The Role of Literacy Work Circles in Developing Professional Community

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Abstract: To address teacher isolation in schools, more reform leaders are finding hope in establishing professional communities as a way to promote continuous school improvement. At the same time, adolescent literacy has been identified as a crucial area to address in the middle and upper grades as part of the reform agenda. Using the characteristics of professional community created by Kruse, Louis & Bryk (1995), we describe the development of professional community of sixth grade middle school teachers implementing literacy strategies across their content areas through a work circle. This particular work suggests that the introduction of a long-term instructional topic, in this case literacy, may contribute to the development of professional community.

Introduction

The work of teaching has long been characterized as taking place in isolation (Lortie, 1975). Too often in the history of schools, teachers have worked alone as adults with discrete student groups in separate classrooms with little time to engage in dialogue with colleagues about teaching practice. However, the work of teachers does not solely occur in classrooms, so opportunities for sharing practice are indeed available in schools.

Today, to address this isolation, more reform leaders are finding hope in establishing professional communities as a way to promote continuous school improvement. A professional community describes the interpersonal relations and activities among teachers to improve teaching and learning (Stevens, Kahne &

Cooper, 2006). In the service of school improvement, professional communities provide opportunities for innovation and improvement of practice (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1994). Teachers in strong professional communities feel a sense of empowerment and a feeling of affiliation with their schools (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1995). They have chances to collaborate, which can increase teachers' sense of mutual support and feeling of personal responsibility for effective instruction (Louis, 1992). Creating successful professional communities requires a deliberate effort and much nurturing, yet the potential to decrease teachers' isolation and improve instructional practice in schools is clear.

Similarly, adolescent literacy has been identified as a crucial area to address in the middle and upper grades as part of the reform agenda. (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; Berman & Biancarosa, 2005; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Adolescent students begin to come across academic discourses and content area concepts in school that necessitate different reading strategies than more traditional literary forms. Adolescent Literacy advocates not only point out the need to improve students' reading, but also the role literacy plays in students' high school success, closing the achievement gap and preparing students for a changing workplace after high school. However, literacy is not just confined to Language Arts and English classrooms. Adolescent readers often struggle to make sense of text in the content areas (Language Arts, Science, Social Studies and Mathematics). Yet, content area teachers do not necessarily have training in supporting reading in their classes.

In our work described here, the teachers formed a work circle (Shrader et al., 1999; D'Amico, 2005) around the concept of integrating literacy across the curriculum in the sixth grade. Work circles are teams of researchers and practitioners that meet on a regular basis to address an issue, design or revise curriculum, or implement new strategies for instruction or assessment. Work circles come from the participatory design (Schuler & Namioka, 1993) tradition. When putting learning theory into action by designing and implementing strategies that instantiate these theories, we can study their impact on the school context.

Framework

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between a literacy work circle carried out by a small group of teachers and the development of professional community. Is there evidence that engaging in literacy work circles plays a useful role in fostering professional community? As a theoretical framework, the five core characteristics of professional communities outlined by Kruse, Louis & Bryk (1995) are beneficial. This core set of characteristics provides us with a lens through which to view and code rich, qualitative data and artifacts produced by the work circle.

Kruse, et. al. identified the following key elements: (a) shared norms and values, (b) reflective dialogue, (c) deprivatization of practice, (d) focus on student learning, and (e) collaboration. Shared norms and values are the teachers' beliefs about institutional purposes, practices and desired behaviors. However, this is not intended to entail complete agreement of all beliefs, but rather a core set of similar values on which the teachers' community may develop. Reflective dialogue refers to conversations that critique practice, pedagogy and student learning. These conversations require teachers to practice their craft in the open and place sustained attention on how pedagogy is linked to student learning.

Methods

The work being reported in this paper is part of a larger effort of addressing literacy in the content areas at middle schools and high schools. The essence of the larger work is to build effective reading–to-learn environments for middle school students and to use these environments to help us understand the reciprocal relationship between content area achievement and reading achievement. We focus on building reading-to-learn environments that rely on the three strategic approaches to reading support: summarizing, T-Charts and annotating text (Scherer et al., in press). Summarizing allows students to capture the gist of a chosen text in writing as well as the major concepts and details supporting those concepts. T-charts, also known as double-entry journals are two or three column charts (like the shape of a T) that provide a structure for students to monitor and document their understanding of texts (Atwell, 1990). Annotation is the process of marking up a text in order to perform content analysis as well as reveal the meaning behind various textual features. (Liu, 1996) Teachers couple these reading tools to the text so that students may gain deeper understanding of the content area within which they are learning.

At our site, grade level teachers already have common planning time, which is meant to promote professional community. However, the school does not prescribe how teachers' time together is spent. There is no guarantee that a professional community will develop amongst grade level teachers merely because they teach in the same grade. This is why we are studying more closely whether engaging in literacy work circles can foster the core characteristics of a professional community.

Over the past year, the three teachers in this work circle have been meeting once a week during the school year for one hour every Friday and about six hours a week during the summer. Once familiar with the literacy tools, the teachers examined the role of text in their respective content areas and designed lessons to embed the tools with the texts. Finally, once they began enacting the literacy tools in the classroom, they reflected on the tool use in order to refine their place in future lessons.

As participant observers, we gathered observation notes, meeting agendas, and teacher generated artifacts as well as interview data. These data provide thick qualitative descriptions of the literacy work circles for one year. Using the framework, the data were coded, often fitting into more than one of the element categories. The coded data also provided us with counterexamples.

In using the Kruse, Louis & Bryk framework, it is worth noting that reflective dialogue and shared norms and beliefs couple themselves to other characteristics of the framework. It is difficult to talk about student learning without reflective dialogue. Two researchers discussed the data in order to increase reliability of the coding, multiple coding and counterexamples. In the next section, we shall try to explain some of the results of the literacy work circles with respect to the professional community framework.

Results: Using the Framework to Describe the Development of Professional Community

The literacy work circle began in a collaborative space. The school teachers are already placed in grade level teams. These grade level teams share common planning times. The grade level teachers are mandated by the principal to participate in two team meetings per week. Yet it is the idea of literacy and integrating strategies that gives the teachers a reason to *collaborate*. Specifically, literacy gives the teachers opportunities to collaborate around instruction. Because the teachers chose the meeting times and dates, the time has been protected. Other meetings took place outside of the Friday meetings, but these rarely involved instruction. Too often, the demands outside of the classroom take up the teachers collaborative work time: parent issues, school paper work related to standardized tests, grades, etc. Instead, Friday is a time for the teachers to co-design lessons that use literacy strategies that provide support for students to learn the intended content. The introduction of a long-term instructional topic, in this case literacy, as well as the involvement of an outside participant-observer prompted the teachers to protect that time.

During these meetings, teachers had opportunities to share the content of their classes, their classroom pacing and successful instructional strategies. This *deprivatizing of practice* allowed the science teacher, for example, to share how she helps students identify in-text definitions. The language arts teacher offered how he teaches topic sentences as a vehicle for writing summaries. The math teachers noted how she encourages the students to identify the textual features of their workbook as a way to understand a new concept.

The work naturally went beyond literacy to bigger picture instructional matters. By identifying and sharing the trajectory of their class content to the work circle, the teachers saw overlaps in their content. Initially, this task's purpose was to identify places to embed the literacy strategies to aid in teaching and learning content. The teachers rearranged the sequence of their content to provide more continuity of what they were teaching. In October, they linked their work for an interdisciplinary family history project, a project, they stated, would not have taken place without the literacy work circle.

The examples of sharing led the teachers to talk about students as well. In general, the literacy strategies were used as tools to address student difficulties in content area reading. As the teachers became more familiar with the strategies, they were able to discuss how they used or adapted the strategies in their planning and lessons. There were numerous examples of the teachers sharing their lesson plans by prefacing what their learning goals were and what challenges they anticipated the students having in reaching those goals. For example, the science teacher shared how she used annotation as a way for students to engage in textbook readings with difficult vocabulary. The math teacher observed that annotation, with its multiple layers of complex tasks, provided students of different levels to connect with the text. The talk of appropriateness of a strategy usually led to consideration of how we know the students have understood the reading. These ideas related to differentiation and assessment were examples of the work circle's *focus on student learning*.

By focusing on the students' learning and their own practices, the meetings afforded the teachers rich opportunities for *reflective dialogue*. Reflection, as one characteristic of professional communities, allowed the other four characteristics to take place. The work circle began in the summer by mapping out the content of the school year. While providing an opportunity to share content with the teachers, the teachers also used this activity as an opportunity to assess what "worked". In order for the teachers to learn the literacy strategies, they reflected on their own use of these tools in the early work circles. They remarked on what worked for them in relation to the tools as well as reflecting on their role as a reader. Once the school year began, the teachers reflected on the implementation of the strategies. Reflection has been key to the teachers' ability to refine the literacy strategies as they apply to their specific content areas. And reflection has been a catalyst for illuminating the teachers' expectations of students in their classes.

Reflecting on the teachers' expectations of the students is one way the teachers' beliefs emerged in their discussions. Agreeing on the expectations of the students was a key component in implementing these strategies. First and foremost, these teachers believed that understanding text was key to making meaning of their content areas. These *shared norms and beliefs* were also evident in the teachers' commitment to using the three literacy strategies as a way to address students' reading obstacles. The math teacher mentioned early on that her perspective of the role of reading in her content area was changing and coming more in line with the other two teachers. She realized that her textbook was filled with new, discipline specific vocabulary and the textbook writers expected students to write summaries and explanations about their problem solving strategy use.

As these examples of results demonstrate, the literacy work circle can contribute to all five of the categories of in our framework. In some cases, a component of the work circle activity may contribute to more than one characteristic at the same time. And some activities contribute to some categories more than others. However, at least in this case, this literacy work circle did contribute in a positive way to the creation of the professional community.

It's important to note that the literacy work circle created a tension in the teacher community because of the time commitment. Because the work has demanded the teachers to reexamine the role of text in their classrooms and how they support the students reading of that text, it has required more planning and reflection time. This time requirement allows for some of the teachers to interact with the strategies more than others. However, this degree of strategy participation has not impeded work circle participation. With a year of weekly meetings, none of the teachers have missed more than three meetings.

It's also important to note that teacher beliefs and curriculum have influenced the amount of strategy use amongst the teachers. For example, all three of the teachers have stated how much more challenging it is to use the strategies in math class as opposed to science. In addition, certain strategies lend themselves to certain types of content. For example, the group has found it difficult to apply annotation to short fiction. This has allowed the science/social studies teacher to more easily apply literacy strategies to her content than the other two teachers.

This framework is helpful to capture characteristics of a professional community. However, our data show us that it is difficult to disentangle reflective dialogue and shared norms and beliefs from the other characteristics. For example, how does a professional community focus on student learning without reflective dialogue? And how does a professional community focus on student learning without coming to the shared belief that this focus is important?

Discussion

Improving schools involves more than simply restructuring them. For example, having teachers divided into grade level teams with common planning time is a start. However, once the structures of this kind are put in place for teachers to come together, policy makers and administrators need to consider what work the teachers will carry out. What are the human and social dimensions for community beyond the structures (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1996)?

This paper leads us to believe that literacy work circles could play an important role in developing professional community beyond the structures. The literacy work circle allowed teachers to reflect on their practice and student learning, uncover their beliefs, and collaborate in a meaningful way. It is the importance of keeping both structures and instruction in mind. When these teachers planned and discussed about literacy strategies, they were able to talk about a vast array of their professional experiences. Perhaps this is one area for further investigation. One of the implications that this work suggests is a set of design principles for the formation of a work circle. Having the structure of common planning time, regularity of meeting time, a long-term instructional goal, deep analysis of cross-curricular content and an outside participant-observer are components of our work circle's formation.

Work circles are just one example of how teachers can come together. Other examples could be groups that exist within the school's organizational structure such as: curriculum planning teams, department teams, common course teams, school improvement committees, etc. There could be groups that exist in schools outside of the organization structure such as board certification or alternative certification cohorts. We can imagine teachers coming together around other long-term instructional topics besides literacy. In our case, the teachers have said that literacy is broad enough that it applies to all of the teachers' content areas and is important to their instructional goals. Students need strategies to read text in all of their classes. However, we can imagine other broad topics as well, such as project-based learning (Wardrip, 2008), cooperative learning or technology.

Indeed, literacy is a reason for teachers to come together and share practice, but in actuality what might be happening is the literacy work circle is building increased interpersonal trust between and among the members in the professional community. Looking more closely into the development of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) among the teachers may be where we discover that the literacy work circle has the greatest amount of traction.

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