

*Constructing High Quality Professional Learning Opportunities
for High School Teachers in a Transformation Context*

Executive Summary

Elizabeth Boatright
University of Washington
July 2007

The Research Problem

Recognizing gaps between student achievement goals and actual student performance, educators, researchers, and policymakers agree that improving the content and delivery of teachers' professional development is essential (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). This is especially pertinent in the case of high schools, which are currently a target of high-profile attempts to improve the quality of students' learning experiences, bring them in line with ambitious learning standards, and do so for all students, not just the college-bound few. And while districts are typically charged with providing professional development opportunities for their teachers, their capacity to sustain high standards for teaching and learning is often limited by gaps in expertise and resources (Marks & Louis, 1996; Knapp, McCaffrey, & Swanson, 2003). Consequently, most professional development opportunities available to teachers involve participation in traditional workshops and other formalized, short-term formats that rarely influence classroom practice in meaningful ways (Elmore, 1993).

Given limited internal capacity to construct such opportunities, schools and districts are increasingly willing to seek partnerships with external partners. External "coaching" organizations are emerging as promising partners, offering a potential source of expertise, that substantially augment what districts and schools might otherwise do to shape teachers' knowledge, skills, and beliefs about content and their students as learners.

The ambitious goals of high school reform require new knowledge, skills, and beliefs related to teaching practice. Teachers are expected to ratchet up the rigor of their teaching *and* ensure that all students exhibit powerful, equitable learning. This is a tall order, given the traditional role that high schools have played in maintaining a status quo about student achievement, prevailing norms and instructional patterns among high school teachers, and the general absence of effective support for professional learning inside districts and schools. Yet through relationships with external coaching organizations or other similar partners, districts and the high schools within them may gain access to new and more powerful forms of professional development support.

The need—and the opportunity—are arguably great in those settings that are seeking to transform high school education. There, expectations have been raised significantly, and teachers and others have at least been willing to attempt substantial

changes in their ways of doing the business of school. Yet the unfolding of the high school transformation movement to date has rarely placed priority on developing high quality professional learning opportunities, specifically aimed at helping teachers anticipate the academic needs of a diverse student population and build their capacity for teaching to these needs.

This set of converging conditions—created by the impulse to transform the high school, the need and even openness in such settings to educational reform, and the limited local capacity for guiding instructional improvement—prompt questions about how externally-initiated professional development interventions can create high-quality learning opportunities for teachers in the transforming high school context. The following research questions guide this study:

1. In the context of efforts to transform high school education in high-poverty settings, how, if at all, are high-quality professional learning opportunities created for high school teachers? What about these professional learning opportunities makes them of “high quality,” either from the perspective of literature, the participants, or both?
2. More specifically, in what ways do the content focus, the nature of teacher participation, and the expert presence of the professional development experiences engage high school teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about content, standards for student work, and students’ intellectual potential?
3. How do these professional learning opportunities shape the norms (e.g., quality and frequency of interactions, who works with whom, allowable and taboo subjects, follow-up on decisions) within high school professional communities?

Framing Ideas

This study presumes that powerful, equitable student learning in high schools depends on relevant, ongoing professional learning opportunities and support for teachers. This premise, and the inquiry of this dissertation, is informed by several strands of scholarly work. Starting at the classroom level where teachers and students interact most, the first perspective is rooted in what teachers know and believe about content and the students they teach (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Grossman, 1989). The second perspective stems from research on professional learning opportunities that are considered high quality and related research on teacher learning (Little, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Stodolsky, 1988). The third perspective is grounded in scholarship on reforming high school contexts, especially when focused on the professional culture and instructional practice of high school teachers (e.g., Rozenholtz, 1989; Siskin & Little, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Finally, the fourth perspective derives from emerging research on external support organizations that construct ongoing, personalized, subject matter-specific professional learning opportunities for teachers that are aimed at closing the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic groups (Resnick & Glennan, 2002;

Honig, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). These four strands of work provide the raw material for constructing a conceptual framework that guides the proposed research.

Study Design and Method

This study relies on a qualitative case study design to develop an understanding of how, in a high school transformation context, high quality professional learning opportunities may be constructed for high school teachers. More specifically, a study of three small high schools – all housed in an overarching school complex – provide contrasting examples of these externally-guided professional learning opportunities. A qualitative study design enables the influence of context to emerge in data collection because it requires the researcher to interact directly with participants, and thus perform as the primary data collection instrument and interpreter of multiple, often conflicting, realities (Glesne, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and relevant documents capture such context-specific information from multiple sources.

Context for Research

The main questions raised by this study and the way I have framed it conceptually is best studied in a setting that is actively engaged in the transformation of the high school and at the same time pursuing the improvement of instructional practice with the assistance of a third-party support organization. The Rainier School District (pseudonym), in partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington, affords such a setting. In addition, the fact that these improvement efforts have been under study over a longer period of time provides a useful, additional context for this research.

The Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) is a fee-for-service resource organization affiliated with the College of Education at the University of Washington. CEL engages in district partnerships that are “based on the belief that powerful instructional leadership is the nexus for improving student achievement” (2006 Prospectus, available at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwcel/>). While CEL recognizes the unique contexts of their partnership districts, their overall theory of action remains the same. In sum, they aim to help school systems get smarter about powerful instruction and the leadership necessary to guide that instruction, work directly with content coaches and teacher leaders at school sites to connect new learning to classroom practice, and (c) ensure that the necessary policies, practices and structures are in place to support powerful instruction by working directly with district level leaders to examine their own district contexts (as described in the Prospectus).

Since the overhaul of Rainier’s high schools in summer 2005, the formerly large, comprehensive Salem High School has been renamed Salem Educational Complex, now comprising three small high schools with some autonomy over their own staffing and budgets. The high schools serve an ethnically diverse, high-poverty population of students, many of whom do not speak English as their first language. Salem appears committed to instructional reform; its leaders contracted separately with CEL for the past three years to receive over 40 instructional coaching days (in addition to what the district

allotted). With the help of an expert literacy coach contracted by CEL, language arts teachers at Salem have been engaging in content-specific, classroom-embedded learning opportunities that cause them to frequently rethink their practices – particularly with struggling students.

Summary of Findings

While a more complete analysis of findings can be found in the larger dissertation document, the following section offers an illustrative glance at (a) how professional learning opportunities were constructed for these teachers, and (b) how these opportunities shaped their interactions with students and their colleagues, according to study participants.

The Construction of Professional Learning Opportunities

1. The teachers' professional learning opportunities took the shape of a three-part, classroom-embedded coaching cycle.

In practice, classroom-embedded coaching is a cyclical, three-part professional learning opportunity that includes *planning* for a lesson, *observing* or co-teaching that lesson, and a *debriefing* period to inform the teacher's future practices. Coaching cycles, as constructed in these three high schools, offered teachers ongoing, "on the ground" professional learning opportunities because each lesson learned fed into future planning, and the teachers' learning environment ended up being their own classrooms with their own students.

Coaching cycles ranged from two to four full days per school and, although one teacher was designated each month ahead of time as the focus of study, all literacy teachers in the same small school typically participated in the coaching cycle and had the opportunity to learn from Heather's specific discussions with the focus teacher (Boatright, 2006, pp. 38-39). The communal nature of classroom-embedded coaching provided teachers with opportunities for building professional relationships and for opening up their own practice for the constructive scrutiny of their peers.

Coaching cycle participants play different roles as they engage in their own and others' professional learning. The focus teacher's classroom was constructed as a lab for her own and others' learning so that what was observed in her classroom provided the group with entry points into conversations about professional practice. The debrief typically involved informal conversation between the focus teacher, her coach, and the colleagues who observed her, and it was through this process that the coach and focus teacher (and sometimes her colleagues) planned for future classes and mutually constructed professional learning goals, given student needs and teacher's comfort level. A few weeks later, the coach usually returned to the school to facilitate coaching cycles with other teachers who became the new "focus teachers." In the end, all language arts and ELL teachers in the small high schools of this study had the opportunity to engage in classroom-embedded coaching. Since the small schools in this study contained a total of four to eight language arts and ELL teachers, each teacher was in the spotlight every four to six weeks.

2. *The content of these professional learning opportunities was influenced by a combination of conditions: the district’s commitment to a Balanced Literacy initiative, joint planning between the CEL project director and the coach, and the length of time that teachers had worked their coach.*

The overarching district plan to improve literacy at all levels of the school system – and their decision to contract CEL’s services to make that happen – shaped the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that teachers picked up from their classroom-embedded coaching cycles. A commitment to Balanced Literacy provided the backdrop for language arts teachers’ coaching; the model is based on a theory of “gradual release” where the teacher gradually releases students to do more independent thinking and provides appropriate scaffolding along the way. The coach’s knowledge and beliefs about what good literacy instruction entails – for instance, getting students to “advocate for their own learning” – also provided a foundation for the embedded coaching work at Salem. Teachers who had not worked with Heather before usually spent their first year on learning Balanced Literacy structures (and the mechanics of Readers/Writers Workshop) and setting a classroom tone around student ownership. In subsequent years teachers focused on blending workshop with their other talents, and building urgency around student learning in their classrooms.

3. *The coach’s facilitation strategy assumed that teachers play an active role in their learning so that they can apply what they know to new settings.*

Heather likens this professional development to “more of a lab, rather than taking away specific practices for teachers to copy.” When not in the classroom, she intentionally designed learning environments for teachers that mimic those that teachers are asked to create for their students. Over the last three years, she engaged in the same process of “gradual release” with teachers, instead of students, to build their confidence and leadership around instructional improvement at their schools. Her perception of how students learn guides the professional learning opportunities she constructs for teachers. And yet, teachers did have some say in how their coaching was carried out.

4. *The nature of teacher participation varied across the small schools, depending on principal leadership, the availability of resources, and overall willingness to receive and give critique.*

Broadly speaking, the classroom-embedded professional learning experiences created time and spaces for teachers to critique their own practices and observe images of possibility for their students. The coaching cycles relied on teachers to “de-privatize” their practices on a regular basis. And, while participation was mandatory, teachers’ satisfaction with classroom-embedded coaching depended on their willingness to de-privatize instruction and engage in constructive critique. Not surprisingly, the norms around teacher participation and opening one’s work up to the scrutiny of peers were noticeably different across the small schools, despite the fact that they resided within the same policy context. Some teachers interacted with Heather and each other more than others because their principals had bought extra “Heather days” with their building budgets at the expense of getting subs. When

principals unequivocally supported the coaching work, teachers appeared more invested in the experience.

Reported Effects of These Learning Opportunities on Teachers' Thinking and Practice

1. Teachers became “researchers” of their students and used the “data” to differentiate their instruction.

Seeing students as valuable sources of information about teaching appeared to be one of the major effects of the classroom-embedded professional learning opportunities. Teachers discovered major gaps in students' understanding about text-based conversations and then used that information to shape their instructional choices. For some teachers, seeing students as valuable sources of information – in particular, sources of data about the effectiveness of their teaching – was a new concept. For example, observing Heather teach and confer with students led teachers to realize that students didn't know how to hold productive conversations about texts. And it's not because the students didn't want to, or were lazy; they simply didn't know how. Some teachers made another shift in how they thought about instruction, which was that not all students needed to be working on the same task or the same skill. One principal claimed, “If I had to say it's one thing, it's that they've really learned how to differentiate for their kids. That's been very obvious.”

2. The coaching experiences extended teachers' visions of what was possible in their classrooms.

Both teachers and principals reported gaining new insight on what they could accomplish with their students, as a result of their observation and participation in the coaching cycles. Side-by-side modeling unveiled ways that teachers had been unintentionally restricting the academic potential of their students, as one teacher explained:

My expectations of kids are so much higher now because I've been given the tools and I've been shown what kids are capable of doing. So my expectations are so much higher than they ever were before or could have been before, because I never really had a vision of what my kids are capable of and I didn't really have any models to look at to see that they were achieving those things.

3. It appeared that the content-specific professional learning opportunities also led teachers to question their initial assumptions about students' academic abilities.

At times, teachers observed struggling students perform sophisticated intellectual work. “Good students” sometimes displayed serious deficiencies in reading or writing. And, whether or not teachers believed in traditional assumptions about academic success – that compliant, hard-working students have more intellectual potential than those with perceived “behavior problems” or “low work ethics” (Oakes et al., 1997) – their observations of student learning sometimes contradicted their expectations. Depicted as a “painful” experience, many teachers realized that their estimations of student ability were wildly off-base.

4. *However, the taboo of giving one’s peers professional advice stifled opportunities for teachers to build internal capacity.*

Some teachers did not want to appear “better” than their colleagues, even when they had valuable expertise to offer. By not giving or seeking advice, teachers were able to “play along” with the myth that everyone is on equal footing, thus keeping their work environment a pleasant place where instructional decisions are not normally questioned. Teachers recognized room for growth at their small schools, sometimes characterizing themselves and their colleagues as “people pleasers.”

5. *The simultaneous conversion to small schools brought teachers’ professional community boundaries into sharper relief.*

Study participants considered small schools as having both positive and negative impacts on their professional learning communities. Several study participants recognized the small school structure as complementing – and even enhancing – the instructional improvement work that had already been established through the CEL-Rainier partnership. Others worried a great deal about teacher “burnout” from the additional responsibilities that they were required to take on. The heavy emphasis on becoming three *autonomous* small schools generated closer-knit professional communities within schools, but also bred competition between schools that ultimately prevented the cross-pollination of ideas between teachers.

What Can Be Learned From this Study

The multiyear partnership between the Rainier School District and CEL engaged teachers, coaches, principals, and district leaders in professional learning opportunities aimed at instructional improvement. The task of building expertise at any level required a clear idea of what “good” instruction entails and the pedagogical content knowledge to do it well. At first glance, the study offers an existence proof of what “powerful” professional learning in the context of high school transformation might look like, when occasions are created for teachers to regularly encounter the necessary expertise and gain from the encounter. There are few such demonstrations of powerful professional development opportunities in high schools. This is one of them.

While this study only focuses on the professional learning opportunities offered to language arts teachers in three high schools, it sheds light on the potential power of situating externally guided professional development in the classroom and within a content area. The interactions between the CEL consultant, principals, students, and teachers – guided by a particular content focus and facilitation strategy for professional development – resulted in ongoing learning opportunities that teachers considered relevant and beneficial for student learning. This study illuminates how the content foci, facilitation strategies, and the nature of teacher participation combined to create an influential context for teachers’ learning.

Additionally, this study identifies some of the reported effects of the professional learning opportunities on teachers’ work with a diverse student clientele, and these

effects appear to be especially relevant to the current mandate that high schools help all students succeed. Almost all teachers claimed that the coaching cycles with the CEL consultant shaped their beliefs about what their students could achieve. Some teachers witnessed (and were surprised by) struggling students mastering rigorous material, inferring that their initial estimates of student ability were sometimes off the mark. Notions about intelligence – and those who “typically” succeed in school – influence the degree to which teachers push their students to reach high standards (Oakes et al., 1997). And yet, they are rarely discussed among teachers for fear of appearing politically incorrect (Oakes et al.). This study offered one example of how ongoing professional learning opportunities based in the high school setting can surface knotty issues about who is meant to succeed, and who is not. Furthermore, it speaks to the power of classroom-embedded learning experiences to address issues of educational equity. In short, the professional learning dynamics reported here get to a central issue in high school reform: whether or not teachers can tend to the learning needs of a diverse student population and approach teaching practice in new ways that *enable* a wide range of students to succeed, where formerly they would have been content to *identify* those who were or could be successful and others who were unlikely to be.

In particular, the kind of professional development documented here takes advantage of the power of teachers’ professional communities. Subject area departments can be one of the strongest influences on how high school teachers identify their jobs as educators (Siskin & Little, 1995), and in small schools (especially recently created ones, within the context of conversions), the “subject area department” —or even the whole small school staff—often become a close-knit group of professionals embarking on a common journey of reform. The classroom-embedded professional learning opportunities addressed in this study illustrate what happens when instructional expertise, which may be lacking in the small school community, grounded in specific content knowledge, intentionally taps into pre-established communities of language arts teachers. In cases where the language arts professional community recognized the benefit of constructively critiquing each others’ teaching practices (e.g., Denny), teachers welcomed the professional learning opportunities that came with having a CEL consultant. And across all three schools, the design of professional learning activities – which emphasized group observation and critique of lessons – harnessed the context of the professional community in service of supporting individual teachers’ learning.

And yet, this study does not answer how these professional learning opportunities affected students’ experiences in school, the work of non-language arts teachers, or the work of language arts teachers in other Rainier high schools. Additionally, it does not address whether Rainier leaders thought the investment in the CEL-initiated professional learning opportunities was “worth it.”

What Can’t Be Learned From This Study

While I can draw some conclusions about the relationship between teachers’ engagement in professional learning opportunities and their ideas about the content and students they teach, I cannot deduce how these opportunities shaped students’ experiences in school. For example, the extent to which students perceived (or didn’t

perceive) increases in their teachers' academic expectations is unknown. My lens for data collection intentionally kept teachers' engagement in classroom-embedded professional learning in the foreground. Although I paid some attention to teachers' interactions with students, I was more focused on how they interacted with the CEL consultant and with each other in ways that were directly related to instructional improvement.

Rainier's continued investment in ongoing capacity-building for teachers raises questions about their immediate need for raising student test scores. Caught between standardized accountability measures and knowing that improving teaching and learning takes time, district leaders faced difficult decisions about what kind of professional development was worthwhile. And yet, these leaders opted for CEL's brand of professional learning. While these tensions are addressed in other studies (e.g., Swinnerton, 2006), this one does not draw conclusions about whether Rainier leaders found their investment in CEL "worth" it after a three year partnership. Toward the end of data collection, Rainier and CEL implemented professional learning opportunities for high school math teachers that appeared roughly similar to those provided for language arts teachers. These district-level changes are essential for grasping the magnitude of Rainier's undertaking, but again, the work of "scaling up" instructional reform in other content areas is not at the center of this study.

While I can learn about teachers' perceptions of change, the retrospective nature of my data makes it difficult to assert that professional development produced changes in teachers' thinking and practices. The strongest evidence of such an effect would have been to collect teachers' statements of what they thought students were capable of at two different points in time, or better yet to develop direct observational evidence of their classroom practice at the two time points. Lacking these forms of baseline data on their knowledge and beliefs about student ability, I could not substantiate based on these comparisons that change happened. However, I was able to corroborate teachers own self-report of changes over time with the observations of others (CEL consultant, principals), who confirmed that teachers were making substantial changes.

References

- Boatright, B. (2006). *Constructing high quality professional learning opportunities for high school teachers, Unpublished doctoral dissertation proposal*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 249-305.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Sykes, G. (1999). *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Elmore, R. F. (1993). The role of local school districts in instructional improvement. In S. H. Fuhrman (Ed.), *Designing coherent education policy: Improving the system* (pp. 35-94). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Grossman, P. L. (1989). A study in contrast: Sources of pedagogical content knowledge for secondary English. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(5), 24-31.
- Honig, M. (2004). The new middle management: Intermediary organizations in education policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 26, 65-67.
- Knapp, M. S., McCaffrey, T., & Swanson, J. (2003). *District support for professional learning: What research says and has yet to establish*. Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African-American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Little, J. W. (1993). Teachers' professional development in a climate of educational reform. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15(2), 129-151.
- Marks, H. M., & Louis, K. S. (1996). *Does teacher empowerment affect the classroom? The implications of teacher empowerment for teachers' instructional practice and student academic achievement*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin.
- McLaughlin, M. W., & Talbert, J. E. (2001). *Professional communities and the work of high school teaching*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Oakes, J., Wells, A. S., Jones, M., & Datnow, A. (1997). Detracking: The social construction of ability, cultural politics, and resistance to reform. *Teachers College Record*, 98(3), 482-510.
- Resnick, L. B., & Glennan, T. K. (2002). Leadership for learning: A theory of action for urban school districts. In A. Hightower & M. S. Knapp & J. A. Marsh & M. W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 160-172). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rosenholtz, S. J. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools*. White Plains, NY: Longman Inc.
- Siskin, L. S., & Little, J. W. (Eds.). (1995). *The subjects in question: Departmental organization and the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Stodolsky, S. S. (1988). *The subject matters: Classroom activities in math and social studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Swinnerton, J. (2006). *Learning to lead what you don't (yet) know: District leaders engaged in instructional reform, Unpublished doctoral dissertation*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.
- Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. L. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools*. Washington, D.C.: The Learning First Alliance and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.