

Partners in Learning and Leading

Nancy Austin and Lynne Miller

We are two people who have long straddled the worlds of the university and the schools. Though we now have faculty positions at the University of Southern Maine, we have taught in both elementary and secondary schools and continue to work in schools and with school people as part of our faculty load. Our participation in the Southern Maine Partnership has reinforced our beliefs that a university and its neighboring public schools are capable of inventing effective ways to work together and can, with effort, forge a true collaboration. In the pages that follow, we tell the story of our school-university partnership, and examine how one of our working groups developed its own agenda for meaningful action and, in the process, promoted new forms of leadership and a new notion of school-university collaboration.

The Southern Maine Partnership

The Southern Maine Partnership is a member of the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER), a national consortium of school-university partnerships, each representing "a virtually untried and, therefore, unstudied phenomenon"¹ and sharing a commitment to Goodlad's dual agenda of the renewal of schools and the renewal of the education of educators. As Goodlad has noted:

The argument for school-university partnerships proceeds somewhat as follows. For schools to get better, they must have better teachers, among other things. To prepare better teachers (and counselors, special educators, and administrators), universities must have access to schools using the best practices. To have the best practices, schools need access to new ideas and knowledge. This means that universities have a stake in school improvement just as schools have a stake in the education of teachers.²

In its efforts to meet its dual agenda, the Southern Maine Partnership has developed a structure that mimics neither

the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the schools nor the organization of the university, where individual achievement is rewarded over collaboration and where theory and research are valued over practice. Rather than having a centralized and elite governing board with respectability for decision making, the Partnership depends on various collaborative work groups to develop their own agendas and to chart their own paths. The only constraint on the groups is that they focus on some aspect of school and teacher renewal. Each group is composed of school people (administrators and teachers) and at least one university faculty member who serves as the group's convenor/facilitator.

During the 1989-90 academic year, there were ten established and one emerging partnership work groups involving over 200 teachers and administrators, 14 full-time university faculty, and the dean of the College of Education. The groups include the following:

- **Superintendents' Group.** Composed of 15 superintendents, this group investigates issues related to curriculum and instruction, especially literacy and numeracy development.
- **Administrative Leadership Group.** Open to all principals and central office administrators, this group explores school/community relations and the shifting roles and responsibilities of schools.
- **Secondary Group.** High school principals and teachers attend this group in school teams and discuss and act on issues related to restructuring and alternatives to tracking.
- **Middle School Group.** Administrative/teacher teams meet to solve problems that emerge from the implementation of the middle school concept.
- **Elementary Group.** Our largest group, composed of over 40 educators, discusses issues of evaluation and experiments with alternatives to standardized tests, such as observations and portfolios.

- **Mathematics Group.** Composed of K-12 mathematics educators, this group explores mathematics learning and develops a wide range of classroom teaching strategies.
- **Literacy Group.** Designed for K-8 teachers, this group focuses on whole language instruction and on process writing approaches.
- **Counselor Group.** Open to all counselors in participating districts, this group develops strategies to deal with new state mandates about guidance education.
- **Teacher Development Group.** Teacher educators from both the schools and the university meet to discuss new configurations for pre-service education and to provide feedback to the pre-service planning team.
- **Adolescent Study/Life Stories Group.** Secondary teachers and university faculty collect and analyze adolescent life stories as a way to understand student issues and concerns.
- **Foxfire Group.** In the process of becoming, this group will be composed of teams from 11 districts who are preparing to learn about and implement Foxfire approaches.

Though the groups have wide ranging agendas and formats, they share a commitment to generating and reading research, to reflective practice, to experimentation and risktaking, to colleagueship and collaboration, and to active engagement in school reform. We think that the best way to explain just how the partnership works is to highlight one group, focusing on its emerging self-definition and continuing development.

Partnership in Action: The Mathematics Group

The Partnership Mathematics Group was the first partnership group to transcend grade levels, since its members teach K-12, and to concentrate on a specific content area. Formed in 1985, the group assumed new direction in 1987 when a newly hired University of Southern Maine mathematics educator joined the group as university facilitator. This new direction has as its centerpiece shared experiences in mathematics learning and dialogue. This dual focus on experience and talk had its beginnings in a dinner conversation among mathematics group members and Liz Fennema, a visiting lecturer from the University of Wisconsin. Fennema's work concentrates on gender differences in mathematics. She noted that since small group discussions provide an effective forum for reluctant talkers, girls and others reluctant to engage in large group

discussion could well be served by small cooperative learning groups. As the conversation continued, the need to provide common experiences as a basis for dialogue became clear to members of the group. When the group met later to plan the agenda for subsequent meetings, members agreed to a new format for their monthly sessions: a shared mathematics experience where teachers could explore mathematics learning together and time for dialogue and reflection of the experience and its implication for classroom teaching and learning. This combination of shared experience and reflective dialogue proved to be not only an effective format for the group but a powerful approach to mathematics teaching as well.

The group soon discovered that mathematics could be learned through working with others, that dialoging in small and large groups was a rich source of learning, and that trying out those ideas shared in a meeting with students in classrooms provided group members with the vehicle for greater dialogue about mathematical learning. Through these activities, teachers became researchers and reflective practitioners. The university facilitator's work with children in district classrooms established her as a participating member of the group. Across grade levels, teachers shared their experience and insights. An egalitarian ethic developed. High school teachers gained from the experiences of second-grade teachers. Learning together, getting new ideas for classroom teaching, and trying out those ideas became the stuff of dialogue. The common mathematical experience at the monthly meetings helped teachers become more reflective learners. The application of mathematical learnings in their classroom helped them become more reflective teachers.

In the course of its work, the group agreed upon three principles:

- 1 The centrality of sharing and dialogue to the learning of mathematics,
- 2 The importance of the learner and his or her construction of meaning, and
- 3 The validity of teachers' craft knowledge, based on understandings of themselves as teachers and learners.

Project CLIME

The abovementioned principles became the basis of a state-funded grant called Project CLIME. It was through CLIME that the three principles were tested and refined and that another element, that of teacher leadership, became part of the Mathematics Group's agenda.

As a result of CLIME, the math group intensified its efforts and began meeting twice a month. One meeting was designed as a four-hour workshop/discussion session providing concrete mathematical experiences, dialogue and reflection, small group work, and planning for classroom experiences around some mathematical topic. The other meeting took the form of a two-hour dialogue session including reflection on classroom practice and personal learnings, exploration of instructional strategies, and discussions of a wide range of mathematics topics. The four-hour sessions were facilitated by both university and teacher participants. Each session was planned by a group of teachers, one or more of whom served as facilitators at the session. The group looked at the topic, examined areas of possible learning difficulty, and possible activities that would serve a diverse group of teachers. In addition, university facilitators modeled effective teaching strategies focusing on the learner, the use of powerful mathematical tools, and dialogue through demonstration lessons in participants' classrooms.

Each four-hour session usually worked through a topic with an emphasis on the use of powerful mathematical tools. Grade-level groups discussed possible applications and activities that might be tried in classrooms. Feedback from these sessions was important. The group initiated a new feedback strategy, based on Gattegno's³ work during these sessions. At the end of each session, participants were asked to talk about what they were thinking, what had come to them as a result of the session, or where they were at that particular point. There were no guidelines other than hearing from as many people as were able to share at that time. The role of the facilitators was to just listen. Much was gained from this type of feedback. People felt much freer to talk about their feelings, especially concerns, when they knew that all comments were equally welcome and that all feelings were accepted. The facilitators and all others knew how other participants felt about their experiences that evening. The diversity of responses was instructive. In general, the facilitator felt rewarded by the comments, and had a clear picture of the thoughts of each participant, and where the group could go next. For the participants, the strategy provided an opportunity to reflect out loud on their own learning and to hear others do the same.

CLIME also encouraged teachers to initiate staff development efforts in their own schools and districts. Success in this regard was varied. While some teachers found support in these activities, others encountered difficulties in establishing legitimacy with their peers and their accepting of attitudes about the teaching and learning of mathematics that differed sharply from their own.

The members of the math group had become reflective learners and reflective practitioners and some found it difficult to work with others who worked differently and wanted quick answers to their teaching problems. While it was safe to share within the partnership group, teachers found a less secure environment in their schools. The norms of cooperation, dialogue, reflection, and experimentation that had developed over time in the Partnership group were often not present in the school culture. Teachers acknowledged this is a problem and one that required more experience in collaboration and explicit training in leadership to solve.

The new focus on leadership training continued through the regular math group sessions as teachers acted as session planners and facilitators in the spring of 1990. As CLIME's grant funding ended, the math group sought to invent a second arena for its work. A new grant proposal was developed and funded. It began with three, full-day sessions last spring, followed by an intensive three-week summer school program where teachers developed strategies and taught classes to public school students. The intention was to provide the opportunity for teachers to refine their skills of dialogue, reflection, teaching, and leading. Through the project, teachers worked in teams to plan, teach, dialogue, and critique teaching and learning as they worked with children and each other. In this way, the classroom became a teaching and learning laboratory, where curriculum was developed and tested. This classroom-as-laboratory model was a powerful one in another way. It provided teachers with an arena in which to grow as reflective practitioners and group facilitators.

For many members of the math group, leadership means to listen in a way that will enable them to accept the opinions and actions of others. This is an important prerequisite to the facilitation of reflective work. If teachers are to become leaders within their schools, they must provide avenues for dialogue and encourage the expression of conflicting viewpoints. Teachers will be supported in their emerging leadership roles through the establishment of a peer support group and opportunities for graduate study in an instructional leadership program at the university.

Understanding About Learning and Leading

Teachers and university faculty who have been involved in the Partnership Mathematics Group have uncovered some important understandings about learning and leading — and the connections between the two activities.

- Teachers are learners,
- Learning begins with dialogue, talking about something (mathematics) to someone,
- Dialogue is most meaningful when it is focused on a shared experience, something people explore together as learners,
- Each learner makes sense of a common experience in his or her own way, each constructs personal meaning from the experience,
- The meanings learners construct are varied and often conflicting; those meanings become the basis for further dialogue,
- Teachers are leaders in their classroom when they structure the opportunity for their students to share experiences and talk about them; teaching is leading,⁴
- Teachers have a wealth of information and craft knowledge that they can share with each other and learn from each other,
- Teachers are leaders in their schools and in the profession when they provide an arena for their peers to do things together, to talk about them, and to apply them to their classrooms,
- Teachers who lead other teachers need to develop the ability to listen and to accept the position of others, even when they are in conflict with their own.

This last understanding is the most difficult to put into practice. It presents the greatest challenge to us as we pursue our work in becoming partners in learning and leading.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sirotnik, Kenneth and John I Goodlad. *School-University Partnerships in Action: Concepts, Cases, and Concerns*, New York : Teachers College Press, 1988.
- 2 Goodlad, John. *Reconstructing Schooling and the Education of Educators*, Seattle : University of Washington, 1985.
- 3 Gattegno, C. *Strategy Taught as Part of a Workshop for Educators*, New York, 1981.
- 4 Schlechty, P and H W Joslin. "Images of schools" in A Lieberman, ed, *Rethinking School Improvement: Research, Craft & Concept*, New York : Teachers College Press, 147-163, 1986.



Roscoe Davidson, left, Chair, Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal, discussing the "thoughtful community" with Rex Brown, Education Commission of the States, and Fannye Evans, Denver Public Schools.

Photo courtesy of Carol Wilson

Lynne Miller is Executive Director, Southern Maine Partnership, University of Southern Maine.

Nancy Austin is a Colleague.