The Surprise Element
How Allaying Parents' Misconceptions Improves a Teacher's Communicative Process

by Rashmi Kumar

Abstract

Challenged by parents' misconceptions about the role of cooperative learning activities in developing their gifted children, a teacher began to mentor the parents. The act of mentoring those parents resulted in the teacher's longer-term professional development: specifically, creating a process of seeking structured feedback from parents and following up through iterative cycles of reflection, appraisal, and revision.

Many teachers can identify a critical learning juncture that has had a notable influence on their learning and professional growth. Often, teachers locate such epiphanies within everyday teaching practices, advanced studies, or opportunities for professional development (Clarke and Hollingsworth 1994, 2002). The author, an elementary schoolteacher faced with parental opposition to using cooperative learning (CL)[1] and group work in her classroom, set out to clarify parents' assumptions by designing opportunities to uncover and untangle their beliefs. Surprisingly, as a result of responding to the above challenge and achieving success in her initially established goals, the teacher experienced a transformative growth in her processes of communicating with parents.

Introduction

Voluntary and organized forms of mentoring have steadily gained acceptance as practices that impact people's ongoing learning and development. Consequently, mentoring relationships occupy a prominent position in various kinds of organizations, including institutions of education (McCann and Johannessen 2005;

Trubowitz 2004; Walker 2007). The commonly attributed results of mentoring include modifications in the knowledge, skills, and understandings of mentees; the positive effects are generally viewed as transferred in a single direction, from the threshold of an expert mentor to that of a novice mentee under the auspices of planned and structured initiatives (Walker 2007). However, Murray (2001) interprets mentoring more broadly, as a form of learning used to "guide the behavior change of all those involved" (p. 5) and initiated within the immediacy of a spontaneous need. Murray further conceptualizes mentoring as taking place within temporarily established, albeit defined, goals of modeling, tutoring, or coaching people for acquiring domain-specific knowledge, skills, or understandings.

Several researchers address the merits of mentoring in modifying the understandings and behaviors of mentees (e.g., McCann and Johannessen 2005; Walker 2007). However, mentoring's impact on mentors has not been investigated with matching rigor, and as a result, several aspects regarding the immediate and long-term effects on mentors remain uncovered (Trubowitz 2004). Within the above context, this study offers a special case of mentoring wherein the teacher uses her knowledge of CL to create a change in the understandings of elementary school students' parents and simultaneously experiences changes of greater magnitude in her own professional practices (Clarke and Hollingsworth 1994, 2002).

The Research Study

The study was conducted within the gifted program of a suburban public school that serves a mostly middle-class population from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The publicly available school profile indicates that more than 70 percent of parents have at least some postsecondary education. The pull-out gifted program included 34 students (including three sets of siblings) from grades 3–6 among a total 714 students selected based on their scores on standardized and aptitude tests as well as classroom teacher recommendations. The total duration of the pull-out component depends on the individual needs of the student, and it is often decided through a complex process of negotiations that involve the joint approval of the parents and school personnel.

I took over this assignment within a new job soon after completing a graduate degree in education. Previously, I had taught for many years within the science and technology departments of middle and high schools. During my job interview, the principal enthusiastically shared that parents at this particular school played a key role in their children's education and were generally eager

to initiate conversations with teachers and visit classrooms. A brief meeting with my predecessor provided a glimpse of the stark differences between our respective teaching methodologies and underlying beliefs about students' learning. Fairly soon in the conversation, it was clear that the students in the gifted program had been accustomed to learning within individually defined goals and tasks, whereas I am an ardent believer in shared goals and shared tasks.

The transition became a natural opportunity to introduce the students to new ways of learning. I was excited to implement teaching practices I believed would best develop positive attitudes toward group work and foster collective creativity among all the students. Accordingly, all the teaching methodologies, activities, classroom resources, and modes of enabling student interactions were selected based on the principles of CL (Baloche 1998; Johnson and Johnson 2004, 2009; Lotan 2006). Those concerted efforts seemed to be paying off: within three months of moving into the new assignment, I could sense uncontained excitement among the students, who responded positively to the experiences designed to emphasize shared responsibilities for learning and completing tasks. Even the bulletin board displays in the classroom and the hallways indicated students' group efforts and their collective creativity; often students and teachers from other classrooms would stop by and linger before the displays. Parent-teacher conferences were right around the corner, and soon, the preparations for them were in full gear.

During the school year, parent-teacher conferences allow parents to receive updates on their children's academic and social progress, and teachers to become better acquainted with the parents and understand their perspectives regarding the children's education. Just before the first round of conferences, several parents had written letters demonstrating their eagerness to visit the classroom and meet the "new" teacher. I had great hopes that the parents would be delighted to see the new initiatives that had been put in place, as well as the learning that had manifested itself among their children as a result.

The Paradoxes and the Ambiguities

The conferences with parents revealed inconsistent perceptions among parents. Although almost all parents conveyed their satisfaction with the resources and learning activities that were being utilized in the pull-out program, several (< 35%) expressed doubts about the value of their children working toward mutual goals and shared tasks. According to those parents, the switch to CL and group work was tantamount to undermining their children's individual abilities to strive for superior levels of achievement. Some even feared

that group work, by removing self-accountability from their children, would therefore lead to complacency among the children. Based on their beliefs, parents had several kinds of questions: If my child is already performing well, why should she have to work with others? Isn't group work going to make my child too reliant on other children? I am worried that my son will not have any say in the group interactions and will lose motivation.

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Clearly, those parents were deeply invested in their children's learning and determined to prevent incorporating any "regressive" changes in the gifted program, but they also had some serious misconceptions about CL. Their skepticism was grounded in beliefs that CL was useful for children of lesser abilities or with special learning needs but not for "gifted" students.

Unconvinced but Not Dismissive

Even though I responded to some parents' questions and tried to contain the underlying negative tones of the situation, a small number of the parents were not fully satisfied, and their dissent remained largely unaddressed. Failing to secure the parents' approval of teaching and learning methodologies unanimously was likely to have an adverse impact on the entire program, because scheduling logistics did not allow for dividing students into two groups, those taught by using methodologies emphasizing CL and those who were not.

Changing people's minds about deeply entrenched ideas is neither a straightforward process nor a responsibility that can be easily executed (Gardner 2004). Yet to continue using the recently placed teaching methodologies, it was necessary to change the parents' minds. Fortunately, although the parents were skeptical about CL as a meaningful pedagogy for their children, they also indicated willingness to consider other threads of understandings. In turn, I was grateful to have the opportunity of working with parents to guide their discovery of CL. The parents' willingness to engage in a dialogue provided a much-appreciated and valuable opportunity to clarify their misconceptions, create newer understandings, and modify their opinions about group work (Evans 2000; Orland-Barak and Hasin 2010). If viewed through the traditional concepts of a mentoring relationship, in which participants are identified by permanent designations of experts and novices, such engagement with parents may not seem to qualify; however, within Murray's (2001) broader interpretations, this case can be considered as a sincere example of "facilitated mentoring" (p. 5), within which a developing contextual challenge in the classroom was used to bring about a change in the parents' beliefs and attitudes toward a specific pedagogical tool (Evans 2000).

An Open Invitation to Participate, Learn, Reflect, and Reconstruct

Using an ongoing unit based on animals and *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Readers* (Fleischman 1988), I invited the parents to view their children's learning through an intimate, structured process of reflection and analysis. Most efforts required of parents took place in the convenience of their homes. Of the thirty-one parents whose children were enrolled in the gifted program, sixteen agreed to participate; among them were eleven mothers and five fathers.

The next few weeks were busy times for everyone. For the students, the process entailed collective creativity and exploration, sharing knowledge and skills with peers, and building upon each other's contributions toward writing poems about animals of their choice. To demonstrate explicitly the differences between individual and group work, as well as the added value of group work, students were led through the same activities twice—first individually, and then in pairs. Both sets of work along with the numerous drafts were sent home to parents so they could compare individually and collaboratively created work and discern the incremental differences between them. For the parents, this engagement was designed to become a process that would allow them direct exposure to the finer details of group work and how it is informed and supported by the guiding principles of CL. Along with the samples of children's individual and group work, I also sent parents brief readings describing the principles of CL; certain sections were highlighted for emphasis. For the teacher, it was a critical time devoted to detailed documentation, ensuring that students had ample time and resources for completing their tasks, sharing the students' work with parents, and subsequently collecting their feedback at critical junctures in the process. Prompts for parents included the following:

- Do you think the contributions of different students within a group are meaningful toward increasing the merits of individual and group work?
- What differences do you see between the individual and group work? In what ways has working in groups affected your child's individual understanding and work?

By asking questions such as the ones above, I hoped to unravel the parents' misunderstandings.

The Launch of a Mentoring Dialogue

Hennissen et al. (2010) conceptualize a mentoring dialogue as one in which people with knowledge in specific domains are

gradually and consciously able to bring about a change in other people's thoughts and actions through extended conversations that take place within a defined context. Through similar means, I intended to change parents' minds within the context of their doubts regarding the relevance of CL for their children (Gardner 2004; Hennissen et al. 2010). For the most part, the parents responded with meaningful comments and questions about the comparative differences between individual and group work. The following vignette shares an excerpt from the mentoring dialogue exchanged with one parent:

> *Parent A*: I am surprised that Daniel wrote about monkeys. It must have been because of Moira's encouragement. Daniel tells me that Moira told him many interesting things about monkeys and how they are quite like human beings. I have been trying to point that out to him for a long time. Now Daniel wants to find out more similarities between humans and monkeys.

> *Teacher*: One of the key benefits of CL is increased confidence in tackling new tasks or information. In this case, Daniel seems to have found a partner who is able to point him toward other possibilities. The ideas shared by Moira have sparked Daniel's interest in things that he had not considered before.

> *Parent A*: Does it mean that Moira is more intelligent than Daniel?

> *Teacher*: It is not an issue of more or less intelligence, rather of different strengths, and often of complementary skills; together, these can be used in accomplishing tasks that are complex and/or require multiple ways of understanding an idea. Ask your child to point out his contributions to the group effort and identify their value to the work being done along with the partner. In the article I shared with you, there are some references to the notion of interdependence and shared responsibilities among members of a group.

Several similar dialogues took place with parents. By viewing the details and corresponding explanations of their children's efforts toward group work, parents began to appreciate the benefits of CL and its underlying principles. By confronting parents' misconceptions, I realized that their primary goal was "to understand how their children [were] being taught and what they [were] learning" (Kumar 2009, 93). More significant outcomes were to come. The parental dialogues convinced me to reevaluate the messages being conveyed and reconfigure them so that they would provide clarity for parents.

The following vignette is excerpted from a lengthy dialogue that took place over several days:

> *Parent B*: I am really confused[,] because in your monthly report, you always say things like, "Your children have done this, your children have prepared reports on this. . . ." Did you mean my child or all children or groups of children?

> *Teacher*: I can see how my choice of words created misunderstandings for you. I realize that I have often used the term "children" in a very generic way that could imply any of the combinations that you have mentioned. In this particular project, within the individually competed work it means your child within the group work; it implies your child and his partner. I apologize for the confusion this has caused.

> *Parent B*: It's all right. I understand. But I would like to tell you how I got confused: before this project, all the work that Jorge brought home had his name on it. So, I am wondering . . . was that his *own* work or the work that he did along with other children?

> *Teacher*: In previous times, it could have meant other combinations. If you tell me a particular project that was sent home, I should be able to look in the record book and provide the details for you.

> *Parent B*: Does that mean that you always know which particular students are working together or by themselves on any specific project?

> *Teacher*: Yes, on all occasions.

> *Parent B*: Are the students aware of who they are working with and how they are expected to make contributions to the whole group's work?

> *Teacher*: Not only do the students know who they are working with, but they also know how their individual contributions are taken into account in the evaluation of the group work.

> *Parent B*: It means the evaluation comments and grades that you have given could be based on one student's work or more?

> *Teacher*: That is true. I use a system through which the students get awarded for their individual contribution to the group work and also receive a collective grade for the

development of new ideas, creative aspects, etc., of the entire group. Then, I add both components and the totals show up as the individual student's grade.

Parent B: Then, why don't you tell us that? Going forward, it would be helpful to know how the projects/assignments and even your grading system are broken [distributed] for each student who is working within a group.

Teacher: This is a useful idea which other parents are likely to appreciate as well. In addition, within the evaluation for each student, I can also identify which specific components of students' group work have been enhanced or developed by the contributions of individual students. In addition, I will ensure that the students on each team label their work to acknowledge their partners' contributions and write their names on different pieces of group work. I will make these amendments right away.

Teacher Change

Clarke and Hollingsworth (1994) describe six perspectives regarding change in teachers' practices, including those that result from professional development and local reform and legislation. A perspective not often discussed in research is that of teacher change that occurs in response to altered circumstances of professional practices (Clarke and Hollingsworth 1994; Fullan and Stiegelbauer 1991). The changes that manifested themselves within the communication processes with the parents originated from a desire to sustain the teaching practices being used; over time, they evolved in response to the questions and dilemmas that materialized during the mentoring dialogues among individuals as well as groups of parents (Hennissen et al. 2010). Working with the parents rather than side-stepping them allowed me not only to help the parents conceptualize the impact of CL on students but also to explicate the underlying processes, which in turn revealed my implicit assumptions (McIntyre and Hagger 1996). For the first time, I became critically aware of the hidden gaps that existed within the instructional claims that had been made and the evidence offered the parents. No wonder the parents refuted the unsupported assertions. There are three specific areas in which communication with parents was modified in order to clarify the processes and goals of CL for everyone:

1.   Clarity in the Statement of Learning Goals

From the beginning, the students were routinely informed about the shared goals of each learning module and associated activities;

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however, within the communication with parents, the choice of language inadvertently gave the impression that learning processes were focused on individual children. It is not surprising that those mismatched communiqués created serious ambiguities for parents. The first modification I made was to eliminate the inconsistencies that existed between the information shared among students and parents by providing accurate and comparable information to parents. For instance, the following notes demonstrate the differences in the linguistic details shared with parents before and after the engagement:

> *Before*: In this month's newsletter are included some pictures of your children's work. Please ask your children to share their thoughts.

> *After*: In this month's newsletter, I have included pictures of project work which was attempted first by pairs of students, and then built upon by groups of paired students. Please ask your child what he or she thinks about the progress of the group work.

2. Reduced Gap between Claims and Evidence
After realizing that parents need to see an alignment between learning goals and classroom activities, I began sharing not only the content, methods, and goals but also detailed documentation of the children's progress. Included in the documentation were drafts of students' work in various stages of development; self- and peer edits of students' work; graphic organizers used by the students to plan their work; and photographs and anecdotal records collected in the classroom. For example, the following note that was sent to parents of two students explicates the process and goals in addition to the content area focus:

> In a poem that was co-created by Maria and Sam, you will see a good use of imagery and rhythm to create meaning. Also enclosed along with the poem are two earlier versions of the poem as it developed while these students read and researched about penguins until they decided upon using the words "waddle" and "huddle" to describe the penguins.

3. Communication Driven by Specific Purposes
Previously, in this and other teaching assignments, I had sent parents a monthly newsletter that often contained a list of activities and highlights from each grade level and ideas for activities to undertake with their children. Now there was a distinct change of which parents took explicit notice and expressed their appreciation.

Communication with parents rose above obligatory or planned reports. I still send parents briefings on scheduled occasions but also provide on-the-spot information about the students' learning. Now I do so to give parents numerous opportunities to understand what and how their children were learning, without having to wait for a parent-teacher conference or a newsletter accompanying the report card. Frequently, parents receive brief notes like the one below, which allows parents to be aware of classroom happenings while it keeps the scope of required efforts within reason:

> This week, the students are being asked to gather their peers' feedback on the work in progress. Please ask your child to identify how feedback from h/er/is peers has influenced the ongoing work. The element of asking for feedback has been included in the group work with the objective of enabling students to understand how ideas contributed by different members in a group can make positive contributions to the collective work.

Conclusion

A consequence of the initiative deepening parents' understandings and clearing up their misconceptions is that the ultimate rewards have long since eclipsed the initial goals of convincing parents (Fullan and Stiegelbauer 1991). Had I not been challenged by the parents, I would have continued to frame and disseminate the information and to communicate with parents as I had always done. Beyond the immediate benefits of being able to eliminate the recognizable lapses in my teaching practices and improving the overall communication process with parents, there were long-term benefits as well. Now, seeking structured feedback from parents and following up through iterative cycles of reflection, appraisal, and revision have become practices of habit, and those in turn have provided the confidence to nurture a culture of candid questions in the classroom (Clarke and Hollingsworth 1994). Only a few other experiences in my teaching career have created change of such magnitude and impact.

Note

1. Cooperative learning (CL) is generally understood as a mode of learning that promotes positive relationships with peers and enables socially constructed understanding through group work (Cohen 1994; Johnson and Johnson 2004, 2009; Lotan 2006). As such, learning activities are designed to promote interdependence and distribute responsibility among students (Johnson and Johnson 2004, 2009). CL allows students to enhance each other's learning through a process of raising challenging questions, solving complex

problems, and mitigating each other's misconceptions (Baloche 1998; Cohen 1994; Lotan 2006). In the past two decades, the work of several researchers has enabled deeper understandings of CL in general, and its implementation in K–12 classrooms in particular (e.g., Baloche 1998; Cohen 1994; Johnson and Johnson 2009; Kagan and Kagan 2008).

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