Chapter 3

Creating Connections across the PDS Network:
A Personal Narrative of One Professor’s Journey

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ABSTRACT

This chapter traces one professor’s journey in a Professional Development School (PDS) network and her personal reflection on that journey. It showcases discoveries of the connections made between different participants of the network and how those connections are constructed in staff development, instruction, and conference presentations. Through the chapter a Common Core Vocabulary project is described and tracked as it is conceived in the elementary schools, then moved to the college classroom, then to the high school in the network, and then to the larger educational community. The chapter portrays how the ideas and activities in one PDS can impact multiple settings across the network and its many students.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately ten years ago I was sitting at the first meeting for the National Association of Professional Development Schools as an attendee to learn what a Professional Development School (PDS) was all about. I found, the concept of Universities and K-12 schools working in partnerships for student achievement and the betterment of teaching, both in-service and pre-service exciting. I had no idea at that moment what the impact would be, but I knew the idea would be big and that it would change how we work with college and K-12 students and teachers, if we made the commitment. I was thrilled to go back to my University to start our first PDS partnership! This way of working with schools to train future teachers resonated with me. I knew in my heart that good practice would have college education students in schools as soon as possible and doing work that trained them for teaching in realistic settings, rather than apart at the University. I could clearly see this was the way of the future! Through the PDS partnerships I have had many moments of clarity like this, where I knew that what we were doing was good, strong, work, where all stakeholders benefited from our time spent together.

Another moment of importance in my PDS work was when I realized how far reaching the partnerships can be across the varied members (Universities, Schools, District Offices) in a network when I conducted a vocabulary project.
For some of you this report of our progress will be confirming. For others just starting out, this chapter may be one of several examples to show you how one idea travels within the PDS network and how that could possibly impact the network that you establish.

This story begins in the middle. Our current network schools are well established. This chapter starts with the introduction of the common core and what our network did to help all members of the network understand the importance and realistic ways to embrace and use the common core standards to help students best grow cognitively. It also includes what we did to help teachers deal with the realities connected to changing goals and demands in their instruction.

During a stakeholder’s meeting with our partnership with two elementary schools, the latest challenge from the county office was raised as a goal that needed to be addressed in staff development. That proposal was to focus on vocabulary and the common core in a staff development program that would help the elementary teachers understand the expectations based on the new common core standards. In addition, a second goal was to facilitate teaching vocabulary in context and in all content areas that they teach, not just language arts. “Pre-reading vocabulary instruction can improve students’ comprehension of their texts and help them retain the concepts that are taught” within all areas of learning (Stahl & Kapinus, 1991, p. 36). In the early grades, if we teach vocabulary using authentic texts, vocabulary acquisition increases between 20% to 25% compared to not using vocabulary instruction during these readings (Biemiller & Boote, 2006).

What has been determined through years of research is that there is a strong relationship between vocabulary and intelligence (Davis, 1944; Spearitt, 1972; Thorndike & Lorge, 1943), one’s ability to comprehend new information (Chall, 1958; Harrison, 1980), and one’s level of financial status (Sticht, Hofstetter, & Hofstetter, 1997). Robert Marzano (2004) discusses in his book that students have two types of intelligence that we must consider when teaching, fluid and crystallized. He states fluid intelligence is the student’s ability to process and retain information and to think logically and reason in novel situations. Crystallized intelligence is knowledge that is learned in an academic setting over a lifetime that increases with age and skills that are learned. Crystallized intelligence is the product of a student’s educational and cultural experiences. School teachers work mostly with crystallized intelligence as it is the area of greatest influence for educators since we cannot control what students learn before they come to us or in the outside environment. We also cannot lament that some students do not come prepared or with excellent “real life” experiences. Our only area of control is what happens in our instructional time and hopefully what will occur with homework as part of the instruction.

It is important that all students increase their vocabulary, no matter the socio-economic class

During this staff development we talked to the elementary faculty from both partner schools about the research behind why some students acquired vocabulary, while others were lacking. Additionally we discussed why it was important to teach vocabulary in context and in all content areas that they teach, not just language arts.

It is important that all students increase their vocabulary, no matter the socio-economic class.
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