I wanted to create a culture where instructional leadership and professional learning included everyone. I remembered what Peter Senge recalled the principal of an innovative school saying (Sparks, 2001): “She said her primary job was creating an environment to continually learn. She said she was convinced that if teachers were continually learning, kids would be continually learning” (p. 47). That meant to me that for students to learn, teachers must learn. For them to learn, I knew I would have to be first.

I began by contacting a university consultant, Scott Greenwood. We spent dozens of hours talking about reform. My school, West Bradford Elementary School in Downingtown, Pa., is one of nine elementary schools in a high expectations, upper middle-class suburban district, and the pressures to score high on state standardized tests really weigh on our staff. The consultant was concerned that the desire to change our staff development was driven by the test, but the more we talked, he began to understand my position: Teachers’ ongoing learning will translate to better student learning — and testing will take care of itself over time. Although time-consuming, our conversations were crucial in establishing a climate of mutual support.

We began to develop a common understanding of our intention and purpose. I wanted a process of personal learning where the teachers would feel some control, understand the project’s importance to the school’s growth, and appreciate that meaningful change takes place over time and with support — as had our conversations. We wanted the experience to be ongoing (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997) as opposed to the traditional sit-and-get model that both we and the majority of school staff knew all too well.

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‘Change had to begin with me’
To encourage substantive change, I would have to model the process. I had to first establish a similar philosophy and beliefs with the consultant, then demonstrate to staff how the two of us could work effectively together as peers, modeling collaborative behavior for the teachers who would be expected to replicate this collaboration within the building.

The consultant and I decided our springboard would be a study group centered on professional reading. We would co-facilitate the group. We recognized that merely handing out books and articles, however good, would have little impact on instruction. But we were confident that active reading would set the stage for the kind of self-reflection and conversation that would evolve into meaningful change. Teachers and I also would set personal goals, and we planned for peer visitations.

The consultant selected two initial texts on literacy. I needed to trust the consultant’s professional judgment that the reading selections would best facilitate achieving our goals. I had to model the trust I would need from the initial group of grade-level teachers who would participate. To stay within the budget of our grant, we asked 2nd- and 4th-grade teachers to be part of the first group. If we were successful, we planned to include the remaining grade-level teams the following year. We gave the materials to the teachers, gave them time to read, and set clear parameters for the upcoming discussion.

I read the books knowing I was preparing to facilitate workshops with my own teachers. As a result, I read with a focus and intensity I rarely apply to my professional reading. The consultant, too, noted his reading took on an entirely different meaning. Rather than preparing a presentation for a college classroom, he was reading to collaborate with practicing teachers about instruction in active classrooms.

We started with two two-hour sessions, dividing the teachers into primary and intermediate grade levels. We hired substitute teachers for that time and set up a staff development room so we could accomplish the work during the school day, underscoring our belief that staff development should be part of teachers’ regular work. As we worked, I sensed new feelings of unity and collegiality as group members revisited highlighted, dog-eared, and sticky-noted texts. There were no long, pregnant silences. The teachers responded to each other’s comments, feeding off each other’s thoughts.

Using the text as a focus let the groups avoid the typical pitfalls of a discussion group: random complaining, speeches of personal beliefs, and birdwalking around the issues. The texts forced us to stay focused on the content of the reading and how it related to the current levels of practice in our classrooms. In many cases, the text affirmed to teachers that they were doing the right things and pointed to areas where they could fine-tune some practices.

My role as a collaborator in this process created unique challenges. A key element to build a professional learning community is creating a climate of trust. To plant the seeds for a trusting environment, I had to share my own dissatisfaction with where I was as an instructional leader, reflecting on the constraints I felt in my role as principal. I wanted to spark similar self-reflection among the staff.

I also needed to function as a peer who was learning, rather than sage. I needed to honor the collective experiences of the classroom teachers, reminding the teachers that I don’t have all the answers, just a firm grasp of the questions. Yet the teachers continued to ask me for direction and decisions in our approach to literacy, leaving me vulnerable to criticism from nonparticipating teachers, colleagues, and district office administrators.

At the end of the first day, I was mentally and physically exhausted. I needed feedback. The university consultant said my modeling of never being satisfied, of being the imperfect mentor, of being aware of the need for continued growth, had set the stage for the work we needed to do next.

The teachers provided candid feedback in writing and directly to the consultant and me. They said they appreciated the opportunity to share ideas and collaborate. The dialogue invigorated them, and they also felt affirmed in many ways by the reading.

The texts helped establish a common base of experience and vocabulary. The readings also were meant as an impetus to change instructional practice. Teachers were encouraged to single out an idea or practice that would prompt a goal or a question for their personal investigation. They were not required to share their personal targets with the group, but many did as they asked colleagues for more ideas and support. These targets were the basis for the next step —
Some teachers were worried that the close we came to classroom visitations. They were concerned there was a catch, that there was something they were supposed to be doing when colleagues visited. They became concerned with the specifics of a schedule, the time, and the expectations. I heard a lot of: “Tell us what you are looking for.” I helped to have a consultant, an outsider who was able to talk privately with concerned individuals and re-establish trust.

The first visitation day began with a meeting. Being clear and explicit about the purpose of classroom visitations was crucial. I needed to make it clear to the participants that it is human nature to place value on observations, but each person needed to distinguish between values and judgments. I, too, needed to reflect on the fact that I was giving teachers the opportunity to take on my role as observer. In many schools, the principal has universal control of classroom observation. Giving up this control gave the teachers and me a real feeling of collegiality. Barriers were broken that first day.

We were careful to use the term peer visitation about the activities to avoid local controversies about the terms peer observation and peer coaching. Yet we wanted the classroom visits to create feedback to help teachers self-reflect and pave the way for further change. We reminded teachers that lasting change occurs first through a change in attitude, next through a change in decision making, and finally through a change in the repertoire of teaching behaviors.

The teachers had chosen practices they would incorporate in their lessons from among those gleaned from the discussion groups. We did not want the participants to sit back and smugly say, “I already do all of that,” and avoid self-assessment — yet we were not looking for overly ambitious or cosmetic change, either. I reminded teachers that our goal for the day was to maintain trust and be comfortable, laying the groundwork for future dialogue.

Roving substitutes took over the classes, and teams of teachers began their rounds. The consultant and I joined a team as peers. Teachers asked genuine, curious, professional questions as they probed to understand changes in familiar practices and how those might apply to themselves.

At the end of the day, we had a debriefing meeting. Teachers seemed to be exploring their personal belief systems as a result of the study and visitations — they were much more reflective. And so was I. There was a feeling of openness and collegial support.

The visitations so far had been intragrade, but several teachers suggested it would be helpful to visit flanking grades to enhance articulation and professional sharing. Some teachers said they at first chafed under the additional burden of assigned reading, that they would not have chosen academic reading after long hours at work with students, planning, grading, and attending meetings — but that once they delved into their books, they discovered the merit and the impact. They talked about prior practices they were used to, compared with what they had just experienced; the tension they felt between district goals and initiatives vs. building-level and personal professional goals; and the pressures of accountability in the current mania of testing.

A spirit of risk taking and growth unified the group. We were beginning to experience a sense of the power of job-embedded staff development as opposed to the traditional chalk-and-talk models. We were energized, hopeful that the momentum would maintain itself, mindful of what we needed to do to keep things going in a positive direction. Rooting teaching changes in good professional literature and honest professional dialogue made me wonder how we ever did it the traditional way.

As principal, I devoted a lot of time and energy to this effort. This work enabled me to move closer to my larger goal of building a vibrant community of learners within our school. How did this experience make a difference? The teachers saw me reading and thinking about literacy; they stood side by side with me during classroom visitations. They observed me while I collaborated with the consultant and co-facilitated workshops and meetings. In short, they saw me change my role and alter my behavior to bring about a change in our school.

Meaningful change can only occur within each individual. The teachers in West Bradford read the selections and brought personal meaning to the readings. They set personal goals for improving practices in their classrooms and shared these practices with supportive colleagues. Now they have begun to have richer conversations as each person develops new perspectives on creating a robust classroom climate where literacy achievement can be even greater. I am frequently pulled into these conversations for collaboration and support. I see our changes rippling through the staff as other teachers invite their colleagues to visit and share new practices. We have grown into a learning community, and I believe now, more than ever, that the high-stakes tests will take care of themselves.

REFERENCES
