USE OF PEER-TO-PEER CLASSROOM WALKTHROUGHS TO FACILITATE A
K-12/UNIVERSITY COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY IN A DIVERSE
RURAL HIGH NEEDS HIGH SCHOOL IN TRANSFORMATION

Introduction & Purpose of the Study

Recent emphasis in academe begs that we as academicians "promote more effectively the use of research to improve education and, thereby, serve the public good…and act more effectively on that knowledge: Education must become the agent rather than the object of change…to ensure that our research is central to the enterprise of educating human beings in all circumstances, in all countries, and in all human conditions." In the vein of our commitment, this study shares an ongoing transformation project currently in implementation at a diverse, rural, high needs high school in South Texas through an federally funded multi-million dollar ARRA grant including a K-12/University partnership (spring 2010 – fall 2013). Part of the professional development, provided by university personnel to the diverse rural high needs high school campus faculty in this study, includes efforts to improve instruction and facilitate development of the professional learning community campus conversation. One primary strategy to accomplish this goal is through implementation of Teaching and Learning Tours (TLTS) (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2007) focused on raising the equity consciousness of classroom teachers and administrators on the campus (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). An initial professional development session on equity consciousness, with follow up and conduct of the TLTS during the professional learning community (DuFour, R., DuFour, R, Eaker, R., & Many, T., 2006) or PLC periods at regular intervals throughout the year, were conducted. The study shares preliminary results based upon compiled data from the observation protocol with regard to observable improvements in instructional strategies being attempted. Additionally, analysis of the observation protocol data indicated increases in student active cognitive engagement after one

semester of implementation of the transformation project. Finally, the proposal includes year two plans focusing on intensifying the efforts of university personnel as change agents in use of these TLTS to push on the positive transformation on the campus in upcoming 2011-2012. Results of both year one and year two data will be shared upon acceptance of the proposal in the final submitted paper.

Theoretical Framework

Boyd and Hord (1994) proffer that supportive and shared leadership is a key attribute in the professional learning community framework. Leadership in this context is a "distributed practice 'stretched over' the school's social and situational contexts (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, p. 23). In implementing this process, the principal becomes a guide or facilitator who partners with faculty in frank conversations about student learning and outcomes weaving a web of interdependence among all stakeholders (Bezzina & Testa, 2005; Burgess & Bates, 2009). Walk-throughs (and the ensuing often frank conversations about instruction) are one "example of a common tool that is used to build community (as walk -throughs generate opportunities for conversations about teaching practice), provide feedback and hold teachers accountable" (Kelley & Shaw, 2009, p. 99) The authors suggest further that, "walk-through *look-fors* may be developed collaboratively by teachers at the school level or by district-level administrators trying to foster a common shared understanding of effective teaching practice across the district"(Kelley & Shaw, 2009, p. 100). McKenzie & Scheurich (2007) suggest that their iteration of classroom walk-throughs or TLTS in contrast to the typical classroom observation

> are not about evaluation or supervision of the teacher being observed; these classrooms merely serve as a laboratory for those observing. In other words, the teaching and learning tours are not about those being observed, but rather about developing reflective practice among the observers. (Argyris & Schoen, 1975 as cited in McKenzie & Scheurich, 2007)

Activities such as these collaborative walk-throughs work to build effective professional learning communities, risk-taking contexts, and a sense of shared leadership which empowers teacher leaders to feel engaged in transformative efforts, to collaborate with colleagues to shape school improvement, to establish norms of mutual accountability, and to feel vested in the outcomes (Harris, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Methodology

The population for the study included 32 core academic teachers who participated in the TLTS during their PLC period during January, March and May of Spring 2011. Additionally, 3 administrators and 3 university personnel participated in the walk-throughs. With regard to the participating teacher population, teacher turnover in the district is at 11.7% in 2010 and 30% of the teachers have five years or less experience (Texas Education Agency). Thus there is considerable need for this sort of ongoing job-embedded professional development. All administrator and teacher participants in the TLT's were trained on the observation protocol and equity background information. For the 2011-2012 school year, TLTS will be conducted approximately every 3-4 weeks instead of every 6-8 weeks as during the spring of 2011. The expectation is that increased use of the walk-throughs will provide opportunities for greater

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TEACHING AND LEARNING TOURS PROTOCOL

Focus: Active Cognitive Engagement; Who is in or out of the zone?

Reminder: This is NOT about the person being observed. It IS about using your

colleague's classroom as a lab for you to engage in *reflective practice*, that is thinking

about your practice.

If this was your classroom, what would you be proud of? What is positive in this

classroom?

What is the TEKS objective being taught? Based on this objective, what is the percentage of children who are actively cognitively engaged? Are there any students out of the zone?

If so, why do you think this is the case?

If this was your classroom, what could you do to "ratchet up" the active cognitive

engagement, or ensure that all students are in the "zone"? What other things might you

consider to make this lesson or classroom environment even better?

Other thoughts?

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Figure 1. *Teaching and Learning Tour Observation Protocol*

improvement in quality of instruction and increased student engagement as measured by responses on the instrument in Figure 1 above.

Data from the three TLT observations was compiled thematically using open coding and the constant comparative method (Glassar & Strauss, 1967). The percentage of student active cognitive engagement was calculated based on the raw data provided.

Data Analysis & Results

During the first implementation of the TLTS, responses to the question on the TLTS protocol reflected overwhelmingly traditional teacher-centered instruction. General comments such as "quiet room," "well organized," "students well-behaved," and "students compliant" were the norm. The percentage of active cognitive engagement from those participants who responded was 55%.

During the second implementation of the TLTS, responses on the observation protocol reflected some increasing use of technology and cooperative grouping as well as hands-on activities such as kite-flying outdoors with students using altimeters for measurement of data. The percentage of active cognitive engagement by the participants was 75.5%.

During the final implementation of the TLTS, similar comments related to use of technology, cooperative grouping and hands-on activities were evident and the active cognitive engagement had increased to 87%.

It is important to note that the TLTS themselves were one means of job-embedded ongoing professional development implemented that were likely in and of themselves not responsible for the increase in observation of higher quality instruction and increased student active cognitive engagement,

but these TLTS were a tool that administrators and teachers alike found to be useful both in oral interviews with participants and simple evaluation data collected with regard to what was working and what was not working in the professional development opportunities. For example, one central office administrator, who will now serve in a co-role of CO administrator/campus principal in 2011-2012 noted that the TLTS were

> an ideal opportunity to begin the culture change needed in the journey to become a professional learning community. The process taught teachers there is no more teaching in isolation. In order to improve, we must have a common understanding of what excellence looks like. That's where I see an opportunity for this next year by adding the follow-ups. We know improving a school means changes in structures and changes in culture. The TLTS sets the stage to do both.

This study will report whether the early success of the TLTS implementation in spring 2011 can be built upon in 2011-2012. Plans include use of the TLTS not only as a teacher self-reflection exercise, but will include a requested commitment by teachers to implement an instructional strategy which has been either observed by teachers in another classroom or attained through other professional development. Then lead teachers, administrators and university personnel will follow up observing implementation of those teacher chosen strategies in a coaching/collaborative model. The goal will be that the administrators and university personnel do not take on an evaluative role in this particular exercise but, in collaboration with lead teachers and all participants, strive to enhance the campus conversation around improved instruction and increased student engagement through continued implementation and extension of the TLTS as job-embedded professional development.

Significance

This project represents a K-12/university partnership that stepped outside of the project personnel's comfort zone. A number of persons, with whom the authors had chance encounters during the process of collaborating for this federal ARRA multi-million dollar funding project, emphasized that

few previous attempts at K-12/university collaborations in this area had been successful.   However, for us as university personnel on this project viewing ourselves as equity oriented change agents (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009), indeed our mantra was: *"Non Satis Scire: To Know Is Not Enough."* Action was needed. The opportunity for success was presented. The transformation is underway.

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