

1

The Case for Networks

Imitation is the best form of flattery.

—Charles Caleb Colton

How better to begin making the case for networks than by hearing from Nancy, who took our idea and went creative. In this chapter, you will read how Nancy extended her professional learning community by adopting our networking model. She provides both her group's experience as well as a strong argument for why others might want to join in this work.



“Nancy, I just came from the best session I’ve been to so far at this conference! These people really know what they are talking about, and we need to connect to them. They are having a breakfast tomorrow morning at 8:00, and I think we should go.” This was the enthusiastic greeting of my good friend and colleague, Fran Vandiver, director of our laboratory school at the University of Florida, when we first saw each other at the 2005 National Holmes Partnership Conference. She had just attended a session by Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) fellows. At this session, Fran had heard these teachers and Ellen Meyers discuss the organization and share the teacher research they had conducted in their classrooms. Immediately, Fran knew we had found kindred spirits for our work in Florida.

We arose early the next morning to attend the TNLI breakfast meeting. Here, we learned more about the organization and heard testimonials by teachers who had experienced the power networking had offered to their growth as professionals and their work as classroom teachers. Fran and I gained a renewed energy for similar work we had begun in Florida. For the past two years, in partnership with the North East Florida Educational Consortium, we had been working to network teachers and administrators in sixteen rural school districts in North Central Florida by introducing them to the power of teacher research (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008, 2009).

Our work was growing and expanding rapidly, and we viewed TNLI presenters at this national conference as a marvelous resource to help us reflect on the work we had begun and potentially take it to the next level. We introduced ourselves to Ellen at the close of the breakfast, promising we'd be in touch.

Fewer than two months later, I was delivering the keynote address at the Fairfax County Public School's annual teacher research conference in Virginia. My talk focused on the teacher research movement in relationship to No Child Left Behind and the era of high-stakes testing, in which teachers find themselves struggling to survive and thrive. As I neared the end of my talk, I made recommendations for the future of teacher research, one of which included connecting different groups of teacher researchers to one another. Remembering my experience with TNLI at the National Holmes Conference just a few short weeks earlier, I mentioned their work in my talk:

Finally, it's time to connect the different pockets of teacher research that exist across the country. For example, I know in the East, we have at least four (and I'm sure there are more) strong teacher researcher communities—Fairfax County Public Schools and George Mason University; my previous home, State College Area School District and Penn State University; my new home, University of Florida and the North East Florida Educational Consortium; and the Teachers Network Leadership Institute in New York. We need to find a way to systematically connect these communities so we develop a collective teacher researcher voice. I hope you will join me in thinking about ways we can enact this vision, for with a collective teacher researcher voice, I believe we have a better chance to be heard in the era of high-stakes testing and No Child Left Behind and a much better chance to shape this era, rather than be shaped by it. (Dana, 2005)

As I spoke at this conference and mentioned the work of TNLI, little did I know that Peter Paul, vice president of Teachers Network (TN), was in the audience listening. He approached me after the talk to thank me for referencing TNLI's work, and a long, rich conversation ensued about the promise of and possibilities for teacher networks. This serendipitous meeting with Peter spurred me to set up a phone conference with Ellen, Peter, and Fran shortly after my return from Virginia to discuss going national with the local teacher research network Fran and I had started in North Central Florida. Thus was the Gainesville TNLI affiliate born.

WHAT JOINING TNLI DID FOR OUR WORK

In the Introduction to this book, Ellen shared that the statement she most often hears from fellows in TNLI is, "This is the best professional development I have ever had." Fran and I had heard this same statement over and over in our work in Florida. For example, the following excerpt came from one of our teachers after we had organized and held a Teacher Research Showcase one Saturday

morning in April, organized so that teachers in our network could share their inquiries with one another:

Thank you for creating a forum in which teachers can reflect on instructional practices used in the classroom. The teacher inquiry process was one of the most beneficial, thought-stimulating processes I have ever encountered as an educator. I learned so much about myself, and I am inspired to keep on “inquiring” throughout my career as an educator. Saturday’s forum was truly a celebration of why we chose to become teachers in the first place. Thank you for providing the opportunity for me to learn so much and ultimately grow as a teacher . . . and as an individual. I promise to energetically encourage my fellow colleagues to become teacher inquirers. I will make it my mission to introduce more teachers to this wonderful world of teacher research.

While statements such as these provided a great deal of inspiration for Fran and me, they troubled us as well. Engagement in teacher research was undoubtedly the best professional development that the teachers with whom we worked had ever experienced, and they were making exciting changes to their practice *inside* the four walls of their classrooms. But what about the influence these teachers’ work could have *outside* those four walls? Our local network had helped teachers take charge of their own professional learning and growth in ways they had never imagined, but it had not yet helped these teachers connect that professional learning and growth to larger school reform efforts and initiatives. How could our teachers bring their vital knowledge to those outside the schoolhouse? We saw TNLI’s focus on policymaking as a way to introduce teachers to the potential role they could play not only as researchers but as political activists as well. As we had hoped, joining forces with TNLI helped take our teachers and their work to the next level.

WHY FORM A NETWORK?

When we became a part of TNLI, we were reminded of five powerful reasons to form a network in the first place. These reasons, illustrated by the stories and words of four of our TNLI fellows, are described in the remainder of this chapter. These illustrations also serve as a preview to some of the powerful strategies and activities of TNLI to be described in detail later in this book.

Reason 1: Networks Connect Teachers to One Another, Removing Them From the Isolation Inherent in Their Work

Because the school day is structured so that teachers spend the majority of their day with students and comparatively little time with other teachers, it is not unusual for teachers to feel isolated in their work. In fact, over the years, numerous educational scholars have discussed teacher isolation, depicting teaching as a lonely profession in which teachers close their classroom doors and have little interaction

with other teachers in their buildings (see, for example, Flinder, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Lortie, 1975). Given the norms of isolation that have been pervasive in schools throughout the years, teachers often feel alone when advocating for students in their classrooms. By forming or joining a network, teachers are reminded that they are members of an entire teaching force and that others share the same struggles. Gainesville TNLI Teacher Fellow Kevin Berry discussed the ways his experiences attending a TNLI national meeting in Delaware helped him remember he was not alone:

In October, I had the privilege of attending my first TNLI meeting and talking to teacher leaders from across the United States. So much was so geographically different among us—one teacher lived in a home on the side of a mountain, while the highest point in my state is barely a lump in the ground. Yet most of our experiences were the same. As teachers, we all felt disenfranchised in some respect. We all needed more time to accomplish what we wanted. We all needed more financial support for our schools. We all were forced to negotiate with a great deal of regulation from an increasing number of sources. We were also all dedicated wholeheartedly to our profession. (Berry, 2008)

Kevin reflected that the feeling of connectedness he was able to develop with fellow teacher colleagues from across the nation through networking became a source of strength for him as he confronted the daily dilemmas of teaching. He developed relationships with teaching colleagues outside his school building to whom he could turn for help and advice, learning from both their experiences and their research.

Reason 2: Networks Help Teachers Rediscover the Value of Their Work, Increasing Their Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

At some point in their careers, teachers come across this adage: *Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.* Unfortunately, this fairly common saying reflects a society that doesn't understand, appreciate, or value the work of a teacher. In fact, recall that in the Introduction to this text, Ellen stated that one of the reasons TN was founded over twenty-eight years ago was to "offer teachers recognition in a society in which an ongoing question to them is 'Are you still teaching?'"

Given the many explicit and implicit messages that devalue a teacher's work in our society, it is not uncommon for even the most enthusiastic and dedicated of teachers to begin questioning the value of their chosen profession. This questioning can lead to a downward spiral of self-doubt in which a teacher's self-esteem and self-efficacy plummet. By forming or joining a network, teachers are provided with constant reminders of the value of being a teacher that counteract the negative messages teachers receive about their work from the larger society. One example of such a positive message and boost to self-esteem comes from Gainesville TNLI Fellow Greg Cunningham.

Shortly after becoming a TNLI fellow, Greg participated in one of the TNLI listserv discussions about an article written by Alfie Kohn regarding the great homework debate. After numerous posts and comments by TNLI fellows on the

listserv, Alfie Kohn himself provided a response to this online discussion. In his response, Alfie referenced something Greg had contributed in his post. Greg excitedly emailed me asking if I had seen the post and thus noticed that he had been quoted by this prominent educator. Later, Greg reflected,

When Alfie Kohn mentioned my post in his response to the TNLI fellows' discussion of his article, it made me feel like I'd just had a conversation with a movie star! Then I guess the lasting impression would be feeling fulfilled and empowered. My opinion had not only been validated, but I'd been personally complimented on a level that few teachers ever experience. Granted, there are those who win teacher of the year, etc., but this was recognition within a serious, high-level discussion of an issue at the very heart of our professional world. (G. Cunningham, personal communication, October 10, 2008)

Forming or joining a network provides opportunities for teachers to be recognized in meaningful ways as professionals. This, in turn, helps teachers replace the adage mentioned at the start of this section with: *Those who can, teach. Those who can't, find some other, less important profession.*

Those who can, teach. Those who can't, find some other, less important profession.

Reason 3: Networks Provide Teachers With the Skills They Need Outside the Classroom to Advocate for What They Need Inside Their Classrooms

One aspect of teaching that makes it so complex is the multiple knowledge bases teachers draw upon simultaneously as they plan for instruction and make decisions about teaching. Intrigued with learning more about the complicated thought processes of good teachers, educational researchers have teased apart and named these multiple knowledge bases (see, for example, Good & Brophy, 1994; Levin & Nolan, 2000; Shulman 1987). According to these scholars, the thinking that occurs during the act of teaching draws upon seven interrelated knowledge bases—content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, student learner knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, context knowledge, and classroom management knowledge. Put simply, to provide effective instruction, teachers must negotiate a myriad of factors, including

- a deep understanding of the subject they are teaching;
- instructional strategies they will utilize to teach the subject;
- their learners' backgrounds, prior experiences, and knowledge;
- the ways their current context shapes what is being taught;
- the need to set appropriate expectations and to adjust curriculum; and
- the establishment of routines or procedures that make the day run smoothly.

Teachers must clearly develop an enormous amount of knowledge to be effective as they interact with students inside the classroom. Consequently, almost all prospective teacher preparation, as well as practicing teacher professional development, focuses on developing the skills teachers need to be effective *inside* their classrooms, neglecting valuable skills teachers need *outside* their classroom to advocate for students. Forming or joining a network provides opportunities for teachers to develop these “outside the classroom” skills, such as interacting with policymakers. To exemplify, I return to Gainesville TNLI Fellow Kevin Berry’s experience at the Delaware meeting:

The purpose of the meeting was to empower teachers. The most interesting part to me was the practice talk we had with policymakers. The meeting organizers divided the attendees into four groups which met in separate rooms. Three teachers in each room were involved in roundtable discussions with a U.S. senator, state senator, or local policymakers. The remainder of the teachers (about 20 or 30 in each room) observed each discussion. I was lucky enough to have a conversation about policy with two other teachers and Delaware Senator Margaret Rose Henry. We all read a case, primarily about high school dropout rates, and discussed possible pitfalls and solutions. After our conversations concluded, we all came back together and had a whole-group talk about what we said, heard, and experienced. Teachers and policymakers offered feedback, and I took many notes. Before I attended this meeting, I didn’t have the experience or knowledge of how to interact with policymakers, and I accepted the fact that teachers’ voices were limited. Now I know we have the potential to exert true influence on policymakers, if we choose to find our voices and use them. (Berry, 2008)

Reason 4: Networks Help Teachers Deal Productively With the Many Frustrations Inherent in Teaching

Given today’s political context, where much of the decision making and discussion regarding teachers occur outside the walls of the classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1994), it has become commonplace for teachers to feel frustrated by district, state, and federal mandates that complicate the provision of sound teaching practices. By forming or joining a network, teachers are provided with opportunities to deal with these frustrations in productive ways. For example, TNLI supported nineteen teacher fellows in writing cases to illustrate how policy was playing out positively and negatively in classrooms across the nation. Gainesville TNLI Teacher Fellow John Kreinbuhl was one of the case writers (Kreinbuhl, n.d.). Through engagement in action research, John had observed what happened at his school and in the morale of his teaching colleagues as they discussed the implementation of a new state initiative termed STAR (Special Teachers Are Rewarded). This initiative appropriated \$147.5 million for performance pay rewards for teachers. John reflects that, prior to writing this case,

he did not have a productive outlet to deal with the frustrations of the unintended consequences that result from national, state, and local education policies:

When the opportunity to write my case came up, I saw it as an extension of my experience with action research. My participation in the teleconferences, where I was able to listen to other teachers from all parts of the country, showed me that there were serious teachers out there trying to make education better. TNLI and similar organizations are valuable alternatives for the improvement of education without the extraneous politics that have turned off so many of us. Writing my case brought me a sense of participation in something that was connecting a genuine teacher's experience with possible political impact. (J. Kreinbihl, personal communication, October 9, 2008)

Reason 5: Networks Inspire Teachers to Action

One final, and perhaps most important, reason to form or join a teacher network is that participation in such a network rallies teachers to action! The daily work life of a teacher is so incredibly busy that it is difficult to find the time to participate as a political advocate for the profession. In fact, some scholars believe teachers have purposefully been kept incredibly busy to keep them out of larger conversations about teaching and schooling. For example, Joe Kincheloe (1991) makes a comparison between teachers and peasants within a Third World culture characterized by hierarchical power structures, scarce resources, and traditional values:

Like their third world counterparts, teachers are preoccupied with daily survival—time for reflection and analysis seems remote and even quite fatuous given the crisis management atmosphere and the immediate attention survival necessitates. In such a climate those who would suggest that more time and resources be delegated to reflective and growth-inducing pursuits are viewed as impractical visionaries devoid of common sense. Thus, the status quo is perpetuated, the endless cycle of underdevelopment rolls on with its peasant culture of low morale and teachers as “reactors” to daily emergencies. (p. 12)

By forming or joining a network, you contribute to breaking the cycle described above. To exemplify, Gainesville TNLI Fellow Debbi Hubbell reflects on how our local blogging online community and the TNLI listserv inspired her to action:

Blogging has been a new and valuable experience for me these last two years. As an action research facilitator, I interacted with other action research facilitators from sixteen different districts in North Central Florida on University of Florida's Center for School Improvement blogsite. I enjoyed sharing deep conversations about student and teacher success, seeking professional opinions or information, and reflecting about one's own path. But most of all, I felt camaraderie among these people that all lived so very far away.

I also felt camaraderie last year in a more global way when I was introduced to the TNLI listserv that connected teachers from across the entire country. It was interesting to read the different viewpoints about the topics of discussion, laugh at the occasional joke, and get inspired to be proactive in changing the negative view of education that many noneducators seem to have. (Actually, I never knew that so many people thought so badly of teachers and the educational system until I became involved with these TNLI posts.) With these strangers urging me on, I tried to get others locally to write their representatives who were involved with making educational changes, or to write their own or use TNLI's pre-made letters to the editor to assist the community in understanding our work and feelings about educating children. In reality, things won't get better just doing the same ol' thing everyday, and the TNLI listserv inspired me to go one more mile. (D. Hubbell, personal communication, October 8, 2008)

By forming or joining a network, you become inspired to go that extra mile and to influence the ways people outside of the profession view teachers, as well as their attempts to change education from the outside in. Networks, such as TNLI, can more effectively contribute to the reform of education, from the inside out!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Whether you are contemplating joining an existing network or forming your own network, it is clear that networks are a powerful vehicle to raise teachers' voices in educational reform. The purpose of this chapter was to illuminate this power by reviewing five important reasons for networking:

1. Networks connect teachers to one another, removing them from the isolation inherent in their work.
2. Networks help teachers rediscover the value of their work, increasing their self-esteem and self-efficacy.
3. Networks provide teachers with the skills they need outside the classroom to advocate for what they need inside their classrooms.
4. Networks help teachers deal productively with the many frustrations inherent in teaching.
5. Networks inspire teachers to action.

These reasons form the foundation for your journey through the remainder of this text wherein Ellen Meyers and Peter Paul share their stories of leading and growing one of the most successful teacher networks in the country. Their stories provide insights into the many lessons learned and the valuable tools you can invoke to create your own vision, find your voice, raise your voice, and make a difference through the power of networks!