



## Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 34

Issue 5 May/June 1994

Article 5

6-1-1994

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### Recommended Citation

Macaul, S. L., Blout, T., & Phelps, K. H. (1994). School/University Partnerships in Reading/Language Arts: Working Toward Collaborative Inquiry. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 34 (5). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol34/iss5/5](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol34/iss5/5)

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# School/University Partnerships in Reading/Language Arts: Working Toward Collaborative Inquiry

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Efforts and initiatives to improve the education of our teachers are currently underway. The Holmes group reports *Tomorrow's Teachers* (1986), *Tomorrow's Schools* (1990), and the soon to be released *Tomorrow's Schools of Education* (in press) provide principles to assist schools and universities as they work together to improve the education of our students. In the Association of Teacher Educator's (ATE) annual survey of critical issues in teacher education, Buttery, Haberman, and Houston (1990) state that "teacher education will not be improved until the conditions of practice in the schools are improved." It is essential that reform in schools and teacher education evolve together.

Sirotnik and Goodlad (1988) identify a variety of relationships that exist between schools and universities. A collaborative relationship is one type in which a "sharing of responsibility exists but where authority for policy is separate and autonomous." A partnership, however, is a relationship

which Sirotnik and Goodlad (1988) define as "symbiotic mutualism" where both partners benefit from a common set of goals and contribute "selflessly." Most schools and universities begin working together from a collaborative perspective gradually moving toward a partnership arrangement that fulfills the needs and interests of the respective participants. Irvin (1990) states that "one of the most pressing issues in teacher education is the reconceptualization of teacher training by redesigning the roles for university and district personnel." Schools and universities can work together in a multitude of ways to support and enhance literacy.

In this article, we will first examine three types of connections in reading that may exist between schools and universities — professional service, teaching and learning, and shared critical inquiry. Next, we will explore an on-going critical inquiry partnership in reading/language arts in terms of the role of the administrator and reflective professional growth. Finally, we will reflect on the impact and insights gained from this partnership.

### **Types of school/university connections**

**Professional service.** Many informal connections exist between the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire Curriculum and Instruction Department faculty and reading specialists, Chapter 1 teachers, classroom teachers and administrators in the Eau Claire Schools. These collegial connections are of three different types. The first and probably one of the earliest and strongest sustaining connections is the local Eau Claire Area Reading Council, chartered in 1969 by faculty member Dr. Roger Quealy. The council has provided many opportunities for school and university faculty, specialists, teachers, administrators, librarians and parents to work together in the planning of three to four annual council meeting/programs each year. In addition, the fall state reading conference is held

in our city every three to four years. Area Reading Council members work together to host that conference. These meetings and conferences involve a great deal of collaborative work which extends into the schools as well as the community. District reading specialists, classroom teachers and university faculty have served together for many years on local and state reading committees and have regularly attended three to four reading/leadership meetings each year to participate in policymaking at the state level. These local and state professional contributions have created a vital link between the Eau Claire Schools and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Department of Curriculum and Instruction reading faculty.

**Teaching and learning.** A second collegial link between schools and universities has been the adjunct teaching positions and guest speaker roles which school district personnel have assumed in both undergraduate and graduate courses. These experiences range from offering sections of undergraduate and graduate reading classes to serving as mentors to candidates pursuing a master's degree in reading and as guest speakers to graduate and undergraduate classes. At least once a year, the reading/language arts coordinator and university faculty serve together on School Evaluation Consortium (SEC) curriculum evaluation teams to review reading/language arts curricula in various districts.

**Shared critical inquiry.** The third and most essential collegial link is critical inquiry. Over the past few years, partnership exchanges in reading between the Eau Claire Schools and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire have ranged from partial load, semester exchanges — where the reading specialist taught one of the university faculty's reading courses on campus while the faculty member devoted one day a week serving as reading specialist in the specialist's school — to a

principal serving half time in the schools and teaching courses half time on campus, to a reading specialist and university faculty member co-teaching university classes while simultaneously serving as co-reading specialist in a school. The district reading specialist, school administrator and UWEC reading faculty members served side-by-side in schools working with students and teachers as well as with undergraduate/graduate courses. This plan was in response to a recent call (Sirotnik and Goodlad, 1988) for an emphasis on critical inquiry to improve teacher education as well as teaching and learning in local school districts.

Sirotnik and Goodlad (1988) refer to the notion of critical inquiry as "self-study generating and acting upon knowledge in context by and for those who use it." This model proved to be the most productive for us since it afforded opportunities to co-plan, coordinate, co-teach, learn and reflect together. Goals became mutual. We found that teaching simultaneously on campus and in the schools provided a unique opportunity to view reading/language arts instruction and assessment through one another's lenses. The opportunity to work systematically in our own and one another's educational environments led to rich dialogue, new challenges, insights and instructional change — all important outgrowths of our partnership exchange. Our goals became mutual. Each of us established professional commitments and made time and resource investments in both institutions. The opportunity to share experiences and insights while teaching, supervising and administering simultaneously across both institutions was one of the most valuable and formative experiences of the partnership.

### **Reflection and shared professional growth**

We found ourselves working together to improve teaching and learning at both institutions. The reading specialist

arranged for the practicum placements for the undergraduate course on assessment to be in schools where he served as reading specialist and could monitor student growth. He worked closely with the students and classroom teachers to oversee this experience. We constantly extend our base of knowledge that supports shared inquiry. School and university faculty, specialists and teachers regularly attend and co-present at local, state and national conferences. As a common basis for shared inquiry, specialists, faculty and teachers continue to share research and reports on literacy, books, articles, instructional approaches, technology applications and curriculum.

### **Administrative support**

In each type of collegial relationship described above, the building administrator and education dean were the essential links, providing leadership, opportunities, time and support for new ventures. In our particular partnership exchange, the district principal not only supported collaborative exchanges but became involved herself in a half-time exchange which involved teaching courses on campus, serving on School of Education committees, and supervising student teachers. Likewise, the School of Education Dean encouraged and supported collegial exchanges by providing faculty with opportunities to participate in differential staffing.

### **Reading/language arts partnership exchange**

Shared decision making and critical inquiry among the building administrator, reading specialist, and district and university faculty are essential components of an effective partnership exchange. The exchanges in which the authors of this article participated involved the following steps: establishing partnerships; sharing current literature; determining needs and identifying goals; securing commitment and resources; identifying participants and timelines; planning for

innovation and inquiry; reflecting on the effectiveness of the exchange; and planning a new cycle of collaborative partnerships. The purposes of the reading/language arts exchanges have been to improve the education of preservice teacher candidates while simultaneously enhancing the teaching and learning of practitioners and learners in the schools. Sirotnik and Goodlad (1988) state that a partnership should involve investigations which allow participants to "inquire systematically along with others in the same situation." The exchanges have involved co-planning, co-teaching, co-investigating and co-evaluating alternative teaching and learning models and practices. The reading specialist, administrator and university faculty accomplished the goals which they mutually proposed with teachers as they:

- co-designed/redesigned course syllabi
- assisted with teacher selected initiatives such as helping the media specialist identify ways to implement action research with book talks
- implemented a case study approach to course assessment
- simultaneously assisted classroom teachers and preservice teachers as they implemented inquiry-based learning
- established and evaluated effectiveness of a reading/writing workshop approach in several classrooms
- modeled and facilitated lessons and literature based reading experiences
- provided ideas and examples of authentic assessment to teachers and undergraduates
- met and reflected upon the drawbacks and successes of new ventures attempted and refined partnership practices
- provided more relevant and appropriate school-based field experiences
- encouraged teachers to serve as presenters at state conferences
- coordinated the university summer session reading assessment course practicum with the district's summer reading program

- invited/participated in planning and policy making meetings at each institution
- evaluated the effectiveness of our mutual roles on campus and in the schools
- implemented literacy/learning experiences which connected the schools, university and community

### **Impact and insights for the future**

Reflective practice and experimentation lead to refined visions. As our partnerships grow and change, the quest for a common mission, joint responsibility and a shared vision becomes more apparent. In this process of renewal and inquiry, questions constantly arise. What was learned? What needs to be done? Where do we go from here? Listed are our observations and insights as to the impact of our partnership exchange in reading language arts. 1) Communication is essential and leads to ownership and commitment. 2) There are many benefits to collaboratively planning, exploring and conducting pilot projects in reading/language arts. 3) University personnel need to experience time constraints faced by elementary teachers regularly, and thus come to understand them better. 4) It is important to have regular, frequent and extensive field-based courses in teacher preparation co-planned with district faculty. 5) It is necessary to redesign university courses so they reflect and exemplify current practice which benefits schools. 6) There is a definite need to monitor and support beginning teachers of literacy. 7) It is critical to evaluate newly attempted educational practices. 8) Teaching and learning can be improved through action research and school/site-based teaching and learning.

We believe that the partnership exchanges in reading/language arts have helped us to prepare for a greater degree of shared inquiry as we enter a new era of education in



reading/language arts and professional development in the schools.

## Conclusion

Our collegial connections in reading/language arts have expanded over the years in direct proportion to our school/university contacts. We have worked on-site in one another's institutions, experienced each other's workplace and culture often simultaneously with our own. We have witnessed the needs, struggles and successes in one another's reading/language arts programs. The exchanges have enabled us to extend and co-develop our knowledge bases, practices and modes of inquiry. Together we have explored ways to re-define our former notions of how literacy can best be acquired, applied and assessed. We have continued to seek, implement and evaluate ways to enhance the learning of preservice teachers, inservice teachers and most importantly the learners in our classrooms.

According to Sirotnik and Goodlad (1988) reform requires four conditions, namely "dialogue, decisions, actions, and evaluation at individual and institutional levels." As those of us involved in the exchanges met on a regular basis, we discussed theory and practice, raised issues, shared articles, books and generally focused on ways to bridge the gap between preservice and full-time classroom instruction conducted by practitioners. School/university partnerships provide continuous opportunities for school and university faculty, specialists and administrators to live, work, critically examine and influence teaching and learning in one another's educational community. The focus in our minds has shifted from implementing the latest practices to mutually identifying problems which we can collectively solve.

To maintain and enhance partnership programs, the university and schools have established two other collaborative programs, namely the Collaborative Efforts Committee and the Task Force on Teacher Education for the 21st Century. Through these two programs, school and university faculty and administrators have been working together on a regular basis to forge new horizons, expand insights, and gain new perspectives on how we can continue to work collectively to effectively prepare future teachers and students to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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