

Collaborative Models for Teacher Professional Learning

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“[I]f we want schools to produce more powerful learning on the part of students, we have to offer more powerful learning opportunities to teachers,” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, pp. 1013-1014).

Teacher professional learning is characterized by three often separate phases: teacher preparation, induction, and continuing professional development. While teachers’ learning needs at each phase are not the same, we, as teacher educators, have sought to provide opportunities for common professional learning in our school/university partnership. We utilized practice-based professional development strategies that engaged teachers in the tasks of teaching – planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting – positioning preservice and inservice teachers alongside one another for this learning. Ball and Cohen (1999) suggest that it is through inquiring about their practice that teachers develop and improve their instruction in order to positively influence student learning.

Conceptual Framework

The Partnership Learning Triangle (PLT) shown in Figure 1 presents a model representing learning across this school/university partnership. Each line has a double arrow indicating the reciprocal learning that takes place within groups (teachers with each other, teacher candidates with each other, etc.) and across groups (teachers and teacher candidates, teachers and students, teacher candidates and students, faculty and teacher candidates) as they interact in this collaborative inquiry about learning and teaching. This model breaks down the traditional assumptions about the hierarchical relationships among university faculty, classroom teachers, and teacher candidates.

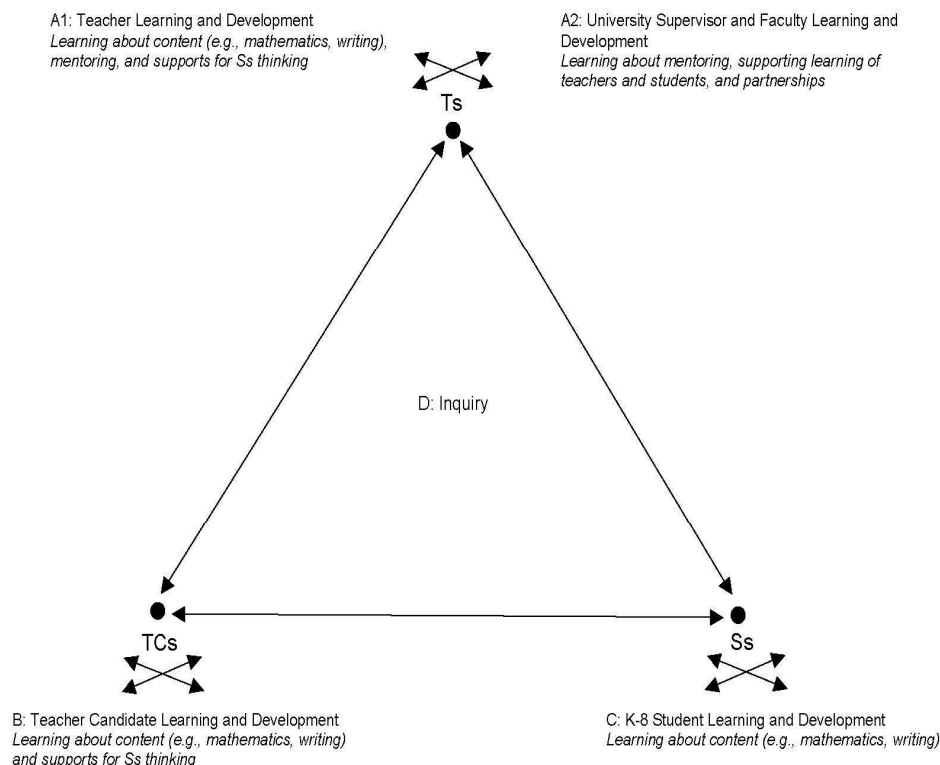


Figure 1: Partnership Learning Triangle

Similar to Cohen and Ball's (2000) Instructional Triangle, the PLT shows the interactions among teachers and students around content. The PLT illustrates the interactions among teachers (A), teacher candidates (B), and students (C) around a common area of inquiry (D) employing Ziechner's call to create structures for bringing academic, practitioner, and community-based knowledge together in the teaching and learning process (2010). In this partnership, inquiry was focused on improving students' learning by studying and improving teaching. The inquiry and collaboration occurred within school- and classroom-based professional learning communities (PLCs), as well as within university course-based PLCs.

Research Questions

In our work with these teachers, we sought to understand how each of these elements - teachers (school and university), teacher candidates, and students - interacted to produce learning across the partnership. This focus led to the development of the following research question:

In what ways does collaborative professional learning in a school/university partnership, focused on deepening student thinking and reasoning,

- influence the learning of K-8 students, teacher candidates, mentor teachers, principals, and university faculty; and
- support the development of the teacher candidates' vision of what it means to be a teacher (e.g., seek opportunities to deprivatize their practice and refine their teaching in collaboration with others and with a focus on student thinking)?

Design Principles

As cohort leaders, our actions and decisions were informed by three design principles - 1) establish professional learning communities, 2) connect theory and practice, and 3) elicit student thinking to further learning. We utilized these because we believe they offer "powerful learning opportunities" for teacher candidates that will influence their actions, decisions, and visions of effective teaching.

Based on the work of Kruse, Louis, and Byrk (1994) we established professional learning communities within our cohort that

- engaged in reflective dialogue,
- deprivatized practice,
- collectively focused on student learning,
- collaborated, and
- constructed shared norms and values.

The cohort was split into four- to five-person Critical Friends Groups (CFG) (Curry, 2008). The use of CFG protocols encouraged and supported reflective dialogue in courses and field-based collaborative sessions that included both mentors and teacher candidates. The triad structure - specifically sharing a common classroom and school - provided the physical proximity that supported deprivatized practice. After-school collaborative sessions further enhanced their common learning through looking at student work or students at work via a video clip from a lesson, for example. On campus, teacher candidates brought *problems of practice* to work on in small consultancy groups.

We introduced a lesson planning cycle (see Figure 2) based on Japanese Lesson Study (Fernández, 2005; Watanabe, 2002) to the teacher candidates and their mentor teachers. This collaborative professional learning approach centered on student learning and collaboration as a means to support student learning.

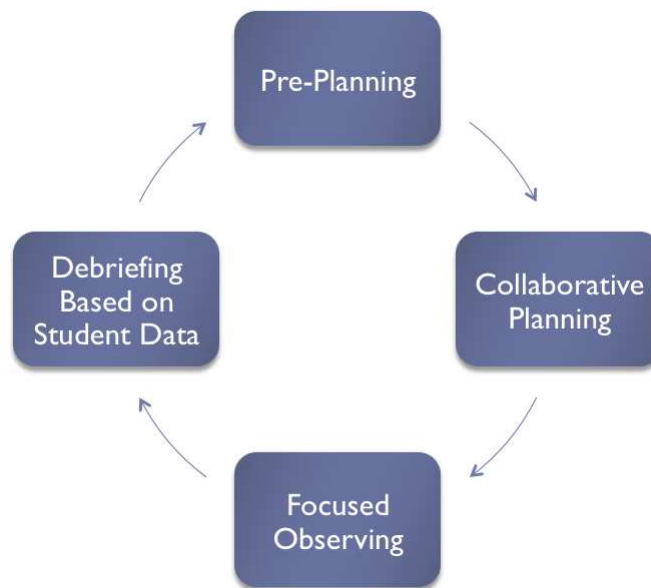


Figure 2: Planning Cycle

Components of the planning cycle offered foci for the after-school collaborative sessions. In one session, teacher candidates brought in sample student work from their unit's preassessment. Discussion centered on making sense of what students already knew and could do and then considering next instructional steps. For another session, teacher candidates co-planned a lesson that they would be teaching and brought the lesson draft to a collaborative session where the lesson was fine-tuned with advice from the mentor teachers and their colleagues. A third session centered on focused observation of one triad's implementation and debrief of a collaboratively planned lesson. Using a process similar to "video club" (c.f. Sherin, Linsenmeier, & van Es, 2006) staged in a fishbowl protocol, a triad viewed a ten-minute segment from a lesson and discussed their observations about their students' thinking and understanding. Once they completed the debrief, each team member shared what s/he had learned through engaging in the collaborative video viewing and discussion. This was followed by a time where several mentor teachers and teacher candidates from outside the triad shared what they learned through watching the team engage in this cycle. Engaging in these professional learning experiences extended beyond the polishing of a particular lesson and included opportunities for polishing instructional practice. The purpose across these sessions was to provide teams with protocols and tools to support their ongoing collaboration and to give mentor teachers structures to guide their mentoring.

As cohort leaders, we worked with teacher candidates to establish community agreements that would support collaborative work recognizing that a safe and open climate is needed when constructing and reconstructing beliefs about teaching and learning (Garmston and Wellman, 1999). This was a first step in developing shared norms and values. The agreements clustered under the headings: listen to understand; participate fully; respect others and their ideas; and be collaborative, caring, and professional. Over time, these agreements became norms and values that were further enhanced through common coursework, collaborative projects, and common experiences in the field.

The second design principle for the cohort was to connect theory and practice. Teacher candidates often wrestle with the disconnect between their personal prior learning experiences, their developing understanding of learning theories, and their clinical experience (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, and Doone, 2006). As both cohort leaders and instructors, we intentionally integrated field-based assignments in courses. They called for the teacher candidates to engage with students through one-on-

one interviews, individual assessments, and small and whole group instruction. These assignments required teacher candidates to “try on” the research-based practices they were learning about through their coursework. We also encouraged teacher candidates to share their “findings” from these assignments with their mentor teachers and as appropriate with their students or parents. The intention in broadening the audience was to support teacher candidates in considering the relevance of the practice as well as expose mentor teachers to current research-based practices and their influence on student learning. Teacher candidates also completed a quarterly written reflection on the connections they were seeing between their course-based and classroom-based learning.

The third design principle was to elicit student thinking as a means to further student learning. Teacher candidates learned that effective lessons begin where students are, in order to support them developing new and/or deeper understanding. As a result, their actions in the classroom were that of a teacher researcher or ethnographer. They observed and listened carefully to determine students’ ideas and conceptions to determine their potential next steps. In courses and after school sessions the focus always began with facts and observations about student thinking and actions, about teacher moves and student responses, before moving to inferences based on this evidence. The structure of staying with “just the facts” and evidence as a starting point was often challenging for the teachers and teacher candidates.

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