in teaching. Individuals for whom success often depends on adapting to the established norms quickly pick up on the tenor and content of collegial interactions. Whether it is by not talking about theory or by not asking for help to avoid appearing incompetent, student teachers are sensitive to their precarious position. Future employment hinges on the recommendation of the cooperating teacher and the provisional contracts offered to first year teachers allow them to be dismissed without cause, with continued employment at the will of building administrators. Rhonda relates the advice she was given by older teachers at another secondary school:

I've been told, you should not agitate for any kind of change, that you will be marginalized and don't—if you're coming in with lots of new techniques—don't try to talk to people about them. Don't try to force them on other people or enlighten other people, because you'll get in a lot of trouble for that.

In contrast, the four student teachers in the Community of Learners Project entered a relationship, not with one or two cooperating teachers, but with an emerging community of 20 teachers. For Rhonda, participation allowed her to understand that differences in pedagogy she observed within the group reflected differences in the nature and traditions of the disciplines. In Wendy's case, she saw the project activities as a means of learning how to teach critical reading. The implications for teacher education were clear: although a skilled reader herself, Wendy concluded that all pre-service English teachers should be reading and discussing books together. She saw a direct connection between the type of collaborative learning that occurred within the Community of Learners Project and gaps in her own teacher education.

As teacher educators ourselves, we were familiar with negative perspectives and attitudes toward teacher education programs in the field. Consequently, we exercised much discretion in our use of research materials or texts currently popular within schools of education. Less aware of these attitudes, the student teachers eagerly contributed to the group's reading agenda by suggesting texts they encountered at the university. These texts included Michael Walzer's (1992) *What It Means to be An American* and Lisa Delpit's (1988) article "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children." As teachers struggled to define questions that would guide the development of curriculum across disciplines and grades, it was the student teachers who brought to the table the five habits of mind discussed by Deborah Meier (1995), conferring on them a validity we could not. Eventually Meier's questions were incorporated into a set of questions that guided the group's work in curriculum development. Thus, the student teachers established themselves as a conduit between the academy and the school in ways not easily available to the research team.

#### University Team

Although the research team brings an expertise developed through our study and work in a variety of settings, including our own teaching, it is our role as outsiders that seems critical to sustaining the development of a community. As

the initiators of the project, we sought the resources necessary for creating the time and space for teachers to come together. Throughout the first two-and-a-half years, we also facilitated project activities and meetings. But as members of the community who did not share the daily context of school life or a long interpersonal history with other participants, we were often drawn into mediations. Clearly, opportunities for factionalism and conflict abound when a group of teachers, long accustomed to independence and socialized to the norms of privacy, are brought together. Early on, when rifts of epistemology and pedagogy were laid bare, it was our intercession that helped to keep some participants involved.

It is tempting for advocates of teacher community to assume it is easy for groups of teachers, not used to working with each other (sometimes actively avoiding each other) to come together and establish norms of professional civility. Our experience belies this romantic conception. Conflict is a natural process in a diverse group of 20 people—people who represent different backgrounds, subject matter training, social and political perspectives, and beliefs (sometimes diametrically opposed) of what constitutes good teaching. As outsiders in this community, we could mediate conflict in ways that were difficult for insiders to do.

Whenever researchers approach their work as participant-observers, they face the question of how to balance these two roles. As the initiators of this intervention, we served a pivotal function. Initially, the community we envisioned was to be structured around a set of professional development activities instigated by the researchers. By providing the time and space for a community to emerge, however, we were in fact asking teachers to assume a greater agency in their professional development. In some instances, the research agenda was out of sync with the level of trust the group had developed.

For example, employing videos of teachers' classrooms as another "text" through which teachers could approach questions of practice exemplifies the difficulty of our role. Although the teachers initially expressed enthusiasm for video-clubs, only one "video-club meeting" occurred. From our perspective as teacher educators, video-clubs offered the chance for teachers to examine the connection between teaching and

student understanding. But from the perspective of some participants, videos were intrusive devices that carried with them the taint of evaluation. In professions such as social work or clinical psychology, the act of watching peers practice is part of professional expectations. With few exceptions, such a culture does not exist in teaching. We underestimated the time needed to establish a professional culture that was receptive to peer feedback and critique.

This speaks of the care researchers must take as participant-observers and the need to be sensitive to both sides of that identity. While from the outset it was clear to all the participants that we were engaged in a research activity, aspects of that role (such as the omnipresent tape recorders) proved troubling for some members of the community. As participants we were also members of the emerging community and found ourselves increasingly aware of the fit between project activities, our expectations and the professional culture we had entered. While at times we thought it necessary to nudge the group in a direction of our interest (e.g. the research agenda), we also came to appreciate the challenges teachers face, both on a personal and organizational level, when they are asked to rethink the accepted norms and values of their professional culture. This is not to suggest that we have abandoned items on the research agenda, but that we are more cognizant of the time, effort, and trust that underlie efforts to reform the professional culture of teaching.

### Conclusions

The project we have described sits at the complex intersection of departmental and disciplinary boundaries, school politics, interpersonal histories and teacher learning—unpredictable terrain for even modest efforts aimed at reforming the professional culture of teaching. The broad-brush nature of our depiction dulls the voices of individuals, but suggests larger trends. We are just beginning to explore in systematic ways—relying on systematic discourse analyses of group discussions—precisely how a community of teachers changes over time. Clearly, we have observed dramatic effects with novice and student teachers in terms of their own learning and their sense of isolation. While it is tempting to assert implica-

tions for teacher preparation and induction, only further analyses will allow us to determine what factors directly bear on teacher socialization.

More problematic to understand is what happens with teachers who are more fully developed in their professional identities. There is evidence to suggest that some experienced teachers found the project activities difficult and threatening. While new teachers may have felt less isolated, a few experienced teachers seem to have been further sequestered in their rooms. But other experienced teachers have taken on new leadership roles in the school. The power of a community of learners and the richness of intellectual resources that exists within a group can fuel a political activism strong enough to reshape school culture—for example, by incorporating time for teachers' collaborative learning within the school calendar.

While teachers within the group recognize that the nature and content of the discussions have changed over the past two years, we do not fully understand how a group of this kind matures over time. Although still in the initial stages, our fine-grained analyses of group discussions point to collective intellectual growth, a maturation and sophistication in the discussion of text. Further analyses will allow us to track how this growth manifests in individuals as well as the collective.

Admittedly, the most authentic assessment of professional development activities may be how teachers take what they have learned into the classroom. Students are the ultimate beneficiaries of professional development. We are mindful of the need to track changes in teaching and learning that occur as a result of this project. However given the complexity of changing classroom practices, especially for experienced teachers who have deeply rooted beliefs and approaches to teaching, it is important to establish realistic timelines for looking for change in practice. Some teachers spoke of the discomfort they were beginning to feel with their current practice. How this discomfort, voiced in a public setting, begins to manifest itself in actual change in the classroom is part of our continuing research agenda.

We already have evidence that the curriculum of the school was affected by the project. Teachers brought project-related texts into the classroom or tried out curricular units they had developed with colleagues. However, curriculum is perhaps the easiest avenue for change in

humanities classrooms. Much harder to change are ingrained patterns of discourse, in which students rarely attain a powerful voice. Our discussion of Postman's and Weingartner's (1969) *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and Lisa Delpit's (1988) "The Silenced Dialogue" began to raise much more fundamental issues about classroom interactions. As we continue with the study, we will examine how these group discussions interact with individual teachers' own developmental trajectories.

When teachers come together for a day-long or a even a week-long institute, the disciplinary and pedagogical issues we have encountered do not have time to surface. Only in a committed community, where individuals have the sustained opportunity to explore issues of teaching and learning with their peers, do such differences emerge. As issues have been reexamined with new insights, as the books we have read continue to weave their way through our conversations and classrooms, we have realized the importance of simply having the time to learn together.

But time is a limited and prized commodity in schools that is firmly linked to money. The feasibility of finding time for teachers to learn together is constrained by tight budgets. To be sure, many of our project activities have been supported by grant money. But many districts already include five to seven days of in-service training in the calendar. Some buildings, such as those associated with Sizer's Coalition for Essential Schools, have reconfigured the schedule in ways that permit teachers to come together for longer and more frequent periods. If schools and districts intend to reconstitute schools as "learning communities," they must take the long view: creating "community" is no quick fix. In a political climate shaped by tighter budgets and calls for greater accountability, policy makers may be wary of approaches to teacher development that recognize the non-linear nature of personal and professional transformation. It will take both commitment and courage to provide teachers the time they need to "chew on texts."

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