Developing a School-College Professional Learning Community to Promote Student Engagement

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Abstract
A school-college collaborative enabled 100 fifth-grade students to participate in a cross-curricular learning experience that involved literacy development through storytelling, science through forensic exploration, and the arts through finger-painting and poetry. Three faculty members (one biology and two literacy professors) and 30 undergraduate students implemented the project. Survey results indicated that the project increased student engagement with learning science and using storytelling and the arts to help students further develop their literacy skills. The 5 fifth-grade teachers expressed satisfaction with their students’ experiences. Planning, communication, and conflicting expectations were noted as challenges that schools and colleges should address.

Student engagement in learning is critical for student achievement (Alderman, 2004). Students who come from diverse and impoverished backgrounds are usually not as easily engaged with traditional instructional methods as those who come from mainstream and affluent backgrounds (Danforth & Smith, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). While student engagement in learning has historically been a focus of urban schools, demographic and field-based research has revealed that the student characteristics and teaching challenges once attributed largely to urban areas are now relevant to a broad range of suburban school districts (Alson, 2003; Richard, 2004) because of changes in socio-economic status, achievement, language proficiency, and race/ethnicity.

Aware of the challenges facing teachers and administrators in these suburban school districts in Westchester County, New York, Manhattanville College School of Education developed the concept of a Changing Suburbs Institute (CSI) to provide professional and program development for seven school districts in need of additional support for their changing student population, specifically targeting the growing Hispanic student population. Since the inception of CSI in 2005-2006, a consortium—comprised of school district, community, and government representatives—was formed to collaborate on attaining CSI goals. This consortium meets bimonthly. CSI also formed a parent leadership network, established substitute teaching institutes for hard-to-staff K-12 positions in the CSI districts, and sponsors an annual educational forum. A hallmark of CSI is the phased-in establishment of Professional Development Schools (PDS) in each of the CSI districts to create strong college-school district relationships that help with the professional development of teachers and college faculty to foster student achievement. To date, three PDSs have been established and developed in three different school districts. A fourth PDS has been established recently in a fourth school district.
The purpose of a PDS is to help prepare preservice teachers, provide faculty development, improve instructional practice, and enhance student learning. PDS partners blend their expertise and resources to engage in collaborative experimentation of new ideas that are put into place to enliven instruction. As McBee and Moss (2002) said, “When professors, teacher interns, and teachers come together in Professional Development Schools to improve practice, everybody learns” (p. 61).

Development of the Project

The project described in this article took place at the George Washington Elementary School in White Plains School District, New York. The White Plains School District is very diverse with approximately 62 percent Blacks and Hispanics. Hispanics make up the largest population with approximately 42 percent, followed by 34 percent White, 20 percent Black, and 3 percent Asian. Almost half of the students are economically disadvantaged. The White Plains School District has five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The George Washington Elementary School has a similar ratio of diverse students because of the district’s efforts to balance race/ethnicity across elementary schools through a lottery system and bussing. The George Washington Elementary School has 43 percent Hispanic, 33 percent White, 31 percent Black, and 3 percent Asian students (New York State Report Card 2005-2006 at www.nysed.gov).

In response to a large number of English Language Learners (ELLs), this school initiated the Dual Language Academy for kindergarten students in 2007 in which the school’s curriculum is taught in both English and Spanish. The Dual Language Academy is a voluntary program to help students achieve in all subject areas and develop students’ literacy in English and Spanish.

To help her teachers adjust to the idea of forming a PDS, the principal worked collaboratively with the education dean to form a PDS Leadership Team (comprised of three teacher volunteers, the principal, the PDS liaison, two education faculty, and the education dean) that met bimonthly for a year to plan and implement small projects (e.g., the use of electronic reading pens for vocabulary development). The PDS began officially, replete with a ribbon-cutting ceremony, the following September. During the planning year, the PDS Leadership Team determined that the teachers needed to expand the curriculum beyond basic skills instruction while helping their students, especially Hispanic students, to demonstrate the necessary skills and strategies for succeeding with informal and formal assessments. The Team identified teacher education faculty with specific areas of expertise (e.g., multicultural literature) and teachers interested in working with these faculty. The team also developed a PDS Fellows program for preservice teachers to immerse them in the school and all school-related functions over a two-year period of time. These Fellows work with students in need of additional instructional support. Additionally, the college brought to the PDS Leadership Team the idea of a cross-curricular learning experience, developed by three college faculty members, for all fifth-grade students. This project involved literacy development through storytelling, science through forensic exploration, and the arts through finger-painting and poetry so that fifth-grade students would develop oral language and thinking skills, and engage in deductive reasoning. The project, eventually funded through an external grant, was called “CSI—White Plains: Science, Literacy, and the Arts.”

To facilitate implementation of the project, a separate CSI Committee was formed. This committee—comprised of the principal, the education dean, the three college faculty responsible for the project, and the special education fifth-grade-teacher—met five times over a six-month period (December through May) to identify instructional needs, develop an instructional schedule, order the necessary equipment and materials,
develop an assessment survey, discuss and resolve challenges that arose, and reflect on outcomes. The second meeting of this committee included all fifth-grade teachers so that they could learn more about the project’s purpose and implementation. In between meetings of the CSI Committee, the principal worked with the fifth-grade teachers to discuss the value of the project for their students and themselves, identify times and locations for the lessons, and ensure that the assessment instruments were used.

Description of the CSI-White Plains: Science, Literacy and the Arts Project

All 100 fifth-grade students in the building, including those in special education, participated in this four-month project, February through May, with three faculty members (one biology and two literacy professors), five fifth-grade teachers, and 30 undergraduate students.

Storytelling. The first literacy professor introduced the storytelling instructional series by telling stories that her undergraduate students and the fifth-graders helped dramatize through pantomime. She used stories such as a participatory folk tale that involved clues for students to make predictions and deductions. Prior to entering with the fifth-graders, undergraduates participated in an hour-long storytelling workshop in which they learned to tell two-to-three minute stories. The literacy professor’s undergraduate students then led a Storytelling Workshop in which the fifth-grade students selected stories to learn and share with their peers. Fifth-grade students created their two-three minute stories; some of the stories were dramatized. Students then had discussions with their peers about the meaning of their stories. The most challenged fifth-graders could create and tell their stories. A few months later, the professor and one undergraduate student went back to coach fifth-graders who volunteered to tell their stories to younger grades. In addition to building home-school connections (“I learned how to tell my story to my family”) and helping students to overcome their fear of public speaking (“I learned to face my fears”), storytelling enhanced literacy development.

Storytelling is recognized as a way to develop oral language and comprehension, and as a way to assess student learning (Morrow & O’Connor, 1995). Fluency was also addressed; in order to learn their stories, fifth-graders willingly and energetically read and reread their stories; rereading is a key component of developing fluency (Kuhn, 2003). Also addressed was growth in vocabulary, as children were able to discuss, question, and practice vocabulary in different contexts (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2003). The art of storytelling can focus children on literacy in astounding ways (Mantione & Smed, 2003).

One of the teachers who had participated the most actually collaborated with the literacy professor and the undergraduates in the professor’s literacy class the following fall semester, in what looks as if it will become an annual event. They repeated the storytelling experience with new, incoming fifth-graders, and added an assessment component of the undergraduate course, which was a Literacy Profile, conducted by the undergraduates one-on-one with a fifth grader. The fifth-grade teacher adapted from the Storytelling Workshop some of the oral language experiences to other content areas. For example, prior to having children carry out the writing component of a social studies project, the teacher had them tell their story as if it was the juiciest piece of gossip they had ever heard, as they had done in the Storytelling Workshop. The teacher reported a higher quality of writing than she had seen in past groups, an effect noticed in other studies (Hom, 2005; King, 2007). This supports the research that storytelling is important for including in a comprehensive literacy framework (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Forensics. The board game Clue provided the framework for the forensics lessons in which students had to use clues to figure out whodunit. With six suspects, six murder
Blood samples, look at angles, to determine blood spatter, and match hair and fibers to the suspects, rooms, and weapons. Each station offered a wide variety of teaching approaches, from discovery based probing to microscopy and computer-aided presentation and analysis, catering to a range of learning styles and fostering observation skills and critical analysis.

The undergraduate students became the Clue characters, using their backstories to bring to life the complexities of solving a crime, while emphasizing to the students that scientific evidence, collected and processed correctly, does not lie. Fifth-graders rotated to the three stations gathering facts and clues, developing their critical thinking skills in response to scientific inquiry. Not only did the students have the opportunity to do all of the activities listed, but they were led through the analysis and testing that might occur at the scene of the crime. For example, while one of the learning outcomes of the blood analysis was to understand the concept of blood typing as it applied to the individual suspects, the students tested stains to determine if there was actually blood, and if the blood found was human or animal. To help in the process of elimination and deductive reasoning necessary for the groups to solve the crime, the fifth-graders completed a section of an assessment worksheet at each station. Then, each of the three groups met to solve the mystery, showing not only that the students could work independently, but were able to work interactively in groups, engaging in productive debates with relevant commentary. When the class came together to discuss how they used the data with the professor and facilitators, the students were eager to share, and it was clear that they had fun in the learning process. The biology professor noted that, although they were challenged by some new content and activities, some of the perceptions about scientific inquiry in general, and forensics in particular, voiced during the introduction had changed, and that significant deductive reasoning occurred, based on the answers given and the pertinent questions raised. One of the fifth-grade teachers actually said that students came in the following week still talking about their discoveries.

**Arts/Poetry.** The art/poetry session was developed to enable students to use finger painting and poetry to express how they had learned from the storytelling and forensics lessons. In preparation for this session, the fifth-grade students responded to a two-question survey about what they learned (“I learned that anyone can tell a story using forensics’ lesson.”

The second literacy professor then invited the students “to converse” about what they had heard and seen. Students’ conversations, however, were not verbal. Paint was the medium they used. For twenty minutes, students were silent while “conversing” with their respective partners using paper and finger paint. After the paintings were completed, the professor modeled for the students how to pull a poem from the paint. Then
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students began to compose poetry about learning. During this time, the professor conferred with the students and scaffolded their efforts. The professor later photographed each painting. She had the fifth-grade teachers work with the students to check and revise their poems in preparation for publishing them in an “Art Conversations” booklet that displayed all students’ art and poetry work. This booklet was given to each fifth grader to take home.

Arts integration, such as the project described here, may offer a meaningful alternative to test preparation that too often claims significant amounts of daily instructional time (McElroy, 2006; Moon, Callahan, & Tomlinson, 2003; Popham, 2004) that is often neither personally satisfying nor intellectually stimulating for students or teachers. Correlations between arts education and increased student achievement are well documented, especially when arts and academic instruction are integrated (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanga, 1999; Deasy, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001).

**Findings from Student and Teacher Assessment Surveys**

The CSI Committee determined that survey data about students’ and teachers’ responses to the project would help inform the committee about the value of using this series of lessons to promote students’ active involvement with learning. Two different surveys were created for this purpose.

**Student Responses**

The students completed a four-question survey at the end of the project. The four questions were: (1) What did you learn from this entire project? (2) What did you like best about the project? (3) Would you want to participate again in this project? Why? Why not? (4) What suggestions do you have to make this project better?

**Question 1 Responses.** Ninety-four percent of the students indicated that they learned something from the entire project. Twenty-seven percent focused exclusively on forensics, with seven percent and six percent focused on storytelling and the arts respectively. Twenty-one percent included a response about all three sessions – storytelling, forensics, and the arts. Eighteen percent of the students provided a broad statement about learning to indicate what they learned from the entire project.

With storytelling, students commented that they learned how to tell stories without looking at a paper, with expression, and with movement. With forensics, students commented that they learned how to solve a mystery using fingerprints and blood samples, and about the usefulness of science to investigate. With the arts/poetry, students learned how to have a conversation through finger painting and how to write a poem from a painting. Overall, students commented that they learned “a lot,” and commented that they learned how to work together in teams because of the collaborative work in pairs or small groups required for each activity. See Figure 1 for student responses and sample comments.
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Figure 1. Students’ Responses and Comments to Question #1: What did you learn from this entire project? (n = 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Three</th>
<th>Storytelling and Forensics</th>
<th>Storytelling and Arts</th>
<th>Forensics and Arts</th>
<th>Broad Statement About Learning</th>
<th>No Response/Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Samples of students’ comments about what they learned included:

**Storytelling**
- How to tell stories, how to find out who people are, and how to make a conversation in art
- How to tell stories expressively
- I learned in story telling how to tell stories without looking at the paper
- I learned how to tell stories better and to act everything out without talking
- How to tell stories to another person
- How to speak with action and expression and how to show my emotion on paper
- I learned you don’t always have to read from a book. When we acted there was a lot of enjoyment in the room
- How to tell stories with movement and to someone clearly. How acting the story out can help you understand it
- I learned different folktales from different parts of the world

**Forensics**
- I learned how to solve problems
- I learned that science helps me to investigate and do crime scenes
- That science is not just all about inventing stuff and testing out objects
- I learned how to find a murder in forensics
- I learned how fingerprints are made, what type of blood types are there, what types of fingerprint points there are
- I learned about forensics that I never knew about
- That from all the clues you can really find out who did it
- Learned how to solve a mystery
- That anyone can solve a mystery! All you need is a pair of hands, eyes and ears and you’re set to go!
- How to investigate
- How to be a detective and do real police work
- I learned a lot about blood types. Before I didn’t even know my own blood type. Now I know there is A+, A–, B+, B–, AB+ and AB–. Then I learned to identify blood type
- I learned about blood splatters

**Art/Poetry**
- I learned how to have a conversation through finger-painting
- From finger-painting that I could write about some things
- I learned how to communicate by finger-painting
- I learned how to write a poem about a painting
- That you can get literate from a picture you painted
- I learned that the poem and finger-painting helps you to write and imagine things
• How to create wonderful poems from the simplest of ideas
• How to make a poem out of a picture. Even though my partner and I made a big gray mess, we found a really great poem
• How to write a very interesting poem by looking at my finger-painting
• You can tell a story from a painting
• How to express yourself in poems and art and how to tell a story without words

**Broad Statements About Learning**
• To have fun with everyone and learn
• I learned to cooperate with a lot of different people
• I learned that sciences, literacy and art could be very fun in many different ways
• The different ways to learn
• Teamwork is very important in not only sports but also activities such as the mystery we had to solve
• How to observe what I did and how to focus really harder
• From this entire project I learned a lot!
• You should try something new because you may like it
• I learned that art, science and storytelling can be fun

**Question 2 Responses.** Fifty-eight percent of the students indicated that they liked forensics best, with 16 percent indicating that they liked the arts best, and two percent indicating that they liked storytelling best. Seven percent indicated that they liked all three sets of lessons. As Figure 2 indicates, many more student comments focused on forensics, specifically the idea of using clues to solve a murder, the kinds of experimentation that they were doing, the newness of the activities for them, and the similarity of this type of lesson to a popular television series. With the arts/poetry, students liked finger painting and, with storytelling, students liked the opportunity to act out stories.

Figure 2. Students’ Responses and Comments to Question #2: “What did you like best about this project? (n = 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Three</th>
<th>Storytelling</th>
<th>Forensics</th>
<th>The Arts</th>
<th>Storytelling and Forensics</th>
<th>Broad Statement About Learning</th>
<th>No Favorite/No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Samples of students’ comments about what they liked best about the project included:

**Storytelling**
• Acting in literacy
• Telling a story to the class
• The storytelling that the college students told
• The stories

**Forensics**
• I liked finger-printing
• Looking at the different types of hair for forensics
• Looking at the blood types and fingerprints, searching for who did the crime
• Forensics taught me how to track down a criminal, and solve a crime
• The science because we had a chance to do different activities
• My favorite part about the CSI was when we learned about fingerprints
• Testing out the clues to get the suspect
I liked how we got to look at the different types of bloods through the microscope
To solve the mystery
That I got to use real tools that CSI people use
It was like a big game of clue
There was so much to do! We played clue and the fingerprint on the clothing was my favorite
Everyone made it fun and the students from Manhattanville are very helpful and explained the directions well. It was so fun!
Testing the blood
Because we did stuff we didn’t normally do
I like testing the blood

Painting in the arts
Finger painting because it was so interesting
When we finger painted because we got to show our emotions
When we made a poem out of the finger painting
The finger painting because we got dirty
The finger painting part the best because I learned and expressed my feeling into a painting and then turned it into a poem
I like the finger painting in this project because I had never finger painted
You get to make a mess with the paint

Learning something new that I never knew before
That it was fun!
Sharing thoughts and doing fun experiments
How everyone got to participate
I liked all of them because they were fun and I learned a lot
I had fun and I learned all new things in all the activities

Question 3 Responses. Ninety-four percent of the students indicated that they wanted to participate in this project again in some way. Three percent indicated that they did not want to participate, and three percent did not respond. As students’ comments in Figure 3 indicate, they saw this project as fun and interesting. They commented that they learned “a lot,” and enjoyed being actively involved with learning. While many focused on forensics as their favorite activity to participate in again, many commented that they enjoyed all three lessons.

Figure 3. Students’ Responses and Comments to Question #3: Would you want to participate again in this project? Why? Why Not? (n=100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES All Three</th>
<th>YES Forensics</th>
<th>YES The Arts</th>
<th>YES Storytelling</th>
<th>YES Forensics and Arts</th>
<th>YES Forensics and Storytelling</th>
<th>YES Forensics NO Arts</th>
<th>YES Forensics NO Storytelling and Arts</th>
<th>YES Broad Statement</th>
<th>NO All Three</th>
<th>NO The Arts</th>
<th>NO Storytelling</th>
<th>NO Forensics</th>
<th>NO Broad Statement</th>
<th>No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2% 24% 3% 1% 1% 1% 1% 2% 1% 4% 1% 53%
Samples of students’ comments about why they would want to participate again in this project included:

- Yes because…
  - In literacy I would do it again because it was fun telling stories. In science I would because I like solving problems
  - It was very fun and interesting, and I learned a lot
  - Especially forensics because they were fun activities
  - It was really fun to tell stories, to finger-paint, and to find who killed Mr. Boddy
  - It was really nice to solve a mystery and learn at the same time and to memorize a story and then read it. So it was fun
  - I would do forensics again because it was fun and kept my attention
  - Doing forensics is a good way to work with others in a group
  - I love solving mysteries and finding clues. They made it a lot of fun!
  - You learn how to make the finger prints appear
  - It was fun and everybody could participate
  - I love Crime Scene Investigation
  - It was the most fun learning I’ve had all year so far
  - I liked how it was active
  - Poems and finger painting are fun
  - Exciting fun and really enjoyable especially for little kids
  - I wish we had these classes everyday! I was so happy and excited and couldn’t wait for the next class with the Manhattanville students
  - I liked the storytelling and finger painting
  - They storytelling help me build up courage, the forensics taught me about science and the finger painting’s fun
  - I enjoyed the whole project
  - I liked the idea of hands on.
  - It was very fun to do those activities. It made me think differently. Like in the art/poetry when she said you’ll speak to each other in the painting. I had no idea what she meant

Samples of students’ comments about why they would not want to participate again in this project included:

- No because…
  - In the arts, it was hard to have a conversation in a blob of paint
  - I didn’t really have that much fun
  - The finger painting and poem didn’t keep my attention
  - I already learned a lot from the project and if I do it again it won’t be as exciting as before

**Question 4 Responses.** Ninety percent of the students provided suggestions to make this project better, with 52 percent of the students focused on specific lessons and 38 percent focused on broad ideas. Figure 4 highlights students’ comments. Students suggested that they should have more time to participate and finish the projects; be involved in more activities; participate in longer lessons; and be provided with more obvious connections between the three types of lessons.
Figure 4. Students’ Responses and Comments to Question #4: “What suggestions do you have to make this project better?” (n=100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Statement</th>
<th>No Response/No Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Samples of students’ suggestions include:

**Storytelling**
- You should do more storytelling it’s fun
- Do storytelling 2 times
- More interesting stories

**Forensics**
- They should make science more realistic
- More things in science would be fun
- Bring back science because I really liked it
- Should have more suspects and more investigations
- Let the kids do more stuff. For instance, at the hair station, I would have liked to dip the cloth into the liquid
- Make the person who did it a student in the class
- Next time we do the solving ourselves
- They should put on a costume of who they are and act like them
- Make more parts for the forensics lab. I think that would make it more fun
- More forensics time or days because it was the most fun

**Art/Poetry**
- It would be awesome if we could get more time finger painting
- In finger painting the person there doesn’t correct a whole lot of our poem, because it felt like that person almost re-wrote the poem
- Let us finger paint whatever we want
- Don’t make us do a poem after making a finger painting. Also we should have made a finger painting just for fun and not with a partner
- Have an auction of the finger-paintings and you only have $200 and there are judges and a winner is picked
- I wish you could make a longer poetry lesson
- Maybe when we paint you can give the option for a paintbrush

**Broad Statements About Learning**
- Make sure everyone understands what you are saying and don’t get confused. Also, try to give more time to say the stories so everybody gets a chance
- Nothing really it is great already
- Come more days! (4 students)
- Let kids get a little more active
- Make a few more stations (7 students)
- In my opinion you did an outstanding job! Thanks!
- They can come longer and more so we can learn more
- More time to finish the projects
- I really don’t understand the connection between the three activities. I didn’t understand the connection and how they went together. They seemed like they were different topics and subjects
- I kind of understand how storytelling, and the painting/poetry went together. You would tell a story in the painting. But I don’t know how that’s connected to forensics. Anyway, it was all fun!
Teacher Responses

The five fifth-grade teachers completed a three-question survey at the end of the project. The three questions were: (1) What did you find most valuable about any or all of the three sessions? (2) Suggestions? (3) Additional comments regarding the program?

All five teachers commented that they found the project valuable in some way for their students, and suggested a follow-up activity or lesson to extend and/or enhance the project. Two of the five teachers enjoyed seeing their students interact with new teachers. Three of the five teachers responded that they want students to understand the connection between the three sessions. The teachers suggested: “More explanation to the teachers about how the idea for this project came about,” and “More explanation of how the three activities fit together and follow-up suggestions for teachers to explore further in their own classrooms.”

Teacher responses seemed to be influenced by what students wrote on their surveys. For example, in the class where students complained about the arts lesson, the teacher commented, “They didn’t like that the teacher edited their work for them!” In the class where students included all three lessons in their summary response of what they learned, the teacher also included all three lessons in outline format to tell what was the most valuable about the sessions. Figure 5 includes teachers’ responses.

Figure 5. Teachers’ Responses to the Three Questions

1. What did you find most valuable about any or all of the three sessions?
   - I always find it valuable to have a chance to sit back a bit and watch my students as they interact with new teachers and activities. It is also beneficial to see how much other people put together a lesson.
   - All three provided students with a positive experience. The opportunity to have guest teachers and new topics (such as forensics) is worthwhile.
   - Forensics: The students found the whole forensics session enjoyable and interesting. They were highly engaged in forensics, and it was an area in which they had no experience. A follow-up is needed so that the students can think about the process and apply it once again.
   - Storytelling: Storytelling was useful for oral recall and struggling students’ fluency when they reread the story. The most valuable portion of storytelling was when the kids went out to the lower level classes.
   - Painting/Poetry: Most valuable was pulling thoughts/feelings/stories out of a simple piece. Poetry needed an additional session, possibly with scanned images to work on the poetry itself.

1. Suggestions
   - More explanation to the teachers about how the idea for this project came about.
   - More explanation of how the three activities fit together and follow-up suggestions for teachers to explore further in their own classrooms.
   - A handout for the students to share with their parents.
   - Multiple sessions of forensics to build upon what was covered (possibly two of the three sessions on one day so that the students can really see the connection), and more student use of the microscope.
   - Better connections between the three activities.
   - More explicit instruction on storytelling strategies.

2. Additional comments regarding the program
   - An overview for the students on how this project came about; why they are doing it and what they would walk away with.
   - Orientation with the college students on appropriate attire for the school building.
• Willingness of storytelling and poetry instructors to come back to George on their own time for follow-up/small group work is commendable
• "This follow-up with the storytelling and poetry was excellent, a necessary task when taking on a large project. Could the storytelling be introduced to the lower grades? The early readers benefit from acting out literature (They’re about to make an immediate connection with what they have read)."

Reflections on the Survey Responses and Observations of Student Work

The survey data from fifth-grade students and their teachers indicated that students actively participated in the three types of lessons. Faculty observed that all students wrote, told, and performed their own stories and participated in the three forensics learning stations. Every fifth-grade class was able to come up with the answer to "who-dunit" by using the clues from the three stations. All students also had their finger painting and poetry included in the "Arts Conversations" booklet that was given to them to take home to their families. These three activities encouraged students to learn by doing (Dewey, 1916), and take an active part in the learning process (Petress, 2006). The five teachers expressed satisfaction with their students’ experiences, and made helpful suggestions on improving the project for the future.

Undergraduate students benefited as well because they learned how to use and adapt their content and pedagogical knowledge to develop lessons for elementary students that engaged them in active and collaborative learning. In fact, they were asked to write an article for the newsletter of the Connecticut Storytelling Center (Werbeck, Brenner, Lara, Florian, & Gangi, 2007), which helped them to synthesize and reflect on what they had learned.

While biology students were initially more focused on content than pedagogy, they quickly learned the importance of making science concepts and procedures understandable. Even though elementary education students were initially focused more on the concept of an instructional technique, the elementary education students learned from their own experiences with the Storytelling Workshop what they had to do to execute a useful and motivating storytelling lesson. The elementary education students had to understand the different story elements (e.g., introduction, character development, and resolution), and how each story element is developed and connected. The elementary education students then learned how the elements are integrated into a story by creating their own stories and testing them with each other. The elementary education students’ own experimentation with and discussion about stories at the college enabled them to conduct a Storytelling Workshop with the fifth-grade students.

Members of the CSI Committee (most of whom are authors of this article) were pleased with the outcomes, even with the challenges that had to be overcome. It was these challenges that helped to better understand how to develop a school-college project to promote student engagement with learning. The next section describes the challenges that the authors encountered, and how they addressed them.

Recognizing and Addressing Challenges

About 20 years ago, when one of the authors was involved in developing a Professional Development School through another college, the then-assistant superintendent of the local school district explained that most of the problems that had surfaced between the school and the college were the result of a "culture clash" between the elementary school and the education school. He explained that the teachers were operating with one set of principles about how they are supposed to do their job and the college faculty were
operating with a different set of principles (e.g., how one’s day is scheduled; how a classroom should be managed; how one should deal with instructional materials; and how one defines professional development).

Elementary classroom teachers are directly involved with their students most of the day. They use the end of the school day to catch up on the day’s events, review student work, and prepare for the next day. They are not necessarily “psyched” for someone outside their immediate environment to tell them what to do and how to do their business. College faculty spend their days differently, with less time interacting with students and more time involved in committee work and scholarship that contributes to their understanding of specific academic disciplines. Their daily pressures are different; thus, creating a different set of expectations for themselves and others. This so-called “culture clash” actually was reflected in some of the challenges encountered with CSI-White Plains.

**Planning for Implementation**

A simple, yet significant challenge was planning for the implementation of CSI-White Plains. Even though this project had been delineated on paper and discussed enthusiastically by both the school and the college, its actual implementation became a challenge as the committee began to work on schedules, classroom set-up, and teacher/student preparation.

With scheduling, the committee had to work around the school, faculty, and undergraduate students. Eventually, and because of the professors’ and fifth-grade teachers’ desire to make the project work, compromises were made to schedule the 35 total hours of instruction (5 hours per class). The elementary classroom teachers took time from their reading and mathematics schedules; the biology faculty had her students reschedule a biology lab; and the literacy faculty did not attend faculty meetings and other college events to be at the elementary school at agreed-upon times. With hindsight, the professors should have assured the fifth-grade teachers that the literacy/science/art lessons were curriculum-based so that the teachers did not think that they were taking time away from their instruction rather than using new approaches to instruction.

With classroom setup, the principal had to work with the college faculty to configure a classroom to meet their instructional needs. The college faculty had to work with the classroom teachers to order appropriate equipment (microscopes) for fifth-grade students. After many back and forth conversations between the school and the college, the classroom was finally ready to be used. With teacher/student preparation, the principal worked with her group to receive their college guests. Two of the three college faculty worked with their respective undergraduate students during and between classes to prepare them for their instructional responsibilities.

Overall, the participants had to spend additional time planning for the project’s implementation. Classroom routines had to be changed to accommodate outsiders. A common space had to be taken off line and rearranged for the lessons. College faculty had to put aside other responsibilities to prepare their lessons, train their students, and figure out how to work effectively with fifth-grade students. The principal and the education dean had to spend time with a host of unanticipated administrative tasks (e.g., instructional materials that did not arrive). The fifth-grade special education teacher worked with the three faculty members to solve scheduling conflicts and room set-up specifications. Everyone’s willingness to spend the additional time, negotiate, compromise, and be flexible helped with the project’s implementation. Email helped somewhat to promote communication between the two groups.
Too Little Communication Too Late

Even with the group’s yeoman efforts to implement the project, certain ideas were not communicated until it was too late, creating challenges for both the college faculty and classroom teachers. For example, the first class that the biology professor and her undergraduate students (all biology, non-education majors) had for the forensics lesson included the special education students from the self-contained special education class who were to be included for all three lessons. While seemingly enthusiastic for the project, the special education students made comments that caused the undergraduate students to feel uncomfortable. For example, the special education students commented on the undergraduate students’ physical characteristics. Had the special education teacher been aware of what was happening, he probably would have addressed the situation directly, instructively, and in front of the undergraduate students. As a result, the undergraduate students did not want to return because they did not understand that these were special education students who had difficulty in knowing how to respond appropriately to this new learning situation. As soon as the principal heard about this, she met with the entire fifth-grade team to establish expectations, alleviating subsequent behavioral issues. With hindsight, the CSI Committee should have coordinated instruction with classroom teachers in more depth and in a timely manner.

A second example occurred with the dress of some of the undergraduate students who came to school in their typical college attire. Although students’ dress really bothered the fifth-grade teachers, they did not express this concern until after the project was finished; thus, creating unnecessary negativism. Once the college faculty learned of this concern, they created a dress-code protocol handout for working in the schools that will automatically be disseminated to future student groups. While the college had a written dress-code policy in the student/supervised teaching handbook, it did not have one for pre-student teaching student placements. With hindsight, the college faculty might have anticipated the need for a dress code for any type of field work, and might have better prepared the students for attire expectations in elementary schools. The CSI Committee might have put into place a mechanism for getting formative feedback about the project, e.g., a mid-term debriefing meeting.

Generally speaking, the too-little-communication-too-late phenomenon is one of those challenges that typically exist, yet can be used to prompt change and improvement. A willingness to turn mistaken opportunities into productive practices helps to move collaboration forward.

Conflicting Expectations

A third major challenge was the different type of expectations held by the school and the college. On the one hand, the college faculty expected all fifth-grade teachers to work alongside them so that they could help their own students before and after each lesson. The college faculty assumed that the teachers would help their students understand reasons for certain exercises within the lessons, and reinforce any skills needed to be successful. The college faculty thought of these lessons as a form of professional development that could eventually be owned by the teachers. On the other hand, the classroom teachers did not necessarily have these expectations for themselves. While they actually were present in the classroom during most of the storytelling, forensics, and art/poetry lessons, and helped students as needed, they did not know how to prepare and follow-up with each of the lessons.

These conflicting expectations were partially due to the too-little-communication-too-late phenomenon. They were also due to the classroom teachers’ understanding that this project was for the students, and not for them. The impact of conflicting expectations
did not really become apparent until after the survey responses were compiled. The authors realize that the teachers should have been part of the process from the beginning. The authors assumed that once the teachers found out that they would each receive an expensive microscope for their classrooms and an honorarium for their participation, they would eagerly get involved. The authors should have been more explicit on what was expected from the teachers’ participation and how such participation would contribute to their own professional development. Again, a mid-term debriefing meeting would have helped to resolve any misunderstandings.

Because the authors were so focused on putting together and scheduling the lessons, they did not realize that they needed to spend more time with the fifth-grade teachers so that they knew what to anticipate and how their involvement would benefit their students. This would have helped to avoid the students’ and teachers’ concerns about having the students’ poetry “corrected.” The teachers would have had a better understanding of how the poetry was going to be published in the "Art Conversations" booklet, and could have explained to their students the reasons for revisions. Now that the authors know that the project can work, they already have built into the plan a half-day of professional development for the teachers so that they know how to work alongside each faculty member to maximize students’ engagement. This half-day professional development session also will help the college faculty to better understand teachers’ instructional styles and students’ developmental needs.

The authors are pleased that one teacher chose to have the storytelling literacy professor come to her fifth-grade class with her undergraduate students each fall to do storytelling and the Literacy Profile. Overall, the challenges turned into opportunities for both the college faculty and fifth-grade teachers to self-reflect about their current practices in relation to the other group’s perspectives, and make changes accordingly.

**Lessons Learned for Moving Forward**

Developing a school-college professional learning community involves a paradigm shift about who is in charge and what is expected. A linear organizational structure is supplemented with a cross-institutional system that involves many more voices in decision-making. Because college faculty and classroom teachers are working together across institutional lines, they need to be able to go to representatives outside their own structures. A liaison needs to be in place at both institutions to solicit and communicate expectations, and address the details of implementation so that the goals of a collaborative are accomplished. While administrators (principals and education deans) might have the best of intentions for serving in these roles, they usually cannot devote the kind of time needed to satisfy all parties. Liaisons need to be rewarded financially for this responsibility.

Classroom teachers need to be involved from the beginning in developing a school-college project. Otherwise, there will be subtle and not-so-subtle forms of resistance. In CSI-White Plains, while all teachers indicated on the anonymous survey an appreciation for the project’s usefulness for their students, some teachers did not really get as actively involved as anticipated. Those teachers who are truly committed to such collaborative work will use it as an opportunity for professional development. These teachers will eventually implement in their own classrooms what they observe college faculty doing, and can serve as role models in their schools to those initially reluctant to participate.

To help teachers become interested, professional learning for faculty needs to occur from the outset, and should occur through workshops and collaborative work. In order for the teachers to better understand what and how their students are learning, they should participate in each of the lessons to be conducted with students during a full-day
insights can help to improve the quality of instruction. Community of purpose is conditioned by “the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups” (1916/1944, p. 99).

Finally, and generally speaking, more attention needs to be given to helping schools to address the changing student population of suburban school districts. There is some research that recognizes the increased diversity in suburban schools, its impact on students’ learning, and the need to make changes in the schools (Luce, 2003; Wang & Aldridge, 2007; Wortham, Allard, & Mortimer, 2006). Studies have been conducted in schools to improve students’ social skills, literacy development, and scientific reasoning (Ackermann, Pierropoulos, & Yager, 1999; Brown & Abell, 2007; Dingboom et al., 1994). Studies also have been conducted with teacher education programs that use field experiences and methods courses to help preservice teachers become more aware of culturally responsive teaching in suburban school districts (Downey & Cobbs, 2007). Our project highlights how a suburban college and a changing suburban elementary school came together to expose teachers and preservice teachers to instructional strategies that engage students in new learning experiences.

Conclusions

The growth of our school-college professional learning community has brought together two different cultures to discuss educational theories and issues, develop new ways of instructing students, and determine ways to improve elementary students’ learning. The principal was critical for initiating and sustaining such teamwork. She needed to be interested in working with the college; able to convince her faculty and supervisors of the value of such work; and willing to assume additional responsibilities to implement new ideas. Also important was the willingness of the college faculty to suspend typical teacher-scholar pursuits to work in the school.

The principal and education dean now are co-partners who are intent on bringing together four different types of groups—classroom teachers, teacher education faculty, elementary students, and college students—to experiment with new types of learning experiences, provide professional development opportunities for teachers and faculty, and involve the next generation of teachers in the classroom to provide assistance and also learn how to best promote student engagement with diverse student populations.

References


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