

DOES YOUR SCHOOL HAVE A DOUG FRANKLIN?

TEACHERS CAN BE THE MOST IMPORTANT RESOURCE IN THE BUILDING

By Linda K. Hoy, Janice Bradley, and Julie Horwitz

Teachers are powerful human resources who are often overlooked and can serve as assets for school-based change. That was our biggest lesson from a two-year partnership between faculty from a state university and three local, rural middle and high schools. The partnership was created to help facilitate teacher mathematics professional learning communities (Horwitz, Bradley, & Hoy, 2011).

These partnerships happened in multiple ways. All professional learning communities met at the school once or twice a month, either during school hours or immediately after school, and were mandated by building administration yet rarely attended by them. During the two-year tenure of the university/school partnership, other key lessons of what worked to support learning and change included:



1. Administrator and organizational support must be in place for teachers to meet;
2. Participant roles for learning in a professional learning community must be clear and agreed upon; and
3. Teacher/university partner relationships influence what gets accomplished during professional learning community time.

However, the role of teachers as human resources gave us the greatest insights into how to help learning communities succeed.

During the two-year study, three professional learning communities demonstrated varied commitment, ownership, and productivity, yet only one seemed poised to reach its potential. In an ever-changing high school professional learning community, specific teacher actions and behaviors, particularly from one teacher leader, promoted teacher learning and change. His asset-based thinking mindset played a critical role in the learning community as he helped to foster a collaborative learning culture among his fellow teachers.

DOUG FRANKLIN'S STORY

Doug Franklin (not his real name) was a new teacher who arrived at his high school mathematics teaching assignment fresh out of college. The school's math department was very small, four teachers covering grades 6 through 12. Franklin had a strong background in mathematics content and quickly distinguished himself as a leader at his school. He was committed to students and colleagues, willing to work long and hard and do what was necessary to help students succeed over the long term. In his first year, Franklin was a listener. He knew he was an outsider in a rural, small community that wasn't always welcoming. The people in this community were accustomed to new teachers coming in with a lot of energy, starting new programs, and then leaving after a short time. As a member of the professional learning community his first year, Franklin was active but not in charge and often followed others' leads. While there were good conversations during learning community sessions, learning was not always intentional or focused. Talk was often around students and math, yet not concentrated, not always productive, and certainly not thinking about students from an asset-based perspective.

During year two of the professional learning community study, Franklin stepped into a strong leadership role. He became a leader who was respectful, collaborative, and highly organized. As facilitator, Franklin planned all meetings. Each meeting began with an agenda, which had a clear, measurable goal or objective. Here is an example of goals for one professional learning community meeting:

- Teachers will engage in problem solving that enriches their understanding of algebra standards.
- Teachers will plan how to present a problem to students at all levels.
- Teachers will plan how to analyze student work in order to reach a better understanding of algebraic thinking.

During learning community sessions, the group completed a short reading, worked on a math problem, and made plans for implementing change in classrooms. Even-

tually other members of the group brought problems, readings, and ideas to share with the group. This was possible because Franklin created a safe environment where members completed challenging math problems; all ideas and solutions were respected and appreciated. Often someone from the group would remark, "This is fun." Sometimes members would get lost in a discussion about math.

Ultimately, these ideas and solutions led to learning resulting in changes in all members' classrooms. Below is an excerpt from an example of a productive interaction where Franklin showed his strong leadership skills with a reluctant learning community member (called Teacher 1 in this transcript) by pointing out different problem-solving perspectives:

Franklin: Please work on the crossing the river problem on your own, and then we will discuss how you attacked it.

Teacher 1: How do you do this if there isn't a rope attached? I am sorry; there is no way to do this.

Franklin: I had trouble with this at first, and I had to draw it for it to make sense.

The teachers are quiet and working on the problem.

Teacher 1: I have always hated these problems, and I don't see the point of them. I think students need to see a point in what they are doing.

Teacher 2: How could you make this problem relevant?

Franklin: What do you see about how the students in the article approached the problem?

Teacher 1: She was counting one-way trips, and we were counting round-trips.

Franklin: It is interesting to think about where she got the variables from.

Teacher 1: But it does work out. That is really cool.

Franklin: It does. That is interesting; there are different ways students represent their knowledge.

They talk about the differences in the students' perceptions of algebraic representation (transcript, September 2, 2009).

Franklin facilitated professional learning among colleagues by employing facilitation skills to create trust among teachers.

TEACHER AS HUMAN RESOURCE

Franklin served as a valuable resource in supporting a collaborative culture in the professional learning community. In education, decision makers typically think of resources as money, books, and professional development. Seldom do they consider teachers and what they bring to the school and classroom as resources. Haycock (1998) explains that the impact on students can be great if the teacher is effective, and negative if the teacher is ineffective. However, it is our belief that teachers' attitudes about their own efficacy and that of their students can have the same positive or negative impact. Franklin's effectiveness

as a human resource can be understood from two perspectives: asset-based thinking and teacher leader actions.

ASSET-BASED THINKING

A teacher can be the most important resource in a school. When the teacher's attitude derives from asset-based thinking, positive impact can occur for both teacher and student. Asset-based thinking is defined as "a way of viewing reality" (Cramer & Wasiak, 2008, p. 7). Those who embrace this model approach things from a positive as opposed to a negative perspective. Asset-based thinkers look for what is working and what strengths or assets exist within themselves, their relationships, and the situations in which they find themselves, and then build on those strengths to accomplish their goals. Asset-based thinking taps inner strengths to realize "personal power [that] comes from leveraging the assets that make you 'you'" (Cramer & Wasiak, 2008, p. 19). In other words, assets that exist within can be used to create change. Cramer and Wasiak (2008) describe asset-based thinking as a model that helps individuals and leaders "expand your influence" (p. 20). Leadership involves influence. When used ethically and positively, this influence opens up doors for creativity, collaboration, and development of other teacher leaders.

Those who use asset-based thinking dig deep inside to identify and commit to areas they feel most compelled to impact. "Making an impact is rooted in what you were born to do. Your impact comes to life at the intersection of your present actions and the future you want to create" (Cramer & Wasiak, 2008, p. 111). Asset-based thinking clarifies where people feel most called to work or serve. Asset-based thinkers answer the question, "What impact or results do we hope to gain from our work?"

With asset-based thinking, the future is an open script to be written by anyone involved in a school. Cramer & Wasiak (2008) describe it this way: "Asset-based thinking collapses the boundaries between past, present, and future, allowing you to focus on all of them simultaneously. You learn to create and tell detailed stories about the future you most desire, as if it had already happened. You make a memory and a vision all at once. The narrative power of asset-based thinking stories creates worthwhile visions of the future that come to life in the present. You become the author and producer of the future you most want so you can live it right now (p. 139)."

Franklin was able to create a learning space for the math department to envision its future. He demonstrated asset-based thinking while facilitating conversations in the professional learning community sessions.

TEACHER LEADER ACTIONS

A teacher leader is an educator who influences educators individually and collectively to improve teaching practices in order to increase student learning (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Franklin's leadership from an asset-based thinking perspec-

tive was essential to fostering a collaborative learning culture among fellow teachers in the mathematics professional learning community. In alignment with the Teacher Leader Model Standards developed by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2011), Franklin:

1. Facilitated professional learning among colleagues by employing facilitation skills to create trust among teachers;
2. Built ownership of the professional learning community;
3. Supported colleagues to collect and communicate data from classrooms to support student learning;
4. Engaged in reflective dialogue with colleagues; and
5. Served as a team leader to use teacher expertise and knowledge of mathematics and instruction.

All functions that Franklin performed as a teacher leader contributed to asset-based thinking and a continuous learning model in the math professional learning community.

RECOGNIZE ASSETS

With ever-diminishing resources, schools must look within to supply resources for supporting continuous professional learning. Educators must consider each other the most valuable resource in a system, to be developed and supported with leadership, structures, tools, and processes for promoting continual professional learning. We consider Franklin, a teacher who led the professional learning community as a teacher leader using asset-based thinking, a prime example of a resource that is too often left untapped.

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