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Scholar-Practitioners Building Learning Communities in Practice: Engaging Curriculum, Engaging Learning

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Abstract

Learning communities has become a buzzword on multiple levels in the field of education, but what this means in practice continues to be unclear. A superintendent of a rural consolidated school district and a critical teacher educator engaged in an exploration of the learning communities construct within a scholar-practitioner leadership frame. Defining scholar-practitioner leadership as moving beyond professional reflection to critical action of preparing K–12 students to face and address the complex issues of the 21st century, the authors used action research methods to engage new teachers to the district under study in scholarly professional development. The project shows an example of how two educators, one in public school practice and one in university practice, built a scholarly partnership and used it to build an inquiry-based approach to professional development within the district under study.

Introduction

Serving as an instructional leader of a school corporation in 2008 in the United States should mean that the superintendent is aware of and in tune to the curriculum needs for the 21st century learner (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006) and as such should be able to know, recognize, and discuss current practical teaching strategies that will lead to an engaged classroom environment throughout a school corporation. The superintendent should be knowledgeable through ongoing reading of research, attending professional development conferences, and engaging with teachers in scholarly conversations about how educators can develop classrooms where the classroom culture is rich with learning opportunities and engagement strategies for all students.

Likewise, an instructional leader should foster the same development among classroom teachers in her corporation. Professional development efforts can build capacity (Lambert,

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2003) in the superintendent and classroom teachers as they explore together what it means to engage one another in learning and what it means to engage K–12 students in learning. This should be the goal; but unfortunately, it is not often the case.

That was the goal of this action research project, which was inspired after Superintendent Laura Huffman (coauthor) listened to a scholarly presentation by Melissa Visalli and Glenda Moss (Visalli, Hoppe, Heniser, & Moss, 2006) at the Midwestern Educational Research Association Conference in fall 2006. Melissa is a middle school teacher in Laura's district, and Glenda (coauthor of this current project and one with Melissa) was Melissa's professor. Laura approached Glenda after the presentation and stated, "I want to do that," meaning to conduct action research in her practice, write, and present professionally. That conversation began our professional partnership and inquiry.

We set up a time to meet a couple of weeks later to begin the inquiry process. We each brought to the table our professional identities, including positions of power, knowledge base, dispositions, and expertise. Laura was in a position to approach classroom teachers to participate in an action research project to facilitate professional development among teachers and to examine the impact of professional development on teaching and learning, and she needed three hours of course credit to professionalize her license. We had to consider issues of fidelity¹ to ensure we did not force classroom teachers to allow us to use their contributions to the professional development process as our data simply so that Laura could receive course credit. Laura's goal was to build a community of learners among the new teachers in her school based on professional trust, and it was not until the participants responded to an anonymous end-of-project survey that the complexity of ensuring fidelity within a research study that is designed for professional development in a school setting was brought to the forefront in one subject's reflection, "One improvement/suggestion is the method used to enlist subjects. I felt at the beginning that I was not asked to be a part of the group but was simply placed in the group. Other subjects (participants) may not 'buy in' or participate as I have. I do see the significance and importance in what is being done in this study and agree to participate fully."

Glenda was in a position to design an independent study course to meet Laura's professional needs, similar to what she had done with Melissa. Glenda brought to the table a scholar-practitioner view of leadership and teacher education (Moss, 2004a) and commitment to building meaningful communities of learners with public school educators. This commitment is embedded in her professional work with the master's in education program at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne, where she participated in the construction of the vision statement.

We seek to build with you, our students, our stakeholders, and ourselves...*Scholar-Practitioner learning communities for engaging in a democratic and diverse society.* (<http://www.ipfw.edu/prst/ElSecUAS.pdf>)

The vision is to move beyond staged partnerships designed to meet grant funding requirements only to dissolve when the money flow ceases.

In the next two sections the authors' voices are each heard separately as a matter of fidelity and intersubjectivity (Moss, 2004b). Although Glenda and Laura are both professional educators and both have doctorates, they are situated in different positions that influence their goals and perceptions. In their work together on this project, they experienced intersubjectivity to one another and the classroom teachers who participated, but they each retained their separate identities. Glenda's professional identity and philosophy are framed by a scholar-practitioner leadership perspective. She will discuss how her perspective influenced this project, and Laura will follow with her narrative of experience in working with Glenda to construct and carry out this project in a rural, public school setting.

Glenda Moss's Voice

My work to advance the scholar-practitioner leadership construct is contextualized by my doctoral studies at Stephen F. Austin State University from 1998 through graduation in 2001 and my antecedent experience as a middle school classroom teacher in a Title 1 school in east Texas. I was in the second cohort of the newly implemented scholar-practitioner doctoral leadership program and worked closely with Patrick Jenlink and Raymond Horn as a research assistant. In that capacity, I found the boundaries blurred between teacher and learner as we worked collaboratively on some projects. Within those projects we were contributing to the construction of the scholar-practitioner leadership construct and exploring what it meant in our separate educational practices.

Because I had spent 13 years in middle school practice, my thinking tended to be framed by that setting as I conceptualized a new kind of leadership in public schools. I found myself writing about revolutionary multicultural leadership praxis², arguing for critical scholarly leadership practice in United States schools. Jenlink and I (Moss & Jenlink, 2000) problematized leadership and situated "it as central to the social politics that resist changes toward participatory democracy in schools." We proposed critical scholar-practitioner leadership "as an important consideration to social critique and action viewed as essential to moving to the foreground politics of race, class, and gender." We argued for critical scholar-practitioner leadership "as a consideration in both critically analyzing policies and practices in schools and in leading stakeholders to active participation in critical inquiry and decision making" (p. 1). In our coauthored text, we presented leadership in a way

to remove the traditional boundaries of role often associated with the authoritarian figure in the school. Rather, leadership is understood as transcending the differentiation of principal and teacher or other

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traditional connotations. As used in concert with [a] critical scholar-practitioner [ideal], leadership is the processes and actions of any person (teacher, principal, parent, student) who seeks cultural and social change through social critique and praxis. (p. 1, footnote 1)

My work with Melissa, the middle school teacher in Laura's district, was framed within this critical view of a scholar-practitioner model to create a human-rights inspired curriculum so as to engage seventh-grade students in self-examination of discrimination patterns within this rural school district. Although the rural school population is predominantly white and middle class, some students do not fit that description and experience discrimination from peers. Melissa and her colleagues were also concerned about the way discriminatory thinking was being passed on from one generation to another and underpreparing the students of the dominant culture to participate in a democratizing process as citizens and future coworkers in a diverse society.

The lack of a clear presence of immigrants learning English as a second language, African Americans, and students of low socioeconomics makes it even more difficult at times to engage white learners in developing an inclusive view and working towards democracy in the broader society. The harmony of democracy in an all-white, middle class society is challenged by immigration and declining economics. What some children have been privileged to experience as the human norm must be challenged by classroom teachers in the process of what Paulo Freire (2003) describes as the development of *critical consciousness* in order to recognize what they take for granted is socially constructed and supported by the dominant cultural patterns of a middle class society. Melissa's project was about developing critical consciousness of human rights among seventh-grade students who live in a global society.

When Laura responded with enthusiasm to Melissa's and my presentation at MWERA, I began to think about what a project with a superintendent of a rural school district would look like. It was a perfect way to further actualize the vision of our master's program to build *Scholar-Practitioner learning communities for engaging in a democratic and diverse society*. With my critical view of scholar-practitioner leadership and a consciousness of the lack of a great deal of diversity among the population in Laura's school district, I wondered if we would be able to design a critical action research project to include "reflexive critique," "dialectic critique," "collaboration," "risking disturbance," "creating multiple structures," and "theory and practice internalized," six principles of critical action research presented by Winter (1996, p. 13–14). At a minimum, we hoped to use reflexive critique, collaboration, disturbance of the traditional distance between superintendent and teachers, disturbance concerning the traditional view of professional development, and promote a scholar-practitioner model of inquiry into practice for the advancement of engaging K–12 teachers and their students in learning.

Susan Hall (1996) has outlined reflexivity in critical action research. This includes critiquing the research process and making clear the ways researchers influence the project. In these opening reflexive narratives, Laura and I are trying to give as much background information as we can so that the readers will clearly see the ways we influenced this study. We do not claim to have used a scientific, empirical approach. The goal was to disrupt traditional teaching practices that minimize education to memorization and multiple-choice testing. We intended to engage teachers in reflexive examination of their own teaching practices through a lens of inquiry into engagement of learners with the hope that they would engage their students in a process of constructing knowledge rather than memorizing a body of knowledge.

When I met with Laura, I talked to her about our master's program vision statement and my critical stance. I told her about how I use dialogue in my teaching to democratize my authority and engage preservice teachers as co-learners and teachers with me. I ground my teaching in a Freirean (2003) inspired practice of intersubjectivity as contrasted to a perennialist or traditional philosophy that promoted the authority of the teacher and submissive, passive role of students. Freire described the traditional relationship of teacher to students as the "banking" model in which the teacher deposited knowledge into students who were viewed as empty vessels. Freire proposed an intersubjective model that promotes engagement of students and teachers as learners through dialogue in relationship to one another and texts.

Through dialogue with Laura concerning a project designed for teacher professional development, I learned that she had 23 new teachers in her district, and I began to conceptualize those teachers as her students, similar to the way that my preservice teachers are my students. My background studies in a middle management program in the early 1990s helped me to conceptualize Laura as an instructional leader. My background studies in learning community theory (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Kofman & Senge, 1995; Sergiovani, 1994, 1996) and critical leadership theory (Parker, 2007; McLaren, 1999) helped me to conceptualize a way that Laura could accept her responsibility as instructional leader and work to engage the new teachers in a way that would model the democratization of Laura's authority through authentic participation (Anderson, 1998).

Laura and I discussed how often there seems to be a divide between central office administrators and classroom teachers. Many teachers never have an opportunity to converse with the superintendent. I imagined working in a district where the superintendent created space for new classroom teachers to engage with the superintendent in a professional development process that would contribute to the professional development of the classroom teachers and the superintendent. From there, Laura and I designed an action research project through which she would

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model engagement of learners by engaging the new teachers in her district in dialogue concerning what it means to engage children in learning. The project was also designed to allow Laura to go into the classrooms as a source of support rather than as an authoritative evaluator.

Because this action research project was intended to be intersubjective in that it was designed to bridge traditional boundaries between superintendent and new teachers, we paid attention to issues of fidelity (Moss, 2004b) to ensure that the new teachers' voices were engaged and heard as a process of freedom promoted by Freire (2003). Rather than Laura telling the new teachers her definition of engagement of learners, dispensing a list of strategies for engaging students in learning, and conducting official, evaluative observations to ensure the new teachers were using the strategies, the new teachers began the dialogue by sharing their ideas on what engagement of students in learning looks like in the classroom. We believed that this freedom is not a freedom *from* but rather a freedom *to* accept responsibility for engaging all K–12 students in Laura's district in learning, as this is essential for the development of literacy, which is essential for participating as critical citizens in a diverse society. Thus, this project was designed with change in mind, change from passive learning to engaged learning.

Laura Huffman's Voice

I wanted all of my new teachers to emerge as teacher leaders and take an inquiry approach to developing engaging instruction in the way Melissa, a first-year teacher, had done with her middle school team. Glenda referred to this as scholar-practitioner teacher leadership (Moss, 2004a). I liked what I saw when Melissa and Glenda presented at MWERA. I wanted to adopt a scholar-practitioner superintendent perspective as I moved forward in my second year in a rural/industrial small town community that houses four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school serving approximately 3,600 K–12 students. I explored with Glenda how to use action research to build an inquiring community of learners among the new teachers to my district. The goal was professional development for the participating teachers and me in a setting where staff development for the corporation had been mostly school-based and lacked cohesion to develop a strong learning community culture across grades K–12. Although professional development existed in the corporation, it had not been comprised of genuine discussions of critical concepts, inclusive of the notion of how to maintain classroom environments whereby the students are involved and active participants.

Thus, I accepted my responsibility for curriculum and professional development by working in a scholarly partnership with Glenda to design professional development embedded in a narrative inquiry project. Glenda (2008) had actively engaged classroom teachers through narrative inquiry methods in the context of school practice and

theorized that such praxis contributes to educational reform and democracy. I wanted to promote a similar kind of educational reform that grows out of meaningful engagement through inquiry.

To develop my identity as an instructional leader in the corporation, Glenda suggested I use dialogical inquiry methods (Burbules, 1993; Freire, 2003; Isaacs, 1993; Jenlink & Carr, 1996; Murphey, K., Moss, G., Hanah, S., & Weiner, R., 2005) to engage new teachers to the district in a collaborative study of what it means to engage students in learning. By design, the project created time and space for reading research, reflecting on theory and practice, and dialoguing with colleagues to develop a learning community. Thus, by design, the project modeled engagement at multiple levels. Glenda engaged me in action research; I engaged the new teachers in my district in inquiry-based professional development activities; the teachers engaged their students.

The ultimate goal was systemic change from competence learning and knowledge acquisition to active meaning making on the part of the superintendent, teachers, and children in learning through authentic professional development. Specifically, we asked the following questions: How do new teachers to the district define student engagement? What strategies do new teachers to the district use to engage students in learning? What impact does engaging new teachers to the district in professional learning activities have on new teachers' understanding of student engagement as evidenced in practice? What learning engagement strategies emerge among the learning community?

Theoretical Perspective of Engagement of the Learner

Engagement of the Learner

Engagement, as part of the concept of "Engagement of the Learner," is a broad term that can be defined by the situation in which it is used. Whalen (1998) referred to the defining moments in the process of creating an engaging learning environment where knowledge and activity blend together as a state of "flow." Another notion of engagement in education is the idea that a learning activity results in "meaning for the student," a key component that determines whether a student will choose to find the activity worth doing (Schlechty, 2001). In this sense, engagement is the positive response of a student to a learning activity that has the potential to result in the student doing and learning in a meaningful way.

Others look at the concept of engagement in terms of student interest. There are two ways for the teacher to think about student interest in the classroom. First, teachers need to care about their students as individuals and accept the trying task of identifying the interests the students have. Secondly, educators are challenged to think of ways to create new interest on the part of students (Tomlinson, 2001). In addition, other education specialists expand our understanding of learner engagement by adding the dimension of

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student ownership (Hiler & Paul, 2005). This involves a metacognitive process in which students engage in thinking about what they are trying to learn and accept responsibility for their own learning. This shift from teacher to student is powerful and visible by the more personal involvement and personal growth evidenced in the student. Some refer to this as empowerment, a phenomenon evidenced by a shift in learning power.

These various perspectives provide a broad umbrella under which we were able to explore the dynamics of engaging new teachers to a district in exploring ways they could more fully engage their students in learning. If “Engagement of the Learner” is a concept to be studied and considered for the educator in today’s and tomorrow’s classrooms, then the definition of this term should be both encompassing in depth and defined in specificity when seeking strategy development, which was a point of this study. It was a significant goal of this study to decide upon a shared definition for “Engagement of the Learner” and then see how we could come together as a Learning Community to do so. Also, it was a significant goal of this study to develop a strategy list and to observe and assist each other as part of this Learning Community to understand how this list could be compiled, utilized, and stretched to meet the different needs of our students and the flow of the particular classroom on a particular day.

Post-Industrial Engagement in the Literature

Many involved in education would share the philosophical belief that students in a classroom need to be “engaged” in the process for true learning to occur. We could surmise without doing a formal survey that the business of schools is to invent tasks, activities, and assignments that the students find engaging and in turn lead to critical thinking skills that go beyond the basics and beyond the rote learning that served as a basic educational foundation years ago in our limited industrialized nation’s goals for our students. In today’s times of technological advancements, higher-order thinking processes are highlighted as being a necessity. In fact, it is noted that the world we live in is becoming increasingly competitive for our students, and that knowing this, it is imperative that we consider how we can engage our students because while students can be compelled to attend school, they cannot be compelled to be attentive while they are there (Schletchy, 2001).

In addition, the notion of changes in students and the coined phrases for the group of students in today’s grade K–12 classrooms as the “millennials” or the “net generation” lead to an awareness that students need to have the benefit of learning environments that incorporate information technology, even perhaps through the use of games and simulations, to create greater engagement (Oblinger, 2004). The students of today are digitally literate and technology advances lead to the need for an engaged environment in the classroom that promotes activity vs. passivity. Classrooms cannot rely on the traditional method of lecture, listen, and learn. This is an adage from the past and one that most would agree is considered ineffective for the long term for enhanced learning.

Oblinger (2004), in her study of the next generation of educational engagement, notes that “our notions of how people learn have evolved over time....Learning is seen as an act of participation; knowing depends on practice and participation” (p. 4). The purposes and reasons of engagement are many, including keeping students in school (King-Sears, 2007). This makes it imperative that teachers become technology-literate and develop skills to rapidly process information and advancements in technology along with their K–12 students. Teachers cannot continue to only follow their K–12 students into the age of technology but must rather engage, themselves, in ongoing learning to create a technology-rich classroom for 21st century learners.

Inquiry and Engagement

One of the key questions we ask ourselves when considering engagement and listening to what our students have to say on this is then practically, how can we apply what our students share and how can we adjust our lessons so that they do “flow” and appear seamless in nature, blending a sharing of knowledge to the higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills so deemed necessary? One suggestion is to take a look at our traditional lessons in terms of an inquiry method, often utilized in the area of science. When we think of our science curriculum we often think of experiments, opportunities in the learning environment that allow our students the time to question, investigate, offer hypotheses, and often work in groups in obtaining their findings. Inquiry can be considered a practical and intellectual activity and includes varied decision making on the part of the learner as he or she interacts with the materials and other students in the classroom. Asking questions, processing answers, attaching meaning, looking at results, and relating meanings are all steps in an inquiry-based science classroom that could be replicated in other subjects as well for an engaging learning environment (Dyasi, 1999).

Another science example worth noting is a study done with students engaged in the process of studying electromagnetic radiation in the form of radio waves (Wise, 2006). The lesson describes in detail the processes used by the students in their work, and within the lesson design particular attention is given to “engagement activities” that include but are not limited to using maps for integration of skills, collecting data, graphing, converting to metric units as necessary, focusing on the incorporation of language skills such as news writing, storytelling, speech demonstrations, and a general collaborative inquiry. These processes were integral to our inquiry project to engage classroom teachers in professional development.

Scholarly Practices in Professional Development

Since one of the goals of this project was Laura’s professional development towards taking a more scholarly approach to her practice as a superintendent, she conducted the initial literature search on engagement of the learner and provided the participating new

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teachers to the district with professional articles for reading, reflection, and dialogue as professional development. The new teachers read two professional articles prior to each of four new teacher professional development meetings and met as a professional learning community to discuss perspectives and ideas. The participating teachers maintained reflective-reflexive journals of professional development experiences so they could develop a pattern of weaving between professional literature, experience, and classroom practice. This was enriched by a superintendent-teacher peer-coaching process.

The superintendent intermittently conducted one peer-coaching cycle for all of the new teacher participants except for two who chose to not be observed. A peer-coaching cycle generally consists of 45-minute preconference, 45-minute observation, and 45-minute postconference. In this study, pre- and postconferences lasted an average of 30 minutes and were not always formal in nature. In the case of school counselors new to the district in this study, extended dialogue sessions rather than observations were conducted in their offices on site.

During classroom observation, the superintendent recorded evidence of student engagement. During the postconference, the new teacher participants discussed what they perceived as engagement of learners, and the superintendent provided typed and verbal reflective feedback in most cases. Laura ended each postconference, suggesting that the participating teacher peer-coach a colleague in the same school or a nearby school if there were no other new teachers to the district in their school. This process enriched the dialogue sessions, enabling participating teachers to reflect on theory and practice, and to consider how they could peer-coach each other as an expanded view of professional development within a learning community. Only about four teachers actually reported on the results of participating in peer-coaching with a colleague.

E-mail narratives, field notes from peer-coaching cycles, and participant reflective journals served as a triangulation of data in an effort to achieve trustworthiness. Laura coded the data and wrote her reflections on the developmental process of becoming a professional development community of learners. Although she was the instructional leader, she was also very much a participant of the emerging community.

Glenda did not participate in the professional development sessions, which she had provided leadership in designing, but Laura stayed in touch with her through e-mail. Glenda provided Laura with research articles to supplement her search and analyzed the coded data, using her skills with narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995). Glenda took the 54 pages of coded data and raw narrative, some written in third person and some in first person, that Laura submitted to her, and drafted a narrative analysis to tell our story of professional development through narrative action research in the context of public school practice in a rural school setting. Glenda then gave Laura a copy of the text to check and edit to ensure fidelity to both of our voices.

Engagement through Inquiry → Modeling → Change

The new teachers to the district under study met in February 2007 for an initial participation activity to establish a beginning understanding of what engagement meant to the teachers. This was done in a dialogical sessions in which participants shared their definitions of engagement of learners. The participants defined engagement of the learner as the student taking ownership in his or her own learning by actively participating in the lesson, listening, presenting his or her own ideas, and evaluating in the process. Students ask questions and look for ways to apply information to their lives and the world around them. Active participation, a component of an engaged learner, can often be viewed through practical observation of the student in terms of eye contact, participation, and attention, all attributes of students that teachers need to pay attention to. Students are excited about what is going on, on the edge of their seats, always wondering what will come next. This kind of classroom is a risk-taking environment where students feel comfortable to participate and share ideas. The learner realizes the value of the material that is presented and is comfortable enough to share views, ideas, and opinions about the material with the teacher and the class.

In this first session, teachers contributed further that engagement of the learner also means connecting to the student, easing pupils into the subject matter by getting to know them personally and individually so that the students are at ease and feel important and appreciated as persons as well as learners. Others theorized engagement could mean grabbing the student's attention and keeping his or her focus throughout the lesson and offering answers or thoughts or completing the activity with enthusiasm. The presupposition was that students are by nature eager and willing to learn and discover. Participants concluded there could be an intrinsic motivation for students that they could build upon in their classrooms.

At this first session, participants moved in the direction of defining engagement of the learner by teacher activities and strategies to capture a student's attention and develop a love of learning so the student is an active and lifelong learner. The teachers generated a list of all of the teaching strategies they had used during the fall semester that they considered engaging activities. The group's collective list included 42 learning activities (see Appendix A).

This first professional development session of the new teachers brought forth an extensive list of strategies and definitions with limited theoretical explanations. The definitions of the strategies presented by the participating teachers at the first session were more personal and sometimes shallow with more of a focus on a lengthy number of strategies. Laura assessed the teachers' lack of reflective pedagogical knowledge was due to the fact that a considerably larger number of the group were new teachers to the field of education who had been formally teaching for only a little over one semester at the time of the first session.

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Although teachers had been exposed to theory during their teacher-education classes, they lacked experience in reflective practice. Bridging the theory-to-practice divide continues to be a challenge for new teachers and their educational leaders. Providing the teachers with professional literature on engagement of learners and time and space to dialogue with other teachers engaged the participants in critical thinking.

Laura ended this session by giving the participants a folder with a blank journal, Bloom's Taxonomy Tool (Lujan, 2005), and a booklet on engagement strategies (Hiler & Paul, 2005). The goal was for the teachers to use the Bloom's Taxonomy Tool to create their own approach to engaging students within the classroom setting. This tool presents Bloom's Taxonomy in a wheel format that equalizes the cognitive processes. The idea was to engage teachers in unlearning Bloom's Taxonomy as hierarchical and move towards aligning instructional activities with critical-thinking development.

During a subsequent session, the group read a professional article by Whalen (1998) on the concept of the classroom that "flows" with buzzing activity whereby the teacher and students become engaged to the degree that time escapes as all are absorbed in the lesson, and thus, the learning. Participants read silently and wrote responses to guided questions in preparation for a group discussion: What is one idea that the author talks about that you feel personally connected with in regards to your own teaching? What is one idea that you learned from your colleagues today that you find intriguing?

The group talked about creating the kind of classroom where absorption in the subject and task at hand is possible. What would it take? How can teachers create an inquiry environment and still meet the standards, expectations, and accountability measures that we need to as educators? These questions drove a most interesting dialogue with all participants seated in a circle and with some taking notes as well. Once again, by design, Laura was trying to model authentic, active learning through alternative configurations from traditional rows of desks. The experience was more powerful than the isolated reading of the theory. Movement in the classroom was also modeled as the teachers moved from working alone to engaging with fellow learners.

In the third professional development session, Laura engaged the participants to work collaboratively in an activity involving "foldables" (Zike, 1989, 2002) and gave them an opportunity to reflexively examine an upcoming lesson they planned to teach. They worked in small groups with paper, markers, and scissors, and then shared with the entire group what they had made. This interactive session proved to be quite lively with ideas and creativity. From a high school history teacher who used a paper airplane full of divergent facts on either side of the folds to represent different sides in a war and their attributes, to an elementary teacher working with recognizing nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs with a four fold configuration, to a guidance counselor creating a handheld paper question device whereby students considered their future career goals, the examples

were each unique and specific to the lesson, but interesting and replicable for others to consider. We were aware of the possibility that teachers could view this as make-it-take inservice, but the goal was to imagine using the activity in creative ways to engage students in critical thinking. Criticality in terms of engaging students to consider issues of race, gender, and social class was not present in any of the teachers' products.

At the final session in May 2007, the group seemed to "flow" better and thus the conversation was lively and informative with participants expanding upon the strategies to share specific classroom examples. The strategies were not one-word suggestions but rather explanations as shared by the small groups as an activity and the conversation was more in depth. The group reviewed the initial list of engagement strategies in small groups of three to four participants and reflected on what they could add to the list based on their experiences during the project. The participants commented on how they had appreciated the opportunity to create the initial list together and then try some of the strategies in their classrooms. An additional 11 strategies were added to the original list of 42 (See Appendix B). More important than the extended list was the theoretical depth of understanding of what learning engagement means.

This was not separate from growth in relationships and identity as a learning community. The teachers and Laura embraced an important concept together, read research about it, talked about it, applied it to their instructional lessons and previous work, observed it in practice in spring 2007, and reflected once more in a final group session in May. They had become a team through this work, a team dedicated to working together in a collegial atmosphere of positive progress, seeking to help one another. If there were walls between the administrative side of education and the actual teaching side in the district, this project cleared the way and opened doorways to dialogue.

Laura's Reflections on the Study

There is a notion in education that teachers do one thing and administrators another! Thus, there seems at times to be a disjoint in the appreciation for and understanding of what really happens in the classroom setting. "Engagement of the Learner" as a concept was a great conversational tool to bring teachers together to focus on strategies of involvement to engage the students in learning. This topic proved to be a fascinating doorway between teachers and me in terms of opening communication channels and talking professionally as a group about current literature and practice. I had direct interaction with the new educators during focus group meetings, through individual classroom observations, and through one-on-one conference meetings. The group meetings allowed time to discuss professional journal articles and participate in fluid dialogue about what engagement is in a classroom setting.

Visiting classrooms was a unique opportunity for me to support teachers' efforts toward student engagement. The observation conferences provided a setting for one-on-

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one discussion, which allowed for even further connection, bridging the classroom and central office. I gained a sense of who the new teachers to my district are, and in turn, made it possible for them to know me as an instructional leader and resource person. This created a sense of being on the same team, working to solve issues of importance to the teachers, for the students, and for the corporation as a whole.

The project presents a model for reform from within through a leadership of learning in collaboration. Superintendents who wish to be instructional leaders must continually find ways to gain firsthand experience in classrooms. By focusing attention on the concept of engagement of the learner, school leaders can become teacher and learner with new teachers to a district and build an inquiry community. Learning communities develop as educators take down the walls of positional distance and talk about what is best for children. Engagement of the learner is a concept worth exploring by all educators, for their students, and for themselves as role models of lifelong learning.

Glenda's Reflections on the Study

As I examined the lists of engagement strategies presented by the participating teachers and Laura's reflections on the action research project, I was reminded of an earlier piece of research (Moss, 2003a) that I conducted with my preservice teachers as participants. In the study of portfolio assessment for teacher certification, four teacher identities emerged based on narrative data: Emergent Scholar-Practitioner as Reflective Teacher Identity, Emergent Professional as Reflective Teacher Identity, Traditional Teacher as Technician Identity, and Identifying Resistance as Technician Teacher Identity.

As I reflect on this current study with Laura, through the lens of that earlier study, I perceive that some of the teachers in this study began as traditional, inexperienced teachers trying to implement strategies in technical ways and developed towards an emergent professional identity as they learned to reflect on theory and practice, and inquire deeply into what it means to engage students in learning. Laura also emerged as a professional superintendent, reflectively planning for professional development sessions, engaging in meaningful dialogues with teachers, and analyzing narratives from teacher journals and classroom observations to determine the impact on student engagement.

Does that mean that Laura fell short of her goal to become a scholar-practitioner superintendent? Or can scholar-practitioner leadership be conceptualized along other theoretical lines of education? Swim (in press) has identified that "functional scholar-practitioners use research findings in technical and specific ways to guide their educational decisions" (p 12) and reflective scholar-practitioners draw "on the hermeneutical tradition" and "invest energies in understanding and making meaning of their practices, both for themselves and the children" (p. 14). Finally, she drew on Jenlink's (2002) work to define critical scholar-practitioners as reflecting a "critical

approach to pedagogies” and “linked with concepts such as critical hermeneutic, social justice, democratic practice, and change agent; scholar-practitioners are transformative intellectuals who take a critical stance on educational issues of social, cultural, and political importance” (p. 17).

Jenlink and I (Moss & Jenlink, 2000) presented an expanded view of critical scholar-practitioner leadership, developing characteristics such as criticalist, critical constructivist, critical pedagogist, critical multiculturalist, and critical pragmatist, as we explored together the idea of revolutionary multiculturalism as leadership praxis for U.S. schools. As I reflect on my early work with Jenlink, a subsequent commentary publication (Moss, 2003b) on revolutionary multiculturalism in U.S. schools, a number of critical narrative ethnographies with classroom teachers (Moss, in press), and the current work with Laura, I feel tension in my work to prepare secondary classroom teachers and to professionally develop teachers and administrators in the field. I am committed to preparing teachers to work for social justice through engaging all students in critical literacy and active participation in the educational process. I continue to believe that critical literacy is central to whether a person will be able to mediate her/himself in the social, political, and economic realms of society. Teachers’ and students’ languages and cultures make a difference.

In our study of engagement of learners among new teachers to a district, there is a clear absence of critical engagement as defined by Jenlink’s notion of scholar-practitioner. Although I conceptualized this project in the realm of criticality because it was designed to create space for authentic participation (Anderson, 1998) of classroom teachers with the superintendent in professional development, the professional development was not specifically designed to raise critical questions concerning race, gender, social class, language, and culture among the teachers and their classroom students.

Transforming educational practice from competence learning and knowledge acquisition to active meaning making on the part of learners is considered revolutionary among undergraduate preservice teachers and graduate teachers in my classes at the university; yet when I reflect on our study, I realize that working for democracy among a white, middle-class teaching staff could possibly work to inadvertently maintain the status quo. I hope Laura and I continue to work together and create space where the same teachers engage in the reading of critical texts and explore what it means to teach for social justice through engagement of learners.

Although we tried to establish a democratic process by creating space for all of the teacher participants’ voices to be heard, we realize that there is a void in presenting teachers’ voices in this paper. Although including their voices was a goal, the project developed beyond what could be managed in this initial paper, where presenting the development of an inquiry relationship between a K–12 district superintendent and university associate professor seems essential for understanding the progression towards

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developing a scholar-practitioner learning community. As we complete this narrative analysis of our inquiry experiences, Laura has already met with the new teachers who joined her corporation in fall 2007 to engage them in inquiry into what it means to engage their students in learning. She and I have also designed a second study, “Critical Teaching: Theory and Inquiry for Practice: Building Communities.” In this professional development project, participants will include representative stakeholders, including a school board president, administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, community members, and a secondary preservice teacher who is student teaching in the district. We are hopeful that participants will engage in a book study of *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* by Paulo Freire (2005), and explore the impact of applying a critical lens to educational work.

I am further hopeful because following the professional development and data collection in spring 2007, Heather Lemmon and Tina Luckey, two of my former students who teach sixth-grade science in Laura’s corporation, and I received IRB approval for a critical literacy project “Critical Texts for Engaging Middle School Students in Literacy Development.” Using texts from *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World* (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002), Heather and Tina engaged students in the reading of nonfiction texts and critical reflection on issues of social justice as they explored science, the world, and their local community. Additionally, Melissa Visalli, also a former student of mine and seventh-grade science teacher in Laura’s district, continues to lead her interdisciplinary team in “Teaching Through the Lens of Human Rights: An Interdisciplinary Project.” Melissa began this critical action research project during an independent graduate study course with me two years ago. Although the language arts teacher in the team changed, the project moved forward with the new team member. Scholar-practitioners building learning communities in practice can transform education.

Notes

¹We believe that issues of fidelity are at the heart of education if education is going to be defined in terms of human growth and development as contrasted to the current working definition framed by standardized achievement testing within a market-driven society. Glenda’s perspective on fidelity is grounded in the work of Blumenfield-Jones (1995), who explored fidelity as criteria for evaluating the quality of narrative inquiry. He noted how narrative inquiry involves a “science/art conjunction” (p. 26). The science part of the inquiry seeks objective truth while the qualitative part seeks the aesthetic value and relies on subjective interpretation. Blumenfield-Jones (1995) proposed these dimensions be joined through accurately chronicling events while situating them in a meaningful and believable story. He defined fidelity as the act of faithfulness and integrity on the part of the researcher to preserve “the worth and dignity of the teller” (p. 27).

²The idea of revolutionary multicultural leadership is grounded in the work of Peter McLaren. See McLaren (1995, 1997, 1999). A Marxist, McLaren proposed that teachers look at Che Guevara as a model of revolutionary multicultural leadership. Jenlink and I proposed that

teachers address critical issues of racism and inequity that get in the way of all children receiving a quality education that promotes democracy in practice. Unlike the military leadership of Guevara, we proposed a scholarly leadership to transform policies and practices in the context of K–12 practice.

Appendix A

1. Bloom's Taxonomy in questions
2. Asking prerequisite knowledge questions
3. Questioning the students
4. Socratic Seminars
5. Assessments (formative and summative)
6. Group work
7. Read-aloud
8. Readers' workshop
9. Free-read
10. Reader's Circle
11. Praise kids to build confidence and willingness to participate
12. Manipulatives
13. Hands-on activities
14. Multiple Intelligence Activities
15. Charts what students Know, Want to Know, Learned (K,W, L)
16. Do a think, pair, share activity
17. Partner groups and sharing
18. Have peers question each other on material
19. Peer teaching of concepts
20. Note taking
21. Role-playing
22. Open-ended activities
23. Powerpoint trivia
24. Community circle
25. Shake each student's hand as he or she enters the classroom
26. Drama and theatre activities
27. Students have jobs in the classroom
28. Writing about topic
29. Drawing about topic
30. Find things that interest the students first and then weave this into the lesson
31. Use real-world examples
32. Group and self evaluation after given tasks
33. Reading stations in classroom
34. Learning stations in classroom
35. Connect personal goals and hobbies to lesson
36. Group discussions where students lead also
37. Lab format in class
38. Remote-control sessions with clickers

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39. Assess prior knowledge
40. Ask students for feedback about class and advice on how to make the class better
41. Use music by either singing or playing or listening
42. Give students the opportunity to make decisions

Appendix B

1. Cultural eye — using an eye diagram to help students view the different “lenses” one brings to a lesson or topic
2. Use a 3, 2, 1 technique, which means list one question you have, two things you want to share, and three things you have learned from the class on the part of the students
3. Acting out vocabulary words through the use of drama
4. Pre-writing — Write all that you know about this subject in the next five minutes
5. Use body movement and songs to imitate characters or expand thinking
6. Role-play a scene from the text used
7. Build projects and or sets that extend the topic of the class
8. Debate in class about topic
9. Have debates but assign the student to take the opposite side of what they believe
10. Make models that are aligned to the subject being studied
11. Use personal journals to expand upon personal meaning to the lesson topic

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