Teacher Empowerment through Partnerships: A Sustaining Model of Professional Development

Throughout our teaching careers, most of us have participated in professional development workshops. Some are led by administration, and some are led by outside contractors disconnected from the school and teaching context; however, models such as the National Writing Project (NWP) position teachers at the center of effective professional development opportunities. The NWP model of teachers teaching teachers empowers teachers to assume leadership roles within and beyond their school communities by preparing for those roles through programs such as Invitational Summer Institutes.

Teacher empowerment has several dimensions, but it happens primarily when teachers are “treated like professionals, feel like professionals, and have the tools to succeed” and when teachers “feel in control of [their] professional lives and encourage others to be successful—in other words, [they] are exercising informal leadership” (Zemelman and Ross x). National Writing Project (NWP) sites work within an established framework of summer institutes, teacher-led professional development, and continuity to cultivate teacher leaders and empower them by applying these principles. Invitational Summer Institutes traditionally serve as the gateway by which teachers become involved with NWP sites and start to devote time to developing their skills in the area of teacher leadership. In a recent survey of the teacher leaders participating in NWP’s Invitational Summer Institutes across the country, two key findings emerged: (1) “the need for high quality professional development in the teaching of writing” and (2) “the NWP as a vital national resource for educational improvement” (Stokes). National Writing Project offers a powerful platform for empowering teachers and for other organizations such as universities and state departments of education partnering with NWP to create professional development. Research on professional learning has shown that teachers need to be actively involved in their own learning and that collaboration between institutions is essential (Cook).

Partnerships for Leadership

Recognizing the need for more authentic and sustainable models of professional development, the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) turned toward the NWP sites across the state to examine ways to offer more relevant professional development to schools. Over the past two years, GaDOE has embarked on an ambitious effort to support the state’s literacy initiative—Literacy for Learning, Living, and Leading (L4)—which is based on a collective impact approach to improving students’ reading outcomes. L4 is a shared expectation that all students will read proficiently by the end of third grade (and beyond).

Collective impact calls on disparate groups, individuals, and organizations working in their respective roles together toward a common goal. As part of this collective impact effort, the DOE recognizes that the state’s National Writing Project (SNWP) sites offer proven practices and broad reach...
that can be leveraged to positively affect teacher efficacy. Because the National Writing Project is such an effective tool for professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al.), the DOE literacy team decided to build on those strengths by partnering with the four state NWP sites, in particular the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project (KMWP), to provide greater reach across the state.

The partnerships between the GaDOE and the state’s National Writing Project sites partners these entities alongside each other and GaDOE to support and scale up the work of the statewide Writing Projects. As a result of the partnership with KMWP and three other sites, GaDOE has been able to reach directly into classrooms to affect writing instruction and student learning.

The partnerships emphasize supporting the development of teacher leaders at the school level. In the first year GaDOE funded the work of the four Georgia Writing Project sites, allowing each one to shape its work with teachers to best fit the context of the site and the school communities it serves. KMWP identified a core group of six teachers to develop and lead professional development workshops. Through these workshops, KMWP teacher leaders facilitated six workshops with the support of site leaders, and KMWP offered a menu of services that could be shared with schools and districts in their network. For year two of the partnership, GaDOE has asked KMWP and other Writing Project sites to continue building a community of practice in an online platform. KMWP will rely on teacher leaders to support and build capacity for teachers in writing instruction. Serving as virtual specialists allows the teacher leaders to lend their expertise in writing instruction and provide ongoing support to teachers in a virtual professional learning community (PLC).

In addition to teachers leading professional learning, the DOE’s literacy team has organized a Literacy Faculty Think Tank that consists of faculty within the state university system and the state technical college system who have committed to the work and will develop a menu of evidence-based practices for literacy instruction and lead professional learning for educators in P–12 settings. The four Writing Project sites are members of this group, and KMWP has contributed to outlining those evidence-based practices.

**Writing Project Partnerships Serve as a Model for Teacher-Leader Development**

**Context of the Work**

KMWP worked with five metro Atlanta schools and their respective KMWP fellows to develop individual school-based literacy initiatives. Our goal as a Writing Project site was to support teachers in identifying literacy needs at their school, developing a plan of action, and implementing that plan. We identified teacher leaders we had already worked with through Summer Institutes and ongoing site work. In identifying these teachers, we considered challenges we knew they faced in their schools, their passion for affecting change in their school environments, and their leadership skills as evidenced by prior KMWP work. The work occurred over approximately six months with teacher leaders meeting periodically to discuss challenges and successes of their school-based literacy initiatives. Teachers also selected and read Jeff Anderson’s *10 Things Every Writer Needs to Know* because they felt it was accessible and offered practical strategies.

With an overarching goal to build capacity to continue the partnership with KMWP, each teacher leader recruited other teachers in their schools to participate in the school-based work and the book study. The teachers, in collaboration with their administrators, identified and developed their work based on their school’s individual needs.

**Planning Individual School Projects**

With the exception of one teacher who had developed a Writing Center at his school, these teachers had not been invited to develop literacy initiatives at the school level, so they came to the work with much excitement about the possibilities coupled with questions and concerns about the practical aspects. While teachers have many natural leadership abilities, they often need mentorship in developing those, which is the role KMWP played in supporting their growth. We used regular planning meetings with all of the teachers together to support this growth. These meetings offered them an opportunity to not only plan but also to discuss and troubleshoot challenges they were facing in implementing their projects in their schools. Studies show that “well-supported teacher research and collaborative inquiry situated in teachers’ local contexts hold
genuine promise for productive professional development opportunities for teachers and for cultivating landscapes for school reform” (Fecho et al. 195).

Planning for Effective Professional Development

In an initial planning session facilitated by KMWP leadership, teacher leaders discussed their school needs and their ideas for addressing them. At NWP sites, writing to think is an integral part of the culture, which is how KMWP initiated this discussion. The writing prompt read as follows:

What do teachers at your school need by way of literacy support? How might some professional development sessions you develop and deliver target that need? What is your (and your administrators’) desired outcome from this work? Consider not just what you want to do, but the goals and desired outcomes. When it comes to literacy work, we have a natural tendency to think towards ELA classrooms. Remember to think about the broad picture of your school and literacy. While you may work with a small group of colleagues with a specific need, you should also consider all teachers and all content areas in your school.

The prompt was designed to engage discussion around professional development needs and solutions in the teacher leaders’ schools. The teachers shared their ideas on large sticky pages and posted them around the room for a gallery walk where they could review and discuss each other's ideas. On these pages, teachers identified the working title of their workshop, the literacy goals, the projected outcomes, and participants they would invite from their school, including content areas and grade levels. During the gallery walk, they posed questions and shared ideas in the margins. Teachers came into the planning with dreams and ideas about what they wanted to see happen in their schools with regards to professional development; however, many had never been empowered to share that thinking and to consider how to implement school-level professional learning with their colleagues.

Bobby teaches at a suburban high school and had started a writing center at his high school a few years earlier. After initiating a peer tutoring program for the writing center, Bobby was faced with the challenge of helping other content-area teachers and students find value in it and use it as part of the writing occurring in non-ELA classrooms. Bobby recognized that this meant training peer tutors to support students in writing that did not occur specifically for the ELA classroom. Figure 1 shows an example of Bobby’s planning. Sylvia teaches at the same high school as Bobby and participated in the project as well. They quickly recognized the benefit in working together, so as a result, Sylvia worked to get more teachers engaging students in writing in content areas and to promote the usage of the writing center through that. Figure 2 shows an example of Sylvia’s planning to support Bobby’s ideas.

![Example of Bobby's gallery walk thinking during project planning](image1)

**FIGURE 1.** Example of Bobby’s gallery walk thinking during project planning

![Example of Sylvia's gallery walk thinking during project planning](image2)

**FIGURE 2.** Example of Sylvia’s gallery walk thinking during project planning

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Implementing Individual School Projects

The projects varied in variety and scope but responded to school-based needs, supporting the notion that professional learning is not a one-size-fits-all approach and that it needs to be customized for the context within which it occurs. The process of designing the projects tapped into Steve Zemelman and Harry Ross’s dimensions of teacher empowerment in that the teachers were treated like professionals in the process, and we were equipping them with tools and support structures to succeed. The projects they were planning also tapped into key features of professional development by linking the teachers’ improvements in teacher effectiveness and classroom practices, which include focus on content knowledge, active learning opportunities, and coherence with other learning activities (Garet et al.). These principles were present in the projects designed and implemented for professional learning at each school.

The stories of teacher leadership below involve not only successes but also messiness. They all share some common variables important to teacher leadership in schools: positioning teachers as professionals with knowledge to share and treating teacher leadership as a process rather than a positional concept.

Piper’s Story

Piper, a fourth-grade teacher in a high-needs urban school, found herself faced with implementing boxed curricular programs for the current year with little to no direction or support from the administration. She recognized that while she needed to work within the parameters of her school’s program, she and other teachers might also have some latitude to bend the boxed units through their interpretation of them. This was at the core of her goal in developing the work; however, she articulated an additional goal of “empowering teachers to build a stronger writing block each day that included explicitly writing strategies and regular student writing conferences.” Piper recognized that this type of working around boxed curriculum was a form of empowerment for her and her colleagues.

Piper’s work focused on a team of fourth-grade teachers and their support teachers, which included one student teacher, an ESOL teacher, and two special education teachers. Each meeting began with a discussion of the standards for the week in all areas so that the team could gain a sense of possible cross-curricular connections. They then moved into discussion of the previous week’s units and questions and concerns that still lingered. Finally, the group previewed the upcoming week’s units and set a goal. The goal of these meetings was to work closely together to identify and fill any gaps in learning that might occur with the units of study and to find resources to help students with language and learning needs.

In concluding the work, Piper’s team learned about how to properly organize and pace their writing instructional block. They also developed a conferencing component to include in the writing time—something for which teachers had previously not made space. Ultimately, Piper and the teachers felt they were able to break apart the essential pieces of the boxed lessons while also recognizing and addressing the content that needed to be taught. As a result, they now have a set of goals and assessment strategies that they can bring to next year’s students. Piper now has a vision of herself as an empowered teacher leader in her school, which includes continuing this work by including another grade-level team to implement some vertical planning. Piper also led professional development in her school that directly links to improving the teaching delivery and outcome for members of her team.

Molly’s Story

Molly, a teacher at a suburban middle school, focused her work on providing professional learning for her colleagues in implementing the Peer Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) for increasing student reading within ELA and other content-area classrooms. She had the goal of introducing a research-based literacy strategy to her school across grade levels and content areas that applies to fiction and nonfiction reading. Molly introduced her strategy throughout a series of department meetings and met with the English, science, and social studies departments on separate occasions. In these meetings, she modeled for teachers how to pair students using Lexile levels to create balanced literacy partners. Here she used a model text and paired teachers to practice the PALS procedures, and teachers then implemented the strategies with students reading their content-area texts.

Molly noted, “Throughout this process, I learned that teachers were receptive to reading
strategies that relate to their content.” She also found that modeling was the most effective means to introduce a strategy to her faculty. Like Piper, Molly has a vision of herself as an empowered teacher leader in her school, which includes creating opportunities for teacher observation of colleagues who have successfully implemented PALS into their classroom practice. This is in direct response to her colleagues indicating they need more training and experience to be successful. As a result of her project, Molly initiated a more open culture of professional development where teachers participated in others’ classrooms to gain specific knowledge to inform their own teaching.

Bobby and Sylvia’s Story

At their suburban high school, Bobby and Sylvia had a portion of teachers and administrators interested in improving Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), which offered them a ready population of cross-content-area teachers with whom to work. For their professional learning they worked with teachers in the areas of social studies and career, technical, and agricultural education. It is worth noting that Bobby and Sylvia teach in a school with a high number of Writing Project teachers, which has helped shift the school culture and create buy-in for this type of professional learning work over time.

Teachers who participated in the professional learning with Bobby and Sylvia did so voluntarily. Bobby and Sylvia invited the teachers to read and discuss 10 Things Every Writer Needs to Know (Anderson) with them, and they joined the larger cross-school group of teachers for those discussions as well. Bobby and Sylvia noted, “The teachers involved appreciated not just the book but also the perspectives given by teachers across grade levels and departments.” They went on to explain that the teachers found practical ideas that they could implement with their writing instruction. Specifically, one of the social studies teachers noted that Anderson’s emphasis on using mentor texts in 10 Things Every Writer Needs to Know will change the way he teaches reading in his world history classes.

Bobby and Sylvia felt positive about the outcomes of their professional learning and hope the culminating result will be a schoolwide initiative in which students are writing in all disciplines, including those that are not considered “core” disciplines. They also noted that the professional learning will affect how they train their writing tutors in the fall. While Bobby had developed the writing center prior to this professional development project, he had not offered teachers in the school professional development to engage them directly in supporting his efforts with the writing center, so this project offered that missing piece.

Lola’s Story

Lola, a teacher at an urban high school, focused on introducing teachers to new ideas to get students writing. Lola is the teacher leader who experienced the greatest difficulty in recruiting teachers in her school to participate. She notes, “I wanted teachers to be able to think outside the box and consider new ways of teaching writing that encourage rather than discourage” students. She felt the goal was important considering the fact that many of the end-of-course tests require students to have a written response. In addressing this goal, Lola implemented a peer-share strategy where she shared tools from 10 Things Every Writer Needs to Know with interested teachers. She noted that “several teachers saw the need to implement new innovative ways to teach writing and this made it easy to share the content with them in a one-on-one basis.”

Receiving positive feedback from the teachers she approached individually, Lola then decided to host an official peer-share event at her school with other interested teachers. The sessions were well-attended and the teachers were engaged with the content. The sessions were generative in that teachers brainstormed ways the content can be implemented in the future, and some even left borrowing a copy of the book. In the end, Lola experienced success and found herself surprised by that. Lola created a professional development opportunity in her school that centered around teachers and their needs by initiating conversations that were otherwise missing.

Professional Development Implications

Professional development in school is most effective when teachers play an active role in designing and leading it; however, like any other professional development opportunity, it is difficult to gain teacher buy-in. We learned that the teachers felt overwhelmed and burdened, which made them reluctant to assume additional obligations. Teachers experience these feelings for myriad reasons, and administrative
stances are among those. We found three basic administrative stances: (1) desiring focus on preparation for standardized testing, (2) seeking grade-level specific professional development, or (3) aligning with a nationally recognized “boxed” literacy curriculum as opposed to authentically meeting the needs of the teachers and students in the school. Finally, teachers found it difficult to manage the time it takes to work with administration and/or fellow teachers while maintaining a regular teaching schedule.

Better communication between teacher leaders and administration offers a step toward addressing this challenge. This communication must come in the form of dedicated time and support for the teachers, and the structure with which KMWP provided them offers a model aligned with principles of teacher leadership for that. Too often communication is limited to faculty meetings and hallway conversations that do not allow this type of space and focus.

The teachers recognize that in order to continue and scale their work they will need to gain buy-in from what they call “key faculty”—department chairs and team leaders. They recognize that they need to do this without alienating anyone or leading other faculty to believe they are assuming one more job responsibility.

Allowing support for this type of leadership work within schools benefits everyone. Schools cannot accomplish everything on their own, despite the fact that we know these professional experiences are best when they are by, for, and within the school community. Outside organizations such as state departments of education and Writing Project sites offer partnership opportunities and bring expertise to support schools in these endeavors.

Teachers genuinely want to affect change, and they want to do so with the support of their administration and fellow teachers in their schools. They want to create a culture of inquiry to effectively meet student needs while not feeling pushed to teach to the standardized test or within a scripted boxed curriculum. Visible change in student outcomes and administrative leadership and support strongly influences teachers’ willingness to implement curricular changes. Additionally, prioritized implementation allows teachers to focus their efforts (Brown and Inglis). To accomplish this takes time and patience; it takes baby steps to get teacher and administrative buy-in for this type of emerging leadership to flourish in a school. Sometimes those baby steps come in the form of approaching individual teachers rather than trying to dive in with a large group, although teachers ultimately found strength within the larger group to be able to go back to their respective schools to continue their work and broaden their scope of leadership within the building.

Works Cited
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