

# NETWORKS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES

## SHAPING THE FUTURE OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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*As technology transforms the institutions of society, changing the way that people work, communicate, and learn, schools must accommodate and adapt to these new conditions. Unfortunately, schools and school systems organized bureaucratically have difficulty changing. Educational reform networks are particularly well suited to making use of new technology and institutional arrangements. By their very nature, they are flexible, borderless, and innovative; they are able to create collaborative environments, focus their efforts, and develop agendas that grow and change with their participants. Studying reform networks, collaboratives, partnerships external to schools, and communities inside schools has taught a great deal about the organizational conditions and practices that support and sustain teacher learning over time. Teacher educators who collaborate with, learn from, and make use of the knowledge created by these networks are helping to recreate the meaning of scholarship itself, not only for teachers, but for themselves as well.*

In the past few decades, reframed conceptions of teaching, learning, and schooling, as well as new practices, policies, and organizational settings for teacher learning have been introduced by educational researchers and reformers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a, 1999b; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Lieberman, 1992; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Studying these new conceptions and practices—reform networks, teacher research groups, collaboratives, school-university partnerships, and professional communities in schools—has taught us a great deal about the organizational conditions that must be developed to support and sustain teacher learning over time.

As technology changes the way people communicate, work, and learn, schools are being asked to provide an education for a growing and diverse population. Whereas further democratization of schooling in a changing society is increasing pressure on schools to accommodate to these new conditions, school systems that are organized bureaucratically and function traditionally have difficulty adapting

to change. Decisions about curriculum and instruction are often made without reference to real problems of classroom life. Teachers are “developed” by outside “experts,” rather than participating in their own development. Unrelated to classroom contexts and teaching practice, bureaucracies tend to create “one size fits all” solutions that often fail to make distinctions among different kinds of school and classroom contexts, or between the needs of novice and experienced teachers. Although bureaucracies work because they can process large numbers of people, they have difficulty responding to changing conditions and the discrete needs of schools, teachers, and students.

Educational reform networks, partnerships, and collaboratives are organizations that on the other hand, are loose, borderless, and flexible, and are particularly well suited to this era of new technology and rapid change.<sup>1</sup> Unlike bureaucratic organizations, networks are organized around the interests and needs of their participants, building agendas sensitive to their individual and collective development as



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educators. They can change quickly and invent new structures and activities that are responsive to their members.

## **DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY**

More than two decades ago, Parker (1977) identified five key characteristics of 60 school-improvement networks. They were a strong sense of commitment to an idea, a sense of shared purpose, a mixture of information sharing and psychological support, a facilitator who ensured voluntary participation and equal treatment, and an egalitarian ethos. Parker's analysis was expanded by others who tried to unravel, both theoretically and practically, what these complicated webs of connection, events, and relationships looked like, as well as the places they held in school improvement efforts (Miles, 1978; Rosenbaum, 1977; Schon 1977).

Whereas Parker studied educational improvement networks from the outside, other researchers began to look inside schools, trying to understand their different contexts and adaptations to the contemporary conditions of teaching and learning. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993), for example, observed secondary schools over a 5-year period. They began to see that teachers who took risks and were continually inventing new ways of working with their students were, at the same time, developing a positive learning community with their peers and creating norms of openness and collegiality. Teachers in the high school departments they characterized as professional communities were rethinking what they could do to change the way they were engaging students. They were sharing what they were doing with their peers and supporting each other as they were learning together. Having a professional community differentiated those teachers who worked together to change the culture of their classrooms and their departments from those teachers who either tried new ideas in fragmented ways on their own or who blamed students for their inability to learn.

At about the same time, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) did a national study seeking to find

the common characteristics of elementary schools that were deliberately "restructuring" to better meet the needs of their students. In their 5-year study, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) were searching for an understanding of how schools developed the capacity to inspire student learning of high intellectual quality. They found that a self-conscious professional community was a salient characteristic of those schools most successful with students. Professional community meant that teachers pursued a clear and shared purpose for all student learning, engaged in collaborative activity to achieve that purpose, and took collective responsibility for their students' learning. It was apparent from both McLaughlin and Talbert's (1993) and Newmann and Wehlage's studies that supportive professional communities inside schools provided teachers with the kind of organizational setting that made continuous learning possible. Describing these conditions, Meier (1992) states,

At the very least, one must imagine schools in which teachers are in frequent conversation with each other about their work, have easy and necessary access to each other's classrooms, take it for granted that they should comment on each other's work, and have the time to develop common standards for student work. (p. 602)

Unfortunately, these minimal conditions to support teacher learning in elementary and secondary schools are found in only a small number of schools throughout the country (Little, 1993).

Studies such as those cited above began to shape our understanding of the need to build collaborative structures inside schools to reverse the isolation felt by many teachers. Interestingly, however, at the same time, it also became apparent that networks, partnerships, and collaboratives external to schools could be a major conduit for involving teachers in improving their practice within schools (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). By mobilizing and motivating teachers to engage in their own learning and, in the best of networks, providing opportunities for teachers that reached far beyond the goals of their initial membership, networks have become a significant force for teacher development and school change (Adams, in press;

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Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999a; Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1992; Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Little, 1991; Wineburg & Grossman, 1998).

### **NETWORKS AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES: THEMES AND TENSIONS**

In 1996, a study of 16 educational reform networks that had been in existence for at least 5 years suggested a frame for understanding networks based on common themes as well as tensions (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). One theme dealt with how networks begin, their purposes as well as the activities organizers use to attract participants and grow the network.

Each of the partnerships and networks we studied began small and tentatively, growing with the needs, desires, and vision of their members and leaders. Some networks came together for seemingly simple purposes such as promoting dialogue between university and school personnel. In several instances, charismatic leaders captured the imagination of educators by sharing their visions for creating more democratic schools. Other leaders, who planned summer offerings for teachers, could not figure out how to sustain their networks without year-round activities. Different purposes brought people together with a focus for their work together. Whatever the genesis of these networks, however, they proved to be a training ground for building collaboration, consensus, and commitment to continuous learning.

Although many educational institutions are not sensitive to developing norms of participation and organizational support as necessary conditions for learning, networks paid particular attention to these conditions by emphasizing the building of relationships through collaboration in support of work that advanced the goals of the network. Enabling members to participate in creating and sustaining a group that advanced their professional identity, interests, and learning released great power and energy. These collaborative relationships helped to build trust within the group, essential to the development of new ideas. In turn, these new

ideas helped to build network interest and participation, even as ideas and relationships were further developed and transformed. This learning cycle energized network members and committed them to each other as well as to the larger ideals of the network.

In addition to common themes, the networks we studied shared a number of organizational tensions that were an integral part of their existence. Understanding these tensions helps us to see more fully how these settings affect teacher growth and development.

Professionals who worked as part of networks were continually involved in negotiating contradictions between long-term goals and short-term needs, seeking to find compelling activities that satisfied them both. Although educators are attracted to networks that seek to promote important and lofty goals (e.g., literacy, student-centered education), high moral and/or educational purposes are not sufficient when teachers need to solve immediate and pressing problems. Networks that last, that hold their members, and continue to attract new teachers understand that they must account for the daily pressures of teaching, even as they seek to advance larger ideals.

Sustaining educators' commitment and interest hinges on keeping the work focused on practice. However, focusing on practice involves taking a position as to where the knowledge comes from that informs the work of the network. This is of great importance because networks are trying to bring people together who have different ways of acquiring, developing, and using knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Sirotnik and Goodlad, 1988). Keeping a balance between inside knowledge (the experiential knowledge of teachers) and outside knowledge (knowledge created by research and conceptualization) is a hallmark of successful collaboratives.

Whereas formal organizations should keep the commitment, energy, and participation of their members alive and growing, networks must do this in order to survive. Successful networks are therefore flexible, responsive to their participants, and continually learning and reinventing themselves. A look at the organizing

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conceptions and practices of what is perhaps the most successful national teacher network further illustrates the potential of networks as learning organizations for teachers.

### **THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT: LEARNING WITHIN A NETWORK CONTEXT**

The National Writing Project (NWP), which has been in existence for 25 years, is the epitome of a network that keeps its focus (teachers' writing) even as it reshapes itself to embrace new conditions and broader constituencies. During these years, it has become more sensitive to an increasingly diverse student population, as well as to the disparate needs of urban, rural, and suburban schools in different states and regions. The NWP is a prime example of how networks can both build and sustain the concept of community, be responsive to varied contexts, and provide a powerful nexus for teacher learning.

A 2-year in-depth study of one urban and one rural site of the NWP has explored the linkages between teacher learning and teacher classroom practice in a network context (Lieberman & Wood, in press).<sup>2</sup> By bringing teachers together to teach and learn from one another, these NWP sites created a sense of community, promoted continuous teacher learning, and developed teacher efficacy through their daily practices, practices that were informed by strong underlying values that infused the activities organized for its participants.

#### ***Building Community by Teaching and Learning***

The NWP begins its program for teachers with a 5-week invitational workshop held on a university campus. Building community starts on the first day as participants are introduced to a variety of activities in which they are to become the primary actors. By the second day, the new participants take the "author's chair," teach model lessons, log the day's activities, work in writers' groups, and take turns providing food. These basic activities, which grow and

develop over the 5 weeks, intensively model how the NWP sites build community while giving their participants opportunities to learn and grow.

Taking turns in the author's chair requires the teacher/writer to go public with a piece of written work. By giving feedback to each other, teachers learn more about the process of writing as well as about themselves and their colleagues. Another activity, teaching a model lesson, displays the knowledge and expertise that teachers have gained from teaching in the context of their own classrooms. Their colleagues then write letters, discuss, or give feedback in ways that are "constructively critical" of the lesson (including how the lesson might be used in their own classrooms). This process helps the participants to think about their own classrooms as they learn how to critique, contextualize, and build on other teachers' work. Informal activities such as meeting in small groups to read work aloud to each other or working on their own fills the balance of the day. In addition, participants volunteer to log the day's activities; documenting the growth of their community makes them more aware of the quality of their personal relationships as well as the growing cultural norms that define the group.

A variety of techniques including scaffolding learning, working in a cooperative group, reading for meaning, writing for clarity and giving feedback, and going public with your work, bring a new awareness of the vulnerability of writers and the courage it takes to go public. Over the 5 weeks of NWP summer institutes, as relationships broaden and deepen, the feedback becomes more pointed and helpful, and writing improves. The experience of being teacher and learner, novice and expert, group member and individual, writer and audience, opens teachers to new possibilities and opportunities. The lessons, strategies, issues, and activities become more than the sum of their parts. Teachers come to feel that they belong to a community that cares for them as people and as colleagues, and that shares their passionate concerns for the success of their students.



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## **Network Learning in Classrooms**

Observing the classrooms of six NWP-member teachers (e.g., three in each of the two sites we studied), we found strategies (e.g., mini lessons, jigsaw, author's chair), lessons (e.g., newspaper writing, debate, story elements), and strong philosophical understandings (e.g., knowing your students, focusing on content and not just correcting errors, respecting different styles of writing) that had been derived from their summer's work. The commitment to inquiry and engagement in a continuing process of improvement was reinforced throughout the school year by activities and relationships at the local site as well as by national programs of the NWP.

Teachers at both the rural and urban sites pointed to particular lessons or strategies that they had adapted from their summer experiences and used in their own classrooms. One second-grade teacher, for example, created an opportunity for her young students to debate a critical question, a strategy she had learned from a lesson taught by a high school teacher during the summer institute. A sixth-grade teacher created writing groups that were similar to those that she herself had been a part of during the summer. It was apparent from our observations and interviews that the support teachers had found and continued to enjoy in the NWP had renewed their excitement about teaching, contributing significantly to their connection to their students and to their effectiveness as classroom teachers. Finally, building on what they had learned from their continuing connection to the NWP, some teachers were given and/or created opportunities to become leaders in their schools, districts, and communities, engaging other teachers (and administrators) in the process of improving programs and practices.

### **THE CARNEGIE ACADEMY: DEVELOPING A SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING**

The Carnegie Academy, a newly created initiative designed to gain a theoretical understanding of the teaching and learning process, is based on the conceptual work of Shulman

(1993). He suggests that scholarly work, including the scholarship of teaching, should be public, reviewed critically by peers, and rendered in forms that can be exchanged and built upon by others. Although the Carnegie Academy is not itself a network, by developing a scholarship of teaching, it is trying to understand and build on the work of many networks. Critical to the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning is the participation of teachers who, as members of educational networks, have already been engaged in activities such as teacher research and other forms of inquiry that reflect these ideas (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Freedman, 1999; Stokes, in press). Because a major focus of the work of the academy is to learn from the ideas and practices of existing networks, these teachers will inform the work of the academy while they more explicitly build on their own self-conscious conceptual knowledge.

The first Carnegie Academy cohort of 20 teachers and teacher educators is in the process of inquiring into their own practice, a process that will continue for 2 years.<sup>3</sup> Their inquiries, both broad and deep, deal with the complex problems confronting teachers today: "How can the achievement gap be closed in my classroom?" "Can student teachers retain an 'inquiry stance' when working on their own as novice teachers?" "How can I teach teachers to use technology in their classrooms?" Such questions indicate the relevance and depth of the research concerns of these teachers.

At the same time that they are collaborating with the teacher scholars, the Carnegie staff is concerned with understanding the conditions that enable or constrain the development of a scholarship of teaching. They are asking complex questions: What do we mean by "going public"? Is all inquiry worthy of being called scholarship? How can teachers rigorously document their own teaching, an activity that demands that they reconcile being passionate teachers with being dispassionate researchers? What kinds of supports inside and outside of schools make this kind of scholarship possible? The answers to these and other questions will continue to inform our knowledge, not only of

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the scholarship of teaching, but also of the contributions that networks can make to the process of reshaping teacher development.

### A FORM FOR ITS TIME

The failure of traditional professional development for teachers has been well documented (Little, 1993). Teachers have been considered as passive receivers of prescriptive programs, given little time or incentive to integrate these new programs into their classroom practice. Networks, in contrast, involve their members in a variety of activities that reflect the purposes and changing needs of their participants. They attract teachers because they mount agendas that give teachers opportunities to create as well as receive knowledge. Teachers become members of a community where they are valued as partners and colleagues, participants in an ongoing effort to better the learning process for themselves and their students.

Although a few networks have existed for some time, their numbers and influence have increased dramatically in the last few years (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Perhaps their loose structure and flexible organization are more in tune with the rapid technological and socioeconomic changes of this era, providing the kinds of knowledge and experience that teachers need to be successful with their students. By providing avenues for members to deal with real problems, to work collaboratively, and to communicate more effectively with a diverse population, networks are uniquely suited to the development of learning communities that are both local and national.

Although some networks have been highly successful, creating the kinds of internal and external contexts that promote, support, and sustain teacher growth and development, networks are complicated and not without problems.<sup>4</sup> We are learning more about them, their possibilities and their limitations, even as they exert a growing influence on teachers in general and teacher educators in particular. Teacher educators who collaborate with, learn from, and make use of the knowledge created by these networks are helping to recreate the meaning of

scholarship itself, not only scholarship for teachers, but for themselves as well (Lieberman, 1992). It is in the process of this recreation that we can strengthen and deepen the professional knowledge that we take into the new millennium.

### NOTES

1. I use the term *network* to include school- and university-based educators organized to work together to better serve students by engaging in their own growth and development. Networks can be intentional or arise spontaneously out of a need for people to collaborate on an agreed-upon purpose. As we will see, these purposes grow and change over time. I use the terms *network*, *collaborative*, and *partnership* interchangeably.

2. A site in the National Writing Project is constituted by a university person and a teacher who codirect professional development activities for a given group. Currently, there are 161 sites in the United States.

3. The Scholarship Initiative is for K-12 teachers and teacher educators. Higher education teachers are also involved in creating the Scholarship of Teaching. For further information on the Scholarship of Teaching program, write to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 555 Middlefield Rd., Menlo Park, CA 94025.

4. For important analyses, see Achinstein (1998), Cuban (1992), Fullan (1993), Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992), Lieberman and Grolnick (1996), Stokes (in press), and Westheimer (1998). All of these authors investigate the complexity of these professional communities, both inside and outside the school.

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