

The Evolution of a Professional Learning Community: The Role of Dialogue Initiated Through Faculty Paideia Seminars

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Abstract

This article describes the evolution of a professional learning community initiated through monthly Paideia faculty seminars. The context for this study was complex in that the school in which the study occurred: 1) was a new start up school with heavy community input and historical overtones, 2) was led by a Caucasian female principal but located in a historically African-American community, 3) was in its first year of operation, and 4) was situated within a district-wide reform effort which promoted professional learning communities. The guiding question for this study was, “What was the impact of monthly Paideia faculty seminars on a developing professional learning community?” The researcher used a qualitative research design to explore this question. Findings indicate that Paideia seminars promoted supportive conditions for professional learning communities and served as a protocol for dialogue among faculty.

The Evolution of a Professional Learning Community:

The Role of Dialogue Initiated Through Faculty Paideia Seminars

Teachers have historically worked under conditions that sustain physical and emotional isolation (Fullan, 2001; Lortie, 1975); they often spend the majority of their day working individually with their students within their own classrooms. Teachers typically do not share lessons, rarely observe each other teach, and only infrequently discuss practices with their fellow teachers. Sometimes, an atmosphere of competition and mistrust hovers, and teachers learn to close their doors and work independently. Hence, teachers in such schools rarely celebrate successes or discuss struggles.

Recently, there has been a focus on changing school cultures toward more collaborative environments (Finn and Finn, 2007; Fullan, 1991). Some researchers have provided a picture of how purposeful interaction and collaboration among school faculties furthers school improvement. One example of this kind of restructured environment is referred to as *professional learning communities*. In professional learning communities, faculties view themselves as learners and work collaboratively to better their practices (Fullan, 2001).

While there is current research about professional learning communities and their effectiveness, there are still very few examples of this practice in school settings (Fullan, 2003). In order for these communities to thrive, it is critical to understand how they

evolve and how they are sustained within schools. One essential component of purposeful the professional learning communities is dialogue among a faculty. The Paideia Seminar can serve as a structure for this sort of conversation. The purpose of this study was to understand how the Paideia Seminar impacted a developing professional learning community at one newly-formed elementary school in a district with a focus on developing professional learning communities. While the context is unique to this one school, the data regarding how a professional learning community evolves over the course of a school year through faculty dialogue extends the research literature on teacher development and learning. If professional learning communities can be developed through dialogic structures, it is essential for educators to know how this happens. To do this, the study was grounded in theories and research on school reform, professional learning communities, and the power of dialogue for learning.

Theoretical Framework and Research Literature

The author was intimately involved in conducting certain aspects of the professional development process studied. She served as participant observer and documented the Paideia dialogue seminars through multiple data sources. The study was grounded in studies of effective school change (e.g., Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Lieberman, Darling-Hammond, & Zuckerman, 1991; Schlechty, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), the literature of professional learning communities (Fullan, 2003; Lieberman & Wood, 2003) and the power of dialogue for learning (Billings & Fitzgerald).

School change. The large and growing body of research on school change has illustrated that change happens slowly and gradually (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Tyack

& Cuban, 1995), and that teachers must be committed for the long-term (Schlechty, 1990). Conflict, struggles, uncertainty, and even temporary halts in the process should be expected (Lieberman, Darling-Hammond, & Zuckerman, 1991; Schlechty, 1990).

The development of functioning schools takes both commitment and positive developing relationships. “Without a way for educators, parents, and citizens to understand, discuss, and participate in new possibilities, change efforts for the long term will be for naught” (Glickman, date, p. 39). Ideally, for changes in teaching and learning to occur, all members feel “in it” together, have the same understandings about where they are headed, believe the changes are practical, and of course, good for students (McIntyre & Kyle, 2006).

Scholars of school reform have emphasized the importance of positive relationships for many decades (Barth, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Schlechty, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Wells, 2000). Some school personnel who recognize this need, look for professional development opportunities that can allow teachers time to talk and think together. Time to talk and work side by side allows for the development of trust and collegiality. With trust, the level of professionalism, collaboration, and the development of a professional learning communities (Barth, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1997) is enabled.

Professional Learning Communities

While there is new research about professional learning communities and their effectiveness, there are still very few descriptions of this practice in school settings (Fullan, 2003). According to Lieberman and Wood (2003), professional learning

communities are characterized by peers giving and receiving critical support. In these learning communities the best teacher of teachers is another teacher. Lieberman & Wood studied *The National Writing Project* and how this professional development opportunity supported teachers in their professional growth. Key elements of this professional development opportunity include teachers learning from each other, making their work public and opening themselves up for critiques, and teachers learning from taking different roles and seeing the world through different perspectives.

Fullan (2003) describes professional learning communities as avenues to educational change. For decades teachers were isolated from each other and made little effort to change those dynamics. When teachers are isolated, dealing with change is more difficult. Lortie (1975) conducted a survey in which he asked teachers what they would do if they had more time in their workday. Ninety-one percent of the teachers selected an individualistic activity, which Lortie attributed to the isolated nature of teaching. Goodlad (1984) studied a national sample of teachers ten years later. The theme of autonomous isolation continued to stand out. Although teachers functioned independently, "...their autonomy seemed to be exercised in a context more of isolation than of rich professional dialogue" (p. 186)

A few years later, Rosenholtz (1989) studied 78 schools in Tennessee, and findings corroborated many of Goodlad's observations. The majority of schools (65-78) were classified by Rosenholtz as relatively "stuck" or "learning impoverished" for both teachers and students. These schools were characterized by isolation among teachers, limited teacher learning on the job, teacher uncertainty about what and how to teach, and

low commitment to the job and the school. Rosenholtz states that this condition is associated with an environment where teachers are not able to learn from their colleagues and therefore have few opportunities to experiment and improve.

Yet, scholars of school reform have shown that opportunities for collegiality and collaboration are vital to teacher learning (Fullan, date; Lieberman & Wood, date). Teachers need opportunities to work one-on-one and in groups to converse about the meaning of change and how to improve. In effective schools, collaboration is linked with norms and opportunities for continuous improvement and lifelong learning. As a result of collaborative environments, teachers are more likely to trust, value, and legitimize sharing expertise, seeking advice, and giving help both inside and outside of the school (Fullan, 2003).

Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) ask teachers to think about what kind of culture they have, what they want, and how they get there. While it is possible to get short-term gains in student achievement scores without re-culturing, these gains are superficial. They do not get at the heart of learning, which is most needed by students (Fullan, 2003). Teachers in professional learning communities continually seek improvement in their teaching and they integrate development with accountability.

The Power of Dialogue

Much has been written about the power of dialogue for constructing new understandings (Adler, 1982; Barnes, 1992; Wells & Wells, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978).

While dialogic discussion has been studied in teacher-student discussions, it has not been studied as a tool for teacher-to-teacher discussions. The present study was intended to do just that.

One highly structured dialogic practice, the Padeia seminar, has been shown to increase student learning (Billings & Fitzgerald). Mortimer Adler (1982) advocated the Paideia seminar as a method for teaching intended to engage students in a discussion of idea and values surrounding a text. Adler drew on the work of John Dewey (1938) viewing participatory inquiry as a central means to learning. He also relied on the work of Robert Hutchins, who believed that opposing opinions should be considered in a civilized manner. In addition, the Paideia seminar is democratic in nature (Adler, 1982; Roberts, 1999) and as such, the views of all participants are equally respected. More details of the Padeia Seminar are provided later in this article. The theories and studies of school change, professional learning communities, and the power of dialogue for learning have grounded this study of the impact of the Padeia Seminar on the development of a professional learning community in one urban school.

Method

The School

Jeffries Elementary School (a pseudonym) was a start-up elementary school in a high challenge setting. There were 325 students in grades preschool through fifth grade. 95% of the students were on free or reduced lunch; a proxy for poverty. According to student records, 40% of students in grades 3-5 were below grade level in reading. The staff also came together from different schools, within as well as outside the district.

They represented fifteen different schools. 44% of the faculty was African-American, 54% were Caucasian and .5% was Asian. Table 1 illustrates the key informants in the study.

Table 1 Key Informant Selection

Participants	K-2 Representation	3-5 Representation	Key Roles within School	Served with Principal at Former School	Race	Gender	Experience
Teacher 1			Media Specialist	Yes	W	F	10 years
Teacher 2			Curriculum Facilitator	No	W	F	25 years
Teacher 3			Guidance Counselor	No	B	F	1 st year
Teacher 4	1 st grade teacher			No	B	M	3 years
Teacher 5		5 th grade teacher		Yes	W	F	11 years
Teacher 6			Exceptional Children's Teacher	Yes	B	F	14 years
Principal			Principal	Yes	W	F	14 years

The Seminars

At the time of the study, the principal was seeking a way to produce trust, collaboration, and cohesion in the faculty, and then turn the collaboration into success for the faculty and students. She chose the Paideia Seminar as the structure for building openness and trust and for establishing productive conversations that would lead to sound policies and practice.

The principal started the school year by establishing five mandatory “meetings” for the *entire* teaching faculty. These meetings were solely for the purpose of participating

in Paideia Faculty Seminars. Paideia Seminars are structured conversations about specific selected texts and the important ideas imbedded within them. Jeffries used a variety of texts ranging from research articles to picture books. Some of the ideas, issues and problems embedded in the texts were collaboration, trust, racism, social justice, active learning strategies and integrating the arts. These ideas were the focus of the conversations and questions; they were designed to probe these ideas and to allow for a variety of interpretations.

According to Roberts & Billings (1999), selection of the seminar text is critical to the success of the dialogue. A strong seminar text should:

- Address a number of human concerns
- Be thought provoking
- Addresses ideas and values of some complexity
- Be evocative and often ambiguous
- Deal with issues of some particular concern

The first seminar text was selected by the principal. She had read a chapter in *New Meaning of Educational Change* by Fullan entitled, “The Teacher” (2003). This chapter addressed the difficulty of being a teacher and working in isolation. The chapter described professional learning communities and teacher collaboration. At that point, she had not hired the entire faculty, but she believed that collaboration was going to be critical to the school’s success and it was the focus of the district. Collaboration was an issue of some concern for the participants. It was not easily disposed of intellectually, and

it was evocative in that each teacher could bring his/her own experience to the text and interpret it differently.

The principal also selected the second seminar text, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform* authored by Bryk and Schneider (2003). She chose this text because she believed it was an important issue for her faculty to discuss if they wanted to create a professional learning community. Since this text did not meet many of the characteristics for a strong seminar text (say briefly why not), the post seminar assignment required the faculty to read Robert Frost's "The Mending Wall" as a supplemental text that evoked discussion about trust. The faculty discussed this poem in small groups after the faculty seminar.

The third seminar text was nominated by the media specialist. The school was engaged in a project called One Book, One School. In this project, the entire student body would read *Martin's Big Words* by Doreen Rappaport (2001), a picture book about Martin Luther King, Jr., and discuss the content of the book schoolwide. She suggested that the faculty read and discuss the book in the next faculty seminar before the school participated in the project. It had many qualities for a strong seminar text, such as challenging and thought provoking ideas and ambiguity that allows for a variety of interpretations. The key factor was that this text would be used later with students and a faculty seminar helps prepare the adults in the building for the dialogue with students.

The fourth seminar text, *Through the Cracks* by Sollman, Emmons & Paolini, (1994) was nominated by another principal. This is a picture book illustrating how traditional instruction can lead to many children's disengagement from school. The main

theme throughout the text was how to help students from falling through the cracks by integrating the arts and active learning in the content areas.

In order to continue with the One book, One school theme the fifth and final seminar was based on *The Purpose of Education*, an essay written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1948) at Morehouse College on the value of character education. In addition, two teachers had asked the parents of their students to write down their dreams for their children in response to the text, *Martin's Big Words* (2001). These dreams were posted in the hallways. In previous seminars the topic of parent involvement and interest had come up so parents' dreams would serve as a catalyst for discussion. The principal gave final approval on all texts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over the course of the school year. Each faculty seminar was recorded and transcribed. In addition, the researcher conducted two rounds of interviews with key informants and a member check after the first round of analysis and at the end of the study. The researcher also observed five traditional faculty meetings and seventeen grade level planning meetings. Pre and post seminar assignments were also collected.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, on-going analysis of the data continued throughout the research study (Mertens, 1998). Stake recommends reading and rereading the accounts and through deep thinking, understanding creeps forward (1995). The researcher utilized a form of code mapping that makes the research process more public (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). A code map was developed which shared three

iterations of content analysis. The first iteration was the initial codes/surface content analysis. The second table merged ideas and themes. This technique, described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is referred to as constant comparative analysis. During this phase of data analysis, categories are integrated and patterns emerge. The third iteration demonstrated a generalization applicable to the data set. By making all aspects of the analysis open to public inspection, the researcher created an audit trail.

The researcher generated categories and codes guided by the research questions that formed the basis of the emerging story. The process included segmenting the information (Tesch, 1990), developing coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and generating categories, themes, or patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) as they pertained to the research questions.

Findings

The impact of the Padeia seminar on the development of a professional learning community in a newly formed urban elementary school was illustrated through five themes. These themes are interrelated, and all illustrate how the Padeia Seminar can help to establish supportive conditions for creating a professional learning community. The use of Padeia Seminars for faculty development have the potential to 1) build relationships among faculty, 2) give all members a voice, 3) provide an emotionally and psychologically safe environment, 4) engage faculty in purposeful interaction, and 5) assist faculty with collaborative problem solving.

Building Relationships: Sharing Histories and Vulnerabilities

The Paideia Seminars appeared to be key in building positive working relationships among faculty members, a goal of the principal, Ms. Hill. She had explicitly told teachers in their job interviews that building relationships was an expectation.

Relationships were the key, and that was the bottom line. I think I told that to everyone that I interviewed. That one of the biggest challenges was to build relationships with the students, with the staff, and with the parents and the community. And that I expected that they build those relationships. So I think I stated it right up front as opposed to implying it. I stated it and I really want collaboration. Now, I don't know if I stated that as, as explicitly as I wanted the collaboration but I did state that relationships had to be built.

Relationship building during the seminars involved getting to know one another better, encouraging one another, and allowing themselves to be vulnerable through honest talk about themselves, their views, and their instructional practices. For example, in the second seminar, *Trust in Schools*, several participants shared with the group stories from their personal histories. In one instance, a Caucasian teacher shared with the group how she misunderstood the term “colored water fountain” when she was young. An African American teacher shared how she wrote a report as a student on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. just shortly after his death, and that her questions as a child are still unanswered. One of the African American preschool teachers shared how her parents instilled in her the

belief that she was as good as anyone else. By sharing these personal stories, the teachers begin to build personal relationships. (Good)

Teachers also encouraged, complimented, and supported one another during the Seminars. They clearly opened themselves up to the group and shared their vulnerabilities personally and professionally. During the seminar on the book, *Martin's Big Words*, the guidance counselor, shared with the group how one of the Jeffries Park students had contemplated suicide. After she opened up and shared this with the group, there was a long silence as the group processed what they heard.

Eve: I had to interview a child today who was distraught to the point where he said he wanted to kill himself, and it was because of some things that he was hearing and he believed those things. And it may have been, I don't know how many times someone said that negative thing to him, but because he didn't have the positive things to counter it, then he bought in to it. I think it is our responsibility to make sure that we're being that positive voice. Martin had a strong support system, he said as a child he heard the big words from his parents and from the Bible, his father was a minister. He had a strong support system, but a lot of our children don't, so we are somewhat their support system. (MLKF03)
[Silence.]

During another seminar, Darlene, a fifth grade teacher, and two other intermediate teachers admitted to the group that, although they agreed with much of the dialogue, they were functioning in “survival mode.” Once they opened themselves up to the group, their

colleagues shared their support for these teachers. In the excerpt below, the teachers share their vulnerabilities after the facilitator had given them the opportunities to discuss in small groups, what they had learned from the seminar.

Darlene: This has been the quiet corner over here because we all feel that we are in survival, completely. The goals we all agree with, we all believe, but today we can't see past today to get there. Truly I believe that every child is valuable and that every child can learn but I cannot see past 2:30.

Shirley: We could commiserate with our community because we are there. We don't have the resources to think about the future if we are feeling so overwhelmed with what is going on from 7:30 until 2:30. We are not able to do our jobs as educators if we are dealing with little things that are going on in every corner of the room. We have the same feelings and frustrations as these children.

Anita: Loss of control.

Darlene: You do get overwhelmed. I know they feel it. We need to make time so that they can learn to value each other.

Shirley: There are those moments when we go on field trips they are perfect, which makes it more frustrating when we are here because you know they know how to do it. It is just making that connection.

Jewel: What we do is so valuable. We can go to other schools but not everyone can teach at our school and that means something. We are so frustrated because we have these visions for these children and it is not... We are their stability.... It is a bigger picture than that... It is good that we are frustrated because that means we want more for them. It is when we are complacent that it becomes a problem.

Holly: (A Caucasian preschool teacher) If you walk down the hall, there is learning going on in every classroom and you can hear teaching going on....my hat is off to all of you because I could not do what you d (work with intermediate grades). We are glad that when you go home, you come back the next day. Those kids love you and you are doing a great job, you are their hope.

Barbara: I have lived through this before. My former school has gone through three years of a new population every year. When you get new kids in, that is just as hard on them, changing schools, as divorce or death. When you add that to whatever else they are going through, yes I am going to make an impression. We have to take time to develop that relationship. I think we have got to realize that

it is going to take a few years and it is going to be easier with the younger ones. The fifth graders are going; you can imagine how it feels to change a school in your senior year. We need to keep that perspective. We need to kill them with kindness.

John was a visiting international teacher from New Zealand. During the King seminar, John related his working class background to the Jeffries students. He shared with the group about his childhood; when he was small he received the message that because he was poor, he was inferior.

John: He would have made people feel a lot better about their selves during this time. But we have parents in our community who feel like the bottom of the heap and maybe they're being told day after day in some way that they are. I gave an example that I come from a British society that is not segregated, but I felt a real stigma when I was a kid because I was a working class kid living in a class system. Now no one told me that I was stink and I was poor but I just learned it. I was never told otherwise. So it is a very powerful thing, this sort of invisible message that tells children day after day after day that they are stink kids, that they are the lowest of the low. (MLK03)

Marilyn, an African American Spanish teacher, shared during the Dr. King seminar an experience at a different school in which the teachers discussed Dr. King's, “

I Have a Dream” speech. As the Spanish teacher, Marilyn was only at Jeffries Park two days a week. During the previous King seminar at a different school the African American teachers were treated horribly. Marilyn was concerned about experiencing something similar at Jeffries Park. She shared her experience with the teachers and praised them for being open, honest and respectful to each other.

Marilyn: I have a comment for the teachers. I sat in on a seminar several years ago and our discussion was on Dr. King’s speech and it turned out pretty ugly among teachers. There were some negative remarks made to us teachers that were African American. And I sat here and I really admire how as a group everyone discussed it and voiced an opinion. When I heard about this book and I thought about coming in here, I kept thinking, I’m not going to witness what I witnessed with the last seminar. It happened before.

Annie: I’m so sorry that happened to you.

Marilyn: Yeah that happened and to a point where we had to interrupt the seminar because of the comments like “African Americans have gotten what they deserve” and you can imagine teachers saying that in a Paideia seminar.

(There’s a lot of noise among group).

Marilyn: I had to let Ms. Hill know that I have been around a lot of schools and there's something special about this staff here and I want to compliment you on the way you act among each other. You make me feel wanted here. I've been in predominantly white schools my whole life and since I've been here it has not been the same. I was a little nervous coming here to the seminar. Is this going to be a rerun? You did very well. When I look at them you all smile and they treat us all the way you would like to be treated. You should be proud of your school. This is a great staff, I tell you that. I go around to twenty-eight schools and I hear a lot and I see a lot. You are wonderful. To sit here with a topic like this and conduct yourselves the way you have and to know what we went through, that we had to interrupt the seminar because of comments, some of us even shed a tear that's how sad it was, it touched our hearts. So thank you very much.

Ms. Hill: Thank you for sharing. (MLKF03)

At the end of this seminar, Ms. Hill asked the teachers how the seminars were working for them. Several teachers spoke out. In addition, Ms. Hill related the intent of the Paideia seminars as a means of building relationships.

Ms. Hill: Is this working? Or not working?.... This is something we are doing to build relationships and also to get reading credits. The main purpose was the

relationships. This gives us the opportunity to talk about something other than school business which is still school business.

Michelle: I think it is working.

Samantha: I think it is helping us get to know each other better but I also think one of the assignments you gave us when we were supposed to the poem and get with someone you don't normally get with and fine time to discuss it. I thought that was good.

Kasey: It has been helpful for me because I am making the switch from student to co-worker. And it has helped me feel less intimidated in front of everybody who has been a teacher for years. I feel more comfortable coming up and asking for help or for advice or to answer a question.

Jane: In the beginning, I didn't really know what the seminar was for. I thought it was just something the doctoral students were doing, a study. I didn't know it was for us to get together, to know each other better. So at first I didn't really understand the purpose.

Ms. Hill: Knowing who I am, I am a control freak and I know that. If I presented the text you would hear all about what I thought. It's also a way for me to sit back

and not be the leader but a participant among you which is very important.

(MLKF03)

It appeared that the Paideia seminar was helping the faculty build relationships among teachers. Other than faculty meetings, the teachers did not have opportunities to get together with the entire staff. They also shared that with each seminar, it became more like conversation and less like answering questions posed by the facilitator. In April, the faculty asked the facilitator to come back and lead this same Paideia Seminar with their students' parents, hoping that it would provide the parents with the opportunity to build relationships and to experience the seminar process within the One Book, One School program.

In summary, the Paideia Seminar seemed to accelerate the development of the professional learning community through the teachers' reflective and personal dialogue with the entire teaching faculty. The monthly Paideia Seminars not only brought them together but provided a protocol for the conversation and kept them focused on relevant issues and gave ownership of the conversation to the participants. Unlike many other types of professional development, the teachers were actively engaged in the learning process and had the responsibility for their own learning. In addition, as the Paideia Seminars progressed teachers felt safer and would open up to each other. The dialogue during the Paideia Seminars was often intense as well as personal. This type of dialogue helped build relationships among teachers. The Paideia Seminars provided authentic contexts for learning more about one's colleagues and one's self.

A Safe Environment: Sharing Vulnerabilities

As these stories demonstrate, the teachers shared openly with one another during the Paideia Seminars. Ms. Hill stated that many teachers were “stepping out of the box.” One explanation for the safe environment was that teachers regularly assessed and monitored their own participation. The purpose of assessment was to note the strengths and weaknesses of participation and to establish norms for following seminars based on the individual and group feedback (Roberts & Billings, 1999). The following dialogue is an example of their self-assessment.

Kasey: I did exceptionally well. My goal was to pay attention.

Eve: My goal was to speak. I think I did pretty well. Because of the book and everyone’s interest I think that is why I was able to pay attention and speak.

Facilitator: What was yours Ms. Hill? You are making a face.

Ms. Hill: I am such a multitasker in discussions, if you guys haven’t figured that out. It’s probably a secret. Mine was to be a good listener, but I still found myself thinking, “I’ve got to get that done, I’ve got to get that done...” So I’m still working on that.

During one portion of the *Through the Cracks* seminar, the teachers analyzed the issues in the book that were causing students to be unsuccessful in the classroom. During the dialogue, Julie reflected on her own practice and questioned herself on whether or not she was engaging students in active learning. Julie and others felt safe enough to reflect on their own practice in front of the group.

Marcia: It was eye-opening for me that we should be more alert of each individual in the classroom instead of focusing so much on one behavior that we tune out the others.

Jade: I see some examples of how different things contribute to a student falling through the cracks, then later how the environment, such as presentation, the attitude of the teacher, how things are beginning to involve the children. You can see them becoming more involved.

Eve: I notice that too. The classroom rules all said “don’t, don’t, don’t.” Then things can be turned around in a positive way such as instead of “don’t run” it can be “please walk”. Be active with them in a classroom; have them actively engaged instead of just sitting there.

John: Ideally that is how we should be teaching the children, that is how they learn the best.

Julie: It made me think about am I doing a lot of teacher-directed or student-directed activities? (CS03)

At the end of the year, teachers completed a summative evaluation about participating in Paideia Seminars. Two participants described the safe environment in their surveys.

Question: What were the strengths of these conversations?

Participant 1: Able to share openly without fear of conflict between the staff with differing opinions.

Participant 2: It allows you to open up with the staff in a non-threatening manner.

The structure of the seminar helped create a safe environment for teachers to share their ideas and practice. The facilitator required participants to set personal behavior goals and participants were asked to assess their own participation. In interviews, participants responded that with each new seminar, the participants would become more comfortable with the process and new voices were elicited in the dialogue. This safe environment allowed teachers to be honest without threat of being ridiculed or embarrassed by their peers. This safe environment was necessary for honest, open and reflective communication.

Giving Everyone a Voice: “Sharing the Dum Dums”

As Eve shared during her interviews, there are teachers who believe they do not have a voice at Jeffries Park. She was reminded of an activity she did at a workshop. At the workshop, some participants were given Dum Dum lollipops. Those that held the Dum Dums were listened to and respected by others that had Dum Dums. Those without Dum Dums were ignored and their opinions were not valued. The Paideia Seminar is structured so that everyone has a Dum Dum and everyone's opinions are valued and respected. The facilitator is responsible for mapping the conversation and keeping track of talk turns. One participant did not speak until the third Paideia Seminar, but after that point the conversations included everyone's voice. During interviews with key participants, several of them stated that not everyone felt included in the Jeffries Park professional learning community. However, they believe that with each seminar more people got involved and participated. Both Ms. Hill, the principal and Holly, the exceptional children's teacher, commented that they worked on being better listeners so that others would have the opportunity to speak. Ms. Hill also said teachers were surprising her by their input.

Ms. Hill: I think I know this group. Some people are surprising me; some people that I think would be speaking up aren't speaking up but they could be like me, they're choosing not to speak up because they're learning other people. Some of the quieter ones are speaking up which is nice to see because they have a tendency to not, so we're seeing that. (PS04)

Later in the year, at a faculty meeting regarding student interns, many of the teachers did not participate in the dialogue. Mary, the media specialist, wondered why the teachers did not transfer the discussion skills they learned in Paideia Seminars to the faculty meeting.

Mary: There is not enough interaction at faculty meetings. They are just too big. They don't talk enough. Did you notice that? ...They have opinions. I think it's odd. We are not a shy group necessarily. Maybe we are just not there yet which is interesting. You would think that Paideia (seminars) would start to feed into it. Maybe we are not being good enough representatives. I mean we're all together for seminars. It's the same group that sits around for faculty meetings that sit around for Paideia seminars. Maybe in Paideia Seminars there's the expectation that you all are going to share and we don't set any kind of expectation at a faculty meeting like "What's your goal today for the faculty meeting?" For participation in today's faculty meeting everyone set an individual goal and write it down. (MSS04) VERY interesting.

However, during a faculty meeting in late March, the group was vocal and shared their ideas freely. Although teachers disagreed with each other about how to use the money, they were respectful of each other. Ms. Hill shared why they would have such different opinions.

Ms. Hill: We are all coming from different perspectives. This teacher may have had a terrible experience so she doesn't want to use the money that way, while

this other teacher may have had a lot of success and wants to use the money that way. There are no wrong answers. We just need to keep asking what is best for our students. (RJS04)

While the professional learning community continued to evolve, it appeared that the participants became more comfortable taking responsibility for the decisions made, and the skills learned in the Paideia Seminars transferred to other faculty meetings and opportunities for democratic dialogue. For this reason the structure of the Paideia Seminars was imperative in giving each faculty member a voice in the professional learning community.

Purposeful Interaction: “Going an Extra Step”

Another theme that emerged from the data was the deliberate and purposeful interaction that the teachers participated in to create this professional learning community. Noah, an African American first grade teacher, shared that teachers were visiting each other, asking for help and “going an extra step.”

Noah: I've actually seen a little more people being deliberate to do things. Not saying that that's not sincere, but I've seen people going an extra step which was good to see. I see people calling on people a little more; asking to do things and actually asking for help. (PTF03)

Ms. Hill set the tone for purposeful interaction in several ways. First of all, she mandated the Paideia Seminar as a way for teachers to interact with the entire teaching staff. Initially, she selected a seminar text that discussed collaboration which forced the issue with her new staff. As Ms. Hill stated she laid her expectations on the table.

Before the school year ever started, Ms.Hill asked the teachers to create a vision for Jeffries Park. They were involved in the process and every teacher was asked to give input. After the winter break the faculty assessed the progress of the vision. At Jeffries Park, the teachers brainstormed both the successes and challenges they faced in meeting their vision. The teachers were divided into committees and worked to make changes in the school that reflected the vision.

Another outcome of realigning the vision was the planning of a Paideia Seminar for parents. The teachers selected *Martin's Big Words* as a seminar they would like to engage in with parents. There were numerous other additions and suggestions to the school improvement plan to help the school meet their vision for Jeffries Park. The teachers engaged in deliberate actions to make it happen and every teacher was involved in the process.

All the key participants agreed that the teachers were being deliberate in their actions and engaging in purposeful interaction. The principal had clearly stated her expectation that teachers would create a professional learning community and that collaboration was a high priority.

Problem Solving: "Bouncing Ideas off Each Other"

The last theme that emerged from the data was problem solving. This first year at Jeffries Park was not without problems. Teachers had entered the school year with the highest expectations and excitement, but as the school year progressed the teachers wrestled with discipline and academic issues that sometimes seemed too large to

overcome. Problem solving revolved around the needs of students, teachers and the community.

During the *Through the Cracks* Paideia Seminar, teachers did not discuss at length the issue of active learning. Ms. Hill shares that she would have liked them to problem solve a little more about this issue but that the group was not ready to do that at the time of the seminar.

I wish the conversation would have turned more towards interactive and being in that direction. But I think that I have a bunch of teachers that are feeling guilty about the fact that they are not doing a lot of that because we are dealing with a lot of behavior issues. ... The conversation is, "No we're not doing what we need to be doing interactively with these kids and engaging them. We just have to maintain them, behaviorally and that means structure and paperwork. (PS04)

By April, the fourth and fifth grade teachers began planning together. In fact, after being challenged by Ms. Hill to create one integrated unit per nine weeks, the fourth and fifth grade teachers decided to increase it to two units every nine weeks. In other grade levels, teachers discussed the needs of individual students and how to best meet those needs. In the second grade, they discussed each child's reading level and the need to move students each quarter to best meet their instructional reading needs.

The needs of the community were many. Jeffries Park Elementary worked to be an inclusive community where the school is the hub or the heart of the community. Area churches worked with the school to provide lunch buddies and tutoring services. The

local universities provided entertainment at the incentive celebrations and they placed college interns in the school to tutor students. One community member received a grant so that she could serve as a family liaison. She worked to bring families into the school and she helped create a PTA. Problem solving was ongoing at Jeffries Park, evidenced at grade level meetings, leadership team meetings, Paideia seminars, and in informal conversations throughout the building.

During the Paideia Seminars, teachers used the opportunity to engage in problem solving dialogue. In the final seminar in which the text shared the dreams of the parents at Jeffries Park, portions of the dialogue focused on how to involve parents in the school as well as understanding the perspectives of the parents.

Kasey: When I read all these dreams, what crossed my mind is that although these are your dreams for your kids, I hope these parents realize that you have to help your child get to that point and the kids and the teachers and cannot do it all themselves. The parents must meet us halfway. These dreams are great but they have to start in the home. You build it from there and when they get here we can add the final touches. These dreams cannot come true unless we have the most important part, the parent, to help these kids get to that point and that is what I thought. Where do the parents come in? Do they realize that they play the most important part, that it is not all about what you put on paper?

Michelle: But what is hard too is that when you look at Martin Luther King's piece, he was nineteen and he was thinking of the future when he wrote it. I wish I

was that thoughtful at 19, to think that far into the future. We have expressed before that our kids are just living for today, they can't see past today, or that moment or that second and then you look at these and some of the parents are living for that moment or that second. To be good in school, what is the dream in that.

Teachers in this school consistently faced problems with students, the community and instruction. The Paideia Seminar served as one structure where teachers could problem solve together on these issues. In some instances, issues brought up during the Paideia Seminar were addressed later in faculty and committee meetings. Other structures were also used for problem solving purposes; grade level planning, committee meetings, and informal conversations between teachers. The professional learning community evolved over the school year through through the year.

Discussion and Implications

This study provides insight into how a professional learning community can evolve. At Jeffries Park, the teachers were highly efficacious at the start of the school year and created a common vision that stated high expectations of teachers, parents and students. Each teacher had been hand selected by the principal and they had all worked previously in schools with high numbers of students in poverty. However, once the school year started the reality of the situation and complexities of this school set in. The teachers were overwhelmed by the enormous demands of the students; emotionally, academically and physically. The mood of the school was somber in the fall and teachers were uncertain about how to meet the needs of these students. Some teachers questioned

their own competence. The type of school they had described in their vision was postponed. Putting out fires and handling behavior issues became the overriding theme of the school.

The Paideia Seminars provided a professional development structure that allowed all the teachers to share concerns about themselves, their students and the school community. Unlike unstructured conversations, the Paideia Seminar required teachers to remain focused on the text and apply it to their situations and the facilitator would not let it digress into a griping session. While much research has shown the power of dialogue (Barnes, Wells & Wells,), having a specific protocol that is structured but not rigid, allowed the teachers to problem solve in a safe, non-threatening environment.

Professional learning communities are a growing factor in professional development and teacher learning (Fullan, 2001). This study found that the Paideia Seminar serves as an impetus for a professional learning community. This study found that both the professional learning community and the Paideia Seminar support teachers in their efforts for lifelong learning and teacher development. Indeed, it allowed for the critical building of positive relationships shown to be necessary for school change (Hargreaves, 1994; Tyack & Cuba, 1995). It allowed for trust to grow throughout the faculty, which follows from positive relationships (Glickman, date). A professional learning community can only develop, through the nurturing of relationships among teachers, students and community; giving everyone a voice in the direction and vision of the school; providing a safe environment in which teachers can express themselves

openly and without fear; engaging in purposeful interaction with the entire teaching faculty; and utilizing opportunities for collaborative problem solving.

The Paideia Seminar is a structure for promoting these elements. Teachers in this school reported that the Paideia Seminar was highly valuable in developing a professional learning community through relationships, voice, safety, interaction and problem solving. This study supports the Paideia Seminar as a protocol and structure for engaging teachers in meaningful reflection and dialogue which in turn nurtures and stimulates the development of a professional learning community.

References

(Jen, the books you need to peruse are on my desk with your name on it; please don't include on your final version any citations of materials you haven't looked at.

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