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INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW
ACTION RESEARCH AT A NEW YORK CITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL

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This article describes a professional development school (PDS) relationship between Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Beacon School in New York City. In examining this case of an urban high school with a diverse student population working with a college of education, the authors add to the literature on PDS partnerships, which has dealt mostly with elementary school partnerships with colleges of education. The authors focus on the action research projects conducted by teaching interns at Beacon who are also master’s students in secondary education programs, chiefly social studies and English, at Teachers College. The authors analyze the impact of this collaboration on participants and institutions, while acknowledging the areas of strain in maintaining the professional development relationship over time.

It was May of 1999, toward the end of the school year, and the entire faculty of the Beacon School—38 teachers in all—gathered in the library for a unique event. Four interns, all graduate students at Teachers College, Columbia University (TC), had over the course of the year conducted an action research project probing the philosophy and practice of portfolios as assessment tools. Under a special arrangement with New York State’s Education Department, Beacon, a public 9th- to 12th-grade high school, uses portfolios called “gradfolios” instead of Regents examinations in major subject areas as graduation requirements. This arrangement now was jeopardized by the statewide initiative to administer Regents exams to all secondary students. Unless Beacon could make a case for the validity of the gradfolio, the school’s authentic assessment approach—and much of its curriculum—would have to be scuttled.

At the meeting, interns shared findings from surveys done with faculty and students as well as observations of 50 hours of videotaped portfolio presentations. They asked Beacon’s faculty a simple question: “Is the gradfolio a student presentation of learning or an oral exam?” Over the next 2 hours, in large and small groups, teachers analyzed video clips of themselves overseeing the graduation portfolio process. In these images, students presented and teachers questioned; the exchanges were often lively. Now, at a moment of intense educational scrutiny, this provocative question focused the faculty’s thinking on a philosophical and practical problem interns had uncovered in Beacon’s gradfolio system.

Their research helped the school launch a process of clarification concerning means and ends in this central feature of Beacon’s mission to its diverse, mostly college-bound students.
This article will describe the action research, focusing on the gradfolio projects TC’s student interns conducted as part of their professional development school (PDS) experience. First, a brief history of the PDS relationship between TC and Beacon will be given. Then, we will assess the value of the action research projects to all parties in the PDS relationship and consider the challenges of collaboration between secondary schools and teacher education colleges, especially those found in urban settings. Our conclusions are based on our shared, direct involvement with the PDS relationship from its inception, observations at Beacon and TC of the impact of the relationship on both institutions, structured interviews with key players, and the products of the action research projects.

Reporting on the experiences of secondary-level professional development schools makes an important contribution to the general PDS literature, which has dealt largely with partnerships between colleges of education and elementary or middle schools. Negotiating the boundaries of the disciplinary structure within high schools presents challenges different from those encountered in PDS work at these other levels. Furthermore, the Beacon-TC partnership undertook a series of action research projects with high stakes in terms of the high school’s functioning. This article will describe both the successes and the stresses and strains that resulted from the ambitious action research agenda serving as centerpiece for this PDS relationship.

BEACON AND TC: COMING TOGETHER IN A PDS RELATIONSHIP

Over the past 10 years, professional development schools have emerged across the country as a compelling new approach to teacher education. According to a publication of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (Abdal-Haqq, 1998), a variety of organizations, most notably the Holmes Group, have encouraged establishment of professional development schools, also known as clinical schools, partner schools, and professional practice schools. Today, according to survey data collected by the Clinical Schools Clearinghouse between 1994 and 1996, more than 84 partnerships between schools and colleges of teacher education exist across 38 states (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education Web site, www.aacte.org/glance.html).

Beacon was a relatively new school, conceived of by its codirectors as an institution with an emphasis on experiential, interdisciplinary, and collaborative learning, as well as a strong commitment to the arts and technology. The codirectors recruited an intellectually strong, hands-on staff, who quickly became directly involved in curriculum development and school management. They also secured a waiver from New York State’s graduation requirement of Regents exams in the major disciplines, thus allowing their faculty freedom to experiment with innovative curriculum approaches built on the principle that less is more in curriculum design. They aimed at making the atmosphere of the school collegial, nonhierarchical, and supportive of ongoing professional development for the faculty. They also insisted that any partnership with TC reflect those principles.

Together, Beacon and TC gained support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation to create an approach to preservice teacher preparation serving the purposes of both constituents. Three emphases shaped a pilot project aimed at establishing a model for secondary-level school-university partnerships. First, Beacon’s student teachers, exclusively from TC, became known as “interns” who were given a modest tuition rebate in the form of scholarship credits they could put toward their TC education. In exchange, they agreed to take on a fuller teaching load than the typical student-teaching assignment and participate in a joint Beacon faculty/TC intern action research project. Action research was seen as critical to providing both the interns and faculty at Beacon a means of sustainable, well-integrated professional development to help the school deal with its own pressing educational issues, in this case, interdisciplinary curriculum and portfolio assessment. Second, the grant provided funding for a TC liaison who would help facilitate a weekly seminar for interns and coordinate the action research projects. Finally, this money also
underwrote a Beacon teacher liaison to work closely with the TC liaison on all aspects of the program.

A doctoral student in the Program in Social Studies was hired as the TC liaison. Two social studies teachers at Beacon, who were graduates of the Program of Social Studies at TC, cofacilitated the pilot project with the doctoral student during its 1st year. A professor in the Program in Social Studies with responsibility for the student-teaching program offered advice, resources, and support for the direction of the project, monitoring its fit with the preservice master’s degree requirements at TC. More by accident than by design, social studies practitioners emerged as pivotal players in the process of establishing the PDS framework at Beacon. The social studies educators’ emphasis on building democratic community reinforced the democratic ethos of governance established at Beacon by the school’s founders that also informed the design of the PDS relationship.

As experienced cooperating teachers (or mentor teachers, as they were called at Beacon) as well as TC graduates, the two social studies teachers were sensitive to the tensions interns would experience in serving two masters during their year at Beacon: the demands of their master’s programs at TC and their responsibilities to mentor teachers and students at Beacon. They deliberated extensively about how best to acculturate interns to the challenges of teaching while encouraging them to get involved in the life of the school, for example, extracurricular activities, faculty meetings, and the community service program. The result was a phased-in process gradually leading interns to full assumption of curriculum planning and instructional implementation responsibilities. In the weekly seminar, the three coordinators also encouraged interns to come up with action research plans that would address compelling questions related to practice at Beacon.

That 1st year, eight student interns joined the PDS project at Beacon. Four were from social studies; two from English; and one each from math and science. Beacon faculty screened applicants for the internships to ensure they had strong academic backgrounds, willingness to participate in the overall life of the school, and compatible philosophy of teaching with the student-centered orientation at Beacon. This process occupied a good deal of time at the beginning of the academic year. Faculty members believed it highly important that interns buy into Beacon’s mission of alternative assessment and faculty-designed curriculum. Above all, candidates needed to be clear about the intensive nature of the internship commitment.

All participants received some form of compensation for their work. Interns got three credits of scholarship to put toward their master’s degrees. New faculty at Beacon gained professional development credit from the New York City Board of Education for attending meetings with the interns. Beacon’s mentor teachers were given two credits they could put toward coursework at TC for each semester in which they served as a mentor teacher to an intern. The three PDS coordinators received financial compensation for serving as liaisons, writing interim and final reports about the progress of the program, and attending a monthly PDS meeting at TC, along with those from other PDS sites.

FRAMING THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

Action research has commonly been promoted alongside the host of nationwide school reform initiatives associated with restructuring schools, especially those centrally concerned with professional development of school faculty. Johnson (1995) provided one definition of action research as the teacher’s attempt at “learning from one’s own work or behavior by critically examining it” (p. 90). Action research involves classroom practitioners or school administrators in identifying a question to investigate, developing an action plan, implementing the plan, collecting data, and reflecting on the results. The process and products provide local knowledge promoting both personal and professional growth. Action research is pivotal in creating a climate of inquiry and contributing to a sense of efficacy among faculty, especially in urban schools in which the challenges of everyday business can be enormous.
According to a recent review of developments in action research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), over the past 10 years what is sometimes called teacher research has also become a central part of teacher education reform. Three aspects of this movement are especially pertinent to the development of future teachers. First is the changed understanding of the role of teacher, now seen as knower and agent in the classroom, rather than simply as transmitter of knowledge. For example, this orientation toward the position of social studies teacher in the classroom has implications for the kind of work students do. Second, as Eleanor Duckworth (1987) has shown, reflective teachers use observation and inquiry in informal as well as formal ways as they try to make sense of their work and solve practical problems. This too is very much the challenge of students in a constructivist social studies or science classroom. Finally, at Beacon, the core principle that “teaching and learning are ineluctably tied together; teaching is learning” (Faithfull & Streep, 1999) depended on creating a school culture of reflective inquiry shared by all teachers. Action research was seen as pivotal to that end. Thus, faculty and interns spent several weeks discussing the book Making Professional Development Schools Work (Levine & Trachtman, 1997) to deepen the community’s investment in this approach as the central ethos of the school.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) distinguished among three conceptual frameworks for teacher research: social inquiry, ways of knowing within a community, and practical inquiry. In many respects, the action research at Beacon fits the model of practical inquiry done in the “crucible of action” (Grimmett, 1988) for an expressed, immediate purpose. It also shares features of the social inquiry and ways of knowing within a community approach to action research. If one considers action research broadly as an ongoing opportunity for educators to examine their teaching and learning through a systematic process involving reflection, observation, and collaboration, then in some respects, the entire Beacon-TC pilot program could be considered an action research project around making such partnerships work successfully. Likewise, the shared element of ongoing curriculum experimentation, planning, and evaluation might also be seen as action research. In short, the action research component of the PDS partnership between Beacon and TC contains several complementary and mutually reinforcing levels, some more formal than others. In this section, we will highlight the results of two action research projects conducted during the academic year 1998 to 1999. Our choice to focus on the gradfolio process stems from the particular significance of this project. Faculty and students knew that proving the validity of the gradfolio as graduation requirement would be crucial to Beacon’s ability to withstand pressures by the New York State Education Department to impose the Regents on the small, restructured schools previously granted waivers from these high-stakes tests.

THE GRADFOLIO PROCESS

During the previous year, tensions over gradfolios had been building. Not only was external pressure intensifying, but teachers had also raised concerns about the reliability of the gradfolios. Interns decided to tackle the project of analyzing the gradfolio process at Beacon. They interviewed teachers, parents, and students. They sat in on gradfolio presentations, videotaping numerous sessions, taking voluminous notes, and conducting exit interviews with both students and teachers. A subset of interns did a related investigation on gradfolios and students with learning disabilities to fulfill a course requirement at TC. The results of their research indicated that some aspects of gradfolio assessment worked well whereas others did not.

Overall, it became clear that individual teachers tended to approach the gradfolio assessment process differently. Some teachers used a compilation of a student’s work over the course of the academic year as the basis for their final assessment and emphasized the gradfolio as an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they had learned. Other teachers assigned a capstone project for the course’s assessment and approached the gradfolio presentation as an
oral exam related to that culminating project. This lack of consistency bothered some faculty and interns. In addition, the research group found that the evaluation rubrics for assessing the gradfolios were vague. These issues encouraged the following year’s interns to pursue an investigation of the gradfolios in greater depth.

In 1998 to 1999, competing interests among the interns resulted in two action research projects for the year’s endeavors. One concerned interdisciplinary curriculum, a fundamental aspect of Beacon’s mission that had been supported by the Arthur Vining Davis grant but that had evolved to no one’s satisfaction at the time the grant ended. The second project continued the research on gradfolios, now increasingly threatened with extinction by state efforts to impose Regents exams uniformly across all schools in the state. Beacon’s faculty and interns were determined to use action research to fight this threat.

Although these two projects may seem to have little linkage, in fact they were related to Beacon’s overall philosophy concerning curriculum and assessment. The logic governing the connection can be found in a statement in the report on interdisciplinary curriculum. One intern wrote, “Much of the specialization in schools is a response to standardized exams.” Thus, interns articulated their belief that standardized testing was responsible for fragmentation of the school curriculum. In addition, they argued that a curriculum that did not make connections across disciplines and connections to students’ lives undermined the relevance of schooling for their diverse student body, by design one third Latino/a, one third African American, and one third White and Asian American. Student and faculty researchers consulted published research and writing about interdisciplinary curriculum and interviewed teachers for their perspectives on the aims, methods, and educational practices around interdisciplinary curriculum at Beacon. In the end, researchers discovered that less interdisciplinary curriculum was actually being taught at Beacon than everyone imagined. The curriculum structure offered only sporadic opportunities for parallel engagements of related curricular materials. The reliance on authentic assessments at Beacon encouraged cross-disciplinary (that is, viewing one discipline from the perspective of another, such as the physics of music and the history of math), but the scheduling of class time had not allowed for truly interdisciplinary work (that is, a curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic or experience).

In the final research report, one English teacher summed up the obstacles to interdisciplinary curriculum at Beacon:

I was very excited about Beacon’s thematic approach [to interdisciplinary instruction]. However, we run into many problems here—constraints of schedule, no common prep time, too many streams, teachers who aren’t paired with the same teachers.

The research report also offered examples of successful interdisciplinary projects: “Brave New Worlds/Revolutions” (with English); “What Should Work Look Like in the 21st Century” (with science, English, and math); “Urban Environmentalism” (with science, math, and English); “A Tale of Two Cities/French Revolution” (with English); “Literature and Economics” (with English); and “Oral History and Immigration” (with English). Still, many teachers considered the school’s scheduling of classes an impediment to the planning of interdisciplinary curriculum. As a result, the faculty programming committee revamped the schedule over the summer to introduce block scheduling that provides common prep time and back-to-back 60-minute English and history classes to facilitate interdisciplinary curriculum. Researchers also encouraged the administration to provide opportunities for faculty to gain professional development in this area, for example, by taking a course offered at TC on interdisciplinary curriculum by Heidi Hayes Jacobs. The researchers explicitly acknowledged, however, the fragile nature of the interdisciplinary effort should the Regents examinations be mandated for Beacon and other small New York City schools.

The opening vignette in this chapter represents the moment at which the other group of interns pursuing the gradfolio project pre-
sented their findings to Beacon’s full faculty. These researchers had set out to deepen the knowledge base created during the 1st year of the action research project, specifically looking at the process of determining gradfolio components, the application of rubrics to the evaluation of gradfolios, and the question of who was and was not passing. Although generally faculty supported this inquiry into an important aspect of their practice, the process of investigation was not without its tension as interns critiqued the work of senior faculty members. Moreover, this investigation was perhaps even more difficult because it involved an area of educational practice in which even the most seasoned practitioner was a relative novice. As Little (1993) suggested, reforms such as authentic assessment are challenging for both experienced and beginning teachers because they represent a substantial departure from prior experiences in teaching and learning. This project inevitably leveled the playing field at Beacon, sometimes uncomfortably, in considering how the gradfolio process was working.

Among the questions the research team brought to gradfolios were Did both students and teachers understand their purpose? Did teachers have differing or similar notions of the role they played at Beacon and the general philosophy of authentic or performance-based assessment? Interns described their own process of inquiry and discovery about these matters in their research report:

Upon compiling our research data, we came to the realization that the information that we gathered could have a lasting impact at Beacon. In our meetings we realized that these assessments, and the way they were taught, had larger implications that raised essential questions which the staff could only answer for themselves. Our research took place at a time when Beacon’s ability to use portfolios was threatened on the state level. As a result, we redirected our energy into creating a staff development meeting, using our research as the foundation on which to elicit discussion among staff about Beacon’s portfolio process. This gave our project a new focus and a renewed energy. The redirection came from our own expanding knowledge about the life of the school and our growth as educators. We sought to make the portfolio process a more humane and empowering endeavor for teachers and students. By shifting the focus from a researcher-centered project, our goal was to use our research to illuminate inconsistencies in the portfolio process in a way that would actively engage all staff members toward clarifying the process.

Interns felt acutely their own positionality within the educational communities of school and college of education as insiders and outsiders. Situated on the margins of a school community they would not inhabit the following year, they were, nevertheless, genuinely concerned about the impact their research would have on Beacon. In the end, they were quite articulate about the benefits found in their experience with an action research project:

This project embodied a process of research which we would want our students to model: a self-directed learning process that taught us a great deal about the area researched [portfolios] and the research process as a way of formulating questions and actively researching them. In this project, we applied our knowledge and learned by organizing our data around a problem and thoroughly integrating the data we collected with our experience as educators. This research recognized that all students are capable of showing excellent work in a reflective manner but must be prepared adequately and supported by the school.

PDS, ACTION RESEARCH, AND THE MENTOR TEACHER

Although recognizing the large amount of time required to be a good mentor, two social studies teachers interviewed for this article suggest that PDS benefits teachers in two important ways: by reducing their student-teacher ratio and pushing teachers to continue their own professional development.

Because Beacon is a portfolio-based school, multiple rounds of practice, revision, and editing of drafts of written work are essential to student success. Cooperative learning is widely used. Within this structure of teaching and learning, having an intern as a second teacher in the classroom is enormously helpful. In a public school system such as New York City’s, where 30 to 34 students in a classroom is the norm, the intern allows for greater individual attention to students and for cooperative and constructivist teaching strategies to succeed. “I felt like the student-teacher ratio was cut in half,” said one
teacher (McGee, 2000). With two teachers in the room, a greater possibility exists that students will receive substantive feedback on their work, and groups provided necessary guidance in completing their projects.

The original vision of the PDS partnership between TC and Beacon was to create and support reflective teachers in an urban, diverse high school setting. The mere fact of having a second adult in the classroom, to whom a mentor needs to explain the pedagogical choices being made, lends itself to ongoing, shared reflection about teaching. The PDS program stimulating a metacognitive dialogue about the classroom. A social studies teacher suggested that the process of learning is a two-way street between interns wrestling with educational theory at the graduate institution and mentors who have years of experience in the classroom. He said, “It’s an opportunity for me to continue my own professional development. Having interns is a great opportunity to keep theory alive in my head and to really consider on a day-to-day basis how I turn theory into practice” (Alm, 2000).

In a review of the effects of the total PDS partnership on teachers at Beacon, Faithfull and Streep (1999) noted the following benefits:

- Teaching practices have improved.
- Interdisciplinary work and cross-disciplinary discussion has been fostered.
- The school community has become an object of research.
- An increase in collaboration outside the school has occurred.

At the same time, the two authors believe that interns have benefited as well from the new approach to field experience by

- Increasing the amount of time interns spend in school.
- Allowing them more opportunities for planned and purposeful educational experiences in the field.
- Providing support for a more collaborative working relationship within the school and between TC and the field experience.

Beacon teachers and administrators hoped that the action research project on gradfolios would help the school continue its status as a Regents-free zone. In the midst of so much retreat from the promising school reform of the early 1990s and embrace of high-stakes testing by state policy makers, success stories such as that of Beacon need to be better known. Beacon teachers and administrators also hope that the PDS relationship with TC may help to provide a pipeline of well-prepared future teachers for Beacon. Such intensive preparation may help address the high attrition rates of those entering teaching in urban schools, a problem that will certainly be exacerbated over the next decade as so many veterans retire from teaching.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOLS AND PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

The Program in Social Studies at TC was involved in the PDS project from the inception of the relationship between the school and college. Admittedly, this subject will be taken up from a particular disciplinary vantage point; however, we believe that the perspective described here could be generalized to other preservice programs involved in the PDS relationship with Beacon.

First, the PDS arrangement has meant better articulation between TC courses and field placements. In other words, interns are actually able to apply the instructional strategies introduced in TC methods courses to classrooms in which mentor teachers support the interns in their efforts at constructivist, student-centered learning approaches. For example, Beacon’s teachers use primary sources in teaching history, emphasize critical-thinking skills, and employ various forms of authentic assessment throughout the social studies curriculum. At Beacon, a premium is placed on writing skills by contrast with the multiple-choice and short-answer assessments so often used in social studies at the larger, comprehensive high schools in New York City. The addition of a Beacon teacher to TC’s Program in Social Studies faculty with responsibility for a section of methods and the student-teaching seminar has ensured philosophical and methodological common ground between school and university, a major factor in improving students’ satisfaction with the preservice program.
Second, through the agency of mentor teachers as well as TC and Beacon liaisons, interns are supported at a level not found in the typical urban high school student-teaching placement. In New York City secondary classrooms, classroom management issues often shape much of what transpires. At Beacon, student teachers find smaller class sizes, curriculum shaped by a less-is-more ethos, and a school culture invested in caring for the students. Student teachers there (typically White, suburban, and middle class in background) encounter fewer of the difficulties associated with classroom management and curriculum coverage confronted by other student teachers in TC’s program.

Third, the full-year internship model at Beacon has broken with the traditional student-teaching model in New York State in several important ways. By staying at Beacon for the entire year rather than transferring to another school during the second semester at TC, the interns gain a deeper understanding of the school culture, build better relationships with students, and gradually assume additional responsibilities closer to the professional life of a full-fledged teacher. As a result, interns get treated “as ‘coteacher’ ” rather than “‘student teacher,’ ” according to a 1998 TC graduate and veteran of the 1st year of the internship program. This intern (Virgil, 1998) went on to add, “By having students view me as a teacher, I gained a tremendous amount of authority in terms of managing the classroom.”

A Beacon teacher echoed this sentiment, “Teachers in the school also see interns more as equals” (Alm, 2000). As a result, interns are given greater responsibility for planning and teaching major curriculum units that extend from 4 to 6 weeks. A mentor teacher (McGee, 2000) explained his growing trust in an intern in these terms:

> Because I had known him for a semester and I knew I could trust this guy, I could say to him that you have five weeks to develop a unit on the Russian Revolution. He could watch me teach the French Revolution as a model, and then take this topic which he was very passionate about, assign a project, and evaluate it at the end.

Another advantage of the full-year internship is that interns become involved with extracurricular activities. PDS interns have coached basketball, volleyball, and outdoor adventure teams. They have mentored organizations such as the Debate Club and the Gay and Lesbian Students Club. They have also participated in faculty committees such as the Course Programming or Academic Standards Committee. One intern with expertise in writing assisted Beacon’s college counseling office by meeting with dozens of seniors who were editing their college application essays. All of these engagements better approximate the real life of a teacher than the standard student-teaching placement. As a result, they seem to aid the transition of interns into their first full-time professional position, especially in challenging urban schools. Looking back, a former intern found it an advantage to her professional growth that she was “so much a part of the school” (personal communication, R. Mayer, March 26, 2000). Now a 3rd-year social studies teacher, she feels strongly that her internship experience provided better preparation for a full-fledged professional position than what her colleagues had going into their first jobs.

The full-year internship also offers participants the benefits of working with an entire interdisciplinary cohort of student teachers. Since the inception of the program, between 8 and 10 interns from across several disciplinary programs at TC have worked on site at Beacon each year. By contrast with the loneliness of many student teachers doing their field placements alone in a school, the interns develop a supportive working relationship with their peers as well as with their mentor teachers. A 1999 graduate (Baquiran, Brown, Lichen, & Welch, 1999) of the Program in Social Studies reflected on the Beacon experience:

> This year I have learned a lot about working with others. Having three different cooperating teachers, conducting research with other PDS interns, developing and teaching a unit with another intern, and teaching four different classes has given me the interpersonal skills of cooperation and bargaining needed to be effective not only in the classroom but
institutionally as well. I think, unlike many teachers, I had a rare opportunity to come into teaching as a team effort, guided by my peers and my mentors.

More particularly, action research projects provide a central dimension to the benefits gained by PDS relationships. TC’s Program in Social Studies places a strong emphasis on research as a basis for decision making about practice. The action research project provides an opportunity for interns to gain understanding of features of research aimed at practical problems originating in schools and classrooms and of themselves as critical, engaged researchers. Not only does this contribute to their ability to make sense of the complex worlds of schools, social studies, and students, but it also develops a reflective, inquiry orientation to teaching and the role of colleagues in the educational process. Because cognitive strategies utilizing analysis, evidence, synthesis, and questioning are all at the heart of the social studies enterprise, engagement in action research projects as part of a learning community provides beginning teachers with a lived experience that enriches their approach to citizenship education, the heart of the social studies enterprise.

Over the past several years, interns have selected a variety of research topics essential to the growth of Beacon: portfolios, interdisciplinary planning in the humanities and in math/science, curriculum standards, and support structures for failing students. In carrying out their internship projects, master’s students blend their developing skills in analyzing educational research from published sources with using questionnaires, participant observation, and in-depth interviews to research an issue or question at Beacon. The ultimate aim is to help the school improve its ability to serve all its students well.

Interns’ research projects are both “totally authentic” as well as “risky” (McGee, 2000). The research is totally authentic because the interns are “looking at the school and school practices and making critical comments” about the school and its practices. With critical comments comes faculty resistance, as well as “tough decisions and an unclear agenda.” The venture is risky as a result of what many interns have called the “insider-outsider problem” (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Interns are asked to be both teachers in the classroom and critical researchers of classroom practice, engaging Beacon’s faculty in this same process on an ongoing basis.

Faculty and interns have used research as a means of ongoing critical review of the first 4 years of the school’s existence, with the aim of institutionalizing inquiry as a seminal aspect of the school’s mission and socializing new teachers along with interns to a reflective professional orientation. Thus far, the action research projects on gradfolios have been successful in staving off pressure on the school by the State Education Department to adopt the Regents exams. The social and political commitments of this community to urban education and diverse student populations gain support on a variety of levels from the action research projects done under the auspices of the PDS program.

Together, action research, school reform, and professional development school partnerships reflect new ways of thinking about teacher preparation, shifting the emphasis away from what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) called “the hegemony of an exclusively university-generated knowledge base for teaching” (p. 16). The statement of the Holmes Group (1990) about this subject in Tomorrow’s Schools reflects the growing consensus that schools and universities need to work together as equal partners in creating knowledge about schools, teachers, and classroom practice, as well as in preparing future teachers.

Not coincidentally, TC’s Program in Social Studies has been altered in subtle but profound ways by the PDS relationship with Beacon and its action research projects. Perhaps the most tangible change has been the increased presence of school-based faculty in teaching courses within the Program in Social Studies. Both TC and Beacon share a commitment to urban public education by providing preservice teachers with preparation that will raise the academic level in New York City high schools. In a small way, we believe this partnership and its action
research project component makes a contribution to those ends.

**ONGOING STRAINS WITHIN THE PDS RELATIONSHIP**

Reviews of PDS partnerships in the research literature offer ample evidence of the struggles that inevitably result from the process of bringing two complex cultures, school and university, together into a working relationship. In the case of the Beacon-TC partnership, tensions exist in four major areas: loss of the liaison, inadequate compensation for Beacon mentors, workload for interns, and TC’s uneven investment in the relationship.

Because the Arthur Vining Davis grant ended in 1998, funding to support the partnership has been cut back considerably. Despite some contributions from TC, diminished funding has meant the loss of a TC liaison with a regular presence at Beacon. Although the liaison’s job was sometimes experienced by its holder as a high-wire act in balancing the demands of TC with those of Beacon, its faculty, and interns, the position also served as a lightning rod for defusing the tensions inherent in doing cross-cultural translation across such institutions.

Since the departure of the liaison, responsibility for the interns’ seminar has fallen on the shoulders of Beacon teachers. Some of Beacon’s faculty believe that more compensation is needed for teachers, especially in their capacity as mentor teachers. The goals of PDS, especially as enacted through action research, ideally should result in adjustment of teachers’ regular responsibilities because they require additional investment of teacher time beyond that associated with taking on an intern as a classroom teacher. Most Beacon faculty have, however, taken advantage of the tuition credits they receive as compensation for mentoring by taking graduate classes at TC, three teachers taking classes toward a degree in educational administration and one toward a doctorate in social studies education.

Another tension within the partnership has been the workload placed on the interns. Inevitably, interns feel torn between the demands of academic coursework and increased opportunities to coteach classes and work with students. During the years reported in this article, interns regularly voiced their feeling of being used by both Beacon and TC. They complained that they did the bulk of action research work, with involvement of only a handful of Beacon teachers. In fact, some of Beacon’s teachers seemed quite resistant to their projects, especially the gradfolio investigation. Likewise, TC did little to acknowledge the long hours interns invested at Beacon, far greater than was the norm for other student teachers in the preservice program. Although the interns gained much from their regular teaching and feedback from mentors, they often ended up struggling to stay on top of their TC course assignments. Furthermore, interns argued that their action research projects should be formally recognized at TC as part of their coursework, worthy of academic credit for independent research.

At TC, this proposal has not been acted on, chiefly due to a lack of leadership there for coordinating an effort to gain support for the idea across secondary education programs. Again, the loss of a liaison to initiate such a discussion is felt acutely. However, the issue also reflects a larger problem concerning the uneven degree of commitment within TC to the PDS partnership. The Programs in Social Studies and in English Education have been highly involved in the partnership, but other secondary education programs have been less supportive. Many of the TC secondary education faculty who are engaged in this work are untenured. The realities of the reappointment and tenure process undercut their willingness to participate more fully and regularly in the development of the PDS program. Thus, initiatives such as academic credit for action research projects simply have been left languishing.

Both Beacon and TC acknowledge that a PDS relationship takes time and trust to build. Changes in both university and school cultures come slowly. Placing action research at the center of the partnership arrangement has already produced tangible benefits for all involved. Securing additional funding would obviously
improve the possibility of carrying out the original vision animating the partnership. Still, until the involvement of interns, Beacon teachers, and TC faculty in PDS becomes a regular and rewarded feature of their respective positions, this relationship will depend on the rather fragile foundation described here, the good will and commitment of people interested in making schools and colleges of education collaborators in the pursuit of learning.

CONCLUSION

Those most closely involved in the TC-Beacon PDS Partnership believe that it models what secondary school–graduate school relationships should look like. This article has been an effort to highlight both the positive outcomes and the ongoing challenges involved in implementing one of the so-called big ideas of recent school reform initiatives. In the end, the authors believe that those most intimately involved in this process, the interns, despite their understandable complaints, would all agree that the experience was worth it.

As a final note on the gradfolio project, the following statement of the interns’ research report (Baquiran et al., 1999) nicely summarizes the contribution of action research to building a community of inquiry at Beacon:

There are many bright and innovative ideas about teaching and learning at Beacon, but there is little focus and consensus concerning schoolwide practice such as portfolio. What I see as lacking are agreed-upon principles that ground teacher practice. . . . I see Beacon at a turning point. Portfolios and thus the classroom habits that support them could turn into the more traditional approach of an oral exam; a teacher-centered process, where students learn to guess what teachers want them to know about their projects. Or portfolios could become places where students would be empowered enough to guide their own demonstrations of what they have learned by actually doing authentic academic tasks followed by reflective dialogue between the teacher and student. I hope that this workshop has in some way sparked the faculty and the administration to choose the latter course.

A final note: In 2002, the New York State Commissioner of Education, Richard Mills, decided that all schools in the state (including Beacon) would in the future be responsible for giving Regents exams in social studies. The current 10th-grade class (the class of 2004) is required to pass five Regents tests in order to graduate high school. Despite the onslaught of testing, Beacon has kept a parallel portfolio system for graduation alongside the Regents tests.

REFERENCES


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