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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on how reform efforts since 1991 have affected teachers in an urban, K-6 elementary school of approximately 450 students. Teachers were predominantly female, middle-aged, and of European descent, while students were increasingly African-American and poor. Children were considered well-behaved by teachers, but less respectful than previous generations. Teacher practices were traditional and conservative and becoming increasingly ineffective with the current student population. The Primary Task Force of the School Improvement Committee examined the school's primary program in the light of new district policies discouraging in-grade retention and facilitated the expression of teachers' views on school policy. Teaching practice was changed from a solitary to a communal practice and the program was changed in substantial ways that either would not receive or did not need the approval of the director, such as more creativity and parent involvement in summer classes. Among recommendations of a Magnet School Committee were implementation of an 11-month school year--a recommendation not ultimately implemented. Overall, teachers learned that they, personally, can impact both school policy and student learning, even when students face difficult socioeconomic situations. Contains five references. (NAV)

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The Emergence of Professional Voice:
School Reform and Professional Identity

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Since March, 1991, I have been privileged to observe a school staff wrestle with problems of practice in ways that changed the way they thought and talked about what it meant to be a teacher, and changed their relations with one another and with their children. Intensive field work continued until July, 1993, with intermittent visits continuing to the present. This paper is a brief overview of the changes that have taken place, and the possible significance of the change. The data reported in this paper are part of a larger study on the effects of school reform efforts that in some way involve teachers taking on new roles within their schools and districts, roles that in a variety of ways were supposed to enhance the professional identity of practitioners¹. In the case of Hilltop Elementary School, an urban K-6 school of approximately 450 students, the new roles that the teachers took on were part of a district move to site-based management and shared decision making. To this end, teachers were given significant voice in the management of their schools, and a committee was set up in each school to institutionalize the teacher's voice. In Hilltop, the committee was known as the School Improvement Committee, or SIC.

Staff involvement in school change was further facilitated

¹ This research project was made possible by grants from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement and the Spencer Foundation. I also wish to thank Gerald P. Grant and Christine Murray for their leadership in the larger project, and for making me part of it. Last, but far from least, I wish to express my admiration for the remarkable women and men -- ordinary heroes -- who continue to work to make Hilltop Elementary School a better place for all adults and children, and also my thanks for sharing the experience with me.

through *ad hoc* committees. Especially significant among these at Hilltop were the Primary Task Force (PTF) and the Magnet School Committee (MSC), which are discussed below.

The story begins with the very first SIC meeting I attended in March, 1991. The staff -- teachers, principal, and vice-principal -- were dismayed by the magnitude of perceived problems with student behavior and academic achievement.² Though the meeting's agenda was to plan an upcoming inservice day, the discussion turned rapidly to problems with the children's behavior and academic achievement, and the staff's feelings of helplessness and futility in the face of them.

The staff were overwhelmingly of European descent, female, and middle aged. Only three teachers were African American at the beginning of the study (this number was increased to four when an African American woman was added as a reading teacher, and reduced again to three with the retirement of a first grade teacher). The only males were a classroom teacher, the physical education teacher (also an African American), the instructional specialist (a "teacher on special assignment" who moved to another school as assistant principal in the third year of the study), and the principal (who was new the first year of the study and who took a position as principal at another school the fourth year).

² Though it is also worth noting that the school seemed in fact to be orderly and safe, and the children were, on the whole, well-behaved, though not as "respectful" of adults as previous generations of students are remembered to have been.

The practices of the teachers were rather traditional and conservative, practices that had served them well over the years, but which were increasingly ineffective as the student population at Hilltop changed from mostly European American and middle class to a higher percentage of African American and poorer students. The efforts of the staff to compensate for their ineffectiveness had largely consisted of attempting to maintain their traditional practices in the face of the changes confronting them.

This was the state of affairs in March. During that meeting, however, the norms of practice were challenged in a way that caused the professional staff at Hilltop to come to see themselves and their students in a quite different light. As one sixth grade teacher pointed out to her colleagues with some passion and no little frustration, their efforts to make changes at Hilltop had focused entirely on getting the students to make changes, but not themselves. In talking about work done the previous summer, she reminded her colleagues that they had established clear "expectations" for the students and had made efforts to enforce those expectations, but had not asked in what ways they needed to change their own practice.

Once this move had been made, there were two responses: some members of the SIC team felt that in order to address the needs of their new student body they would need to depend on the expertise of outside consultants; others argued that the resources necessary to make the required changes in practice resided within the building itself. Over the time of this study,

this latter voice became the dominant one as the teachers found the confidence to assert their control over their own practice.

The Primary Task Force and the Magnet School Committee became the places where this professional voice began to first emerge and was nurtured. We will first look at the steps by which this "professional voice" emerged and then examine its meaning and possible significance.

The Primary Task Force

The Primary Task Force was established at the initiative of the Central Administration. Its portfolio was to consider possible changes in the school's primary program in the light of changes in district policy regarding retention in the early grades. The district had recently declared that children would be retained in grade only under unusual circumstances. There was a recognition that this change at least required examination of course content and pedagogy, as there would now presumably be larger numbers of children in classes who were not "ready" to do the work of that grade. Thus the district's Director of Elementary Instruction set up a Primary Task Force in each elementary school to consider what accommodations would be necessary and/or desirable under the new policy.

There was no stated limits on the changes the teachers could make, but the Director of Elementary Instruction had her own rather strong opinions about the nature of good primary practice, and the teachers knew well enough what changes they could and

could not hope to have approved.

This group consisted of seven of the primary grade teachers; a "floating" primary teacher, who worked in several rooms in tandem with the classroom teachers; the building Instructional Specialist, a loosely defined "teacher on special assignment" position; and the assistant principal.³ In addition, a representative from central administration was present at the meetings as a facilitator. His manner in this role suggested that he was also supposed to make sure that central administration's agenda for this committee was met.

Making the entry into school more comfortable for children was clearly the group's primary concern. They had already made some adjustments in their practice, using a "floating" primary teacher who was added to the staff in the 1991-92 school year. She does not have her own class, but moves from class to class assisting in different ways in different classes. This makes it easier for these teachers to provide greater help for the children who need it.

The plans the PTF are developing include continuing to use Melissa as a floating teacher. The question comes up whether it would be better to use her to reduce class size or eliminate a split grade situation in one of the upper grades. The consensus

³ In the partnership between Tom Harris, the principal, and Judy Willis, the assistant principal, Tom is the building manager and Judy is the curriculum specialist. The division is not that neat, and their tasks overlap in an apparently excellent working relationship, but their skills are complementary, and they are both aware of that.

was that if she continues to provide help in the primary grades, the problems of teaching in the intermediate grades would diminish. While this is clearly somewhat self-serving, it is also clear that it is a sincere belief.

I had heard that the academic demands of the primary grades were discussed in the group's first meeting, which I had not attended. In this second meeting it was brought up one of the first grade teachers, who quite heatedly argued that the first grade curriculum puts teachers in a double bind: if they do not teach the curriculum, and if their children do not make the expected progress on the district assessment forms, they are held accountable; on the other hand, in order to meet that accountability they must be "pushing too much on little people," as she puts it. This strikes a nerve with the teachers, and a heated discussion of the fact that the school does not have time for kids follows. The Instructional Specialist (IS) claims that "Kids don't have time to blossom," to which the teacher responds that they don't even have time to be kids. As this is an issue that the teachers really have no say in - such decisions get made by central administration, not at the school site - the facilitator tries to move the group along to some less incendiary topic, one which the group can legitimately address. But this is of real importance to the teachers, who persist in discussing the need to resist what Elkind (CITE) calls the "miseducation" of the young child. The IS comments that "We're afraid to teach them where they are," and the first grade teachers immediately and

heatedly responds, "We're afraid to let them be kids." The strength of the teachers' feelings on this matter can be inferred from the fact that in all the meetings I had seen facilitated and processed by central administration staff, this is the only time that I see this sort of rebellion. On other occasions, teachers allow their own interests to be submerged to the process and the agenda of the facilitator.

This then is one of the points where professional voice is beginning to emerge. They are discovering communal norms about what good practice is, or at least what good practice is not. These teachers have discovered that whatever their differences, and however they might dispute the details of good practice, they do agree that the way school is currently being kept is not good for the children they teach and should be changed. Having discovered this shared sense of the professional problem they face, they are not about to allow Frank to move them along. It may be the case that there are serious limits to the changes they can make, but they are not prepared to take that to mean that they can make no changes at all.⁴

For example, it became clear that they believed the primary curriculum placed too much academic pressure on young children,

⁴ This ability to see problems as needing to be addressed and the willingness to do what they can to make things better instead of insisting on the power to do exactly what they believe would make things best is one of the things that distinguishes Hilltop from many of the other schools in the broader study. They did not see the fact that there were some things they could not do as evidence of Central Administration's bad faith, and so they pushed to do those things they could do that would make things better.

and that this interfered with not only with their learning, but also with the way the children came to view school. There was a consensus about three things: (1) formal reading instruction ought to be delayed some, (2) the "levels testing" program mandated by central administration to track students' progress through the basal series ought to be done away with, and (3) the director of elementary instruction would not allow such things to happen. However, they did not abandon their consideration of what they still could do, as opposed to what should be done in the best of all possible worlds. Teacher autonomy was circumscribed, neither total nor all-encompassing, and the Hilltop staff was prepared to do what they could in an imperfect system.

The result was that the primary program was changed in some substantial ways that either would receive or did not need the approval of the director. Teaching assignments were changed so that most of the primary teachers (and, as it turned out, most of the teachers in the whole school) had split grade assignments (that is, a single classroom would consist of, say, first and second grade children). This sort of thing is usually done by the administration for financial reasons as a more efficient way to staff classes. However, these teachers chose this staffing for educational reasons: (1) it would encourage thematic and interdisciplinary teaching, since there would no longer be a presumptively homogeneous groups of children; and (2) it would make school more comfortable by allowing children to be with the

same teacher for two years, and roughly one-half the students would already be "veterans" the first day, able to show others the ropes. Further, what they named "vertical teaming" was also part of this plan, which meant that the 1-2 teacher was teamed up with the 3-4 teacher, and some students moved between those rooms for some instruction. This would provide some continuity as the children moved from grade to grade; they would still have some contact with the old teacher, and the new teacher would not be a total stranger.

We should note that this was significant change in the way the teachers chose to practice. For our purposes we should particularly note that in the discussion about how to meet the needs of the children the teachers were beginning to make assertive claims to each other about how "we" should do things, contrary to the usual norm of "loosely coupled institutions" that schools most often are. More and more, these teachers were coming to base claims about practice in research findings. As part of the work of school improvement, and as a result of their commitment to "get things right," these teachers had begun spending time in the library of a near-by research university. They were no longer simply sharing stories with each other about things they were trying in their class; they were making claims about what "we" should *all* be doing. This tendency affected the way teachers discussed practice not only in committees, but in private conversations with each other as well.

The desires of this task force include (1) developmentally

appropriate education, (2) low pressure entrance to school, (3) team teaching, (4) cooperative learning in classrooms, and (5) a program based on continuous progress. During the course of their conversations, the members of this committee come to see the overhaul of the curriculum as the solution to their problems created by the inappropriate curriculum and inhospitable primary program.

What they had come to see was a connection between the difficulty they were having with their students and the difficulty that their students were having in school. Problems formerly thought of as *discipline* problems requiring more strict enforcement of the rules were now recast as *educational* problems, requiring greater accommodation on the part of the school to the needs of the students. Further, through the conversation about shared concerns, they came to hold the view collectively, not as individuals. Another place where this staff articulated a communal view of teaching was the Magnet School Committee (MSC).

The Magnet School Committee

The members of this committee were nine class room teachers, the music teacher, the PE teacher, a classroom aid, the principal, and the IS.

In the end, the work of this committee was not ratified by the district; Hilltop was not chosen for the district's magnet school project. This made changing to an eleven month school year, the feature around which they had designed their magnet

idea, a dead issue, since it depended on a great deal of money for teachers, transportation, and supplies. When Hilltop was not chosen as one of the participating schools, the chances that it would receive the necessary financial support became effectively zero.

However, there are two things to note that again point to the growing sense of professional autonomy and ownership of this process of change and professional development. The first thing to note is that the committee formed as an *ad hoc* response to the fact that so many people in the Hilltop catchment area sent their children to another school; this wounded their professional pride and they wished to stem the out-selection of students by fostering the image of Hilltop as a manifestly good place to be. They believed this to be so, but recognized that they had an image problem in the district; they lacked a clear image with which they could be identified. When they heard that the district had plans to fund a few magnet schools in the city, a group began to consider applying, discussed the idea with Tom, and then began meeting once a week. The topic of conversation became: What sort of a place do we want Hilltop Elementary School to be? If we get a chance to redesign the way we keep school here, how would we change it?

It is important to note, then, that when their idea of a year-round school was not accepted for funding, they continued to meet, and to discuss the question of how they could reinvent themselves. They did so with the understanding that there would

be no assistance from the district, that they were in this on their own. What they set out to do was to renew their school, and their professional practice, from within (CITE Fullan).

As was the case with the PTF, there was an early and general recognition that the cause of much of what was wrong at Hilltop, what had been expressed in terms of problems with the children, family, neighborhood, or society in general was in fact rooted in inappropriate educational practice. Given an opportunity to think together about their problems, and to talk about what school improvement would look like, they express strong criticism of the way they teach and their curricula.⁵ As was also the case with the PTF, they are quite clear that they believe bad educational practice alienates both children and parents from schools. As with the PTF, it is important for our purposes to note that this understanding was communal, not merely individual. It is not just that teachers are coming to see their practice as in need of change. To some extent, they apparently already had seen this individually. What is significant is that these teachers, as members of a community of practice, we coming to see this as a community of practice.

At first the term "magnet school" was generic; they did not know in what way they would be unique or what about them would serve as a magnet. Performing arts was mentioned (and remained

⁵ It almost seems that the reflex is to blame discipline problems on the child and/or the family, but when given time and a forum to actually think the question through in a communal and serious effort to understand what is going wrong, they see the sources as within school practice.

an aspect of the magnet school idea), as was "whole language" (but there were already a few "whole language schools" in the district, so that was ruled out). Finally, the notion of keeping school in session for the whole year was mentioned and was received positively. The committee then focused on turning this idea into a magnet school proposal.

The very first thing on which consensus was reached was that any summer program would need to be more "relaxed" and "at ease" than the current educational program. This idea needed little discussion; it was obvious to everyone. As Bette puts it, "And it's my idea that when and if we do teach in the summer that it would be in a creative way. Maybe not exactly, well definitely not exactly the way we do all year, but in a creative manner." Sue then suggests that instruction should be organized around specific unifying themes, ones that would engage the children and give them reason to learn the skills and information that is being taught. As Lisa puts it, "...we figure if we do that in a different way they'll be learning, but they wouldn't really know they're learning and they might like it a lot better than they liked it before."⁶

Another idea they have for the summer program is to include the parents. The principal reminds them that many families see the summer as time for family, but by including the parents they try to "Not break that family bond that some people would want to

⁶ Or, as Dewey (CITE) puts it, when we engage children's interest, they are more likely to learn.

have, but take advantage of it as part of the whole program." This would not only enable family bonds to remain intact in the summer, it would forge closer ties between family and school that would last. The kindergarten teacher was especially excited about this prospect, as she is the one who is helping families adjust to school. This proposal would make her job easier by creating a less formal atmosphere to which the children and the family could ease into school.

With further discussion, they discovered that the sort of program they would like to set up in the summer is the sort of program they would like to have year-round. What begins as a way to teach when school is not in formal session is quickly seen as the way they would all like to be teaching all the time, but feel they cannot do within the constraints of the school as it is now run, and about which they may be right. Though there is some sense that they will be needing to test those constraints.

What seems most significant is that this group of teachers comes to believe that what is wrong with school is their teaching, not the children or their families. Throughout my field notes from the PTF and the MSC it is striking that when confronted with the question, "How can we improve this school?", the answer they come to is, "Teach different material differently." These teachers have come to see their children as alienated from school because of features of the school, features which can and should be changed.

Professional Voice

There was a moment when I realized the magnitude of the change that had been taking place imperceptibly over my time in the building. It was at a meeting in the summer of 1992, and I realized I was listening to teachers speak in a very different voice than the one I heard at that first SIC meeting. By that time, the SIC had been replaced by what was known as a Strategic Planning Team. The charge was roughly the same, though there were some differences that need not detain us. The group was divided into four task forces that included involvement of all members of the Hilltop Staff in dealing with different aspects of school improvement.

The moment was at a meeting of the Strategic Planning Team, when Bill Martin, who chaired one of the task forces, was presenting the findings of his task force to the assembled Hilltop staff. His presentation was a report on the research the task force had reviewed and concluded that the preponderance of the research indicated a direction for the staff to take. What was notable was that he was not reporting on what he was going to try, nor what the members of the task force were going to try in their classes. Rather, and quite specifically, he was informing his peers, speaking on behalf of the task force, how they should communally conduct their practice. What had happened in my time at Hilltop was that the teaching had changed from a solitary to a communal practice. Hilltop was no longer as loosely coupled as is the norm for schools. No longer did teachers face problems of

practice alone, as teachers had been doing when I first arrived at Hilltop. These teachers faced problems together, using the collective wisdom of the community as well as the research when it seemed relevant. The professional norms of practice had significantly as the teachers had been given the space and the time to explore their own feelings about their practice. It was an exciting thing to see; at one point in my notes I refer to the fact that watching the Hilltop staff in the 92-93 school year was like watching a veteran staff of first year teachers. That is, they had the enthusiasm, excitement, and idealistic commitment that we associate with early career teachers, but they also had the wisdom, judgement, and knowledge of children that comes from experience.

Professional Voice: Membership and Normation

We often hear today of individuals or groups discovering or finding their voices. This paper has been an attempt to examine a change of voice among a group of experienced educators. By examining the experience of the ordinary heroes who work there, it may be possible to better understand the growth and development of professional identity, and the means by which this can be nurtured.

Like many -- perhaps most -- educators, the staff at Hilltop assumed that many of the things that affected the educational success of their students were things that were beyond their control: the quality of the home, the stability of the family,

the supports offered by the neighborhood, financial resources, the intelligence of the children, and the children's willingness to exert effort come readily to mind. This feeling of helplessness in the face of these factors was one of the things that changed most dramatically in Hilltop during the time of the study upon which this paper is based. It is now time to consider how that which is marked off by talk of "voice" is related to both "membership," and "norms."⁷

The thesis I want to consider is that what is now being called "voice" is a way of expressing what used to be called "normation"; one can speak in the voice of a group only if one understands the norms of that group. Adoption of voice is a sign of membership in a group, though not an infallible one. It is always possible for an individual to adopt the signs of membership and not to have truly internalized the norms, or for an individual to have truly internalized the norms but to be rejected by the group they would presume to join. So while the ability to speak in the voice of a group does not guarantee membership, inability to do so definitively indicates a lack of membership. Voice is a necessary feature of membership, and is partly constitutive of it, one of the outward signs of normation.

Voice, Norms, and Membership

⁷ The following discussion of norms is greatly influenced by the work of Tom Green. In addition to private conversations, I am using ideas stimulated especially by "The Formation of Conscience in the Age of Technology" (CITE) and "'The Conscience of Leadership'" (CITE).

As Green (CITE) makes clear, part of acquiring membership in a profession is acquisition of a certain set of norms, those that govern practice within that profession. It is this set of norms that helps define good practice, not just in the technical, but also in the fullest moral sense. That is, the norms of the profession include the technical norms of competence, but they go far beyond that, also defining the ends of the practice and the means considered appropriate in pursuit of those aims. In the case of Hilltop, for example, we can see that the technical definition of "good practice" is radically dependent on the communal sense of what the relationship between schools and children should be. It is this that Green refers us to when he talks of the "conscience" of a profession. It is the communal eye through which I learn to judge my own practice.

There are norms of practice common to teachers that are taught as folklore or as the "way things are done" in a particular school or district. So many of us were taught "Never smile until Christmas" as one way to establish good classroom discipline, with the explanation that it is easier to begin the year tough and loosen things up as the year progresses than it is to do the opposite.

Schools have been described as "loosely coupled institutions," or "a collection of classrooms held together by a common parking lot." Where such norms prevail, independence is an important qualification for being a successful teacher. Hence each teacher needs to be able to solve her own curricular,

pedagogical, and management problems (to the extent these are separable). The folkloric version of this is that the door on the classroom allows teachers to practice their individual versions of good teaching in private; the message to those who would join the profession is that they must find their own way to be successful. Problems of practice are individual, not communal.

A third group of standards of professional membership have to do with accepting the limitations of the influence of teachers on the success of their children. It is often accepted as fact that teachers can do little to counter the effects of unsupportive or dysfunctional families and decaying and dangerous neighborhoods. This view was given widely cited support by the research of Coleman (CITE), though others, most notably Edmonds (CITE) have challenged Coleman's analysis. Limited ability is seen as another factor that teachers can do little to change, and that will lead to poor academic performance. Thus questions like, "What can I do with a kid like that?" or "What can I do with a kid from a home like that?" become rhetorical.

We might think of this as the hidden curriculum of becoming a teacher, a sort of inservice into the gestalt of teaching. Such beliefs are often so common that they are invisible and unquestioned. But in the three years I spent in Hilltop it was precisely these beliefs that were not only made visible and questioned, but were changed. The things that the Hilltop teachers had taken for granted were examined and rejected, and a

new set of norms became the standards for practice in this building.

Voice is a reflection of normation, and normation is part of professional membership. As the norms of professional practice changed, so too the voice in which those norms were expressed (and by which those norms were shaped) changed. Teachers learned to speak differently to each other about their practice and their students. It was no longer acceptable to speak of students as beyond help or hope: the question "What can I (we) do for a child with these problems?" was no longer rhetorical; it was posed as a real question for communal attention.

These new norms were not universally accepted. Indeed, one of the recurrent problems that was discussed at SIC meetings, in private conversations, and in PTF and MSC was how to accommodate those who had not come to share the new norms and expectations. The old norms of individual independence remained in effect to the extent that it was felt that no teacher had the right to impose practice, even improved practice, on another teacher. It was felt, however, that the pressure of the new consensus would lead to some retirements and/or transfers among those who could not accept the redefinition of practice that was occurring. Despite the developing consensus around the norm of communal standards of practice, the norm of individual autonomy remained strong.

This is one of the issues that is often unclear when one is talking about "professional autonomy": there is a big difference

between a situation where autonomy is a prerogative of the individual practitioner and one in which the autonomy belongs to the professional community in such a way that one's very membership in that community of practice depends on the recognition and internalization of the norms of that community. Much will obviously depend on how that notion is defined in the movement to reform schools through enhanced teacher professionalism.

Permanent Change?

As this is written it is the second school year after the events reported in this paper. One of the issues that is now being decided is whether the movement to communal and collegial practice is permanent or transient. Many changes have taken place in Hilltop: the principal, assistant principal, and the instructional specialist have all left for other schools. The new instructional specialist, who had been the floating primary teacher, has increased the instructional and support aspect of the job. The new principal and assistant principal are men whose leadership styles are very different from their predecessors'. There has been a renovation project recently completed, with a resultant increase of both the staff and students. In short, much change continues to swirl around Hilltop, undermining the staff's confidence in their ability to make the changes they have wrought permanent.

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