

Reflection as Empowerment: A Look at Increased Awareness, Dialogue, and Agency
in One School

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Teaching is an art which draws not just on an educator's knowledge of subject matter, pedagogical repertoire, and skill, but also on his or her ethical and professional judgment, critical perspective, insight, empathy, interpersonal acumen, creativity, and commitment; and it must be supported by professional development that acknowledges and fosters all that the educator must bring to this complex enterprise we call education. Yet current emphases in professional development for educators on content knowledge and prescribed curricula and on specified instructional approaches, driven by the No Child Left Behind Act and its provisions for highly qualified teachers and by a positivistic approach to professional knowledge and competency, have attempted to reduce a highly complex, multi-faceted and nuanced field to a body of information to be learned, a set of skills to be mastered. And most regrettably, the current emphases and even punitive context have undermined teachers' sense of their autonomy, professional judgment, and creativity, silenced educators with much to contribute, and driven

thoughtful, creative professionals from the field. As W. Ayers (1992) says in his article, “In the Country of the Blind,” “teaching, . . . a voluntary, intelligent, collective activity, . . . occurs in contexts that are often coercive, ignorant. . . . Yet teaching remains intellectual and ethical work, person-specific and situationally grounded.”

What schools must honor, and what professional development must support, are what Connelly and Clandinin (1988) refer to as the ethical, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions of teaching if we are to foster educators’ ongoing development and growth, including their increased knowledge and skill and their heightened awareness, creativity, and commitment. As P. Palmer (1998) has put so well, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to good technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” Thus schools and professional development models must not just offer new instructional strategies but also provide for educators’ renewal, and support their sense of their potential contribution and agency. They must help to develop a true learning community in which educators can openly share their challenges, wrestle with their dilemmas, and bring all of their collective insight and experience to bear in support of their students’ learning, well being, and growth.

Based on these tenets, a group of teachers and I developed a year-long seminar “Professional Development in Schools: Teachers as Learners, Researchers, Colleagues, and Leaders,” which was one piece of a pilot program, “Teacher Professional Development: A Whole School Model,” developed by faculty in the Master of Education Program at Vermont College of Union Institute & University and funded by an Eisenhower grant. Our aims for this program included supporting new teachers facing the challenges and demands of their first years of teaching, supporting experienced

educators in furthering their professional development and taking on enhanced roles in their setting, and, through addressing the needs and challenges of both beginning and experienced educators, supporting the development of a schoolwide culture of inquiry, all of which would serve to contribute to improved student learning.

Toward these ends, we developed a three pronged approach, which included a seminar for beginning teachers, “The Teaching Journey,” a seminar for experienced teachers, “Professional Development in Schools: Teachers as Learners, Researchers, Colleagues, and Leaders,” and a mentoring component which paired participants from the two seminars, an experienced and beginning teacher in each pair, in a mentoring relationship. This paper will focus on the seminar for experienced teachers, first outlining the goals and design of the seminar and then discussing the experience and outcomes for the seminar participants.

The seminar “Professional Development in Schools: Teachers as Learners, Researchers, Colleagues, and Leaders,” was aimed at experienced educators interested in furthering their professional development through both reflecting on their practice and taking on new roles in their setting. Participants spanned elementary, middle, and high school levels and subject areas ranging from art to family sciences to social studies and special education. Its four primary purposes were that participants (1) examine and develop their own teaching practice; (2) develop skill in helping colleagues develop their practice; (3) examine and evaluate various approaches to professional development; and (4) acquire knowledge and develop skill to lead similar professional development groups for their colleagues at their school. Within these broad purposes, particular goals included: greater awareness of one’s own views and values as an educator; knowledge of

a range of approaches to examining one's practice; increased skill in using these approaches for oneself and with others; understanding of the many possible foci of examination; increased capacity for critical examination of curriculum, pedagogy, and the organization; increased understanding of essential elements of professional development; and heightened sense of one's voice and agency within the school. In support of these goals, I hoped that participants would gain knowledge of adult development, reflective practice, and change; would build trust through dialogue and gain awareness of the importance of trust and community to honest exchange and helpful communication with one another; would gain awareness of challenges in and obstacles to their effective teaching; and would increase their understanding of spheres of influence as they considered their agency within the organization.

Drawing on the literature of critical reflection (Clift, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Jalongo, 1995; Newman, 1990; Ritchie, 2000; Schon, 1982), professional development (Palmer, 1988; Portner, 1998; Witherell & Noddings, 1991; Newton et al., 1994), and autobiographical narrative (Ayers, 1993; Intrator, 2000; Keizer, 1988; Schubert & Ayers, 1992), we used a number of approaches to focus on issues related to students, curriculum, pedagogy, the teacher's "pedagogical personality," (Millies, 1992), and the school as a whole.

After confirming our understanding of the goals of the seminar, broadly conceived, we used our first session to identify participants' particular interests, questions, and needs regarding their teaching and their professional development and to talk together about what would help them not just to be a better teacher tomorrow but to continue to grow as educators. This first step was fundamental as it laid the groundwork

for our inquiry and work together and gave me the basis for developing our syllabus and designing the seminar in response to their perceived needs, key to meaningful and effective professional development.

What these teachers shared on that first day as they came together from their isolated classrooms to talk about their professional development was fascinating, first as they outlined current professional development practices in their district, then as they identified so readily needs they had in common and, finally, as they saw clearly the stark disparities between approaches to professional development in their district and their felt needs. Spanning the three different levels, all housed on a campus of adjoining buildings, and, as noted above, teaching widely varying subjects, these educators rarely saw one another, much less shared their goals for their teaching, their students, or their school, or discussed their views regarding professional development. Yet the needs they voiced most emphatically, ranging from more time with colleagues to discuss practice, to more freedom to develop curriculum, to, simply, encouragement, they all had in common. What they needed, they said, was time to come together—to confer regarding students, to solve problems, to learn from one another.

The seminar design then, which emerged in part from these goals and needs, encompassed five segments:

- I. “Teachers as Learners and Researchers,” in which we developed understanding and skill in reflective practice and progressed from focusing on oneself as educator to focusing on curriculum, pedagogy, and our students.

- II. “Teachers as Colleagues: Working Together,” in which we focused on mentoring the beginning teacher and serving as peer coaches and consultants to our colleagues.
- III. “Teachers as Leaders: Focusing on the Institution,” in which we looked at both curriculum and policy development and strategies for change in the organization.
- IV. “Structures for Professional Development in Schools,” in which we examined and evaluated the various objects of our inquiry, tools, and strategies that we had employed for our own development and then developed a model to propose for professional development at the school.
- V. “Individual Professional Development,” in which participants shared their individual project, designed to further their practice and professional development.

To explore these issues, topics, and questions, participants, drawing on both readings and their experience, tried a variety of approaches to examining and developing their practice, which included for example reflecting on critical incidents in their experience; examining dilemmas related to their curriculum, pedagogy, or students; and trying a reflective practice cycle, which included first observation and analysis, and then innovation and evaluation. We employed a variety of tools or structures for reflection, such as individual reflection in journals, paired sharing, group consultation, observation of a colleague’s teaching, mentoring new teachers, and action research. And participants wrote four brief papers: (1) identifying a critical dilemma in their practice, using the reflective cycle noted above to identify their goals, develop an innovation, and evaluate

the results; (2) reflecting on their identity as an educator, including what shaped them, views and values they hold, what issues or challenges they wrestle with, and one way they would like to change or grow; (3) describing their individual project and discussing its outcomes; and (4) identifying a challenge or obstacle with which they contend in their organization and, using the reflective practice cycle, setting a goal, identifying an action they could take, and stating how they will evaluate the results of their action. Thus participants were able to focus on a range of objects of inquiry and to try out a wide variety of tools in reflecting on and developing their practice.

When we embarked on this piece of our whole school model for professional development, our primary purpose, as noted above, had been to support experienced educators in furthering their professional development and taking on enhanced roles in their setting. What we found however, through several means of evaluation of this dialogue, were outcomes which in many ways surpassed our original goals and hopes. Attesting to the power of the experience for them individually and collectively, participants in the seminar reported: decreased isolation; increased comfort in expressing struggles, dilemmas, and views in this setting; increased confidence and sense of their own voice; increased understanding of the value of peer coaching; a variety of self-discoveries regarding strengths and talents; and a new sense of their shared perspectives and vision for their learning community.

During the evaluation phase of our seminar, first, in regard to changes or growth in their teaching, statements made by participants included, for example:

“I have learned how to examine my own teaching and improve upon it.”

“What I feel most good about is how I have grown as a teacher.”

“We spoke about school issues that stretched my comfort level, and therefore, taught me to stretch my comfort level in my teaching also.”

“Now that I have labeled [this] dilemma, I feel as though I am more in control of the problem and that I can design solutions to deal with this obstacle.”

“I used one student as a case study and am now in the process of trying out some things with the larger group.”

“I have coordinated with other students around alternative teaching approaches regarding students to help them find success in their learning (including behavior plans, teaching strategies, and refocusing activities).”

“I can [now] see obstacles as something to learn from, not to run from.”

Second, concerning changes observed in their students’ learning and behavior, participants reported, for example:

“With [the student I focused on] there has been a drastic increase in his learning and grades.”

“Students pay more attention in classes [in which] I have tried new materials.”

“[I perceive] more focus and greater attention.”

“[I see] better problem solving skills.”

“Students were supportive of our observations of each other and were glad to see we do want to be better teachers!”

In addition, from their experiences with peer coaching each other and observing and mentoring beginning teachers, they reported a number of equally positive outcomes, including, for example, “the reward of helping,” “learning to ask better questions,” “seeing how much I had grown,” “bringing back...enthusiasm to teaching.” And they wrote:

“It [serving as a peer coach] allowed me to see the positives in my struggles.”

“I have learned new skills in regard to mentoring and peer coaching that will help me to focus on my partner’s needs.”

“I learned that a healthy mentoring program would benefit both new teachers and veteran teachers.”

“It [focus on my professional development] has always been through evaluation; this is the only time I haven’t been threatened.”

Beyond, however, increased skill and effectiveness, these educators also talked about their increased awareness of their own identity as teachers, about their increased confidence and voice, and, too, about their heightened sense of their capacity to make change. Referring to the value of focusing on themselves and their identity as educators, participants made comments such as:

“We are so often dictated to, we lose ourselves.”

“I am amazed as to what I learned about myself as a teacher.”

“I didn’t know who I was till I wrote that paper, . . . [or] how much my values affect my teaching.”

“[It] was refreshing to focus on myself; [it] will improve my teaching.”

Talking as well about their increased confidence, they noted “[becoming] more comfortable asking questions, speaking up,” and “[becoming] more assertive,” as they also wrote:

“The more I listened and shared my thoughts in and out of class, the more I realized that I am an experienced teacher and what I say and do does have validity.”

“I learned that I do have a voice on school issues and that other teachers share the same voice. There is hope for a better climate here at school!”

“I have been more vocal about my thoughts and more sharing of my approaches.”

And threading through all of these outcomes, they noted the importance of coming together and discovering shared concerns as major factors in their learning and growth:

“I have also learned that we all have areas we struggle with in teaching, and that we all feel somewhat alone in our profession; by sharing our thoughts and ideas with others, it helps to connect us, and to find that we are not alone in our daily struggles.”

“Here I felt comfortable. All opinions were welcomed and people would be listened to. Several times we got into problem solving. REAL problem solving. This was something unique. As a group we gave our input in hope that we would be of some aid.”

“I think in this time of teaching, when we are all searching for answers, it is imperative that the faculty have time on a regular basis to spend sharing.”

“It [has] helped me as a veteran educator realize that much of what I see and feel on a daily basis is the same with my colleagues.”

“I feel more a part of this faculty due to the course and the openness of our discussion.”

Inspired and emboldened by their own and others' learning and growth, in addition to articulating their increased sense of their identity and voice, participants also identified their shared priorities for the school as a whole, as they framed a set of recommendations for structures and approaches that would help to build the trust and community necessary to developing true culture of inquiry for the entire school. These recommendations, they based on extensive evaluation of the lenses, techniques and structures they had tried in the seminar in support of their own professional development. Foremost among their priorities were faculty designed, job-embedded professional development and restructuring time. Rejecting the preponderance of the “outside expert,” “scatter shot” approach to “in-service” days, participants elected to develop a proposal to their school and district administration articulating some of their goals and recommended structures for their professional development. The following passage from the proposal we developed (with the teachers identifying goals and approaches and me

serving as scribe and composing the proposal for their approval) gives some sense of the priorities, ideas, and goals informing their recommendations:

First, we want to clarify that we are defining professional development broadly as those activities which help us to perform our job better, that is, to become better teachers. As such, we are saying that our professional development should not be limited solely to taking courses or to focusing on our subject area. Rather it should provide for faculty coming together to share issues, concerns, and questions—whether about our students, our teaching, the curriculum, or the school—that we have in common and that we could examine together both to gain understanding and to build our skill.

In reaching these conclusions, we are strongly aligned with the literature on professional development which recommends that it be job-embedded and site-based, that it consider teachers as constituting a learning community, and that it foster the development of a culture of inquiry for the entire school. (Jelly, 2002)

Specifically, to develop this culture of inquiry, they first recommended two course offerings: Saying that “Coming together, across disciplines and age groups that we teach, to examine our practice—including both our teaching and our roles in the school—has allowed us to re-evaluate what we do, to work on real problems, to analyze issues in order to deal with them more effectively, and to gain suggestions and ideas for our teaching,” participants urged offering again “Professional Development in Schools” to a new group of experienced teachers. And they recommended offering a kind of “Professional Development II” for participants “who would like to learn more about mentoring, peer coaching, and reflective practice, in order both to take on these roles and to be able to lead ‘Teaching and Learning Groups’ much like this seminar.” They then recommended, “in regard to job-embedded professional development, that these ‘Teaching and Learning Groups’ be set up for all faculty to be able to come together in groups... simply to share and work on the dilemmas and questions we all deal with in our teaching.” Those having completed “Professional Development II” could serve as

facilitators of these conversations, with the goal that all faculty be involved in ongoing groups.

Second, in regard to job-embedded, professional development, the proposal recommended that, in order to be responsive to faculty's needs and goals, certain professional development activities be conceived by faculty, who would solicit ideas from the full faculty, identify the foci, frame the goals, and plan portions of both regular faculty meetings and designated "in-service" days. In support of these recommendations, the proposal stated, "Our goal, through both these forums, is that faculty—often in small groups, sometimes as a whole—could share common issues, gain ideas for their own teaching, and work together to solve problems, and, overall, participate in a culture of inquiry in our school."

Thirdly, to introduce their specific recommendations regarding the restructuring of time in their school, the proposal read:

In regard to time, we all know we do not have enough—enough time to plan, enough time to attend well to every student, enough time to grade all that should be assigned, and enough time to refuel ourselves. We want to suggest the importance of re-looking at time to find ways to support the faculty's professional development, our students' learning, and our school community. We believe that school climate and faculty well being are important to faculty's effectiveness; that communication among faculty—whether to learn more about what one another does or to share concerns about a student or solutions to a problem—is essential; and that a strong community—among faculty, students, and administration—benefits not just those of us who work here but ultimately the students' learning and well being.

And their recommendations included:

- 1) restructuring the school day to:
 - provide common time for informal exchange, for example during a longer lunch period
 - provide a half day a month for professional development, including for example reflective practice groups and discussion of faculty identified topics

- 2) restructuring the beginning and end of the school year to provide for:
 - community building, including faculty, students, and administration
 - welcoming new students, faculty, and staff

In sum, the proposal concluded,

What we are proposing is putting into place structures and approaches that will allow much of [our] professional development...to be systemic and self-sufficient, that, through our frequent interaction—across grades and subjects—will support our continuing development as educators, and that will have a positive impact on school climate and our students' learning.

As this proposal to administration indicates clearly, what had happened for these educators went well beyond our originally framed goals. They had indeed gained greater awareness of their views and values as educators, gained knowledge of a range of approaches to examining one's practice, and increased their skill in using these approaches for themselves and with others; they had increased their understanding of the many possible foci of examination and increased their capacity for critical examination of curriculum, pedagogy, and the organization. And having examined their own practice, they had not only gained awareness of their teaching identity; they had also strengthened their sense of inquiry and learned to identify and conceptualize critical dilemmas in their practice, which allowed them to reframe their questions and develop new approaches; they had gained a greater sense of the complexities of teaching and new skill as peer coaches and mentors. As the principal put it in our meeting evaluating the experiment (personal communication, 2002), while these teachers had not begun the seminar necessarily thinking of themselves as learners, by the end that is how they saw themselves. And the school's mentoring coordinator, who was also one of the seminar participants, stated that through their dialogue they had learned something about themselves, they had built a sense of community, and they now felt they had a voice

(personal communication, 2002). Through individual and shared reflection, these teachers had most assuredly furthered their knowledge, understanding, and skill as teachers.

Yet they had also discovered that others, across a wide range of disciplines and grades, shared similar issues and concerns; and they had achieved a level of trust that allowed them to share their struggles and vulnerabilities, as well as their successes, ideas, and insights with one another. In short, they had experienced the potential and value—to themselves and their teaching, to their students, and to the school as a whole—of coming together. In addition, through that dialogue, and the support and encouragement it yielded, they gained as well an increased sense of both their voice and their own agency, of their potential to effect positive change, and of the importance of developing a real learning community in their school. It was out of this sense of agency that their vision and proposal for change, for developing a culture of inquiry and a learning community in their school emerged. They had come from their separate classrooms to articulate their shared vision. Thus they had renewed, invigorated, and taken forward not just their own teaching, which would be of direct benefit to their students, but also their vision for the school community as a whole, including parents, students, faculty, staff, and administration.

What then, did we conclude in regard to professional development? Out of this experiment, participants concluded, in accord with the literature (Barth, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Meier, 1995), that, indeed, professional development for educators must be job-embedded, part of the culture, a regular part of the school day, intrinsic to a learning community, in which all—teachers, students, administration, staff, and parents—

are learning all the time, from and with one another. Professional development must occur in a context of a culture of inquiry. Professional development must be based on educators' real needs. It must be grounded in underlying principles and tenets of critical reflection (Ritchie, 2000; Schubert & Ayers, 1992; Brookfield, 1987), adult development (Kegan, 1982; Mezirow, 1991) and transformative learning (Daloz, 1986; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991). And, for meaningful professional development to occur, educators must be provided with time and space—for dialogue, for identifying the real questions, for sharing expertise and experience, for looking at not just the successes but the struggles as well, for getting to the rich, messy, complex, endlessly challenging questions inherent to teaching and learning, for getting to the heart of the matter, and for allowing educators to bring their heart to the matter.

If we are to keep intelligent, thoughtful, creative and talented people in the field of education, then we must treat these educators as the professionals that they are; we must create meaningful professional development, which provides for stimulation and support, for new learning and validation, for challenge and encouragement. And instead of working conditions which serve to suppress and undermine educators' creativity, contributions, and commitment, we must create learning communities that tap and allow that creativity to grow, that support our teachers' thoughtful contribution and innovation, and that fuel their commitment to their students, their development, and their field. Given the time and space to acknowledge and build on their professional knowledge, insight, skill, and talent, to come together to help each other in their shared enterprise, and to strengthen their learning community, professionals in dialogue can make a

profound difference—to one another's growth and their school and, through these, their students' learning.

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