

# Chapter 6

## Transformative Professional Development: A Professional Development Team Learns from Students Who Write across the Curriculum

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter begins by describing the authors' professional development team and its influence in schools where they have engaged in professional development partnerships. Next, the authors offer literature that supports the need for professional development teams in educational settings. Then, referring to the excited conversation above, they show how they study students, write about them, share writings, and share this work in schools. The authors end by explaining how this recursive process—study, write, share—might serve as a PD prototype for other collaborative teams within Professional Development Schools.*

### OUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TEAMS OVER THE YEARS

*“This is the best PD experience I’ve ever had!”  
Several teachers say this, and no one dissents.*

*“Why?” the newcomers wonder.*

*Quickly, the teachers quip three answers.*

*We study our students—with magnifying glasses!*

*We write about them, and we actually learn more about them when we do.*

*When we share our writing with our team we get even more new ideas from fellow teachers. The best ideas. Just wait!*

*The newcomers don’t have to wait long.*

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Each Wednesday, one-by-one, a team of teachers, university professors, and doctoral students enters a local coffee shop. Surrounded by light music, used books, and hot brew, we sit around a table and spend our first minutes catching up on each others' lives.

Over the years, the membership of the research team has varied, but it regularly consists of teachers, teacher educators, and graduate students. The perspectives vary, which leads to rich table talk that, in turn, keeps this vibrant professional development opportunity alive for us, for our colleagues, and for many students.

Over the years, we have studied student writers as old as community college students, and as young as preschool. At our weekly meetings, even though we begin with updates on our lives, we soon focus. Each of us has brought a sample of a student's writing and a one-pager of our own in which we analyze the sample of writing. In other words, given all the pieces written by students that week, why did the adult choose this one to discuss with the team?

As writers of weekly reflections, we become a closely-knit group, influenced by the discussions of the young writers we study. We aim to gain new insights into students as writers, so we can use those insights to finesse our own teaching practices and so we have ideas to share with colleagues.

Educators at our schools become interested in our work for various reasons, but often it is the writing of our students that draw their attention to us. Yes, the students in the classes we study tend to write in noticeably articulate ways. Also, our teacher-friends sense our excitement, and try new ideas that stem from conversations and meetings at which we offer our new findings. Plus, we team members either teach at, or twice-weekly attend each school, so our follow-up support is available for the teachers who thirst for growth in their students' engagement as writers.

## **THE SPECIFICS OF ONE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TEAM**

The team we write about in this article, the Writing Across the Curriculum Team, consisted of six members: three teachers, one professor, and two doctoral students. The three teachers taught grade one, grade three, and sixth-grade mathematics, and each of them studied their own students as writers. The professor studied student writers in a high school U.S. History class. The two doctoral students studied the writers in a preschool (age 3) and a prekindergarten (age 4) class.

All of us team members performed similar roles – to intentionally learn from children and each other, and to offer our insights to interested colleagues from whom, in turn, we would continue to learn.

The team members committed time each week to four tasks. First, each team member collected data by observing and interacting with students as they wrote. Importantly, the writers were in classrooms where writing played a central role. Teacher-researchers studied their own students as writers across the curriculum (this practice gave our team its name, Writing Across the Curriculum, which we abbreviate to WAC), and doctoral students and the university professor studied writers twice a week. All six of us recorded meticulous notes, photocopied student work, and conferred frequently with the students as they wrote.

Second, each team member selected a piece of student writing each week and wrote a one-page reflection about it. In these analyses we highlighted the context in which the writing occurred, and the significance of it to the writer, classroom, teacher, and/or researcher.

Third, every week during the school year, our team of six gathered for an hour and a half. At these meetings, we distributed copies of the students'

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