
The Perils and Promises of One School/College Partnership

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Developing partnerships between teacher education programs and public schools has been strongly advocated by a number of professional groups as an important part of teacher education reform. The Holmes Group (1990), for example, advocates such an arrangement between college and school which it terms a Professional Development School (PDS). A PDS is defined as "a school for the development of novice professionals, for continuing development of experienced professionals and for the research and development of the teaching profession" (p. 1). The need for and desirability of such an arrangement is hard to dispute, yet creating such relationships is not without its challenges. What follows is my account of participating in one college's attempt to initiate such a relationship. I tell the story to highlight both the perils and the promises of this experience.

The Partners

The partnership between Mt. Pleasant High School and Rhode Island College is nearly five years old. I was involved as College Coordinator for this partnership from almost the beginning and served in this capacity for four very intense years. This year, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the experience in hopes of gaining perspective and some useful insights. Let me introduce the partners:

Providence School Department's Mt. Pleasant High School (MPHS) is a culturally diverse urban school of about 1400 students located less than a mile from my campus office, next to the main entrance to Rhode Island College. Although teacher educators in social science education

were using MPHS as a practicum site and teacher education students in various classes made occasional school observations there, the two institutions had a history of mutual apathy that went back decades. Thus, people at the high school entered the relationship with more than a bit of skepticism; after all, they had been essentially ignored by Rhode Island College for a long time.

Rhode Island College (RIC) is a comprehensive public college with undergraduate programs in liberal arts and sciences and a variety of professional fields and with some graduate programs in related fields. Teacher education has been a mission of the college since its inception in 1854 and continues to be a major focus. While our high school colleagues had reason to be skeptical of the college's intentions and good will, professors and staff members at RIC also had some concerns; the Providence School Department had the reputation of being a difficult district with which to work. It has the reputation of being extremely political, and there is a strong and highly active teacher union. Not unlike many urban areas, the district has been seriously underfunded while at the same time being called on to serve a more and more diverse population. Over 70 languages are represented in the Providence schools. Achievement test scores are low and dropout rates high.

Hope and Dreams

Encouraged and supported by a new dean in the School of Education and Human Development, a cadre of professional colleagues at RIC, both faculty and staff, were enthusiastic about this partnership. We were committed to educational equity for urban, culturally diverse students and schools. Further, we were optimistic that the time was ripe for school reform in the district and that we could make some positive contributions to that effort. The optimism was based on the results of a comprehensive and well-done investigation of the Providence schools that reached conclusions about needed reform with which most of us agreed. Further, a small group of MPHS teachers was excited about working with us to create a key component of our partnership, the Teacher Academy, a program designed to attract and prepare urban, culturally-diverse youngsters to enter the teaching profession through eventual participation in the College's Teacher Education Programs. Without downplaying the idealism with which we all started, it is certainly true that among the motives for the Mt. Pleasant High School/Rhode Island College partnership were the accreditation needs of both institutions. In some ways, this was a marriage of convenience.

What did the partners want from this relationship? In retrospect, it is easy to see that our differing expectations could be a source of

problems. The Dean of Education and others at the college hoped for the development of a full-blown Professional Development School, and thus the opportunity to be actively involved with reform efforts at MPHS. There was hope that the two institutions could find ways of working together that would benefit the students of both. What most of the people at MPHS wanted was for the college to do more for their students; specifically, they felt that the college should be doing more to encourage their graduates to attend RIC. They hoped that this would be done through activities provided by and at the college to interest and attract Mt. Pleasant High School students and that college attendance for at least some graduates would be made possible through scholarships. In a time of decreasing resources for both institutions, the college was viewed as the rich neighbor up the hill who could be doing more to support urban students. While there was interest in reform among some of the MPHS faculty, the idea of RIC might have input into or participation in reform at MPHS was not something that most people at the high school were willing to consider.

The opportunity to participate in this project appealed to me for a number of reasons. Mostly, though, I was excited about having the time to spend in the school and about being able to share what I knew about literacy, teaching, and learning. I knew from reading dozens of student observations of classes at the school that teaching done there was frequently uninspired. I thought I detected low expectations based on students' diverse backgrounds and their poverty. Both from having been a teacher in urban high schools for 10 years and from my professional studies, I felt that I had some understanding of the issues of student apathy, disrespect, and poor attendance, and that I was aware of some ways other schools with similar problems had of coping with and even reversing these factors. In short, I thought I could be useful and make a difference. However, from my own experiences of working with college faculty and participating in inservice experiences when I was a high school teacher, I was also aware of the need to proceed with great respect and caution in my dealings at the school. I had respect for the challenges that the teachers faced, and I saw myself as a resource and possible facilitator as they moved into some positive changes.

First Step

During the first year of our participation, I set out to establish myself by getting to know the school and its people. My goal was to establish trust and do whatever needed to be done to get the Teacher Academy started and, at the same time, to build the foundation of a more extensive partnership. I saw myself as a learner and coworker. I hung around and listened a lot. I got to know the students, the Teacher

Academy teacher-mentor team, and some other teachers and staff in the building. I worked closely with the MPHS coordinator and the teacher team in planning activities, events, and, eventually, curriculum. We established a program in which students from our introductory secondary methods course served as mentors, tutors, and learning coaches for Teacher Academy students. I read extensively about Professional Development Schools and school reform and encouraged teacher education colleagues in the various disciplines to consider moving some of their practicum experiences to Mt. Pleasant High School as a way of broadening our relationship and increasing our involvement. In many ways, this was a honeymoon period in which the core group of professionals from each institution was excited about the possibilities and enjoying the opportunity to work together to create the Teacher Academy Program and possibly more.

The second year brought more positive experiences. The Teacher Academy core group expanded by adding five new teacher-advisors. For the first time, a specific Teacher Academy course was offered. Two MPHS teachers and I worked together during the summer planning this course, and I had the delightful experience of team-teaching it, during the first semester, with one of those teachers. For this teacher educator, nothing could have been more affirming than the opportunity to be in a classroom daily with 27 high school sophomores and juniors and to learn that I could not only "practice what I preached," but that I could do it with considerable success. In addition, I found myself and my work in the education courses I was teaching being more and more grounded in the rushed and messy "real world" of teaching and in the realities of the lives of poor, urban youngsters.

As a counterbalance to these positive elements, I was beginning to realize, with a sinking feeling, that if establishing a Professional Development School was our major purpose, the prognosis was not good. Although I had established good relationships with those few teachers involved with the Teacher Academy, the culture of the school and the leadership style of the administration gave me the feeling that I was perpetually encircling some impenetrable fortress with little to no hope of ever getting in. And while RIC colleagues in several disciplines now had established practicum sites at MPHS, attempts on the part of others from the college to be more involved in the life of the school were not welcomed.

Reform Strikes Out

During the spring of the second year, Mt. Pleasant High School became involved in serious reform efforts. By this time, I had pretty

much defined my role as college coordinator for the Teacher Academy only, and so my role in this was unofficial and highly peripheral—I listened a lot and shared appropriate professional articles. Other efforts to be involved, or even just be helpful, on the part of RIC were rebuffed. Year three brought the reforms that MPHS faculty had decided upon—basically a house system based on themes and a rotating schedule—and year four saw most of the reform efforts thrown out on the basis of a very close vote by the Mt. Pleasant faculty. Had the teachers had the support (skill-building opportunities, time, resources, leadership) necessary to make the reforms work? I don't think they had, but more than that, the situation had most or all of the components of what Tittle (1995) identifies as "the culture of inertia" (p. 263) which paralyzes so many attempts to reform American public education. Those components include not only limited resources, but other elements such as the passive-conservative nature of the teaching profession, miscommunication, turf disputes, and the pervasiveness of "us versus them" thinking. In short, the very factors that doomed any in-depth partnership with the college also doomed the reform efforts that some of the faculty at MPHS so valiantly worked for on their own.

The Teacher Academy survived, but not unscathed. Most of the Teacher Academy teachers had worked hard on the reform efforts, and they were frustrated with the results. They were tired. There were feelings of betrayal and interpersonal conflicts stemming from complex and disappointing experiences of the previous year and a half. It took a full semester of that fourth year to reestablish a good working relationship among the MPHS teachers on the Teacher Academy team.

Conclusions and Reflections

What are the perils of school/college partnerships? Based on this experience, I can identify at least two. First, given the two cultures involved, the college and the high school, it is dangerously easy to reconfirm old prejudices. Despite the best of intentions and the gentlest of approaches, many high school teachers (and administrators) may perceive the institution of the college and college professors as the "other," intent on imposing ideas upon them through force of "higher status." (After all, we do call it "higher education.") Attempts, such as the one I made, to work collegially may only serve to marginalize the individual making the effort; I cannot count how many times I heard MPHS teachers say, "We know you understand, *but* the College (or the Dean) . . ." I also heard RIC colleagues express their frustrations when efforts to work together were rebuffed or made extremely difficult by people at the high school. I still feel some frustration about that myself, even as I come to understand more about the sources of the difficulties.

Second, the cost of establishing a partnership may be very high, both to the institutions and to those working to create the partnership. For partnership development to move forward efficiently and effectively, it would be best if both of the institutions involved had smooth-working, open, participatory decision-making systems already in place. Several studies document the role of the principal and the school wide decision-making process as crucial to partnership development (Valli, Cooper, & Frankes, 1997). Without this stability, time and resources can be wasted at almost every step of the process, if the process happens at all. On an individual level, professors who spend time working on partnerships take that time from other activities more productive of the research and writing that are highly valued at the post-secondary level. They may also find, as I did, that the work I had to do in this effort took me a long way from my key academic focus on literacy. Participants from the high school risk both wasting their energies and becoming alienated from colleagues who view such efforts skeptically.

What are the promises of this particular experience? First, we do have the Teacher Academy Program functioning, and while it needs ongoing development and support, it is a worthy and viable program that has the potential to meet some of need for recruitment and training of culturally diverse teachers for which it was designed. Secondly, the tutoring/mentoring program that we established with the Teacher Academy continues, and thus our students in the secondary teacher education program all have the opportunity to work in an urban school setting and to get to know these young people on an individual basis. The RIC students rate this as one of the most important components of their introductory coursework; they appreciate the opportunity to get beyond some of their misconceptions about urban students and schools and acknowledge the value of having their coursework grounded in the real world.

Finally, as a teacher educator, I consider the experiences I had during the four years working with MPHS priceless. Despite my disappointment in not being more effective and in the limited opportunity I had to use my academic strengths in this effort, I have learned a great deal that serves to ground and inform my practice as a teacher educator. My experience has increased my credibility with my teacher education students, both graduate and undergraduate, and it influences almost every decision I make, both in course and curriculum development with colleagues and in my own planning and actions in the classroom. Even if it is costly, and whether or not the arrangements fit into the category of partnerships, it seems to me imperative that teacher educators periodically have the opportunity for significant experiences in the public schools, as learners and coworkers, and not just as occasional visitors or invited experts.

The challenges of bringing about changes in public schools are formidable (Sizer, 1996). There's no evidence that this generalization is less applicable to changes in public colleges. True collaboration involves willingness to change from both parties involved, and deep commitment to change is not so easily gained. Sizer suggests that the slow process of change in American schools in recent decades is a result of a "tacit acceptance of differences among stated goals" (p. 112). The implication is that we don't have the courage to face the issues that genuine change would open up. He continues: "Letting the sleeping dog of existing practices lie assures that it will not wake up and make us pay attention."

In their report on the 7-year-old relationship between Queens College and Louis Armstrong Middle School, Trubowitz and Longo (1997) say, "The attempt to link two different cultures, college and public school, might be compared to an effort to mate two different species. The joining will be difficult and obstacles will be inevitable" (p. 65). They describe the 10 stages of development that they have experienced over the 17 years, and, from my perspective, the RIC/MPHS partnership is somewhere between Stage 3: The Period of Truce and Stage 4: Mixed Approval. Within the limited but shared goal of maintaining the Teacher Academy Program, the two institutions do have a better relationship than they had at the beginning of this experience. There is great potential for further work; there are many challenges still to be faced.

Trubowitz and Longo (1997) view school-college collaboration as a creative enterprise with endless questions. I would agree with them and acknowledge that the enterprise requires great flexibility, patience with uncertainty, and willingness to commit human and material resources in less traditional ways. The potential for learning on the part of all participants and the promise of making positive differences in the school and in the teacher education program are reasons enough to accept these challenges.

References

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