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AUTHOR Marshak, David
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ABSTRACT

In a rural Washington school district 60 percent of teachers and administrators have completed a course on collaboration as part of a key effort to bring a collaborative culture to their schools. This course was one part of a change effort that included development of School Advisory Committees where teachers and administrators made significant decisions together through consensual processes. Teachers from grades K-6 worked together to adapt district curriculum guidelines to their own school's mission and character. Over several years teachers evolved a variety of teaching teams so that almost all instructional staff teach in collaborative groups for a significant part of their day. These efforts have brought significant, positive change. Changes were possible because most teachers wanted to break out of their isolation and work together and because they developed collaborative skills through ongoing practice in their schools and through focused course work. Graduate courses on collaboration offered in the district followed a pattern of practice in class which, in turn, was followed by application, and then reflective debriefing. Components of the courses included work with parts of four books on teaching and collaboration, practice applying collaborative skills, exploration of conflict, and decision making with a focus on consensus. (JB)

DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

David Marshak

Assistant Professor
School of Education, Seattle University
Seattle, Washington 98122

206-296-5773

Seven teachers and both administrators, the principal and assistant principal, from a rural elementary school sat in a circle in a high school classroom at 5:00 PM on a winter evening a few years ago. They were actively engaged in a simulation of a "school governance council," trying to fashion a consensus about a controversial issue. A second grade teacher chaired the discussion with growing confidence. At one point, with a smile, she gently reminded the principal, who had been her supervisor for fifteen years, that he needed to wait for his turn to comment again.

Yes, veteran educators can learn new skills and new roles, if they have the will to learn, effective instruction, opportunities for practice without penalty, and appropriate support and recognition of their accomplishments.

With twenty other educators from their district, these teachers and administrators were participating in a graduate course entitled "Collaboration in Schools: Theory and Practice." They were learning the concepts of effective collaboration and practicing key collaborative skills. This learning assisted them -- and the sixteen of their teaching colleagues who took part in a similar course at different times -- in transforming their workplace: from a school with a conventionally individualistic, competitive, and hierarchical culture to one in which working together with others became central to the work lives of most adults in the building. Collaboration became a central quality both in school governance, through the development of a School Advisory Committee where teachers and administrators made significant decisions together through consensual processes, and in curriculum and instruction. Teachers from grades K-3 and 4-6 worked together to adapt district curriculum guidelines to their own school's mission and character. Over several years, teachers evolved a variety of teaching teams, so that almost all instructional staff, including special educators, instructional aides, and Chapter I teachers as well as classroom teachers, now teach in some sort of collaborative group for a significant part of their day.

The value of collaboration was evident in the renewed dedication, hard work, and enthusiasm of teachers throughout the school. It was also evident in the excitement and the learning displayed by children. There were two keys to the transformation of this school's culture: (1) most educators in the school wanted to break out of their isolation and begin to work together in profoundly interdependent ways; and (2) many of the educators gained a conceptual understanding of collaboration and developed effective collaboration skills through a combination of focused course work and ongoing practice in their own school.

How do we really change schools? A study conducted in 1993 by LH Research for the Ford Foundation strongly suggests that engaging teachers in collaborative school cultures in which teachers are both *interdependent* and *empowered* encourages teachers to make significant changes in their instructional practice. The study involved interviews of 2,000 teachers from across the nation. 41% of these teachers reported that shared decision-making/school-based management had had a major impact on their school. 59% said it had not.

> The fact is that when teachers report that school-based management/shared decision-making has been put into effect, many other features of reform have also followed, including introduction of cooperative learning; mixed ability classrooms; tougher graduation standards; authentic assessment, using students' portfolios, exhibits, and projects to evaluate student performance; essential school approaches, emphasizing subject matter depth, with teacher as coach and student as worker; accelerated approaches that challenge all students to achieve learning at high levels; efforts to synchronize classroom practices and school climate with home culture and environment of students...; and non-graded classrooms.[1]

This study echoes my own experience in schools. When teachers have an opportunity to make decisions that matter and to work with others, most are much more willing to take on the challenges and risks of change, I believe, because they know both that they will have some significant control over that change and that they will have support from colleagues as they make the change. "Human beings of all ages are...able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise."[2]

Yet we cannot assume that teachers who have worked in conventional schools will know how to collaborate effectively. In fact, service in conventional schools encourages teachers to become individualistic, competitive, and isolated. For many teachers -- and administrators, the longer the service, the more confirmed they are in their independence and isolation. Because teachers have historically had limited power to affect the larger structural issues that impact them both on the school and district levels, many teachers become strongly attached to whatever control they do have over their own classrooms. All school people know about the historic "bargain" that teachers and supervisors make. *Keep the kids quiet enough in your classroom, you won't be bothered much by your supervisor, and you can do pretty much what you like.* I believe that this "bargain" is ultimately destructive for everyone: the teacher, supervisor, and particularly the students.

To create successful shared decision-making and collaborative curriculum and instruction, we need to transform both the structure and the culture of schools. Essential to both of these efforts is the work of educating teachers and administrators to become effective collaborators. To do this, educators must gain an understanding of collaboration, and its current role in our culture, and they must develop high quality collaborative skills.

The graduate courses that we offered in the district focused on these two

goals. Each was organized around the following framework:

1. We read the Chapter Six, "The Reality of Isolation and the Search for Collaboration" in Susan Moore Johnson's *Teachers at Work: Achieving Success in Our Schools* and discussed our own experiences in schools of isolation, competition, independence and interdependence, and collaboration. Through this discussion we both identified the isolationist and competitive norms in our own schools and surfaced the belief shared by most participants that we could all do better things for kids if we could work together effectively.

2. We read the first half of Michael Schrage's *Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration* and several chapters from Glenn M. Parker's *Team Players and Teamwork: The New Competitive Business Strategy.* Schrage defines collaboration as involving some element of shared creation as well as shared enactment and offers many examples of historically successful collaboration from the worlds of science, business, and the arts. He argues that the image of the lone discoverer, the isolated genius, is often mythical; rather, that many inventions, discoveries, and masterpieces have evolved from collaborative processes. In addition both Schrage and Parker provide a critical historical context for educators: the movement toward collaboration is not unique to schools; rather, it is a worldwide cultural evolution that in many ways is more advanced in other institutions, particularly in leading edge business circles.

3. Next we worked through Roger Fisher and Scott Brown's *Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate.* Fisher and Brown provide a focused, detailed map for effective collaboration. The central concepts/skills of their framework are the following:

> Disentangle relationship issues from substantive ones.
> Be unconditionally constructive.

Balance emotions with reason.
Learn how others see things.
Always consult before deciding -- and listen.
Be wholly trustworthy, but not wholly trusting.
Persuade, don't coerce.
Deal seriously with those with whom we differ.

At each class meeting, we explored a couple of these concepts, and then practiced applying them as skillful, conscious behavior in a variety of simulations. Part of the participants' homework between classes involved ongoing application of the concepts and practice of the skills for that week in real-life work situations during the following week. When we returned to class, participants shared their experiences from that week. Then we reflected on their ability to employ the skills successfully and explored further applications of collaboration skills.

4. Next we explored conflict, with a focus on the causes, functions, dysfunctions, categories of conflict behavior (avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration), stages of group development (forming, storming, norming, and performing) and group roles and rules that can help to make conflict constructive. We followed the same pattern of exploration, simulation, real-life experience, and reflective debriefing with conflict as we had with the previous concepts.

5. Finally we explored decision-making, with a particular focus on consensus: what it is, and what people commonly misunderstand it to be. Again we followed the pattern of practice in class, followed by application, and then reflective debriefing.

One particularly powerful element of the course was that educators from the same school, teachers and administrators, took part together. This kind of participation encouraged people to take the risk to apply what they had learned in class in their

work settings, because they had support and validation from colleagues who understood what they were trying to do.

Over a four year period, more than 60% of the teachers and administrators in this small, rural district completed a version of this collaboration course. Equipped with a conceptual understanding of collaboration and a growing repertoire of collaboration skills -- and the will to work together both to enhance the experience of teaching and ultimately to improve the learning and growth of all students, educators in the six schools in the district developed some form of collaborative governance in each school and a wide variety of collaborative teaching endeavors throughout the district. These efforts profoundly enriched their own lives and the school lives of their students of all ages.

Notes

1. Harris, L. and Wagner Jr., R. F. (1993) *Testing Assumptions: A Survey of Teachers' Attitudes toward the Nation's School Reform Agenda.* New York: LH Research: v.

2. Bowlby, J. (1973). "Self-reliance and some conditions that promote it." In R. Gosling, ed. *Support, Innovation, and Autonomy.* London: Tavistock Publications: 23.

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