

Collaboration and Inquiry: Guiding Principles of the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal

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How do we spend our time in classrooms as public school teachers and professors in teacher education programs? How do we know what our students are learning and/or not learning? What school and classroom practices do we engage in, perhaps unknowingly, that inhibit access to and receipt of learning for all students? How often do we create environments that promote thoughtfulness, reflection, and self assessment? Questions such as these arise as we in the schools and higher education institutions of the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal join forces to inquire into the circumstances of our schools and teacher education programs.

Implicit in the paragraph above are two guiding principles of the school/university partnership concept that are also salient characteristics of the Colorado Partnership. First is the vital role of critical inquiry in reshaping our schools and teacher education programs. We believe that there is great power in developing the norm of educators asking questions together. This norm of questioning leads to the examination of beliefs and assumptions, the expansion of knowledge and understanding, and the development of new practices.¹ This is the essence of renewal.

Enmeshed in the process of critical inquiry is school and university collaboration, the second principle of the partnership concept. This basic principle, as does the partnership concept itself, grows out of the work of John Goodlad² who reminds us that if schools are to change, then those who are to teach in those schools must be educated in ways that are consistent with the desired changes — and vice versa. Additionally, those in schools and higher education must work as equal partners for the mutual benefit of both. In working toward this aim, we focus on the development of vibrant, renewing schools as places in which a significant part of teacher education will take place.

Although difficult to separate, for purposes of elaborating Partnership aims and activities, I shall describe

the two principles separately. Before doing so, some background on the evolution and current structure of the Partnership may prove helpful.

When the Partnership was organized in the fall of 1986, its primary activity was the formation of work groups that comprised teachers, administrators, higher education faculty, and community members. Work-group topics included curriculum and instruction, at-risk students, and professional development. These groups met monthly to discuss current literature and to relate the implications of the readings and discussion to their situations and settings. This activity provided a means for developing relationships across schools, districts, and higher education institutions, and broadening and deepening of understandings and insights of participants about issues in the respective areas. It did not by itself, however, result in significant change in schools or in teacher education programs.

In light of the need to move forward, work-group participants again acknowledged that revitalizing schools and programs depends upon the actions of those most directly involved. While they represented a part of the school or program, they realized that they had to be joined by their colleagues in the school setting in order for significant change to occur. Additionally, considering the wisdom of John Dewey who said that "the sources of a science of teacher education reside in the problems of the school,"³ work-group participants felt that Partnership work should begin to focus on specific schools. The work of the schools should therefore also benefit teacher education. As a result, a number of schools decided to become involved in particular lines of inquiry that would lead to the kinds of change that their settings needed. Teachers and administrators in a number of these schools also expressed interest in working closely with teacher education programs; this meant that their schools would eventually become partner schools, a concept described later in this article.

Additionally, work-group participants believed that these groups could become the networking mechanisms for others in the Partnership to gain access to the ideas and learnings of the schools that were involved in renewal. The work groups would continue to meet on a regular basis, thus allowing those in the work groups to participate, even if their schools were not involved in collaborative inquiry. Additionally, new participants would have a forum for pursuing their interests and developing new relationships within the Partnership.

CRITICAL INQUIRY: EXAMPLES FROM A PARTNERSHIP

Areas of inquiry which schools are addressing include alternative assessment of student progress, how we think about and teach certain curricular areas, changing demographics, student use of information, and equal access to learning. These areas provide points of departure for continual questioning and examining school and classroom practices. Creating and trying out new practices follows, leading to new areas of inquiry.

Alternative Ways of Assessing Student Progress

How we assess what students are learning continues to be a central issue in schooling, largely because in many of our schools and districts assessment means testing, and testing drives curriculum. In a time of specialization and compartmentalization, assessment has become separate from the aims and purposes of instruction. Our belief is that assessment techniques should grow out of and be inseparable from the purposes and substance of what we teach. By examining what we are trying to accomplish with students, we can then begin to think about how to assess not only what students are learning, but also what kind of learning opportunities we as teachers are creating.⁴

We are examining how students can develop the capability to assess themselves so they will become "self-regulated learners." Additionally, we are exploring how parents can learn to ask appropriate questions so they will become partners in the educational process. This last point has numerous benefits. Parents can gain a much better perspective about what students are actually doing in school, thereby increasing understanding and lowering suspicion. Second, consistent understanding and expectations both at school and at home communicate to students that their learning holds value across settings. Third, using assessment as a means, communication among

teachers, students, and parents can be enhanced.

The assessment group includes teachers, principals, central office personnel, university graduate students and faculty. Meetings focus on articulating the purposes of our instruction, examining the assessment techniques we now use, exploring other possibilities, trying out the possibilities, and reconvening to discuss what we learn.

As a way to network and stimulate discussion among the educational community, the curriculum and instruction group meets regularly and welcomes anyone in the Partnership who wishes to participate. Another approach to expanding the dialogue has been through symposia and conferences. One such symposia featured Ken Sirotnik from the Center for Education Renewal and local educators who are providing leadership in the area of developing curricular and instructional alternatives, and accompanying assessment processes.

Curriculum: A Vehicle for Reshaping Schooling

Discussions about changing schools and teacher education programs usually revolve around doing the same things — only better.⁵ Treatment of curriculum in such discussions often amounts to reorganizing the "stuff" of the curricular area, or perhaps even making it interdisciplinary. Seldom does it mean rethinking the essence of the subject area, examining what we believe about how the subject interrelates with how students learn, or most importantly, how all students might learn.

Project TIME (Teachers Improving Mathematics Education) is providing the Partnership a vehicle for rethinking the nature of mathematics, exploring our beliefs about fundamental issues such as what it means to learn, and giving renewed consideration to what intelligence is. Further, it promotes the practice of teachers working together to inquire and learn for the benefit of all students. While the focus is on mathematics, other subject areas come under scrutiny as teachers and others explore issues that underlie all learning.

This project promotes the idea that teachers need time and support for making important changes. Although change must occur from within the schools, teachers also need to interact with and have ongoing access to resource people in other schools and higher education in order to challenge and expand their perspectives.⁶

The Project TIME group includes elementary, middle and high schools, as well as central office and higher education participants. The Colorado Partnership is linked with the Greater Tucson School/University Partnership, the Puget Sound Educational Consortium,

and the Project TIME creators at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This connection beyond our immediate Partnership lends encouragement and enrichment to our local efforts.

Our work group for the ideas emerging from Project TIME is a group called Math and Beyond. The "chief warrior" for the group is a middle-school mathematics teacher who is assisted in her efforts by a community member and an assistant principal from another school.

Changing Demographics

The thoughtful use of information plays a key role in inquiry. Often, however, we have information all around us without recognizing its presence, much less its value in helping us understand and meet the needs of students. Recognizing and wishing to address the changing demographics of its community, one group of schools decided to delve further into student perceptions about how students experience school. With assistance from higher education, we developed the following set of interview questions for students:

- What is the best part of what goes on in the classroom(s) with your teachers?
- What is the one thing you would like to improve or change?
- What do you spend most of your time doing in your classroom(s)?
- Which students in your classroom get the most attention?
- What is your understanding of what your subjects are? What is math? What is science? Etc.

At the time of this writing, we have completed the first round of interviews. Additional students, parents, and teachers will be interviewed. Teachers and administrators will analyze the differences in responses and use insights they gain as a springboard for revisiting how they address student needs in the classroom. Clearly, responses in the first round have been intriguing and should provoke lively discussion when presented to the schools' faculties.

A Response to How Students View and Use Information

Arising from interests of teachers and higher education faculty is a developmental proposal that revolves around

the idea of information literacy. Students need to know how to work productively with the overwhelming amount of information that is available. They need to know how to gain access to information, how to critique, and how to use it. Using technology as a means toward these ends, we will endeavor to engage students in long-term, multidisciplinary projects that they will develop in collaboration with teams of their teachers. The proposal is one example of how we can draw on immediate issues to begin to rethink how we organize our work with students. Once again, the project is not an end in itself, but a catalyst for encouraging teachers and others to examine critically many of the practices that have become unquestionably accepted in our schools.

Equal Access to Learning

A surprising number of practices and organizational patterns commonly used in schools and classrooms perpetuate the barriers that inhibit, and sometimes prevent, learning for many students. Several members of the Partnership have developed a proposal for higher education and schools to examine whether school and classroom practices promote or inhibit equal educational opportunity for all students. The project's aim will be accomplished in two ways: (1) each participating school will engage in examining its practices in light of issues of equity, and (2) teams from five schools will meet in monthly seminars to discuss work going on in each of the schools. Areas for discussion and study include grouping students, amount and types of work required of students, attendance and discipline procedures, and others.

The purpose of this project is to increase awareness of what equal educational opportunity means in terms of the regularities of schooling, with a view toward reshaping practices that impede students in acquiring access to equal educational opportunities.

A Caution!

All of the examples cited above contain the risk of becoming ends in themselves, rather than ways in which adults in a school and in higher education can continue to question, grow, and change, while keeping in mind that the ultimate benefactors are students. A dilemma in many of the partnerships is how to overcome the typical process/substance dichotomy.⁷ The examples above are attempts by those of us in the Colorado Partnership to

engage in substantive process in our schools and teacher education programs.

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS: THE DESIGN IN COLORADO

In a chapter entitled "The Teacher in John Dewey's Works," Maxine Greene notes that "participation and collaboration [provide] the ground for an ongoing creation of identity."⁸

The evolution of the partner-school concept in Colorado aptly illustrates Greene's statement. As those of us in the Partnership schools and higher education institutions learn more about how to work together, we also see more possibilities. The nexus where many of these possibilities come together is partner schools.

The concept of partner schools, also referred to as key schools, is common across the 14 partnerships in the National Network for Educational Renewal. The way that partner schools develop varies with each setting.

In Colorado we are beginning at the point of existing overlap between schools and teacher education programs; that is, the field experience of prospective teachers. As we progress, we will examine other aspects of teacher preparation. Working with renewing schools that are engaged in the kind of inquiry described above, we aim to do the following:

- 1 Place groups of practicum students and student teachers with groups of teachers in a renewing school, thereby capitalizing on peer relationships in both groups for encouraging reflection and discussion among and across groups.
- 2 Create for these students opportunities for a variety of experiences in other partner schools (across levels, districts, and communities), while maintaining a base in one school throughout the practicum and student teaching.
- 3 Focus the work of teacher educators with pre-service teachers and also inquiry with faculty in the school to encourage and support the norms that make the school a vibrant and vital place.
- 4 Develop ways for teachers, teacher educators, and prospective teachers to discuss as a group the merits and minuses found in existing school practices and teacher preparation.
- 5 Examine teacher education programs in light of questions pertaining to quality and sequence of experiences for prospective teachers, and other appropriate issues.
- 6 Develop ways to respond to what we learn from the five previous points.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

The endeavors described above have provided myriad opportunities for us to learn, not only about the subjects of our inquiry, but also about working together in new ways and across differing cultures. Milan Kundera, author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, considered entitling his book *The Planet of Inexperience*. His reasoning resided in the fact that in life we are continually entering into realms of inexperience. We are born into this world not knowing what it means to be an infant; and enter childhood, adolescence and adulthood not having previously experienced these stages.

Our inexperience is evident in these ventures into inquiry and collaboration. Delving into our own school and classroom practices with a view toward understanding them in new ways is unusual. Even more unusual and difficult is to consider abandoning comfortable patterns in order to try out alternatives that emerge from new understandings. Few public school educators approach professional growth in this manner. More common is the experience of attending an in-service session to receive training in a particular technique without ever seriously questioning or understanding why or how the technique is desirable.⁹ Typically, we overlook the questioning phase and move directly to the solution. The solution may not apply to our particular circumstance, or it may build on fallacious assumptions. A consequence of such "solution seeking" is that we become accustomed to having someone else figure out the answer, having someone else think for us. Questioning, probing or exploring is messy and uncertain. As educators we have been reluctant to engage in messiness and uncertainty, a circumstance which gains importance when we consider the analogue of teacher in the classroom with students. Telling is the most common classroom practice.¹⁰ Encouraging students to ask fundamental questions, questions to which we may not have an answer, is not. Considered in this light, engaging in inquiry may have yet another benefit. If we are willing to do it, perhaps we would be more willing to structure our schools and classrooms so that students can actively inquire.

The experience of inquiring together helps us begin to see how the norms that we have created to serve us can also hold us captive. It feels safer to retreat into certainties than to journey into uncharted territory. One learning is that when we do launch into critical inquiry as colleagues — public school and higher education — we can expect struggle, individually and collectively. Part of the struggle is to resist easy answers.

An important aspect of this phenomenon of wanting to be provided an answer is recognizing that we do not readily claim our responsibility to question. Involvement, participation, collaboration, and learning do not happen to us. The work of the Partnership advances when designated leaders in the Partnership and in the individual institutions promote the values of inquiry and collaboration for both the Partnership and the institution, and educators in the institutions have the inclination and mechanism for joining the quest. Neither is sufficient by itself.

One final learning is that it takes time to build a foundation, to develop relationships, to share meanings, to forge new norms in order to push forward with observable change. Many educators, school and higher education officials, want immediate results. If we push for certain results too soon, we may unwittingly foil our progress. Developing our abilities to appreciate and nurture the subtleties of significant change may prove more productive in the long term.

In the process of learning about collaborating and inquiring, we are learning that internal dilemmas and issues will continue to arise. As we persist in addressing the problems, we need to look to the larger context of the community; local, business, state and others. The climate in Colorado, as in many states, is characterized by concern and heightened dialogue about education in our broader community. The result is that myriad groups and organizations are becoming involved in some way in public education. Inviting others to participate in our efforts and joining in the public discussion are crucial extensions of the mission of the Partnership. Our self-examination must not be construed as self-absorption. We must be willing to raise questions, such as: What is our context, and how does it affect what we are doing or trying to do? How do we create opportunities that promote thoughtfulness, reflection, and continued dialogue across the essential groups? Continuing to question and push forward will help us create further opportunities to capitalize on our inexperience and thereby create alternatives we do not yet know.

Membership in the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal includes: Boulder Valley Public Schools; Cherry Creek School District; Denver Public Schools; Englewood Public Schools; Metropolitan State College; School District 12, Adams County; the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the University of Colorado at Denver.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sirotnik, Kenneth. "Evaluation in the ecology of schooling: the process of school renewal" in *The Ecology of School Renewal*, Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- 2 Goodlad, John I. "School-university partnerships: rationale and concepts" in *School-University Partnerships in Action: Concepts, Cases and Concerns*, Kenneth Sirotnik and John Goodlad, eds, New York: Teachers College Press, 1988.
- 3 Dewey, John. *The Sources of a Science of Teacher Education*, New York: Liveright, 1929.
- 4 Hiebert, Elfrieda. "Beyond Wobegon: Increasing the Role of Teacher-Based Assessment," *forthcoming*.
- 5 Wilson, Carol; Richard Clark and Paul Heckman. "Breaking new ground: reflections on school-university partnerships in the National Network for Educational Renewal," *Occasional Paper No. 8*, Center for Educational Renewal, University of Washington, 1989.
- 6 Goodlad, John I. *A Place Called School*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.
- 7 Wilson, Clark and Heckman, *op cit*. See Footnote 5.
- 8 Greene, Maxine. "The teacher in John Dewey's work" in *From Socrates to Software: The Teacher as Text and the Text as Teacher*, Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- 9 Heckman, Paul and Carol Wilson. "On professionalism in teaching" in *Education Week*, Commentary, February 24, 1988.
- 10 Goodlad, *op cit*. See Footnote 6.

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