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Abstract

This article reports the progress of one project aimed at bringing together professionals from post-secondary and K-12 environments. The project is being implemented at Richards Middle (RMS) in Columbus, Georgia and involves a collaborative partnership between several universities and RMS, resulting in a school-based evaluation initiative with direct implications for strengthening leadership, training, and instructional practices in schools. Faculty researchers from three universities from two states, Troy University, Columbus State University, and Auburn University are working collaboratively with faculty and staff of Richards Middle School on an inquiry with a three-fold purpose. The primary goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme in its first year of implementation in the sixth grade. A second goal of the investigation is to evaluate the effectiveness of the staff training and development process employed during the initial year in terms of effective professional learning practices. A third goal is to investigate the effectiveness of the collaborative process itself in terms of the implementation of the dialogic approach discussed in Clark, et al. (1996).

In the wake of the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), schools throughout the United States have been left awash in unresolved issues. NCLB's requirement of Annual Yearly Progress through instruction "grounded in scientifically-based research" (U. S. Department of Education, 2004) gauged by assessment data disaggregated by population subgroups (Simpson, LaCava & Graner, 2004) has created a host of issues for states and local school systems who are trying to develop successful instructional programs that improve student achievement in ways consistent with the legislation. Research-based instruction and standardized tests (as well as different generations of effective schools correlates) and stringent accountability measures have been emphasized for years as delivery and assessment methods (Hargrove, Hargrove, Walker, Huber, Corrigan, & Moore, 2004; Riley, 1994; Viadero, 2004) with the resulting levels of student achievement being perceived by the public (and their representatives) as less than desirable. In a survey released by Educational Testing Service in June of 2004, only 22% of adults surveyed gave American schools a grade of B or above (Parents Take Schools, 2004). For leaders and teachers at the school level, the present political and educational topography presents the challenge of finding ways to ensure that research-based teaching methods are being used in the classroom (Hargrove, et al., 2004). These instructional methods should take into account individual learner differences, cultural issues, and psychological and

physiological issues relative to the development of the brain (Fischer & Pare-Blagoer, 2000; Gardner, 1993).

There exists, as well, the necessity to use appropriate assessment components to evaluate the effectiveness of those methods so that mid-course corrections may be made before the yearly standardized assessments are administered. This is a tall order for local schools in that there is a presumption of expertise in research-based teaching methods, professional development delivery methods, and organizational methods, not to mention the funding and personnel, to meet the requirements of NCLB (U. S. Department of Education, 2004).

One model with promise for bringing together the resources and personnel to meet those requirements is that of a collaborative team comprised of professionals with a variety of expertise that can be focused on issues related to school improvement. Hagstrom (2000) addresses the topic of collaborative relationships among scientists saying that in the scientific arena, research issues have increased in complexity and "require skills not possessed by a single individual" and that "scientists often require the technical assistance of professionally trained persons" (p.251). That this is no less true in the field of education has become apparent to public school personnel in the field and university faculty who are charged with preparing teachers and leaders for the new, research-based environment created by NCLB (Hargrove, et al., 2004).

Collaborative relationships bringing together university researchers and teachers at the local school level have proven to be effective partnerships when research (or other) expertise is required at the school level and when university researchers come in as partners who are willing to engage in two-way dialogue with school personnel with mutual benefits for all. Clark, Moss, Goering, Herter, Larmar, Leonard, Robbins, Russell, Templin, and Wascha (1996) discuss a model in which researchers partner with schools in a dialogic approach to collaboration with researchers and school faculty seeing change and professional development occurring for both K-12 educators and university personnel. Personnel in this study reported that teacher perceptions of university faculty as the "ogre" who comes to observe and criticize have changed to a perception of faculty as partners in facilitating change. At the same time, the dialogic approach changes teacher perceptions of their own roles. They become less concerned with curriculum prescriptions and more concerned with individual learner differences.

Collaborative relationships between university researchers and local school faculty have not always been effective. Goldstein (2000) points out dilemmas created for researchers when roles are not clearly defined and when relationship issues for team members impact the work of implementation and assessment. Baldwin and Austin (1995) assert that "productivity is greatest among collaborative teams mature enough to have well-defined procedures (an infrastructure) in place to operate efficiently but not so old that creative tension has diminished" (67). They also warn that "collaborations comprised of members with diverse backgrounds (e.g., collaborators from different disciplines, genders, ethnic groups, status levels) require more 'systems maintenance,' negotiation about goals, roles, procedures, and responsibilities than collaborations that are homogeneous" (p. 67).

Collaborative inter-organizational ventures can be effective in that they afford organizations with resources to which they might not have been able to gain access without partnerships. Since the East Central Alabama/West Central Georgia area is rich in post-secondary educational institutions there is great promise in the development of those kinds of partnerships directed toward the development of promising practices for the improvement of student learning.

Project Description

This article reports the progress of one project aimed at bringing together professionals from post-secondary and K-12 environments. The project is being implemented at Richards Middle (RMS) in

Columbus, Georgia and involves a collaborative partnership between several universities and RMS, resulting in a school-based evaluation initiative with direct implications for strengthening leadership, training, and instructional practices in schools. Faculty researchers from three universities from two states, Troy University (Alabama), Columbus State University (Georgia), and Auburn University (Alabama), are working collaboratively with faculty and staff of Richards Middle School on an inquiry with a three-fold purpose. The primary goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme in its first year of implementation in the sixth grade. A second goal of the investigation is to evaluate the effectiveness of the staff training and development process employed during the initial year in terms of effective professional learning practices. A third goal is to investigate the effectiveness of the collaborative process itself in terms of the implementation of the dialogic approach discussed in Clark, et al. (1996).

Project History

The project initially began as an investigation of professional learning practices for K-12 teachers in an era that emphasizes accountability and research-proven practices. Researchers from two area universities approached the principal of Richards Middle School (RMS) regarding an investigation of the effectiveness of professional learning at RMS. During initial discussions, it became apparent that the principal's ambitious goals for the school year included the successful implementation of the International Baccalaureate Programme as a magnet component, the incorporation of methods brought to bear in the IB classroom in the rest of the school, successful achievement of goals relative to Annual Yearly Progress as required by No Child Left Behind, and the integration of new faculty into the RMS instructional culture. Three questions emerged from the initial meeting:

- 1) How can RMS teachers most effectively be trained regarding IB goals, objectives, and practices?
- 2) How effective will the IB Programme be in improving student achievement?
- 3) How can these two questions best be evaluated (assessed)?

Given the complexity of the task taken on by staff at RMS, the initial collaborative team sought additional expertise resulting in the incorporation of two additional members from a third area university.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme is a program that establishes a "common curriculum and a university entry credential for geographically mobile students" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2002, p.1). Administered by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), the program provides a curriculum focused on "emphasizing critical thinking and exposure to a variety of points of view (that) would encourage intercultural understanding" (p.1). Three programs are offered by the IBO to include the Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programme (MYP), and the Diploma Programme (DP). Richards Middle School is in the first year of implementing the Middle Years Programme.

The Middle Years Programme (MYP) is designed for students from ages 11-16, with an emphasis on providing students an international perspective at an age when they are "particularly sensitive to social and cultural influences and are struggling to define themselves and their relations to others" (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2002, p. 8). All major disciplines are included in the IB curriculum: language, humanities, science, mathematics, arts, technology, and physical education. The IB curriculum allows local schools to include other subject areas, particularly those mandated by the local governing authorities of schools throughout the world. The IB curriculum brings to the middle school program a focus on subject areas from an international and cultural perspective.

In the Middle Years Programme (MYP), subject matter is taught utilizing an organizing framework, the Areas of Interaction. Each area of interaction provides a perspective from which to examine aspects of subject matter under study. The Areas of Interaction include the following:

- 1) Approaches to Learning: students develop skills in analyzing information, presenting ideas, accessing information, and working independently;
- 2) Community and Service: students apply their knowledge in helping their communities;
- 3) Homo Faber: students focus on changes effected by humankind in the world;
- 4) Environment: students study issues pertaining to dependence on the physical world;
- 5) Health and Social Education: students examine subject matter in terms of effects on health.

Student work in the MYP is comprised of multiple student products that teachers may assess. Among student products are essays, projects, portfolios, and test performance. Teachers are trained in MYP grading systems and criteria to include grading rubrics. IB provides examples of appropriate assessment practices for teachers to review. The two areas of design of student activities and assessment of student product generate the most need for professional learning experiences for teachers, an issue being examined in this research study.

Evolution of the Collaboration

From the beginning, members of the RMS IB research team have been aware researchers have cited the failure of collaborative endeavors (Clark, et al., 1996; Goldstein, 2000; Chaddock & Saltiel, 2004). As the relationship among team members developed over several meetings, roles for team members were established. A responsibility of team members from the university is to assist the leadership team at RMS in the development and implementation of professional learning strategies that seek to promote the successful implementation of IB, a methodologically innovative program steeped in best practices for student learning. A second responsibility of team members from the university is to evaluate the effectiveness of both professional learning and the implementation of the program itself. A responsibility of team members at RMS is to implement the IB Programme, schedule and conduct training regarding the program, and collect data relative to the program so that program effectiveness can be assessed. All team members join in evaluating the effectiveness of the collaboration itself and make recommendations for improving the collaboration.

The research team has been meeting every three weeks from before the beginning of the school year through the present time. Due to the complexity of the collaboration and to avoid the pitfalls created by lack of communication, organization, and role definition, a project leader for the research components of the project was chosen.

Methods and Evaluation

The evaluation of the IB Programme includes an assessment of student and faculty information that seeks to answer the following question: In what ways does the International Baccalaureate Programme impact Richards Middle School? Three snapshots of student and faculty data will be taken over the period of a year and will be used to evaluate the program.

Students and faculty who are not in the IB program will serve as a control group. Student evaluation will include student-centered assessments; performance-based assessments in music, art, technology, physical education, and Spanish; and quantitative reading and math scores from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Muscogee Assessment Program (MAP) tests. Other sources include student essays and teacher recommendations used as part of the application criteria and selection process for admission into the IB program.

Additional indicators that will assist in evaluating the program include the number of IB applications (from within and outside the school zone), quality of IB applications, IB enrollment patterns, drop-out rate, faculty involvement, and professional development. The school year began with three IB classes and two grade level teams with over 30 children from outside the neighborhood zone on a waiting list. Demographic variables include race, gender, neighborhood, elementary school attended, and previous and current teachers. Faculty assessment will focus on the IB Programme as an innovative change to the overall curriculum. The research team will survey teachers asking questions to gauge teacher information seeking styles. One example of such a survey question is: "How many times have you gone to the IB webpage?" The content of teacher planning meetings will be assessed at three primary points: at the beginning of the year, mid-year, and at the end of the year.

Initial Findings

Though the project is in the initial stages of implementation, team members have kept, and shared, extensive field notes on the implementation of the IB Programme at RMS, efforts at professional learning, and of the development of the assessment model for the study. A review of these notes yields two major observations. The first observation is that, at least initially, the roles of team members in the collaboration are clearly defined. Issues relative to the team of the types cited by Goldstein (2000) have been few. The second observation is that initial resistance to the implementation of the IB model at RMS (teachers initially reported being overwhelmed by IB and No Child Left Behind) has yielded to the rapid rollout of methods and practices encouraged in this model reported by the IB Coordinator.

Initial evaluation of assessment instruments used to identify candidates for the IB program have shown reliability in terms of discriminating quality of student performance and show promise as means of evaluating the program. Survey instruments prepared by team

members will be used to ascertain perceptions of both the IB Programme and the training components used to develop the professional learning environment at RMS.

Evaluation of Initial Baseline Data

In order to initiate this investigation as a study over time it was necessary to establish base-line data for future comparisons and analyses. While data involving IB Programme assessment at the High School level are fairly accessible, data pertaining to the Middle School IB Programme are fairly rare. The team of researchers elected to establish base-line data for Richards Middle School to allow for the development of future assessment information. The sample included both IB participants and Non-IB participants as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Sample Population

Participants	Grade Level	# of Students
IB Participants	6 th Grade	76
Non-IB Participants	6 th Grade	244

n = 320

Data were analyzed using a Discriminate Function Statistical Technique and the following relationships were revealed. A variable called Academic Performance was created as an umbrella for the Tested Subtests of English, social science, science, reading and mathematics which are the five standardized sub scores used for student proficiency determination. Pooled within-groups correlations between discriminating variables and the standardized canonical discriminant functions are shown in Table 2. Cohen and Cohen (1983) recommend a correlation of .30 or better as representing an acceptable level of statistical significance.

Table 2
Sub-Test Correlations

Subject Area	R
English	.89
Social Science	.87
Science	.87
Reading	.81
Mathematics	.76

When using the subtest scores as a predictor for group membership, Non-IB Programme membership could be identified with 84.5% accuracy and IB Programme membership with 94.5% accuracy. These data indicate clear delineation among the IB/Non-IB student groupings. This was an expected outcome due to the stringent pre-selection procedures for admittance to the IB Programme. However, having established a score supported baseline, future data analysis viability is increased.

Future Directions for the Study

Although the project is only six months old, team members are excited about the possibilities for the project both in terms of improved student achievement and increase of the knowledge base in terms of scientifically-based, research-proven practices. The team has recommended several steps for the coming semester: the continued implementation of the professional learning model developed by the IB Coordinator and the research team; the continued evaluation of professional learning practices at RMS; the continued refinement of assessment methods for evaluating those practices and implement those methods; and the continued evaluation of student performance and analysis of and teacher, parent, and student perceptions through the remainder of the school year.

It is the view of all team members that the RMS IB Project will require a long-term commitment from the team in order to track students and assess student performance in future years. Additionally, the team perceives that there is great promise for the IB Programme as it unfolds in the coming years in terms of identification of sound instructional practices, the development of productive professional learning practices, and the evolution of multi-institutional collaborative associations aimed at improving student learning.

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Iris Saltiel is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Troy University in Phenix City, Alabama. She has conducted research on corporate/collegiate collaborative partnerships, partnerships in learning, training design, and evaluation. She has published works on topics as diverse as the development of cohorts and collaboration.

Mike Johnson has taught technology at Kendrick High School, served as Assistant Principal at Blackmon Road Middle School and is currently Principal of Richards Middle School. A transformational leader, he is leading Richards through the first year of implementation of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme.

Kathy Hesler has taught music and performed as a symphonic trombonist both in the United States and with the Bamberger Symphony Orchestra in Germany. She presently serves as the International Baccalaureate Programme Coordinator at Richards Middle School which is in its first year of implementation as a magnet middle school program.