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ABSTRACT

This study looked at the experience of four high school teachers as they worked to develop a collegial community by implementing the "Connections" program. The teachers were on the faculty at Cedar City High School in southern Ohio where their subjects were, respectively, English, Social Studies, and Physical Science; one teacher was in special education. Connections was a three-period block encompassing the subject areas of English, World History, and Physical Science. The four teachers' goal was also to develop a community identity through the program. Data collection followed a qualitative case study design which included observations, interviews, and document analysis. The study used the story form to follow the year's implementation and the teachers' common participation in that story as a foundation for their identity. The progress of the year saw the gradual development of a separation with one member of the team The study concludes that by the end of the year each teacher's commitment to Connections was defined in terms of his or her belief in a core Connections value: ensuring student success. It appeared that both shared interests and democratic processes of deliberation and critique were necessary to sustain the communities required for change. (Contains 22 references.) (JB)

MAKING "CONNECTIONS": CREATING AND SUSTAINING A COLLEGIAL COMMUNITY

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Within the current education reform discourse, an increasing emphasis has been placed on the creation of what have variously been termed "collegial communities" and "collaborative cultures." Policy initiatives such as inclusion and interdisciplinary curricula, for example, clearly rely on the ability of implementing teachers to work together as a community. Implementing such innovations requires that the well-documented professional norm of teacher isolation (e.g., Flinders, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Little, 1992; Fullan, 1993) be supplanted by a norm of collaboration. Thus, provisions designed to foster teacher interaction --- common planning time, for example --- are put in place. Yet these efforts are critiqued as generating only a surface collaboration that Hargreaves (1991) labels "contrived collegiality." Despite the rhetoric of collaboration, collegiality, and community, changes in school structures have not generally been accompanied by changes in school cultures (Sarason, 1971; Fullan, 1993; Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993).

"Community" has been elusive not only in its implementation, but also in its definition. As Judith Little (1992) observes, "Notions of professional community are now also in flux" (p. 161). She further explains,

> The broad optimism attached to "collaborative cultures" has been tempered by critiques that center not merely on pragmatic obstacles, but also on fundamental conceptual inadequacies and ideological dilemmas. (p. 161)

Most understandings of "community" emphasize bonds of "shared

values, purposes, and commitments" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 46). With this understanding, the work of building community becomes that of achieving goal consensus, often through the development of an articulated statement of vision to which all members of the school comm ıity would subscribe. Kahne (1994) distinguishes this perspective from John Dewey's notions of democratic community:

> He [Dewey] also wanted to create communities that . . . made space for those with dissenting opinions. . . . [While] he supported policies that recognized and fostered common interests among members, he also supported policies that facilitated critique of current norms. (p. 256)

For Dewey, then, community (more particularly democratic community) is a dynamic, on-going, deliberative process of communication. Dewey's (1916/1966) standard of community is two-fold:

> How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? (p. 83)

Dewey's princip.es find a more contemporary voice in Robert Bellah at al.'s (1985) discussion of community:

> A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussions and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. (p. 333)

For Dewey and for Bellah et al., the relationship between the individual and the community is reciprocal --- each must promote the growth of the other --- and so individual and community are inseparable. Notwithstanding this rejection of the dualism

of individual and community, reconciling the traditional individualism of school cultures with the collegial community implicit in many educational reforms is not an easy task. As Little (1987) noted,

> Tenacious habits of mind and deed make the achievement of strong collegial relations a remarkable achievement: not the rule, but the rare, often fragile, exception. (p. 493)

If, as Little (1987) has asserted, "Collegiality shows its peculiar architecture only close up" (p. 503), then understanding the processes involved in creating and sustaining a collegial community will require the lens of local context. This paper provides such a lens as it examines the experience of four teachers from a school in southern Ohio, Cedar City High School, in implementing "Connections." The program derived its name from its interdisciplinary goal of designing instruction so that students would come to understand the interrelatedness, or connections, between subject areas. Success in implementing Connections, as the teachers understood it, would not lie solely in their ability to connect their subject areas. The work of Connections, in large part, would be a process of constructing a community identity. It is that process that is the subject of this study.

An Overview of the Study and Its Context

As this study traces the processes surrounding the creation of a Connections community, two questions provide focal points for analysis:

1. What elements were involved in Connections' community identity as constructed by the teachers?

2. How was Connections' community identity forged, and how did it evolve over the year of initial implementation?

Dewey's first community standard (how numerous and varied are shared interests) is within the scope of the first question. Also encompassed within the first question are the patterns, values and norms, signs and symbols, that comprise a culture. The second question points to Dewey's concerns about the nature of the process through which community is created --- about the interplay of other associations, and about the need for open forums for dialogue and experimentation.

Data Collection. This study follows a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1988). Data sources include: (1) observations -- of the teachers' planning sessions prior to the start of the school year, meetings of teachers with administrators, parent information meetings, and twice-weekly observations of both the teachers' common planning period and the three-period Connections block of classes throughout the year; (2) interviews -- with teachers at the conclusion of each instructional unit and with the principal and assistant superintendent preceding and following the school year and at the end of each quarter; and (3) documents -- including internal communications, district community newsletters, and relevant local newspaper articles.

Connections' Context. Located within commuting distance

of three urban areas, Cedar City (population 10,000) is a postcard prototype of small towns of the American heartland. Cedar City Schools, and the high school that is the setting for this study, mirror the town's character. It is a pleasant and clean atmosphere --- no graffiti-covered walls, no signs of inattention to maintenance --- that bespeaks the character of its inhabitants. It is an environment that is comfortable for the 750 overwhelmingly white, middle class students and their 44 teachers.

Several changes in administrative personnel within the three years preceding Connections' implementation signaled change in Cedar City Schools. A district vision statement was adopted in 1992, and companion building vision statements followed in 1993. The Cedar City High School (CCHS) vision statement, posted in all classrooms, lists Connections as one innovation the school was committed to undertake. Within the school's seven-period day and highly departmentalized and tracked organization, Connections would be a three-period block encompassing the subject areas of English, World History, and Physical Science. A voluntary program option, Connections was conceived as serving a heterogeneous ninth grade cohort of 80 students, including students identified as having learning disabilities. The four Connections teachers represented each of the subject areas and special education.

The four Connections teachers were: Sheryl Hart, English; Bernie Lyons, Social Studies; Tim Schwartz, Learning

Disabilities; and Dan Centers, Physical Science. Before Connections, ties among the four teachers had been limited. As Sheryl commented,

> Tim, I sort of knew; Bernie was a "hello"; Dan, well, English and science people don't get much chance to know each other. (9/14/93)

Working together as the Connections teaching team would change that. The Connections experience is the story of the teachers' journey from acquaintance to community.

The Connections Saga

A community is not created quickly. It is, in Bellah et al.'s (1985) words, "a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of the past" (p. 333). The power of stories of the past to define a community is evident in organizational sagas as "a particular bit of history becomes a definition full of pride and identity for the group" (Clark, 1972, p. 178). In emerging communities, sagas could be expected to develop early on and play an important part in establishing unity and loyalty among community members (Clark, 1972). Such was the case with Connections.

The First Day Story. On occasions when visitors would come to observe Connections and talk to the teachers, the story of the first day was invariably told. Because the story came to figure so prominently in Connections lore, and because many elements of Connections' emerging culture are visible in the first day story, it will be related in detail here.

The morning of the first day began as the teachers gathered

in Dan's room for their common planning period. In a ritual rooted in the summer planning sessions held in each other's homes, the teachers paused in their preparations to share a homebaked coffee cake Sheryl had brought. Continuing another ritual that developed during the summer, Bernie put the finishing touches on the white marker board that charted the plans for the first week's "Bridges" unit. The unit derived its name and focus from the activity that would consume all three periods of the first Connections block. In cooperative learning groups, students would be given cardboard, markers, and all the other materials needed to fashion bridges able to support the weight of at least one, and up to 13, bricks. After agreeing on the roles to be designated within each student group, assuring that all materials were in place, and greeting the three parent volunteers who would videotape the morning's activity, the teachers were ready to meet their students.

As the bell signaling the end of first period sounded, the 80 Connections students found their way to the double-size room allocated exclusively to Connections for the first four periods of each day. A computer-generated banner proclaiming "Welcome to Connections!" greeted them. A few moments after the 8:42 bell indicated the start of second period, Bernie, whose voice carried best, took center stage.

> We've got a <u>wonderful</u> day --- it's 90 degrees!
> We all <u>like</u> to sweat! I need your attention for
> a couple of minutes. This is Connections class.

Then, after introducing himself and the other three teachers,

Bernie turned to the next item on the morning's agenda: announcing student advisory groups. In a semi-random manner (all learning disabilities students became part of Tim's group), the teachers had divided the students into four groups of 20, and each teacher had chosen a color name for his or her group. Sheryl's group was blue ("my favorite color"), Tim's was red ("I'm a Cincinnati Reds fan"), and Dan's was green. Not content to christen his group with a primary color, Bernie chose magenta. After each teacher had called out the names of students in his or her group, Dan became the emcee. He described the project for the day, identified the roles to be delegated within each student group, and pointed out the materials to be used. By then, it had come time to, as Dan phrased it, "rock and roll."

Meeting first in their advisory groups, students counted off by fours, and then scattered in clusters to begin the work of building bridges. After almost two periods of working on their bridges, each student group presented their bridge to the class during the last period of the Connections block. Each group's "communicator" introduced the group, described their design process, and revealed the name of their bridge. Punctuated by rounds of applause (at Bernie's initial prompting) and the flash of Sheryl's camera, the parade of bridge presentations found all but three willing and able to "push the envelope" (Bernie's phrase) and risk the weight of all 13 bricks. An article in the local newspaper reported the morning's events and quoted Tim's description of what would become the

best-remembered moment of the morning:

> When the bell rang for the other students to change classes, they didn't even look up. They were so absorbed in the lesson. (9/15/93)

From that moment on, the "phenomenon of the unheard bell" was assured a place in the Connections saga.

On its first day, Connections had created powerful first impressions for both teachers and students. Pieces of teacher conversations reveal more about those first impressions:

> Sheryl (to Tim): Most of the presenters weren't honors students. That is so cool!
> Bernie (to Sheryl): You gotta see some of these designs! They're doing a double-decker!
> Tim (to Dan): Know what? Three of these are mine [LD students], and I didn't even know it. Look at them!
> Sheryl (to Dan): The most traditional thing we did today was call out names --- I love it! I'm going to hate my regular classes this afternoon.

Near the end of the year, I asked George Cerny, the principal, to reflect on the significant moments in Connections from his perspective. He quickly responded, "We had a good first day . . . It was imperative that they got off to a good start" (4/29/94).

This story shares two common dimensions with all of the stories that eventually comprised the Connections saga. Each conveyed cultural messages about Connections' community identity. Each was a success story.

Sagas as Cultural Messages. The words, actions, and events within the Connections saga stories serve as illustrations of the cultural norms and values that became the heart of Connections' identity as a community.

The first day's bridge building story points to a project orientation in Connections. Moreover, the first day's projects transcended the boundaries of academic disciplines. As one Connections student, Amanda, told a group of eighth grade students considering enrolling in Connections for its second year, "We do projects all the time . . . It's not as boring; it's different" (4/12/94). An interdisciplinary focus, active learning and group work would be Connections hallmarks. The scheduling options the teachers created within the Connections three-period block encouraged such a pedagogical approach.

For the first day, and on many other days, the full Connections cohort would meet for the entire block. Another option lay in a complex 1½-1½ period configuration balanced over three days. The teachers could also elect to follow the regular high school schedule for what became known as a "three-class rotation." When the teachers asked students to evaluate Connections at mid-year, the students overwhelmingly voiced a strong preference for the full-block or 1½-1½ formats. As Bernie (2/1/94) noted, "They know we can't lecture that long." Most of the projects, as on the first day, were group projects. All of the Connections teachers had taken the district-sponsored summer workshop on cooperative learning and had come to view this strategy as one appropriate to Connections.

The teachers' comments about the first day point to another key element of Connections identity: the heterogeneous nature of its student cohort. Ensuring that all students would be

able to experience succe: n the classroom was part of Connections' perceived mission. As the year passed, strategies for meeting that mission varied among the teachers. Sheryl drafted various test forms and used parallel texts. Bernie often evaluated students with open-book and take-home assignments, and he used simulations and dramatizations extensively. Dan provided more time in class than he usually would for working on his assignments. Tim offered small group assistance, especially to students struggling with reading.

The first day story also offers cultural messages about the relationship among the teachers within the Connections community. In keeping with Huberman's (1993) tinkerer model, the first day saw teachers openly conferring to create on-the-spot adaptations of their basic lesson plan. They sought and accepted the suggestions of their colleagues. Over the hours of planning together during the summer, the teachers had become aware of the strengths each teacher brought to the group. Bernie was the charismatic idea-person; Sheryl, the organizer, liaison to the world outside of Connections, and, on occasion, a motherly figure; Dan, the group's technical wizard, attending to details, often using his computer expertise; Tim, the internal communications facilitator, and also one who would attend to organization and detail work. But this process of taking on roles within the group was not deliberate. As Dan observed (9/10/93), "Each of us seems to pick up on things to do. It's not really discussed. Each [of us] seems to have our own

interests." Tim's observation (9/17/93) was similar, "The camaraderie of the four of us is good. If something's not being done, someone picks it up."

Tim's reference to camaraderie points to another cultural message that is also visible in the Connections saga: a distinctive family climate. The welcoming banner and the student advisory groups both communicated a cultural message of family. Throughout the first semester, the full Connections cohort gathered together each morning, ostensibly for attendance and announcements. Gathered together each day in the double room that accommodated all 80 students and four teachers, a sense of "home" developed, enabling both students and teachers to connect and define themselves as a community. For the teachers, the feeling of family had its origins in the summer's planning sessions as they took turns in providing hospitality. Events during the Connections year would strengthen these bonds. Tim's father died at the beginning of October, and Bernie's mother died at the end of October. Those events made it clear that the importance of family in the teachers' personal lives also was a value they held for Connections:

> Sheryl (9/14/93): There's so much more family feeling, a growing sense of community.
> Tim (4/12/94): I know these students better than any other students I've had in 16 years of teaching.

Sagas as Success Stories. By definition, all of the stories that find their way into a community's saga are success stories. Clark's (1972) discussion of the role of sagas in the development of community distinguishes two stages. The first is initiation.

Like Bolman and Deal (1991), Clark points out that sagas (or what Bolman and Deal call myths or fairy tales) are most likely to develop when an organization is new and uncertainties abound. The uncertainties of the education enterprise are well-documented (e.g., Rosenholtz, 1989; Jackson, 1986). Those uncertainties are compounded in the initial implementation of an innovative program like Connections. As Sheryl explained (3/21/94), "We were all apprehensive at first." In such a context, sagas develop quickly to meet pressing needs. One of those needs lies in the much-discussed dependency of teachers on students for a sense of success (e.g., McLaughlin, 1993; Lieberman & Miller, 1990; Pauly, 1991; Cohen, 1988). Another need is for a strong enunciation of the group's meaning (Clark, 1972; Bolman & Deal, 1991). Within the Connections saga, the first day story provided evidence of student success. The first day story also encoded cultural norms and values central to Connections' community identity. So it is not surprising that the first day story, and other similar stories, would become deeply entrenched in a Connections saga whose initiation coincided with Connections' beginnings.

Several cultural processes appeared to be at work as the teachers engaged in the initial work of creating a Connections community. There were rituals --- the various schedule options, the white marker board, the gathering of the full group together each morning, the sharing of coffee during common planning time. There were symbols --- the student advisory groups, the welcoming

banner, the applause for each presentation. There were cultural norms --- active learning through projects, interdisciplinary focus, group work, ensuring success within a heterogeneous group. But as all of these elements were encompassed within stories, the development of a Connections saga was the most powerful means for establishing meaning, solidarity, and certainty in the emerging Connections community. Sustaining community is another matter.

The Rest of the Connections Story

In addition to the first stage of initiation in the development of an organizational saga, Clark (1972) describes a second stage: fulfillment. A saga is fulfilled when the community's members adhere to the values expressed in the saga and the community's practices embody those values. In other words, in order for a saga to be fulfilled --- and thereby serve in sustaining a community --- a saga must be not only an "espoused theory," but also a "theory-in-use" (Argyris & Schön, cited in Bolman & Deal, 1991). As the Connections saga was often repeated whenever teachers or students had occasion to "explain" Connections to others, it was most obviously an espoused theory. But as Sarason (1971) notes,

> Public positions taken by groups within a culture cannot be assumed to be the private positions taken by all or most of the individuals comprising those groups. (p. 70)

Sagas demand more than utterance for their fulfillment; they require the members' belief. Shared beliefs that are expressed

in practice form a foundation for the trust and loyalty that turns a group into a community (Clark, 1972). The stories within the Connections saga were success stories. Other stories were also part of the Connections experience. In their telling, more complete understandings of the extent to which Connections met Dewey's standards for community and of Connections' theory-in-use may be revealed.

The "lab book crisis" is a Connections story that was never included in the Connections saga. McLaughlin (1993) describes three general patterns in teachers' classroom responses to students. Teachers may maintain traditional standards and conventional practices; they may lower their expectations; or they may adapt their practices and pedagogy, broadening their definitions of achievement and creating active roles for students. According to the Connections saga, all of the Connections teachers would be expected to follow the third pattern. The lab book crisis proved otherwise.

The main activity in Dan's science classes was lab work. During the first week of school, Dan made it clear to students that he had very specific requirements for an appropriate lab book. Since he had not been able to have lab books included in the fee schedule for his class, Dan offered to purchase lab books for students at the university where he was taking graduate courses. A few students took him up on his offer, but many more did not. Further complicating the matter, Dan would not grade lab reports until they were recorded in a lab book.

Several weeks into the first quarter, a form of gridlock had taken shape: Dan's standards were not altered, and as many as 22 students had not yet secured appropriate lab books. Yet the matter did not become a topic for common planning time discussion until the first of October. Bernie raised the issue:

> We need to get closure on the lab books somehow. About ten [students] are starting to go back to an us-them mentality. It's starting to frustrate us. It's defeating the purpose of what we're trying to do with this class. We need to free up a day and work with kids who are struggling.

Dan acknowledged, "Maybe I should have taken up papers, but then I'd grade them twice." For Bernie, "That's neither here nor there," and the meeting continued with Tim's volunteering to purchase lab books over the coming weekend and work with students. That was the weekend Tim's father died. Time eventually resolved the crisis.

The lab book crisis story foreshadowed a rift that would develop within the Connections community. It also signaled other aspects of the Connections saga that proved difficult to fulfill.

By mid-December, Sheryl, Tim, and Bernie had become increasingly frustrated by the team's seeming inability to "connect" science with the other two subject areas. Increasingly, Connections followed a three class rotation, with Dan "unplugged" (a Connections term denoting a lack of content relation). Increasingly, in a pattern suggestive of Hargreaves' (1993) strategic individualism, Dan was present in the room, but he did not actively participate in common planning time.

The team's initial plans for interdisciplinary units driven by themes derived from the chronology of history had gone awry. As Dan explained,

> I'm not a science historian. It's never been easy to connect academically. I wasn't taught that way. I know it's me. I don't want it to be artificial, contrived, a surface connection. The kids see through that. (5/10/94)

Dan's explanation goes to Dewey's "interplay with other forms of association." The larger school culture's norm of subject specialization, through secondary teacher preparation and departmental structures, proved to be a "tenacious habit" that resisted change. The teachers' response to this rift is noteworthy. While the principal was aware of the issue, he wanted the teaching team to come to a resolution without his intervention. Sheryl's words summarize what happened when the teachers met in mid-December,

> The meeting produced no <u>great</u> changes, but we're looking at how we could structure second semester to include science better. We'll each make a list of key things to be covered, then meet to see if thematic groupings suggest themselves. (12/14/93)

True to Connections ritual, the teachers met for breakfast one morning during the Christmas break. Taking their lead from science concepts, they developed units around the themes of structures, reactions, and the future. From George Cerny's perspective as principal (4/29/94),

> The real watershed was when the three teachers decided to follow the needs of the one. That showed commitment and maturity on their part.

The new plan had promise. But another event interrupted.

Unexpectedly, Dan was assigned a student teacher, Jim Pelfrey, for the second semester. Dan remained detached during common planning time, and even near the end of his 16-week Connections sojourn, Jim said, "I still don't feel part of the team" (4/26/94). As the year's end neared and several Connections students were "failing" science, Tim, Bernie, and Sheryl began to openly talk to each other about whether Dan should continue as part of the Connections team for the next year.

Fulfilling the norm of interdisciplinary focus was not the sole area where espoused theory and theory-in-use were discrepant. As Sheryl planned her "structures" unit around grammar, Connections' heterogeneity also posed a problem. Within Cedar City Schools, the cultural norm of tracking assumes importance at the junior high level. So the ninth grade Connections students' background in grammar varied with their tracking designation. In a concession to the "tenacious habit" of the larger school's tracking system, students were grouped by tracks, rather than student advisory groups, for the six weeks of the grammar unit.

As this discussion illustrates, fulfillment of the Connections saga was uneven. Some of the saga's cultural messages were abiding messages. Others were challenged by the influences of the larger Cedar City High School culture. The difference between the stories included in the Connections saga and those that were not points to the difference between creating a community and sustaining a community. It is that difference

that is addressed in this study's conclusion.

The Moral of the Story

Yet one other norm of the larger school culture, one common in school cultures (Rosenholtz, 1989), also intruded on Connections: the norm of mutual non-interference. When individual differences arose, the Connections' teachers first instinct was to avoid conflict. The lab book crisis simmered until October. The nonconnection with science was not raised for discussion until December. The question of Dan's continuing as part of the team was not openly confronted until the first week of June. The conversation at that time was important to understanding this study's conclusions. After talking about plans for the next year, Sheryl raised the issue while Dan was not in the room.

> Sheryl: We need to talk about Dan, about whether he'll buy into this.
> Bernie: I'll do that. . . . Solo?
> Sheryl and Tim: Yeah.
> Bernie: I think the way to approach it is from a philosophical basis. We need to make science accessible to all students. . . . If you don't want to make the commitment, then let's bail out now and find someone else.
> Sheryl: It's not like abandoning ship . . . It's the vision thing. (6/3/94)

For the Connections teaching team, constructing community came to rest finally on "commitment" and "the vision thing."

Among the lessons of change, Fullan (1993) finds that

> People need a good deal of reflective experience before they can form a plausible vision. Vision emerges from, more than it precedes, action. Even then it is always provisional. (p. 127)

For Connections, the Connections saga stories became visions of what-ought-to-be or what-is-possible that persisted even when the stories did not reflect what-is. Which elements of community embodied in the Connections saga would become crucial matters of belief did not become clear until near the end of the year. That said, I am not suggesting that the Connections saga was a hindrance to either creating or sustaining a Connections community. Quite the contrary. The Connections saga served as a source of pride, solidarity, and identity. Still, it was only in moments of crisis or in rare moments of purposeful reflection as a group that the vision embodied in the saga came to be a focus of either the process of deliberation Dewey sees as integral to community or the process of discussion Bellah et al. ascribe to community. For Connections, despite an extra common planning period and hours of summer meetings, the process of constructing community seemed to be more often unconscious than conscious.

In his consideration of education policy implementation, Odden (1991) distinguishes two kinds of commitment: the commitment to <u>try</u> a new program, and commitment <u>to</u> the new program. Odden concludes that the latter usually emerged at the end, rather than at the beginning, of the implementation process. Certainly, all four of the Connections teachers were committed to trying Connections. By the end of the year, each teacher's commitment <u>to</u> Connections was defined in terms of his or her belief in a core Connections value: ensuring student

success.

The Connections experience in forging community renews credence in Dewey's concept of community. Shared interests are integral to community. So, too, are the democratic processes of deliberation and critique. Both are necessary if teachers are to create and sustain the communities required for change.

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