

bilingual staff developers, teachers, and student teachers. Third, diverse forms of expertise are important to the work of a study group. Dialogue among school-based and college-based faculty has promoted learning for both groups. Finally, the facilitator must be skilled in group process and focused on building trust among participants. Despite a history of collaboration among the teachers in the study group, members had to face the inherent risks of making their practice public and come to understand that comments intended as critique of the program potentially threatened the efficacy of individual participants.

Preliminary evidence has already emerged that some teachers' theories of practice are changing as a result of their participation in the study group (Dubetz, 2001). To determine whether the inquiry that takes place in the study group ultimately has an impact on student learning, base line data on the ELLS in the bilingual classrooms have been collected during the first year of the study group.

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### Putting Student Work at the Forefront of Professional Development

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Every year teachers spend countless hours sitting through professional development in-services designed to improve instruction. Most teachers will agree that few, if any, of these in-services have a significant impact on their classroom practices. The current trend in professional development is to move from traditional, isolated in-services to results-driven programs that encourage communities of learners who are motivated and empowered to improve instruction (Burke, 2000).

Frederick Douglass Middle School in the Rochester City School District has implemented a professional development program designed to promote learning communities of teachers focused on improving classroom practice. The program provides opportunities for teachers to meet weekly to review student work and discuss educational beliefs and classroom practices. The purpose of these discussions is twofold: (1) to connect the student work to state and local standards; and, (2) to modify instruction and assessment using actual student performance. The student work serves as the "data" that guides the discussion and informs decision-making surrounding instruction and assessment.

The teachers at Douglass are joining a growing number of educators across the country who are coming together to engage in formal discussions about student work and classroom practice (Bythe et al, 1999). This process of

looking at student work (LASW) originated with group scoring, an integral part of most performance assessments (Mitchell, 1996). Teachers follow specific steps that guide the inquiry process including meeting regularly, designating a recorder, trying the assignment, and developing an action plan to improve learning (Cohen, 2000). These steps or protocols formalize the looking at student work process and create a structure that makes it safe for participants to ask difficult questions ([www.aisr.brown.edu/LSW](http://www.aisr.brown.edu/LSW)). By engaging in the process, teachers develop a mutual understanding of beliefs and assumptions surrounding instruction and reflect on their own practice. Ultimately, the process positively impacts student learning as teachers modify practice to support students in meeting rigorous state and local standards.

Using data to guide decision-making is not a new concept in the educational arena. Many comprehensive reform efforts such as the Accelerated Schools Project utilize the data inquiry process to inform decisions surrounding organizational change (McCarthy and Riner, 1996). Additionally, strategies such as portfolios and work sampling involve using student work as data to develop a comprehensive picture of student performance (Meisels, 1997). What separates the looking at student work process in place at Frederick Douglass Middle School is the focus on using samplings of student work to evaluate classroom practices and to challenge beliefs surrounding instruction. Although the goal of data inquiry is always on improving student performance, the focus of LASW is specifically on the teacher, not the students or the organization.

### Background

Frederick Douglass Middle School is a large urban school serving a diverse population of approximately 1200 students. The middle school includes grades six through eight. Ninety-three per cent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The school is organized into four houses, schools within a school, with each house having its own administrators and student body.

Frederick Douglass Middle School formed a professional practice school partnership with the State University of New York College at Brockport in 1987. The original goals of the partnership were to improve the induction of new teachers, enrich the professional development of veteran teachers and, above all, enhance instruction by fostering a culture of reflection in the school. With these goals as a guide, the partners have been collaborating for the past 14 years to maintain a comprehensive program that meets the educational needs of both partners.

The partnership has resulted in numerous professional development opportunities, including workshops for preservice teachers and new teachers, critical discussions of current issues in education, and in-services supported by SUNY Brockport and Douglass. Over the years the partnership has evolved into a strong network of educators

dedicated to improving teaching and learning. The culture of reflection established through the partnership was critical in laying the foundation for the looking at student work initiative.

Murray, Balzano & Linn (1998) conducted a study of the partnership between SUNY Brockport and Douglass to determine its effect on teaching and learning at both the school and university level. The study found that the partnership contributed to a school culture that values and supports professional growth. Through staff surveys and interviews, teachers expressed a belief that the program promoted more staff interaction with students, improved

### Laying the Groundwork

In the fall of 1999, a team consisting of the newly appointed principal, a SUNY Brockport professor, Douglass teachers and an outside consultant from the Rochester Teachers Association (RTA) began to meet weekly to review and align the various professional development activities in the building. In October 1999 members of the team received data inquiry training at a Data Strategies Institute sponsored by the New York State Education Department under the Dwight D. Eisenhower Program. The team members who attended the training provided an overview of the data inquiry process to the team. The discussion then turned to how data can be used by classroom teachers to improve instruction. The RTA representative knew of a public school in Boston where teams of teachers used student work as "data" to guide discussions surrounding classroom practice.

The team was intrigued and the principal, with the financial support of the RTA and SUNY Brockport, sent school representatives to Boston to observe the process at the public school. The group was able to observe the looking at student work process in practice and discuss the benefits of the process with teachers at the school. The teachers returned enthusiastic about the project and committed to the implementation of the LASW process at Douglass. The principal strongly supported the initiative by arranging to replace administrative assignments (which generally consisted of hall or lunch duty) with LASW sessions.

The LASW was a natural alignment with the school's efforts to create standards-based classrooms. The LASW process would provide teachers with an opportunity to analyze the end product of instruction and connect this work to the standards. This would be a critical link in aligning instruction and assessment with state and local standards.

The group of teachers who initially observed the process in Boston was asked to facilitate LASW teams. Initially, the facilitators met with their respective teams to share their knowledge and observations regarding the LASW process. All staff members were asked to complete feedback forms and outline any concerns they had with the process. The response was overwhelmingly positive and the majority of the staff bought into the process, which was critical to its successful implementation. There were some concerns over whether the process would be sustained long enough to

reap benefits, or tossed to the side like so many other initiatives over the years. The principal assured staff that the initiative would be sustained for at least a three-year period, with yearly evaluations and modifications. With the overwhelming support of teachers, administrators, SUNY Brockport, RTA, and the NYS Education Department through the Dwight D. Eisenhower Program, the LASW process was launched in the 2000-2001 school year.

### Facilitator Training

The eight teachers who agreed to facilitate the process attended four training sessions during the year and met with the principal at least once a semester to reflect on the process. The first training was held in June 2000. Facilitators received in-depth information on the LASW process, defined the role of the facilitator, reviewed different protocols and meeting reports, and learned strategies for dealing with challenging team members. Subsequent trainings focused on strategies for engaging team members, evaluation techniques and guiding questions. The facilitators were constantly refining the process and looking for ways to engage team members.

### Staff Training

The RTA Professional Development Facilitator, with support from the LASW facilitators, provided an orientation for staff members in August 2000. This orientation provided staff with an overview of the LASW process, focusing on the protocol and types of warm/cool feedback. The staff then viewed a video that provided a model of the process in action. Finally, the staff practiced the process using samples of student work.

### The LASW Process

At the first meeting, the LASW teams established ground rules and reviewed the protocol for the process. The protocols differed with each team but generally included a review of the assignment, the presentation of student work, clarifying questions, warm and cool feedback, and reflection on the process.

Each week a different teacher presented an assignment and the accompanying student work. Because the focus was not on students, but on student learning, the names of the students were removed (Mitchell, 1996). This alleviated the tendency for teachers to discuss individual students. The facilitator guided the discussions, ensuring that the ground rules were followed and the protocol completed. Weekly meeting reports, which provided an overview of the discussions and outlined action plans to improve student learning, were completed weekly. Some groups occasionally veered from the protocol to engage in a professional discussion around an issue that developed in the group.

The process was primarily teacher-driven. Conversations were confidential and visitors were permitted

only through prior agreement by the team. Administrators were not allowed to observe the process or review meeting notes without the permission of the group, although attendance was submitted to the principal. Confidentiality and trust were critical to the success of the process because through the presentation of student work and assignments, teachers' instructional practices were exposed to scrutiny, making the teachers vulnerable. Overall the teachers accepted the responsibility for the success of the LASW process by ensuring that their team members contributed to the discussions and invested in the process.

### Evaluation

At the conclusion of the first year of implementation, teachers completed an evaluation to provide feedback on the impact of the LASW process on teaching and learning. A preliminary review of the data reveals that the process has had a positive impact on teachers. The teachers commented upon the strategies discussed and implemented as a result of the process and the effect these strategies had on student performance. In addition, teacher comments included the impact of the process on collegial interactions, what they viewed as the next steps for LASW and possible ways to evaluate the initiative.

Teachers generally agreed that the first year was primarily spent on team building and developing relationships. Many of the comments stressed the importance of maintaining the same groups in order to build upon the work accomplished in the teams the first year. Most agreed that it is too early to quantify the effect of LASW on student performance.

### Next Steps

The first year of implementation was essentially devoted to team building and becoming comfortable with the process of LASW. Although the process involved connecting student work to the standards, much of the conversation and effort was expended in developing collegiality and community among the team members. Now that collegiality has been well established and team members are comfortable with each other and have developed an understanding of the LASW process, the emphasis will be on using student work to modify instruction and assessment.

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### **Study Group in Professional Development School Investigates the State of New York's Grade 4 English Language Arts Assessment**

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Two powerful educational innovations are transforming educators and their practice in Fulton, New York. Since the fall of 1999, J.E. Lanigan Elementary School has been designated a Professional Development School, or PDS. In November 2000, a learning community grown out of the PDS collaborative involving teachers and faculty from SUNY Oswego organized a study group to examine the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 4 performance

test.

Professional Development Schools are institutions formed through partnerships between professional education programs and P-12 schools. Their multifaceted mission encompasses professional preparation of candidates; faculty development; inquiry directed at the improvement of practice; and enhanced student learning (NCATE, 2001). School-based study groups, which bring educators together to learn, plan, and support each other, are an increasingly important approach to professional development.

#### **Teacher study groups as an approach to professional development**

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2001), the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (Sullivan, 2001), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 1999), and the National Education Association (O'Mahar, 2001) have been implementing and sharing effective professional development guidelines and practices. Recently, the New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2000) has also played a significant role in bringing professional development to the forefront. Each district in New York is now required to develop a data driven Professional Development Plan (PDP) that reflects recent research on effective professional development practices. As the literature indicates, one such effective practice is participation in study groups.

"The foundation of the study group concept" is the core idea of teachers "rethinking traditional beliefs about how they teach and how students learn" (Cramer et al., 1996). Citing Reutzer & Cooter (1992), and Harste (1989), the authors point out that educational change often arises from grassroots movements that lead teachers to abandon isolation to join others in professional conversations and actions. A study group has two intrinsically related roles. From a cognitive perspective, it allows members to address problems in a safe environment, drawing on the richness of personal as well as of collective knowledge. From an affective point of view, a study group is likely to provide participants with a sense of belonging, and emotional nourishment and support.

This dual function, affective and cognitive, makes study groups a valuable setting for professional development (Cramer et al., 1996). They offer opportunity for teachers to learn within social settings that break isolation, grant support, and generate conversations and networks. In other words, study groups promote simultaneously the development of professional independence and interdependence.

Traditionally, staff development was designed and offered in a way that teachers "sit and get" information from "experts". Typically, this has been done in one day without any follow up or support offered to assist in its implementation. Surveys of teachers about their attitudes toward these types of inservice experiences indicate their dismay and frustration (Guskey, 1999). Study group participants, on the other hand, actively make decisions and take responsibility for individual and group learning. This

requires complete involvement by persons who typically are more motivated to change. They find in study groups attractive and safe places where new information can be learned without fear of being judged or penalized for "mistakes". They promote more immediate transference of new knowledge into classroom practice and clarify the connections between pedagogical inquiry, theory and practice.

Teacher study groups have been used for a variety of purposes, including: preparing for school restructuring (Garrot, 1995; Boggs, 1996); addressing changes in the curriculum such as in reading (Birchak et al, 1998; Matlin & Short, 1991), writing (Murphy, 1999), and mathematics (Gross, 1993); examining teacher assessment practices (Appalachia Educational Lab, 1992; Hange & Rolfe, 1994); general school-related issues—interpersonal relations, situational leadership, clinical supervision, models of collaboration, etc. (Fishbaugh & Hecimovic, 1994); and, implementation of computer technology in schools (Holbein & Jackson, 1999). At J.E. Lanigan Elementary PDS, the study group met to discuss what students need to know and need to be able to do to achieve success on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 4 performance test.

#### The J.E. Lanigan Elementary PDS Study Group

When J.E. Lanigan Elementary was established as a Professional Development School, a group of teachers started meeting informally outside of the school day to discuss work related issues. Because of interest and concern about state-mandated standardized testing, teachers decided to examine the previous year's Grade 4 NYS ELA Assessment. To assist with this work funds were secured through a grant sponsored by the local teacher center. The PDS coordinator brought a copy of the study group grant RFP to the Lanigan teachers and asked for volunteers to draft the application. A grade 5 teacher and a grade 2 teacher volunteered to complete the \$5000 grant application. The purpose of the group grant was to "provide for the support of a school based study group using NY State assessment results to improve teaching/learning or to meet needs as discussed in district professional development plans" (OCTC RFP, Fall 2000).

In addition, the PDS management team, a structure designed to monitor and strengthen the partnership, drafted a proposal to the Fulton City School District administration for study group participants to receive inservice credit. After negotiations with the Fulton City School District, the proposal was accepted as a pilot. This support was instrumental in bringing study groups from theory to practice.

The group was composed of nine teachers representing K, 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, two student teachers, two faculty members from SUNY Oswego and the PDS coordinator, who acted as facilitator. It met in the Media Center about twice monthly, the second and fourth Tuesdays before school, 7:30-8:30 a.m., from November 2000 through June 2001. A

few of the meetings were cancelled due to snow days or school delays.

The Elementary ELA Study Group, had the following goals: (1) To understand what students are expected to know and be able to do to meet or exceed the elementary ELA standards as assessed by the Grade 4 performance test; (2) To develop shared responsibility and efficacy for supporting all students in reaching high standards; (3) To identify and close gaps in curriculum, instruction and assessment at the elementary level.

#### Study group activities and procedures

The central work of the study group included having all participants review booklet two of the Grade 4 NYS ELA performance test for the year 2000. This was the first time most of them had seen this test. Divided into small groups, they discussed one section of the test at each meeting. Observations were recorded on a prepared form listing knowledge and skills students need to have and what they need to do in order to be successful on each particular section of the test. One task in the elementary assessment requires students to analyze how a character changes from the beginning of a story to the end. Students are required to synthesize their conclusions in an extended response using details from the story to support them. As each item on the test was analyzed and discussed, teachers identified aspects of the curriculum that met the expectations, also noting the gaps and duplications at each level and across levels.

At each meeting, a teacher volunteered to complete a Study Group Log to provide an ongoing record of the process and information. It included: a brief summary of discussion and activities answering the question "What happened today?" and classroom application of what had been studied—"What are students learning and doing as a result of what you learning and doing? It also included answers to the questions "What are you ready to share with other colleagues?" and "What concerns or questions do you have for school leaders?"

The study group also encouraged the sharing of educational materials such as articles and books. While discussions often focused on testing (content, technical aspects of grading, standards, education policies and politics), they also covered many other related topics as well (teacher and student portfolios, specific instructional strategies in reading, writing, and listening, and work with preservice teachers.)

The culminating group activity was sharing the results of the study group investigation of the Grade 4 NYS ELA test with other teachers at J.E. Lanigan Elementary. Three meeting times before school were planned to allow most teachers to be reached. As incentive to attendance, the group decided to offer a small stipend equivalent to the earnings for teaching after school groups for one hour and access to money specifically targeted for ELA. Those present received a list of teaching strategies that took into consideration knowledge and skills that students need to be

successful on the Grade 4 ELA K-4 performance test.

## Results

The final grant report, the meeting logs, and notes from conversations with participants provide some indicators of results achieved in the J.E. Lanigan PDS study group. According to the literature, participant teachers are more likely to transfer to the classroom what they learn in a study group approach rather than in more traditional staff development activities. After just four meetings teachers in the study group indicated that they had introduced changes in teaching focus and practices about following directions, reading and writing: "students are applying their ability to pick questions apart, read for information and answer in complete sentences in other areas of the curriculum (math, science, etc.)" (Study Group Log for 1/23/01). Upon reflection, grade 1 teachers realized that they were not providing enough opportunities for students to develop their listening skills. As a result they started having students respond to questions orally and in writing concerning daily morning announcements.

Informally during meetings teachers communicated new ideas put into practice, generating numerous conversations and identified research questions that made evident the connection between educational inquiry, theory and practice. An instance concerns the questions about the development of listening skills. Teachers talked about allowing or not students to take notes at the same time that a text was read to them aloud. They wanted to know at what grade level and how should note taking be taught (Study Group Log for 5/8/01).

A third outcome of the study group was the long-term effort in K-6 curriculum alignment. By identifying knowledge and skills that students needed to acquire by fourth grade, gaps in the curriculum emerged. It was possible to identify certain specific skills were not taught in any of the grades. Teachers then began planning the steps in curriculum and instruction necessary to close these gaps. Tests required that students write within a specified time frame. Not enough opportunities were given to students to learn and practice this time management skill, and teachers were then able to include this in writing activities on a more regular basis: Teachers also found that K-6 literature at Lanigan included mostly works of fiction. Realizing the importance of non-fiction reading, they sought to include more of these texts.

The three meetings conducted at the end of the year by study group members to share information about the analysis of the ELA performance test extended the conversation about classroom practices, educational inquiry and curriculum development to all the J.E. Lanigan faculty. This fulfilled important PDS goals, faculty development and dissemination of inquiry directed at the improvement of practice. The grant report concludes: "This proved to be an enlightening time for everyone. This kind of sharing of information, both horizontally and vertically rarely happens, mainly because

of the constraints of schedules. This was a valuable venue for sharing that we hope to do more of in the future."

The rich list of teaching strategies to enhance student learning and performance included the following suggestions: provide formal lessons to develop listening skills; practice timed writing; pay close attention to sequence of events; vary transition wording; use non-fiction materials frequently; apply critical thinking skill, calling attention to changes that occur in stories; move beyond the literal in a reading, identifying themes and symbolism; offer music and art with literacy components; analyze titles closely; rephrase questions and practice rephrasing orally and in writing; compare similarities and differences in the texts; develop independent readers.

In the last study group meeting, an informal self-assessment conversation took place. The group unanimously declared the process unfinished—there was no closure. The tone of the statement was positive. The process remained unfinished because there is still work to do concerning the understanding of testing of curriculum and its alignment, of best instructional practices that promote student learning and growth, and, bringing it to full circle, the understanding of authentic assessment. The study group has work to do: "We plan to continue this study group in the fall to follow up on our findings and curriculum writing. All members have been very dedicated to our task. It has been a meaningful learning experience for our staff members and a chance to share across grade levels" (grant report, 2001, p.3).

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