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# A Literacy-Focused Professional Development Academy

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"No link in the education chain is intellectually weaker—or institutionally more tenacious—than teacher education," argues Denis P. Doyle (1996) in the *Los Angeles Times*. "(Teacher education) is a classic example of a 'closed system,' one in which there is little or no feedback from the outside world. Teacher educators, institutionally insulated, have been under little pressure to change or improve."

## **The Impossible Dream**

At Florida International University two literacy faculty members sought to challenge the thinking reflected in Doyle's accusations. We did so by developing, updating, and expanding an on-site, practice-what-you-preach, literacy-intensive Professional Development School (PDP) master's program. Even though we had no additional faculty, funds, or resources, we attempted to tailor the program to the needs of students at the school site.

## **Opportunity Conversation**

We conferred with the schools. In collaboration with a principal with whom we had a long-standing cordial, trusting relationship, we mutually compared needs and resources. From this conversation, a remarkable fact emerged: Through collaboration, both institutions could gain significant resources. One institution's need was, in fact, the other institution's resource. For example, the school needed in-depth teacher training. As a research and development center for the county, the school should be implementing state-of-the-art, cutting-edge curricula-

lum projects. A majority of the teachers had taught at this center for many years; half lacked a master's degree, and many lack training in current reading methodology in spite of significant changes in the field. This jeopardized their role in modeling cutting-edge strategies. Our institution, Florida International University (FIU) needed students in our master's program, which had a specialization area in literacy. Their need-teacher training-was our resource.

The university needed best-practice placements for our student teachers. When teachers supervise student teachers, they gain released time (as student teachers assume more and more responsibilities for the classroom day) and a tuition waiver that grants them a full semester of course work at no charge. Thus, the university's need became a teacher-training opportunity for the school: We gave placement preference to teachers enrolled in the master's program which provided them graduate study at minimal charge and free time to complete tasks associated with their graduate courses. This also provided us with closely monitored best-practice placement experiences for our student teachers.

As a research and development center, the school needed to engage in research and dissemination. University faculty needed to conduct research and disseminate findings via presentations at a professional meetings, and publish books and articles in professional journals. Both endeavors needed additional funding, so it seemed self-evident that both institutions could benefit from mutual collaboration on grant proposals.

The College of Education lost available campus-based classrooms at times convenient to teachers. Schools, on the other hand, have many areas for training available after hours. Teachers, we found, welcomed the informality and relative comfort of non-campus-based instruction. We found the spaces easier to manage since we taught in classrooms arranged in cooperative groups, eliminating the hastily preclass rearranging and postclass replacement into straight rows. We had immediate access to materials, such as children's books or content textbooks, and direct strategy applications surrounded us since we generally used the classrooms of teachers in the program. It seemed as if we had a learning laboratory crafted for the benefit of maximizing teacher training.

Each challenge raised by either institution seemed to offer more opportunity. It became increasingly clear that through collaboration, both institutions had more resources than either could assemble alone. So we began crafting a collaborative, on-site Professional Development Academy (PDA).

Table 1

### Mutual Need-Resource Match in Professional Development Collaboration

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School Needed:	Florida International University Had:
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In-depth, change-oriented teacher training	Cutting-edge graduate study
Incentive for updating skills	No-charge degrees (tuition waivers) Released time (student teachers) \$2,000 raise upon completing degree \$1500 increase after completing 8 courses
Extra adult assistance	Student teachers, field students
Instructional support	Professor-in-residence conducting model Lessons and cognitive coaching in their classes
Research	Classroom action research; faculty research
Identification of best practice	On-line computer search with university-donated computer, modem, and printer with direct link to search resources (e.g., FIRN, PantherNet, Internet); professional expertise
Dissemination	Presentations at professional meetings, articles, train-the-trainer opportunities, curriculum development); Internet home page with "Teach Peeks," best practice videotapes; Bahamas Teachers Training Teachers link
Funding	Grant writing collaboration; financial aid; monetary awards

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School Needed: Florida International University Had:

Acknowledgment Awards; newspaper articles; radio spots; requests for training in other locations

Technology support Faculty expertise

Florida International University Need:

School Has:

Faculty offices Office areas, phone access

Students for graduate program Half of the teachers without master's degrees

Research contexts/topics Researchable needs; children, schools, teachers, parents, and other subjects; school-wide school improvement team goals

Teaching-learning contexts Classrooms, schools

Teaching areas Classrooms, media center available after school hours

Funding Grant proposals which involve collaboration tend to be more readily funded

Best-practice student teacher placements Clinically certified teachers

Skills updating, especially for those out of field Inservice opportunities in conjunction with graduate course work, research projects

## Professional Development Academy

For the PDA, we crafted a wholly on-site master's degree program that featured hands-on, interactive, practice-what-you preach, classroom-relevant course work. In these courses our graduate students learned via the techniques we trained them to use: cooperative learning, peer coaching, alternative assessment (e.g., demonstration of mastery, portfolios, rubrics). Students accessed everything on-site, from admissions, registration, and advisement to course delivery. We made every effort to secure funding to defray the cost of the course work: Teachers enrolled in the master's program received first priority to have a student teacher placed in their classrooms. This meant the teachers received fee waivers for two semesters' worth of course work. We assisted our master's students in securing county funds to reimburse them for the semester of expenses not covered by the university-generated fee waivers. We helped secure a number of minority grants and monetary awards for selected students that supported their textbooks expenses or travel to professional meetings. At these meetings, the teachers shared strategies they learned or developed during the program, which met the school's need for dissemination.

Professors involved in the program served as professors-in-residence. On the days these professors taught a course at the school, they arranged to spend the afternoon there coaching students in the program, conducting classroom demonstrations or research, holding office hours, serving on committees, collaboratively writing grant proposals, and other problem solving.

## Innovative Practices

In an effort to maximize the benefit of on-site delivery, we included children in our course. In this way, the teachers perceived professors as current, since they applied strategies directly with children in a classroom context. We believe that teachers have a tendency to learn more effectively when expected to apply techniques directly with children in their graduate classes. So, both students—adult educators and children—benefit.

Initially, professors brought their students into classrooms for demonstrations or showed videotapes of strategy applications in classrooms. One summer writing workshop lent itself to innovation (both with small numbers and informal, 3-week-long, all-day delivery). Mornings involved teachers learning (and applying to their own writing) various process writing strategies; afternoons were devoted to teachers applying these strategies with children (elementary school) involved in a *Right Write Summer Link*. In the fall, fourth graders (who faced the *Florida Writes* examination) were invited to join graduate

students in a *Think Write Club*, in which teachers and students, together, experienced various speaking, listening, reading, and writing techniques in a graduate language arts course. When we processed strategies, children talked about their reactions and understandings of the various techniques and suggested ways to change them to make them more effective.

Later, we combined our Diagnosis and Remediation courses and offered them in a 4-week block (*The Community Literacy Club*). More than 35 at-risk children participated in this theme-based, literacy-mentoring project. The graduate students learned by actually interacting with the children, one-on-one. We experimented with other unusual delivery systems. For example, children's literature course was delivered through distance learning across two counties, and week-long intensive courses were offered during spring break.

### Reflections

As we entered our sixth year, we reflected on this experience. There were many positives:

**Awards.** Both individual teachers and schools received significant recognition. The Department of Education recognized the research and development school as a National School of Excellence two years after we began collaborating. The New Jersey Writing Project named the second PDS site a National Writing Center at the end of the first year of our collaboration.

**Grant funding.** Forty-two teachers submitted action research projects to the Florida Reading Association (FRA) for funding. FRA granted only two awards, both to inner city teachers in our program. Several teachers wrote mini-grants in order to access district funds for action research projects. A number of these received funding. We secured a \$50,000 State of Florida Break-the-Mold Incentive Challenge Grant with a collaborative proposal for alternative assessment, a cornerstone of the content of our program and our training.

**Professional dissemination.** Teachers associated with our Professional Development Academy courses/training have shown professional leadership. More than 14 published articles in professional journals. These articles derive from unusual applications of existing techniques (e.g., innovative uses of Venn diagrams and the application of an adult thinking/decision making program) (*CoRT*, de Bono, 1947) in kindergarten classes or in a fifth grade social studies unit on elections. Many of our students have presented at professional meetings such as the Florida Elementary Education Association Conference, Florida

Reading Association Conference, Coalition of Essential Schools' Fall Forum, and American Reading Forum. A number of our teachers have been asked to train other teachers in neighboring counties relative to the infusion of thinking skills throughout their curriculum. We will prepare best-practice videotapes to illustrate application of effective strategies at various grade levels. These videos will become a part of our *PDA Internet Home Page*. The home page will include a section on "Teach Peeks," that will allow teachers to (a) access strategy cards of effective techniques and (b) view brief best practice video clips for each strategy. We filmed a best-practice videotape of classroom applications of de Bono's CoRT Thinking for the March, 1997, 20-20 TV program.

For every positive, there were challenges:

**State politics.** The Florida Board of Regents dictates the location of university programs and has a policy disallowing duplication of effort. The board of Regents designated Florida Atlantic University (FAU) as the lead institution for Broward County, which meant they had first choice of programs they wished to offer. Since both institutions offered an undergraduate elementary education program, FIU's professional development school lost the on-site course work portion of their undergraduate program. As a result, our PDS lost major during-the-day resources, notably the frequent in-class demonstrations of current practice, consistent infusion of additional adults in classrooms across the school, and voluntary tutors for at-risk students (a part of undergraduate special literacy projects).

State budget cuts also affected release time policies and personnel allocations. This restricted the amount of time professors could spend on administrative duties or school site collaborations (e.g., demonstration lessons, committee work, action research support, grant writing). FIU's College of Education shifted personnel resources from school-site projects (like the PDS) to campus-based doctoral programs.

**County politics.** Politics at the local level also played a part. In spite of multi-level approvals and a 3-year track record, the change of the superintendent and other county personnel necessitated renegotiation of new agreements. We had to rebuild basic knowledge and reestablish trust with newly appointed administrators at the county and school-site levels. A newly hired, business-trained administrator in charge of school/community partnerships required us to draft a proposal to establish FIU as a "business" partner of the school. Each of these tasks required enormous expenditures of faculty time and energy. What originated with a trustful handshake became an unwieldy, time-consuming mire of paperwork, Board presentations, and meetings. These

took a toll on faculty energies and the amount of time available for the actual program.

**Standards.** During this same time frame, FIU sought NCATE approval. The NCATE-PDS (1996) standards committee has two levels of standards: (a) Threshold Conditions (factors that are PDS baselines and which are prerequisite for moving to Quality Standard assessment) and (b) Quality Standards (factors which mark PDS evolution and evidence of achievement). An analysis of our PDS initiative relative to these Threshold Standards provided significant insights.

1. Evidence of a formal school/university partnership that shows agreement on the mission (teacher preparation, supporting student learning, and teacher development and inquiry).

We always maintained a formal agreement for student teacher placement. With the development of the PDS, we initially worked from two formal letters of endorsement from the original superintendent and his deputy superintendent. These were rendered null and void with the change of administration. We then had to draft two additional agreements: (a) facilities usage (Lease Agreement) and (b) a partnership agreement which, was later discarded. The eventual lack of a formal, purposeful agreement adversely affected the continuance of the PDS.

2. Commitment by the partners to the core principles of (a) support of learning for all participants, (b) practice based on best knowledge available, (c) parity on all issues of practice and policy, (d) continuous improvement supported by ongoing practice-based research, (e) equity as it affects students and teachers.

We met all of these standards except the parity on all issues of policy. Removal of teachers and professors from policy making directly and adversely affected the project.

3. Positive working relationships and a basis for trust between partners.

This site-level trust formed the foundation of the PDS, but needed constant reestablishment with changes in administration or with teachers new to the program. Because the classes were on-site, some teachers expected inservice workshop-like delivery rather than the rigor of university graduate courses.

4. Achievement of quality standards by partner institutions as evidenced by regional, state or other reviews.

The schools involved in our program received National School of Excellence and National Writing Center designations. FIU was evaluated and passed NCATE review earning high praise for work at the PDS sites.

5. Institutional commitment of resources (financial and human) to the PDS for both partners including faculty participation, time commitments, financial support, organization to support mission.

The lack of resources for the university as a whole (which is deliberately funded at 70% actual capacity) created major obstacles for the creation and maintenance of a PDS. Florida legislators expect universities to make up funding shortfalls with faculty-secured grants. Fiscal cut-backs render grant funding difficult to secure. The two faculty members associated with the PDS wrote grants with the schools and with their graduate students. This collaboration secured over \$50,000, but this was not adequate to effectively support PDS efforts.

6. A commitment by the PDS to work in the three areas defined by the quality standards: supporting a learning community; public and professional accountability; and the development of a culture, roles, and structures to support the mission of the PDS.

These factors constitute the greatest strength of the PDS. Modem links to the university afforded school sites access to current literature searches through the university library. We worked hard to establish a broad-based learning community which involved children, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community. We required teachers to conduct classroom action research projects, write grant proposals and publish professional journal articles that involved and documented student learning. We included children in graduate classes (e.g., *Community Literacy Club*, *Write Right*, *Summer Link*, and *Scribliolink*). Many of the teachers involved in the master's program demonstrated professional leadership as they presented strategies they researched to their colleagues at professional conferences and on professional development days.

## Evaluation

The evaluation of our 5-to-7 year PDS using the NCATE rubrics helped us understand what elements became obstacles to the efficient

and effective continuation of a time-intensive but worthwhile collaboration and suggest which critical issues to overcome should another such future project be proposed. All the good intentions, hard work, and accomplishments put in by professors, administrators, and teachers from such bottom-up projects has little chance for creating a relationship of permanence without a firm, continuing formal agreement which realistically commits resources and understandings on the part of all participants.

## References

- Doyle, D. P. (1996, October 1). Reprint from the *Los Angeles Times*. Schools of education are relics. *The Sun Sentinel*.
- Draft standards for professional development schools. (1996). [Available from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education Professional Standards Project (NCATE-PDS) manuscript in preparation]