The Limitations of Partnership

BY GIRANN TAM

It was a hot Friday in mid-July, and we were clicking into week three of our summer institute. I was braving the noontime sweltering sun, walking across the University of Arkansas’s Little Rock campus to Dub’s, a popular off-campus eatery and bookstore. Here, I would join five others around two tables, two groups of strangers engaging, at first, in perfunctory small talk but soon getting down to business.

On one side of the table sat Bonnie Lesley, Suzie Davis, and Gene Parker, all Little Rock School District (LRS&D) folks. On our side of the table sat Rich Raymond, Dana Steward, and myself, all Little Rock Writing Project folks.

Just about the time our polite conversation reached its saturation point, Bonnie Leslie, Little Rock’s associate superintendent for instruction, pushed back her plate and spoke very plainly: “Our teachers need help and what we are interested in is more of them benefiting from your writing project.”

Bonnie’s announcement confirmed our hopes. The LRS&D really was interested in how we could work together to improve professional development for the district’s teachers. For the next 30 minutes, we discussed a variety of strategies for teacher development, including greater participation in summer institutes, teachers teaching teachers through our workshops, and a fall or spring course modeled after our summer institutes. We left the luncheon feeling upbeat. The possibility that we would work more in tandem with each other seemed real.

Soon after the July luncheon and before school began, Suzie Davis, Little Rock’s director of language arts, invited Dana, our site writing coach, to a local language arts conference that the district was hosting for its teachers. During the four-day conference, Dana connected with Suzie several times, but their conversation never focused on, as we had hoped it would, the nuts and bolts of our collaboration with the school district.

Then in early September, Suzie contacted Dana, informing her that the district was pretty much set for the year. Translated, Suzie’s message conveyed, “We’ll call you when we need you.”

This sounded like a brush-off, and indeed, other than one lone workshop for the district for social studies teachers, no earth-shaking ventures sprang forth as a result of our summer luncheon. I was disappointed.

We heard not a peep from the school district for five months. Then, in mid-February 2000, out of the blue, we were invited to team with LRS&D and the university’s education department to develop plans for a grant. The grant, called Gear Up, would address the needs of college-bound high school students. As a new co-director that fall, I attended the Gear-Up grant’s first planning meeting with great eagerness. This, after all, was our first joint endeavor with the district since our July luncheon meeting seven months previous. Nine folks participated in this preliminary meeting held at the district’s Instructional Resource Center. For three hours, I sat beside Bonnie Lesley, munching the hot, buttered popcorn she kept bringing in as we worked. Filling up two long walls of marker-board, we compiled a working list of supportive measures already targeting Little Rock’s high school students. We then began to brainstorm how the grant money could streamline these measures and better serve the district’s college-bound students and their teachers.

The second Gear-Up planning meeting was rescheduled twice, and in the end, I was unable to attend. I learned later that the district had finalized their grant proposal, deciding not to draw on resources from our site or the university’s education department. Again, I was disappointed.

In late March of 2000, Suzie Davis called and asked if our writing project would be interested in putting together a writing-focused summer program that combined professional development for middle school teachers and summer school hours for middle school students in danger of failing. To put it mildly, I was thrilled by Suzie’s call.

“Yeah, absolutely, Suzie. We are interested. Let’s talk.” If Little Rock was going to keep thinking of us, we must continue to be available. One of these days our efforts at collaboration would bear fruit.

I knew that we could put together the kind of program Suzie was looking for and do it well. I began to envision Little Rock teachers and students flocking in to reap the benefits of the wonderful summer program our teacher consultants would provide. At our first district planning meeting, however, I discovered very quickly that our site would not run the show exclusively. In my naivety and inexperience, I had assumed that we would organize, coordinate, and implement the program. But, in fact, the Summer Institute for Teaching and Learning, as the six-week program came to be called, would demand coordinating efforts from several parties.

To begin with, our budget was underwritten by Title I money. This involved the district’s management of those federally authorized funds. Secondly, the administrative team at Southwest and Cloverdale Middle Schools became involved because it was their failing students we were targeting. Thirdly, those students needed math and science units before advancing to the next grade, so the district appointed their director of instruction for math and science as project coordinator. He selected our math and science curriculum kits, provided trainers to inservice the 26 teachers involved, and recruited seven district teachers to serve as science and math mentor teachers.

The district then appointed a curriculum coordinator from our university education department. Her role included coordinating the integration of our three subject areas: math, science, and reading; assisting teachers in the development of lesson plans and team teaching; implementing a pre- and post-assessment of students; and supervising nine middle school interns who would assist in team teaching. At last, our writing project was at the table, but we were not controlling the menu.

My own contribution as writing project co-director was three-fold: I facilitated the process of integrating writing throughout the math, science, and reading; recruited nine teacher consultants to serve as mentor teachers; and managed a graduate-level teaching-writing course for 10 of the 26 teachers.

And then we plunged in. For two weeks, we immersed ourselves in an intense program of teacher development and training. We digested numerous essays and book excerpts from writers such as Ann E. Berthoff, Toby Fulwiler, and Reggie Routman. As we read, we kept reader
response journals, practicing teacher reflection. The first part of each morning, we wrote in response to teacher-generated prompts from our readings. In the afternoons, we attempted to close each day with more reflection.

At week three, 140 middle school students joined us. These students had failed one or more subjects in science, math, or English. From 8:30 a.m. to noon each day, nine teacher teams organized their students into cooperative groups and moved them through three lessons of hands-on, discovery-type instruction in reading, science, and math. Theoretically, writing was to facilitate all learning, weaving its way through all instruction.

On paper, of course, all this sounds wonderful. Before the six-week Summer Institute for Teaching and Learning had begun, I had romanticized the idea of collaborating. In contrast with doing our own thing on the university campus, collaborating with our school district colleagues seemed innovative and fresh. I felt it made us comrades in arms.

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through? I've felt a little disoriented and would have liked to have these plans thought through and discussed before we got started, rather than do our planning one day at a time as we have done.”

There was planning time in the afternoons, but as one TC commented, these meetings turned into “gripe sessions.”

And the writing to learn that was to be the core of our teaching did not really take place in all of the teacher groups. Kathy wrote, “Writing in science and math has been limited to short answers to questions. This has been a source of frustration for me.”

In spite of the problems we encountered throughout our collaboration, I am hopeful that partnering with our city’s school district communities will continue. Although operating beyond the boundaries of our summer institutes is intimidating and unpredictable, I firmly believe that we must no longer be satisfied with the success of our summer institutes only. Pursuing additional and ongoing ventures with our school district colleagues will expand our reach and thus impact more teachers and their students.

We will be no less tenacious in pursuing these partnerships, but we will take with us some important lessons we have learned.

Lessons on Time: Enthusiasm and willingness to collaborate must not preclude the time-demanding processes of planning and reflection. It is imperative that we not hurry into any one collaborative opportunity. Sufficient time must be freed up to identify, clarify, and implement a program’s objectives.

Lessons on Focus: Any collaboration should not attempt to achieve too much too soon. Teacher and administrative participants in collaborations generally gather from diverse teaching communities and backgrounds. This diversity has the potential to both impede and enrich the collaboration. If the collaboration’s focus and scope are clearly defined and narrow, its participants can focus their energies and expertise and work more effectively together.

Lessons on Leadership: Sharing leadership in a collaborative project is complicated. In our summer institutes, teacher leadership and growth are nurtured and furthered through a sharing of responsibility, through a teacher-teaching-teachers approach. One’s collaborators, however, may not hold this view of leadership. How leadership will unfold must be worked out and agreed upon.

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