BRIDGE BUILDERS

TEACHER LEADERS FORGE CONNECTIONS AND BRING COHERENCE TO LITERACY INITIATIVE

By Jacy Ippolito, Christina L. Dobbs, and Megin Charner-Laird

An initiative to improve the content-area literacy skills of all students at a Massachusetts high school demonstrates the important role teacher leaders play in bridging the various elements of school improvement efforts.

The Content-area Reading Initiative is a cross-departmental initiative (see box on p. 23) launched in 2012 at Brookline High School in Brookline, Mass. More than 140 teachers serve about 1,700 students, who represent 76 nations and speak 57 languages. The increased diversity of students entering the school — 28% English language learners, 15% free or reduced lunch, 16% students with special needs, 8% African-American, 15% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 7% multiracial, and 60% white — called into question business as usual.

Meeting students' language and literacy needs within content-area classrooms is becoming ever more challenging. Thus, in 2012, the school called on university-based consultants to help teachers and leaders focus on disciplinary literacy instruction, exploring discipline-specific ways of reading, writing, and communicating (Galloway, Lawrence, & Moje, 2013). With funding from the Brookline High School 21st Century Fund, the Brookline Education Foundation, and the Brookline Public Schools, a multiyear professional learning initiative began.

The initiative included four essential components:
1. **Content-area teacher**s would apply to participate in discipline-based professional learning communities.
2. **Faculty-elected teacher leaders** would convene the professional learning communities and work collaboratively with each other.
3. **A site-based project leader** would be designated.
4. **University-level instructional coaches** would act as outside consultants.

While each component is important, teacher leaders

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

- **Three teacher leaders:** Each departmental team (the first two years included world languages, English, and social studies) elected a teacher leader to guide the group during its participation in the initiative. The three teacher leaders were neither the newest nor the most seasoned teachers on their respective teams.

- **15 teacher participants:** Three teams of five teachers each formed small content-area professional learning communities. Teachers taught across academic levels and programs at the school, and their teaching experience ranged from one year to decades.

- **Two outside coaches:** Two university-level instructional coaches, with expertise in literacy and teacher leadership, facilitated whole-group sessions, supported teacher leaders, and served as general resource providers for the group.

While these were the main characters in the initiative, department chairs and the school's headmaster were also involved in planning and shaping the initiative, as well as helping share the work with the broader faculty.

PROJECT STRUCTURE

Initially, all 18 teachers and department heads participated in a weeklong summer institute, primarily facilitated by the two university coaches. The institute introduced six fundamental concepts related to improving adolescents' reading, writing, and communication skills as encouraged by the Common Core State Standards (Ippolito, Lawrence, & Zaller, 2013). It also served to prepare teacher leaders to engage colleagues in inquiry cycles around the concepts (Ippolito, 2013).

Once the school year began, teacher leaders facilitated weekly professional learning community meetings. These hour-long meetings allowed team members to share teacher and student work, investigate dilemmas of practice, and read research and practice-based articles to further their goals.

Examples of professional learning community inquiry cycles during the first year include the study of effective vocabulary instruction in world language classrooms, close reading in English classrooms, and supporting research skills in social studies classrooms. Teacher leaders not only planned and facilitated meetings, but also provided ongoing support for teachers.

Additionally, teachers participated in six professional learning days held off-campus. While the university coaches facilitated the first days away, teacher leaders served as co-planners, and gradually facilitation shifted almost entirely to teacher leaders, with the university coaches playing a supporting role.

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emerged in early project evaluations as most critical in building useful professional learning communities and connecting to the work of the external coaches.

THE WORK OF TEACHER LEADERS

Teacher leaders were essential to the project's early success because they served as bridges between various personnel and components in the project: between participants within content-area professional learning communities, between content-area professional learning communities, between teachers and the university-based coaches, and between participants and the new research and practices explored throughout the initiative.

Though the initiative was designed to include teacher leaders as key facilitators within content-area professional learning communities, their role as bridges *between and across* individu-

als and groups served to bring coherence and a deeper level of learning to the initiative as a whole.

Here are the various ways in which teacher leaders supported professional learning. Each section begins with a quote from a teacher leader about her work, illustrating both the power and challenge of the role.

BRIDGING BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

■ *"A little less teaching, a little more talking."*

In one-on-one interviews and focus groups, teacher leaders repeatedly discussed the challenges of moving from the traditional egg-crate model of teaching (Tyack, 1974) to a new collaborative approach. As world languages teacher leader Astrid

Photo by JACY IPPOLITO

Teacher leaders, from left, Astrid Allen, Jenee Ramos, and Kate Leslie forged connections between learning communities to improve content-area literacy skills at Brookline High School in Massachusetts.

Allen noted, the transition from "a little less teaching" to "a little more talking" with colleagues pushed against a school culture that valued individual autonomy and a laser-like focus on each teacher's classroom.

Early professional learning community interactions were challenging, and teacher leaders knit the groups together. Kate Leslie, the social studies teacher leader, described her team as one comprised of "some really dominant personalities." As a result, she had to develop strategies to bridge personalities and focus on collaborative work.

For her, this involved the creation of tight agendas for meetings: "I think one of my biggest roles as team leader has been to come in with a very strict agenda with time caps on it. ... I keep a strict meeting … and pull people back in if we start to stray."

◼ *"Meetings went really well sometimes and other times — crickets."*

Teacher leaders had to grow into their roles as facilitators to serve their groups most effectively. Initially, all three teacher leaders had to help build relationships among professional learning community members, who — despite working in the same content-area departments — did not necessarily have previous experience collaborating.

Teacher leaders needed to find effective routines for running meetings, setting agendas, and keeping the work moving forward, while simultaneously balancing work as teachers experimenting in their own classrooms. Success in this area was initially mixed.

To develop rapport among team members, teacher leaders used different means of interaction, including face-to-face meetings, peer observations, and communicating online. All three teacher leaders sought facilitation advice from the university coaches and experimented with using protocols for running meetings until they found structures that worked particularly well for each group.

◼ *"If one person's doing somersaults and the other person's learning how to walk, I'm OK with that."*

Another challenge facing teacher leaders was the varied levels of teacher engagement with implementing instructional change. Teacher leaders worked hard to ensure that all teachers were feeling well-served by the work while also allowing them to learn and change at their own rates.

Teacher leaders were instrumental in assessing where individual teachers were in experimenting and implementing change in their classrooms and negotiating situations when teachers were struggling to find ways to participate.

All three teacher leaders assessed team members' readiness to take on the initiative and met them where they were — supporting some in taking first steps (e.g. spending time reading literature and planning lessons) and supporting others as they leapt ahead into new and unknown territory (e.g. audiotaping class discussions to help colleagues reflect on the nature of students' use of academic vocabulary).

◼ *"[The initiative] has given me license to experiment in ways that I wouldn't have before."*

Teacher leaders also supported the work of the initiative by modeling experimentation. Through modeling risk-taking with new disciplinary literacy practices (e.g. designing close-reading guides), teacher leaders not only offered group members the freedom to experiment, but their own classroom-level work provided a focus for collaborative conversations and reflections.

Seeing teacher leaders go first helped teachers know that they would be supported in a safe environment when reflecting on their own new work. Jenee Ramos, leader of the English professional learning community and overall project leader, described her dual focus on her roles as a leader and a role model: "I know it's true for me that this gave me the license … oh, now I'm going to try this. I had always wondered about this, but I didn't think I was going to try it. But now I have to because I'm accountable to these people and, yeah, let's do it."

BRIDGING BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND OTHERS

◼ *"Serving as reporter."*

Teacher leaders played key roles in helping teachers across the entire project to see connections among the varied individual and group inquiry cycles and to connect to the coaches.

Without this bridge, it would have been all too easy for the small teams to conduct their work in a vacuum and not connect their efforts to the larger project. Content-area groups were naturally curious about the work of other disciplines, and because the teacher leaders met weekly, they could quickly share results of classroom experiments.

Teacher leaders saw communication across teams as a means of support for their own work. Kate Leslie, the social studies teacher leader, said, "I felt like I could go to Jenee (Ramos) or I could go to Astrid (Allen)," pointing out the support that she felt among the team of teacher leaders.

In fact, conversations among teacher leaders served as a means to gain important skills and ideas for leading the teams, as well as insight into the similarities and differences across groups.

■ *"Direction and guidance."*

Teacher leaders served as conduits between the university-based coaches and the project teachers. Teacher leaders sought direction from the coaches when assembling resources and beginning inquiry cycles and looked to them for ideas about effective facilitation techniques.

Leslie noted that monthly in-person and weekly phone meetings with the university coaches, and, in particular, the focus on how best to facilitate meetings lessened her stress.

In turn, teacher leaders provided support to the outside coaches. They provided key information to help the coaches understand team members' classrooms, concerns, and interests more effectively. This feedback loop formed a bridge that was key to tailoring the project so that the outside coaches could more precisely meet teachers' needs.

■ *"Doing that big-picture planning ..."*

Teacher leaders were also key to keeping the professional learning communities connected to the vision that each group built for its respective inquiry cycle. Teacher leaders remained focused on the big picture, ensuring that groups were not bogged down in too much research or discussion without translating that thinking into experimentation in the classroom.

As teams designed ambitious projects, such as creating a historical literacy diagnostic, teacher leaders helped form the steps to accomplish those tasks. Allen, the world languages teacher leader, described the clear structures that she enacted to move along the work of her team: "We were super-productive at the beginning of the year. We created these team documents, and we moved from cycle to cycle pretty quickly."

After initially worrying that her group would struggle to work together, Allen focused on structure and being transparent about the products produced: "That's the part that I bring to the group. I want to put something out there. I want to show the other teams, the world languages department, and the school what we're doing."

MAKING THE CONNECTION

As Roland Barth (2013) writes, "Despite … formidable challenges [to teacher leadership], the time may be ripe for change" (p. 11).

As project evaluation work is underway to assess teacher and student learning as the result of the first year of the initiative, qualitative data (interviews, focus groups, surveys, and student work) demonstrate that the work of teacher leaders is paying off.

Not only are teachers working together within professional learning communities — a structure that is new in a school that values and rewards individual autonomy and creativity — but Spanish teachers are now consulting English and social studies teachers about best vocabulary and comprehension practices.

Students across departments are using similar interactive reading guides to scaffold close reading. The interconnectedness of the teachers and the depth of their work would not have been possible simply through the creation of professional learning communities or the involvement of consulting coaches.

By connecting the work of outside coaches to the effective professional learning community structures they built, teacher leaders have forged new connections within and across groups and are pivotal in making instructional experimentation not only possible, but also productive. This is the first monumental step toward realizing Barth's vision of a school as a "community of leaders" (p. 16).

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