

Creating Adult Learning Communities through School-College Partnerships

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At Lakeland Middle School, students are accustomed to working on different task assignments within a given class period. When asked about how their tasks differ, students are quick to point out that, although they may be working with the content in varied ways, they are all focused on the same goals. In Mrs. Wilson's sixth grade math class, Jacob explained,

You know, it's like playing soccer. There are a bunch of different offensive and defensive moves for getting the ball downfield to score, and some players are better at some things than others. The point is to get everyone where they can be their best, but no matter what position you're playing, everyone stays focused on getting the ball in the goal. That's pretty much the way it is in Mrs. Wilson's class.

Jacob's soccer analogy helps explain the way that Mrs. Wilson differentiates curriculum and instruction to meet individual needs. For example, during one class at the end of a recent nine-week grading period, she assigned each student two tasks. One task was based on readiness and the other on interest. Mrs. Wilson designed the readiness task in response

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to a formative assessment that she had given on number sense (prime, composite, odd, even), fractions and decimals, factors, and estimation. Based on the assessment results, she knew that Jacob needed more work with fractions and decimals.

Because Mrs. Wilson had assessed her students' learning preferences, she knew that Jacob responded well to kinesthetic tasks and that working with manipulatives related to fractions and decimals would likely help him to cement these concepts. She created a domino game that asked Jacob to select a domino, convert it to a decimal, compare his decimal with a partner, and see who had the largest decimal, which would "win" each round in the game. Other students were working on similarly engaging, hands-on tasks that were all focused on the key learning goals for the nine weeks.

Once they completed their readiness-level tasks, each student selected an interest-based activity from a menu that included center games, multiplication flashcards, speed drills on multiplication, and card games that focused on prime/composite and odd/even numbers. For his interest-based task, Jacob decided to work with speed drills on multiplication. He knows his multiplication facts, but he wants to remember them more quickly, and the speed drills with a partner appeal to him. While the first assignment was targeted at strengthening knowledge, understanding, and skills, Mrs. Wilson knew that the second task would capitalize on the role that interest plays in motivating her students. As her students started work on their first assignment, she moved from group to group to ask and answer questions, clarify, prompt, and encourage. Along with Mrs. Wilson, four additional adults in the classroom were observing, taking notes, and interacting with students.

This is the second year that Mrs. Wilson has participated in a district-wide, school-based, staff development program focused on differentiation. In the same way that she designed her math lesson to respond to individual readiness in math, this staff development program is responsive to individual teachers' understanding and practice of differentiation. For the second time this semester, three teachers who are also learning about differentiation, along with their "differentiation coach," a colleague with extensive expertise in responsive teaching, are visiting Mrs. Wilson's classroom.

After the lesson, all four teachers debrief with the coach. The group discusses what they think went well and what needs improvement. One teacher compliments Mrs. Wilson on how well each task relates to students' lives. The coach suggests an "anchor activity," a meaningful and respectful task for students to complete independently after the assigned work is finished (Tomlinson, 2001). This suggestion is in response to the

coach's observation that two students finished their readiness and interest-based tasks before the end of class and were unclear about what they should then do. Mrs. Wilson recalls that she quickly came up with some options but reflects that her spur-of-the-moment suggestions were not really optimal. The teachers and coach discuss the importance of anchor activities for ensuring that no time is wasted in a differentiated lesson, and they brainstorm together about what Mrs. Wilson can do when she teaches this lesson again. The tone of the conversation is collegial. Everyone, including Mrs. Wilson, makes important contributions, building their confidence about their understanding of effective differentiation. This dialogue helps to focus the outcomes for their next visit.

DuFour (2003) emphasizes the importance of the type of focused reflection and common purpose that characterize the professional learning community that brings Mrs. Wilson and her colleagues together. Because teachers in a professional learning community share a common conceptual framework and core of knowledge, they can draw from this shared vision and mission and learn from each other. They can gather and analyze data, identify areas in need of improvement, locate areas of concern, and support each other through the processes of planning, teaching, and reflecting through collaboration, coaching, and feedback (DuFour; Lambert, 2002).

The value-added effect of this kind of collaborative inquiry is powerful. Mrs. Wilson's experiences in this learning community help define her professional goals. As she models lessons for teachers new to differentiation, she continues to sharpen her own skills through collaborative analysis and reflection. The coaching model embedded in Mrs. Wilson's staff development program embraces the ideals of an adult learning community in the truest sense: its parameters are continually renegotiated by its members, it depends on mutual engagement, and it allows everyone to benefit from the experience of the participants (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008; Wenger, 1998).

Given the challenges of time and economics in education today, what are practical models for creating adult learning communities that improve teaching and learning in today's diverse classrooms? How do we foster and nurture adult learning communities once they are established? We have found that carefully crafted partnerships between PK-12 schools and higher education can provide promising answers to these questions.

In south central Virginia, the partnership between Amherst County Public Schools and Sweet Briar College, located in Amherst County, grew out of a need for trained, high quality mentors for novice teachers and student teachers as well as a desire for sustained professional develop-

ment for veteran teachers. The partners have established a variety of approaches to develop and enhance learning communities since 1992. These collaborative projects have evolved in response to participant feedback, have been mutually beneficial, and, in some cases, have expanded training to include other colleges and school districts. A look at three current projects—study groups, mentor teacher/clinical faculty training, and coaching for effective differentiation—will provide details about building adult learning communities and suggest recommendations for how to sustain them.

Study Groups

For 16 years, a study group focused on differentiation has linked Amherst County in-service teachers with pre-service teachers from Sweet Briar College. Side-by-side, in-service and pre-service teachers study key principles of differentiation, analyze examples in practice, and reflect on how to implement effective differentiated instruction. Pre-service students are paired with in-service teachers in grade levels and subject areas corresponding to their endorsement areas. Pre-service students complete 12 hours of field work in their study partner's classroom, ultimately designing and teaching a differentiated lesson. Pre-service teachers benefit from the wisdom and experience of their in-service partners and can apply what they are learning in the real-world classroom. In-service teachers engage in focused study about differentiation, reflect on classroom application, and appreciate the enthusiasm and innovative perspective of pre-service teachers. Teachers receive a modest stipend or recertification credit for their participation. While many staff development programs have come and gone, the study group has continued to flourish. In 2000, the group won an Innovation in Teacher Education Award from the Southeastern Regional Teacher Education Association.

Mentor Teacher/Clinical Faculty Training

As Amherst County and Sweet Briar's partnership has expanded to include other central Virginia colleges and school districts, another unique learning community has evolved. In response to state requirements for training mentor teachers and clinical faculty, and with support from block grant monies awarded by the Virginia Department of Education, Sweet Briar College, Randolph College, and Lynchburg College have collaborated with several local school districts. The combination of resources helps pre-service, in-service, and novice teachers design and

deliver student-centered curriculum and instruction. This collaboration focuses on teacher quality, one of the most influential school-related factors in student achievement (Rice, 2003). Effective teacher preparation, supportive mentoring relationships, and meaningful induction strategies contribute to teacher quality and build a teacher's confidence in the ability to improve student learning. Developing this confidence is critical in teacher decisions about whether to remain in the profession (Berry & Hirsch, 2005; Levin, 2003).

In an effort to improve induction, mentoring, and teacher responsiveness, the learning community supported by this school-college partnership receives staff development from the New Teacher Center at University of California, Santa Cruz. With intensive training from the Santa Cruz staff, mentors and clinical faculty have learned to implement effective formative assessment tools, mentoring strategies, and research-based techniques for responding to the unique needs of new and pre-service teachers. As a result of the success of the Santa Cruz New Teacher Induction Model, Amherst County Public Schools has become a member of the New Teacher Center National Teacher Induction Network.

Coaching for Effective Differentiation

Because differentiation is the core philosophy of the teacher preparation program at Sweet Briar College, it is critically important that student teachers are placed with in-service teachers who believe in and practice differentiation in their classrooms. In 2004, Amherst County Schools launched a pilot program to build and support differentiated learning communities within classrooms and among in-service teachers. Four Amherst schools joined with the Education Department at Sweet Briar College in a new learning community focused on instruction, demonstration, and coaching to model and support differentiation in practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002). In this community, teachers who are skilled in designing effective differentiated curriculum and instruction coach colleagues who are learning to differentiate. Education faculty from Sweet Briar College provide instructional workshops based on participants' needs, train coaches, and support principals.

Project participants move through stages of building expertise, similar to those described by Berliner (1988), as they expand their capacity to differentiate. Veteran teachers frequently find themselves in the novice stage once again. For novices, rules and routines must be clearly defined, so teachers new to differentiation receive four half-days of training and observe their coaches teaching a differentiated lesson with a debriefing conference after the lesson. In the next stage, the coach and teacher co-

plan and co-teach a differentiated lesson and debrief afterward. This shared control is important, as Berliner observed, because advanced beginners start to strategize as they recognize patterns in knowledge and context.

As differentiation principles and theory are transferred into practice independently during the third stage, the teacher gains confidence and competence in differentiating instruction but may need some scaffolding. Therefore, the coach and teacher co-plan a third lesson taught by the teacher and debrief afterward. In the fourth stage, teachers are proficient and design and teach differentiated lessons on their own, with observation by the coach and debriefing afterward. In the final stage, expert teachers engage in advanced study and more complex coaching activities as well as design differentiated curriculum. They often share their expertise on a regional or state level, and their classrooms become exemplary models for other program participants, schools, or districts. Teachers who are now in their third and fourth years with the project choose from a menu of options that includes modeling, videotaping, designing differentiated lessons for sharing across schools, or taking a graduate course on “backward design” of curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) at Sweet Briar College.

As teachers have moved through the stages of development with differentiation, new cohorts join the learning community, and the project has expanded across the district to include six schools. Program goals are revisited and refined, driven by self-assessment and feedback, the by-products of collegial dialogue and reflection. With feedback from their coaches, teachers decide whether they are ready to move from one stage to the next. As professional development is differentiated to meet teachers’ needs, goals and objectives are adjusted accordingly at each stage.

The shared vision of the importance of lifelong learning and individual growth as well as the common understanding of differentiation as it applies to both teachers and students has helped the partnership weather the test of time, personnel changes, and budget cuts. Program participants continue to serve as mentors, clinical faculty, and role models for their peers. Teachers, such as Mrs. Wilson, have generated excitement and a desire to learn among their initially reluctant colleagues, and the numbers of trained mentors and clinical faculty have steadily grown over the years.

The adult learning communities established and supported by continuing collaboration between Amherst County Public Schools and Sweet Briar College offer teachers such as Mrs. Wilson differentiated staff development as they become proficient in differentiating for their own students. Throughout this process, Mrs. Wilson knows that she

has the support of coaches, administrators, and teachers in her learning community. This support empowers her to realize her professional goals. School-college partnerships dedicated to creating adult learning communities have the potential to model lifelong learning and build reflective, autonomous teachers who challenge themselves to provide the best education possible for every student.

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