

COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT SUPPORT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Judith W. Irwin and William Farr
Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut,
Storrs, CT, USA

After reviewing the literature on the power of collaborative community in schools, the authors describe interview data collected from educators involved in collaborative change projects related to literacy. First, the authors interviewed a teacher from a middle school team that had changed their literacy instruction toward a more inclusive and authentic pedagogy. Second, the authors interviewed participants from a similar one-year collaborative change program in one elementary school. The data describe experiences of teacher decision-making within communities that are characterized by respect for differences, mutual caring and support, and inclusive decision-making processes. The subsequent loss of a sense of collaborative community in the school study is partially explained by factors that intervened in the ensuing years and was accompanied by a shift away from authentic literacy experiences and back to the use of worksheets and standardized programs.

More than ever, teachers, today are faced with the challenge of meeting the literacy development needs of students with a wide variety of learning disabilities and experiential backgrounds. The task of providing all these students with appropriate literacy experiences can be daunting to even the most experienced educators. Although many look to such quick fixes as programmed and scripted literacy programs, others seek a more authentic pedagogy in which teachers use methods that motivate empower, and support a wide variety of student abilities and interests. For many, this requires a long-term effort toward change within buildings and districts.

Allington & Walmsley (1995) suggest that in their experience, every school program in which change was sustained involved collaboration

Address correspondence to Judith W. Irwin, Ph.D., Professor, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 249 Glenbrook Road, Unit 2033, Storrs, CT 06269-2033.

Address correspondence to William Farr, Ph.D., Assistant Professor-in-Residence, at the same address.

among teachers. There is considerable research evidence to support this assertion. Herein we review this research and present summaries of qualitative data we collected to further clarify what types of setting help teachers build a collaborative community and what kinds of classroom changes may be supported by such a community. Finally, we have attempted to gain some insights into whether collaborative school contexts facilitate meeting the needs of learning disabled students, including remedial readers. One would expect that such communities, with their emphasis on empowerment and acceptance of difference, would promote positive and authentic literacy experiences for all types of learners.

RELATED LITERATURE

Collaboration and Change in Schools

Many studies have documented the importance of collaboration to create a pedagogy that results in authentic literacy experiences for all students (Risko & Bromley, 2001). This may be because collaboration results in the construction of empowering communities within schools, which is subsequently reflected in classroom interactions and student learning. Irwin (1996) maintains that the organization of schools and beliefs about power in schools exert a strong influence on the type of education that results.

Basing her work on Kriesberg (1992), Irwin suggests that there are two paradigms available for schools: power-over and power-with. Power-over is a hierarchical form of organization in which some individuals literally have power over what others do. Such domination results in a mentality that objectifies others and results in a lack of interpersonal connection (Freire, 1998; Kreisberg, 1992). In contrast, the power-with paradigm involves empowering individuals to have a voice in decisions that affect them (e.g., teachers making decisions about curriculum), and it connects persons with one other in a relationship of mutuality and respect. Moving from power-over to power-with seems essential in building a collaborative community.

What exactly is collaborative and how is it related to issues of power? In his book, *Transforming Power*, Kreisberg (1992) suggests that 'power-with' is "characterized by collaboration, sharing, and mutuality" (p. 61). Kreisberg's study of six teachers working together in the Boston Educators for Social Responsibility from 1984 to 1986 demonstrated that power in a community can be experienced as co-agency through consensus, mutuality, and respect for each individual voice. Results from the study indicated that each member felt included and that his/her voice was heard, even if he/she chose to dissent from the group.

In Irwin's (1996) interview study of teachers who teach literacy in authentic contexts and lead others to do so, all of the teachers interviewed

found supportive relationships with colleagues to be critical. Indeed, the key supportive factors identified by these teachers could be classified into the categories of connection, autonomy and self-esteem. To achieve such conditions, Irwin recommends that schools build “conscious communities” (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993), that nurture each person’s individual growth, thus supporting individuality and diversity within a broader framework of community and interpersonal connection.

In a study investigating professional development as a means for empowering teachers, Brody and Davidson (2000) define collaboration as “personal, cooperative experiences that help one internalize, value, and understand the dimensions of co-op living” (p. 70). Henderson (1996) adds to this definition, notes that “collaboration is a facilitative relationship between two people who are willing to support each other’s professional autonomy and celebrate their diversity in the context of shared consideration and creative examination” (p. 187). Essential to this type of collaboration is shared power (power-with).

Many studies also view professional collaboration as distinct from cooperation. Henderson (1996) found that although cooperation is helpful, it is only a “prerequisite to collaboration between professionals” (Henderson, 1996, p. 8). Collaboration is more complex. In collaboration, participants have equal roles and power is evenly distributed. The emphasis in collaboration is on problem-solving and planning focused on long-term outcomes (Aldinger, Warger, & Eavy, 1992).

Thus, collaborative school communities function well because the staff is involved on a sustained basis in a nonhierarchical form of collaborative action. In fact, Sergiovanni (1999) recommends that we substitute “community” as a metaphor for “organization” in schools, based upon Ferdinand Tonnies’s theories (originally published in 1887 and republished in 1957) concerning *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* communities.

Gesellschaft (“company”) is a situation in which people are separated in spite of unifying factors. They are caught in an artificial construction or a society that brings people together on a superficial level yet maintains their essential isolation. In contrast to this is *gemeinschaft* (“partnerships”), a community of mind in which the community is united in spite of separating factors. Sergiovanni’s research suggests that in *gesellschaft*, people base their actions on contracts, self-interest, rewards, contrived connections and the psychological ramifications of loneliness, isolation, disconnectedness. People tend to be polite to others only if it benefits self. Conversely, *gemeinschaft* describes a community in which people act out of a commitment and obligation to each other. For Sergiovanni, *gemeinschaft* involves a common set of goals and values leading to a sense of “we” (Sergiovanni, 1999). This sense of “we” closely corresponds to Irwin’s sense of “power-with” and Henderson’s (1996) concept of shared power.

In a study of school change processes, Little (1981) found that collegiality is the presence of four specific behaviors: teachers must talk about their practice; they must observe each other engaged in practice; they must work on the curriculum and the evaluation of such curriculum; and they must teach each other what they know about teaching, learning, and leading. In these conditions, the decisions the teachers make are better, more carefully thought out, and more thoroughly implemented, and there is a higher level of morale and trust among the adults working together (Barth, 1990; Little, 1981).

Shannon (1989) suggests that change is a real possibility if certain conditions are in place:

- teachers must engage in free and open discussion.
- The discussion needs to be a forum in which participants can and do discuss their experience while reexamining daily happenings that contribute to that experience.
- They need to make connections between their experience and the current social structure of the school.
- They need to believe that instruction does not have to continue as it always has.
- Only then can teachers act on their own knowledge, carefully constructed through open dialogue with peers (Shannon, 1989).

Little and McLaughlin (1993) have directly studied collaborative communities to discern the differences between what Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) termed “contrived collegiality,” in which teachers are invited to collaborate on agendas set by administrators and policy makers, and those true collaborations initiated and controlled by teachers. Little and McLaughlin (1993) found that teachers’ interactions with students, colleagues, specialists, administrators, paraprofessionals, and parents in the course of a normal day affected their collegial relationships. They also noted that teachers can and do interact in ways that undermine positive curricular changes. Finally, they reported that there are at least three varying dimensions of teacher-to-teacher interactions that influence collaborative results:

1. *intensity*, the strength of the ties to professional practice,
2. *inclusivity*, the boundaries and limits of the group,
3. *orientation*, the teacher’s value dispositions and their individual depth of pedagogical expertise.

Risko and Bromley (2001) suggest a new vision for collaboration based upon four assumptions: that collaboration is a *problem solving process*, a

development process, and a *dynamic process* that incorporates the *dialogic process*. The first assumption, problem solving, implies that there needs to be a nontraditional and visionary restructuring of the curriculum to meet the needs of all students and that instruction must be guided by ongoing assessment. To achieve this, there must exist a meaningful way for all participants to work together toward these goals. The second assumption, the developmental process, suggests that collaboration is a nonlinear, recursive process that allows individual participants to reform and rethink knowledge and practice. This leads to the third assumption: in the dynamic process, collaborative arrangements are not static but dynamic catalysts that bring about a restructuring of traditional approaches to meet the needs of all students at all levels. Finally, the fourth assumption, that collaboration is a dialogic process, indicates that collaboration should also include discussions that encourage critical, in-depth thinking about problems and solutions.

At the heart of the kind of collaboration proposed by most researchers is dialogue, the conversations that teachers have with their peers. Conversations are different when among beginners in the field of teaching, beginners and experienced teachers, or experienced teachers and mentors (Rust & Orland, 2001). In particular, beginning teachers worry more about themselves, while experienced teachers worry about children and the context of the school. Experienced teachers talk about classroom management, the students, assessment, the curriculum, and, of course, mandated tests. Clark (2001) tracked the dynamic interaction of conversation and learning as teachers participated in inquiry groups and concluded that teachers need time for dialogue on the dynamics of learning conversations, and that through these conversations, teachers can begin a process of professional self-development and engage in collaborative community-building activities.

Conversations around the stories of the lived experiences of the participants also constitute a powerful tool for fostering teachers' professional growth (Clark, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Florio-Ruane, 1991; Gudmundsdottir, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Postman (1995) notes that teachers come to understand their lives and ascribe meaning to their actions by placing them in the context of a story that is told and retold to colleagues. In the telling and retelling, a sense of continuity and purpose is developed. These narratives help determine what teachers believe and what changes they are willing to support (Postman, 1995).

Richardson (1996) conducted a collaborative process study that engaged intermediate grade reading teachers and their principles from five schools in a similar examination of their beliefs and practices. Two levels of collegiality seemed essential for the project to succeed: there was a collaboration between people representing two different fields of

inquiry (reading teachers and teacher educators), and the teachers collaborated while they participated in the project (see Anders & Richardson, 1994).

Anders and Richardson (1994) examined the school context and its possible effects on instruction and teacher collaboration. They concluded that staff development must move into nontraditional formats. It must include a collaboration between experts and all other participants on an ongoing basis. Reading research is only important as a starting place for new practices. The practices need to be conceptualized by individual teachers and scaffolded by collaborative work among colleagues. Collaboration brings about the reflection so necessary for new knowledge to develop and for changes in practice to occur.

In a study involving three special education teachers trained to provide consultation and collaborative services in twelve randomly selected elementary schools, Osborne and Schulte (2001) found that time was a crucial factor for success: teachers, consultants, and students required adequate time to fully participate in the collaborative situations. Moreover, the teachers particularly noted that active listening, sharing through self-disclosure, and managing conflict tactfully were also important. Osborne and Schulte (2001) observed that the potential barriers to effective collaboration confronted in the study included a lack of administrative support and insufficient resources. Nevertheless, ongoing collaborative interactions between special education and regular education teachers hold great promise for helping to meet the needs of learning disabled students (Allington & Walmsley, 1995).

Lyons (2001) examined the development of a literacy framework and model of professional development in schools that had made a commitment to a five-year plan requiring the professional development of an in-school teacher educator as well as a literacy coordinator. She found that at first, it was difficult for the teachers to develop trust and collegial support among colleagues: those teachers who did not wish to change their methods of teaching were resistant to the ongoing professional development sessions. However, for the majority of teachers, the continuing weekly sessions with live demonstrations and informal discussions about student progress supported collaborative efforts and created collegiality.

Teams resolved obstacles through regular team meetings and by developing a problem-solving process that included listening carefully to others' concerns. In addition, the teachers expressed the belief that it was crucial to invite administrators, support staff, and parents into the process, and that the process must be non-threatening. Most importantly, the teachers reported that through these collaborative efforts, they delivered that all children can learn, thus paving the way for more authentic activities for learning-disabled students.

Bean (2001) investigated a project in which candidates for reading specialist certification worked collaboratively with K–6 classroom teachers in Title I programs. Five models of collaboration were examined: station or center teaching, support teaching, parallel instruction, teacher and consultant-teacher collaboration, and team teaching. The models came from the most recent research concerning such collaborative processes (Bean, Trovato, & Hamilton, 1995; Cook & Friend, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hamilton, 1993; Meyers, Gelzheiser, & Yelich, 1991).

Bean found that learning-disabled students benefited from the shared expertise of both teachers working together to improve instruction, as indicated by improved achievement levels. However, she also found that the teachers were not always adequately prepared to work collaboratively, and issues of power and ownership arose. While the teachers and the reading specialists needed to work on an equitable basis to improve instruction, this did not seem to always be the case in the data presented. In addition, results indicated that a single administrative approach to collaboration reduced the teacher ownership that is essential to success (Bean, 2001).

Finally, although it is difficult to prove in an experimental setting, some studies do suggest that there is a strong relationship between collaborative community contexts in schools and support for authentic learning experiences for all students. Menuchin (1996) studied to fourth grade classes in pairs of schools with contrasting cultures. One set of schools was characterized by strict discipline, authoritarian administrators, and a hierarchical staff that emphasized bureaucratic procedures. The other set had students involved in determining school rules, a democratic role for the administration, and equity among staff. In the latter set of schools, Menuchin found that students had higher self-esteem, better attitudes toward school skills, less gender segregation in activities, and more experiences with cooperative group activities than in the former set.

Similar results were found by Wells (1996), who reported that in the *gemeinschaft* (community-oriented) middle school she studied, students had numerous authentic literacy experiences, while in the contrasting *gesellschaft* (management-oriented) high school they later attended, instruction involved rote learning and reliance on worksheets. A possible explanation for these findings is that when teachers have supportive and authentic collaborative experiences, they may be more likely to engage students in similarly empowering experiences.

Douville and Wood (2001) found that teachers in two increasingly diverse classrooms included more cooperative activities that helped all students, including learning-disabled students, participate in authentic activities as a result of collaborating with the researchers and with each other in an atmosphere of equity. They believe that it was the sharing of

power that fostered a restructuring of the pedagogy in these classrooms by creating a community of learners for both students and teachers.

Perhaps Richard Schmuck (1998) described it best when he defined the cooperative school culture as one in which:

school culture has norms in support of respecting every one's ideas and feelings, of egalitarian teamwork and collaborative effort, of openness, candor, and honesty, of warmth and friendliness, of caring for people of all ages, and of seeking self-esteem for everyone. The cooperative school culture has administrators, teacher leaders, and student leaders who know how to act democratically in their roles. (Schmuck, p. 253)

METHOD

Two Studies in Teacher Collaboration and Curricular Change

Ample evidence exists that pedagogical restructuring is facilitated by collaborative school cultures. In order to further our understanding of such collaborative settings, we recently conducted two interview studies. The first is a case study of one teacher who had previously described a collaborative experience as a part of the research reported in Irwin (1996). Though all the teachers in that investigation were change agents somewhere, only one (Sally [alias], a fourth-grade classroom teacher) had been involved in a full-scale change in her own school, and only she had received the majority of her support and connection from grade-level colleagues in her own building.

To further investigate Sally's experience since that time, we conducted a follow-up interview to see if she reported that the collaborative school community had sustained itself in the intervening eight years. We also wanted to look more specifically at her experience to gain insight into the type of contexts that had facilitated the authentic reading instruction mentioned elsewhere in this volume and to see whether these same collaborative contexts seemed to be helpful to her in her work the learning-disabled children in her classroom.

Our second current study focused on a school that had undergone a process of collaborative community building from 1996–1997 while working with Irwin in a project to improve literacy instruction. A meeting in the spring of 1997 indicated that these teachers had made major curricular changes and were experiencing an increased sense of community. Had these changes sustained themselves? Were the needs of individuals being met more effectively as a result? Was a student-centered, meaningful language arts curriculum still in place? Did the teachers still feel like members of a collaborative community?

The Empowered Teacher Case Study

As we revisited the original 1995 interview with Sally, we were surprised to find that it contained a wonderful description of an effective “power-with” community:

We collaborate . . . We have very different teaching styles; none of us do anything the same way but we’re all . . . supportive of one another and we share the things that we take pride in and nobody is afraid to admit that something that they’ve tried wasn’t as good as they wanted it to be.

This emphasis on sharing and connection within a context in which differences among the teachers were accepted is collaborative and empowering. Moreover, the end result of this “support group” was a change to heterogeneous classes in which reading was taught in authentic situations, especially in the content areas:

The group of people I was working with made the decision to change the context of reading instruction. . . . We had been talking about it. . . . It was a totally teacher-initiated change We said we were going to sit down and talk about this and when we made this change to heterogeneous grouping, we had weekly meetings. We’d meet weekly after school We’d talk about instructional issues. It was a support group. We arranged with the principal to send . . . their student down to the fifth-grade teachers [author: to wait for bus] and the fourth-grade teachers would go upstairs. . . . We’d sit around the table sometimes until 4:00. The other thing that we would do when things got really bad, there would be a group of us . . . we would go to one of the other teachers’ houses

There clearly was a high level of commitment on the part of these teachers. Sally later talked about some of their energy coming from the gains they saw in student learning. While rereading the transcript of this earlier interview, we noted the number of times Sally used the word “we” (eleven, in the short excerpt above). This seemed to show a mindset of decision making and shared planning, which clearly reflects *gemeinschaft* as described by Sergiovanni (1999).

Finally, Sally also reported seeing a connection between the kinds of changes they were making in the classroom and the kind of process they were using to make those changes:

It’s been, you know, if you think about empowerment, it’s been sort of a teacher empowerment through the students’ empowerment really. We’re trying to help the kids make connections, learn more effectively, take more control over their learning and because we are doing that for them, we have to do that for ourselves, too. . . . It’s sort of like empowering them empowers

you, and working out how that happens is really complex. . . . What's good practice for our kids is good practice for us, too. We as teachers were making a shift. We were being required to actively start to learn more about how we deliver the instruction . . . and we were asking kids to do the same thing.

This connection between the sense of independent learning and decision making of the teachers with that of the students in their updated program suggests that when teachers are active participants in their own learning process, they will encourage this in their students.

Shortly after that 1995 interview, Sally was transferred to the middle school to teach sixth grade. Thus, the current interview focused more on her experience as a member of a middle-school teaching team. A two-hour semi-structured interview was conducted, taped, and transcribed. The interview questions focused on how the team made decisions, how instruction changed while the team was in place, factors that helped or hindered the team make changes, and how the changes made affected the instruction of learning-disabled students.

The interview transcription was then coded for themes and consistent categories of information. The constant comparative procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1976) for data analysis was utilized. This involved comparing one segment of data with another to determine the similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. This dimension is tentatively given a name and becomes a category. The data are also held to a serious inspection during the qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

When we compared the categories emerging from the analysis of Sally's interview data with those emerging from the school study, we found many similarities. The data from both interview studies fell into the following categories: resources and/or supportive conditions available, the processes used to facilitate change, the group's expressed norms and values, and the types of classroom changes made along with their potential impact on learning-disabled students.

In terms of supportive conditions, Sally described a 'laissez-faire' administration as desirable, implying that either her other experiences with administrators had been less than helpful or the autonomy provided by this situation gave the team room to make its own decisions. Such an administration allows teachers to pursue creative solutions to complex problems. This is not to suggest total freedom; rather, it values the work of the teachers and empowers educators to approach problems without administrative restrictions. In a similar vein, the fact that teachers in their district were not evaluated on the basis of test scores was a sort of support by absence. Thus, these teachers had a great deal of power over what went on in their classrooms in terms of both curriculum and methods.

Sally felt that the extensive experience and self-confidence of the teachers on her team helped immeasurably. She also described the differences among the teachers as an asset:

We had a continuum of styles, so that for any kid with a problem, there was somebody who was able to deal with it because while you might be perceiving the child through one lens someone else on the team would be able to say, “Did you ever look at it this way? . . .

Not only does this valuing of difference reflect a power-with system in which no one has to conform, but Sally expressed her belief that this range of teaching styles helps to meet individual needs, presumably also those of learning-disabled students. Later in the interview, we asked Sally directly if her effective team collaboration had an impact on meeting the needs of learning-disabled students:

Well, it absolutely did. I have this philosophy and it’s so trite—you know, the “it takes a whole village” thing? . . . If you’ve got a tough kid, it takes way more than one person to have an impact, so you better have a whole lot of people with an interest . . . By having at least two adults who are routinely interacting with a child on a daily basis . . . you’ve got somebody to bounce ideas off of and check into and say “What do you think was going on?” and so you are automatically building this net . . . for the kid that’s academic, social, emotional, behavioral, all of those things.

Sally describes the basic concept of inclusion, which is grounded in collaborative team work. This sort of teamwork allows for not only the cooperation and collaboration of teamed teachers but the involvement and cooperation of students in their own learning. Indeed, this ability of a functioning team to better handle diverse needs was exemplified when the learning-disabled students who were regularly scheduled for pullouts for their reading instruction were gradually integrated back into the classroom reading program:

So there was a really strong feeling that the kids in those two bottom groups were not making as much progress as they needed to, especially the kids who were pulled out for their reading/language arts program, but the deal was you weren’t responsible for their reading and language arts program so when they weren’t in your room, you were teaching reading and language arts and sometimes the resource room teacher sent other work back for them to be working on while the rest of the class was doing reading and language arts. . . . So gradually people started to integrate those kids back into the classroom. So we’re doing heterogeneous grouping and it is reading time and this LD kid is in the room, so what do you do? You say, “OK, John, why don’t you move over next to Susie and follow along as we’re talking about this and

what do you think about this anyway?”. . . . And then people started talking about how this was going on and so we just kept doing it.

In a similar comment, Sally reported that her 1995 collaborative group had “definite conversations about students and a willingness to share responsibility for students that were having difficulty” as well.

Moreover, all of the curriculum changes made by this team were in the direction of authentic literacy experiences as described in this volume. They switched to heterogeneous grouping with high-interest whole texts, an emphasis on reader response, and teaching reading in the content areas when students were reading for a purpose. Sally felt that all of these changes led to large amounts of growth for all of the students, including those with learning difficulties.

The group process that Sally described exemplified a power-with system. She mentioned a lot of sharing: modeling in each other’s rooms, sharing results of activities, supporting each other, “ten-minute therapy” sessions after school, and lots of conversations about students. The decision-making process of her current team was particularly interesting. Sally said that the decisions were easy because everything had been fully discussed prior to the moment of making the decision. She mentioned that there was a very conscious attempt to involve everyone equally and to make sure that everyone had voiced an opinion on a given topic. She thought it was particularly helpful that there was a school-wide model of a team plan, and someone on the team made sure they followed that model. She explains:

Well, D. took that to the letter of the law. He had the book. He had the team model. . . . He kept all the minutes. He was Mr. Organized, and he’d say tongue-in-cheek half of the time: “Well, the team model says that we should be approaching this from this way” and when anybody tried to pull a fast one like being dictatorial and telling you what to do, he’d whip out the book and say “Sorry, we have to discuss this.”

In addition, the team plan made time for group planning meetings several times a week, a key factor also mentioned in the school study.

The importance of a sense of mutual respect and care came up repeatedly when Sally discussed her team; it seemed to be a core value on which the team operated.

When it first started out we would get a little—I need your input on this and this—kind of feed us an agenda. . . . but our team didn’t have any trouble functioning because there was this sense of mutual respect for one another which didn’t have to be built. . . . You have to watch our dynamic. Someone says something and then we all look at each other sort of like “how do we all

feel about this?" you know, and then there—it's not like who is going to say what—it's very much like where's the idea coming from that I'm going to bounce off. (Trying to understand the other person's perspective?) Absolutely, before you go blurting out your own opinion. There's this real sense of looking out for one another . . .

Another core value was the commitment to shared decision-making. Sally repeatedly talked about being "all in it together." In contrast to the typical isolationism of many school communities, Sally explicitly said that no one changed individually: "If we're doing it, we're all doing it together." The power of this sort of group cohesion was evidenced when the principal said that the entire school would departmentalize, and their team decided to refuse—and did so successfully.

Finally, as might be expected, when we looked for barriers to either collaboration or the meeting of individual needs, we found little in Sally's interview even though we asked about these several times. She did talk about the team energy being drained on some administrative imperatives, and, in the area of inclusion of students who were the most seriously impaired, she spoke of trying it but being unable to continue without administrative support and the support of a strongly committed special education staff.

She did also talk about one period of time in which the team struggled when a fifth member was added who did little teaching and spent most of her time in the hall. This team could not support incompetence or irresponsibility, and they were forced to get more "pushy" than they liked and to sometimes make plans without involving that person, a balkanization that made them very uncomfortable. That teacher was soon transferred to another grade level.

Thus, in her interview, Sally had described a successful collaborative middle school team that had made significant curricular changes. They had been given ample time to meet and the authority to make the necessary decisions. The team consisted of teachers with a variety of teaching styles and this was considered an asset. There was a norm of respect for each other, a sense of mutual caring, multiple forms of sharing of both methods and concerns, and consistent inclusive decision making. In Sally's opinion, the special needs students benefited from the multiple points of view available and from being included in the regular classroom for their language arts instruction.

The School Community Study

We were intrigued by the nature of the collaboration that Sally described and its possible advantages to learning-disabled students as well as the fact that these teachers had successfully implemented a more student-centered

curriculum. Thus, we conducted another interview study, focusing on one school that had been involved in a curriculum change project in 1996–1997 for which Irwin had been a consultant. In this project, school-based decision making teams had been trained in current reading research and pedagogy and empowered to involve the teachers in their schools in the selection of goals and processes designed to improve reading instruction. This particular school team had consciously connected community building to their change process during that time.

We examined documents related to meetings in 1996 as well as current similar reports. In addition, we conducted semi-structured, two- to three-hour, retrospective interviews with the two educators who had been the most involved in the curriculum change process in 1996–1997: the consultant-teacher, who had originally been the most active change agent in language arts in that building, and the district elementary curriculum coordinator, who had been the district language arts coordinator at the time of the project.

Taken together, their comments, which are in full agreement with their experiences, provide a picture of the best that collaborative community can offer to teachers and students. Their descriptions have much to say about what fosters and what inhibits collaborative school communities. And, interestingly enough, their interpretation of their experience was that the individual needs of students were being met more directly when the teachers in the school were involved in collaborative planning and decision-making.

Lincoln School (an alias) is one of nine in a large, semi-urban district. It is a large school with a majority of the students classified as nonwhite and a large percentage on a school lunch subsidy. The turnover rate for students is very high, so these teachers are daily challenged with meeting rapidly changing and widely ranging student needs.

The supportive condition most commonly mentioned by these interviewees was having sufficient time for teacher meetings. The principal had made every attempt to provide regular meeting time for committees, grade levels, and others who felt the need to come together to discuss programs. These meetings were initiated by the teachers. Interns from the local university provided classroom assistance, thus freeing up some of the teachers' time. When asked about important resource considerations, Martha (also an alias), the district elementary curriculum coordinator, stated:

And I think that time is another thing, I think that is a big . . . you need to make time somehow to have people work through issues that are going to make or break a team. If you don't take the time to listen, to talk, to research other ways that you can do this better, share ideas . . . If you don't have structures

that allow for that time to communicate with one another, I think that It really hinders what can develop.

Other supportive resources were provided by a mathematics curriculum grant that supplied the mathematics team with paid time to write a curriculum, a room in the center of the school to house new materials, and money to buy these materials. The teachers quickly filled it with a meeting table, bulletin boards, and a copy machine, all of which facilitated communication among teachers.

Ellen (an alias) was a consultant-teacher whose job was to support the teachers in their change process. She, Martha, and the principal shared a philosophy of community empowerment and authentic literacy teaching approaches. They were variously described by each other in very positive terms, “supportive,” “resourceful,” and “on top of things.”

The norms developed in the building were variously described by the interviewees as a respect for differences among teachers, openness and honesty, and a sense that everyone was learning together. This tone was set by both Ellen and the principal, as well as by the mathematics curriculum committee, as indicated by both documents from that time and statements made by the interviewees. For instance, Ellen worked primarily with the fifth grade at first because the fifth-grade teachers had expressed an interest in making some changes. Ellen tried to present herself to the teachers as a learner rather than a director, describing it this way:

She (a fifth-grade teacher) was wanting to get more into meeting individual needs of kids and she said “this is what I’m not doing”. . . . She was just bogged down at that particular time, but she was really into computers and I was really not, so I said “you know, what if the kids could teach me and I could set up a literacy-based center with computers and I could try to help with research and so forth talking with you depending on what your class needs and I’ll learn from it.”

Ellen also talked about when the fifth-grade team wrote a letter to the fourth-grade team, thanking them for the good job they had done. This exemplified the kind of professional respect that seemed to be the norm at that time.

The mathematics curriculum project was also one in which teachers were working together. Teachers involved in that program went into each others’ classrooms to find out what was needed for the program. The process of change began with teacher interests. Ideas were tried in classrooms, and results were shared and discussed. Teachers modeled in each other’s classrooms. Decisions were made in groups and carried out by those involved. The bottom line for each decision was successful learning in the

classroom. When Ellen was asked who was in charge at that time, she replied, "We all felt in charge."

These themes of shared power, communication, reflection, and respect for differences were repeated when these interviewees reported on the changes going on in the curriculum. For instance, in math, the resulting curriculum emphasized problem solving, with students being encouraged to come up with more than one way to solve a given problem. Cooperative learning, manipulatives, and students' reflection and verbalization of what they were doing were hallmarks of the program. In language arts, there was an emphasis on shared comprehension experiences, multicultural sharing, and critical thinking. Ellen reported that she modeled a cooperative activity using a "Jack and Jill" narrative in a fifth-grade classroom with great success. (In the story, Jack and Jill are youngsters who are retrieving water from a well.)

I went into her room—two interesting things happened. One little boy was absolutely not going to have any part with the groups, and so I said to him, "why don't you just sit and listen," and . . . within five minutes he began to talk, and so the teacher saw the power of this collaboration. . . . The group who had Jack and Jill had a Nigerian girl who had actually built a well . . . speaking of a teachable moment!! She's telling the kids how it was to build this well and put rocks around, and you have some kind of a sign or symbol so no one else would go near it . . . to fetch a pail of water, as we talked about fetch and where he was getting the pail of water from . . . and the kids are like "yes!" and speaking of student as teacher, and we all learned so much . . .

Finally, when asked specifically about what school norms seemed to be related to meeting the needs of learning-disabled students in the district, Martha answered quickly:

Well, the first thing that jumped into my head is respect. I think that respect that the teachers have for one another, that teachers have for the principal, and then everyone has for the kids. I think when it was really going on [author: the 1996–1997 project in Lincoln School], it was everywhere. Everyone felt respected and their voice and opinion mattered. They were given time to talk. . . . I almost think that because you respect people, whether you're a teacher or a kid or whoever you are, you generally have respect . . .

Unfortunately, numerous factors have intervened since 1997, and each of the respondents reported that the sense of community and openness, the sense of excitement, and the curriculum changes from that time have since been compromised. Though it would be tempting to end with the positive reports, we feel that it is also important to describe how this sense of collaborative community was lost. The factors that intervened are all too common and deserve scrutiny.

First, the principal who had been so committed to collaborative community left to pursue graduate studies. The new principal was a first-time principal who was described by all three interviewees as being more “management”-oriented. In her first year, she experienced a serious illness that took her out of the building a significant amount of the time. At the same time, the building went through a series of assistant principals, a revolving door of university interns, and a significant change in staff: Seven of the 21 teachers were replaced, often by those hand-picked by the new principal whose agenda was different from that of the previous principal’s. There were two sudden retirements that forced Ellen to work almost exclusively in those classrooms to keep them afloat. She finally transferred and reported her complete exhaustion at the end of those years of crisis. The new consultant-teacher is untenured and bogged down in administrative duties.

The interviewees each reported their impression that the upper levels of the district administration were not completely aligned with the grassroots change philosophy. New state mandates for mathematics and central office decisions resulted in the mathematics committee being asked to rewrite their grassroots curriculum to match the state standards that some felt were unrealistic for their students. The new consultant-teacher in the building was placed in charge of this process, indicating a shift away from a philosophy of shared ownership and control. Numerous meetings were canceled, and at least one teacher reported reduced enthusiasm for the project.

Spaulding (1992) describes motivation as being most affected by feelings of competence and control. In this case, the loss of control seemed to lead to a loss of motivation. Further examples of teacher disempowerment since the initial project period include a strict test preparation program that was carefully monitored in each building so that each teacher prepared and administered it in exactly the same way, and new state guidelines for literacy assessment that ignored the positive work that had gone on before and required that the district again revamp their brand-new assessment procedures.

Other interesting resource shifts occurred as a result of the aforementioned factors. First, meeting times were cut down, and everyone reported that meetings were regularly canceled. The principal required that she attend all grade-level meetings, thus limiting the number that could occur (as well as openness and honesty, presumably, since this was a management-oriented principal). The principal moved the resources to a room in a remote, obscure corner of the building, and that valuable space for communication was lost.

A norm of balkanization emerged. The principal encouraged those who wished to abandon the flexible grouping established previously, causing

dissension among teachers. The primary and intermediate grades began criticizing each other. One teacher heard the principal make a derogatory comment about some unnamed teachers. The teachers began to feel that there was no room for open disagreement.

So what had happened to the classroom changes accomplished in the language arts project? What happened in this building when the sense of collaborative community was undermined? Of course, we don't know all of the answers to that or the casual chain of events, but what was reported to us was disturbing: lowered expectations for students, a "one size fits all" curriculum, more ability grouping, more rote learning, extensive whole group instruction, and a decline in the meeting of individual needs.

DISCUSSION

The voices of the educators we interviewed in both studies eloquently for the power of *gemeinschaft* (power-with) over *gesellschaft* (power-over). A sense of community and control motivated these teachers and provided opportunities for them to work together for the benefit of the students. Respect for individual differences among teachers seemed to transfer to the classroom, where heterogeneous, cooperative, and authentic literacy experiences for all students were being implemented.

Sally's team decided to implement a response-based literature program and content are reading within heterogeneous classes. Lincoln School teachers chose to pursue multilevel literacy centers, cooperative comprehension activities, and critical thinking. All these represent authentic activities in which reading and writing are used for meaningful purposes. It is especially intriguing that when the sense of community was lessened at Lincoln School, there was a simultaneous shift toward worksheets and a standardized curriculum.

Although the relationship of the school climate to what happens in the classroom in regard to meeting individual needs is difficult to establish, these brief phenomenological studies suggest that this correlation should be investigated further. In each case, the power-with community of teachers was able to meet the needs of diverse learners better than when there was a power-over community, according to these interviewees. For instance, Sally's team moved voluntarily toward the inclusion of learning-disabled students in their regular language arts program. Ellen described an example of a cooperative comprehension activity on "Jack and Jill" that provided an opportunity for a student from another culture to be included as an expert in her learning community.

These studies also suggest that regular time to meet and a supportive (or at least *laissez-faire*) administration are important conditions for

building a collaborative community. Teachers need to have decision-making power so that their shared planning time will be viewed as worthwhile. When teachers were told to revise the math curriculum to meet state standards, there was a noticeable loss of motivation. Moreover, in regard to the collaborative relationships themselves, the participants in both studies mentioned respect for differences, inclusion, and consensual decision-making. “Sharing” was a word used by each interviewee, referring to either the sharing of ideas for instruction or the sharing of one’s experiences. These were relationships based on egalitarianism and honesty.

The school community study also demonstrates how fragile such a collaborative community can be. A new administration with different priorities, staff turnover, canceled meetings, overburdened support staff, changes in district priorities and state mandates all contributed to a change in the climate at Lincoln School. These are common occurrences that need to be monitored by anyone hoping to build community in schools; however, it does seem that Lincoln School suffered from a uncommonly large dose of discouraging factors all at once.

The interviewees all described collaborative relationships that were inclusive, intense, and oriented toward a high level of expertise (see Little & MacLaughlin, 1993). In the language arts program, they had worked closely with outside consultants who provided needed expertise. The practices were then reconceptualized and implemented in ongoing collaboration among teachers (see Anders & Richardson, 1994; Douville & Wood, 2001). It certainly could be that other forms of collaboration are less useful for promoting positive changes in classroom instruction.

In such a qualitative study, no generalization are possible. Nevertheless, we were struck by the universality of notions of power-over (hierarchy) and power-with (collaboration), as expressed by these interviewees, and by the positive, motivating quality of power-with situations. (Ellen called her professional experience in the project period “the Renaissance.”) Since authentic literacy experiences that honor the needs and culture of the individual student clearly require such a mindset in the classroom, attention to the climate of the school certainly seems warranted.

REFERENCES

- Aldinger, L., Warger, C.L., & Eavy, P. (1992). *Strategies for teaching collaboration*. Ann Arbor, MI: Exceptional Innovations Press.
- Allington, R.L. & Walmsley, S.A. (1995). *No quick fix: Rethinking literacy programs in America’s schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Anders, P.L. & Richardson, V. (1994). Launching a new form of staff development. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Teacher change and the staff development process* (pp. 159–180). New York: Teachers College Press.

- Barth, R.S. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bean, R. (2001). Classroom teachers and reading specialists working together to improve student achievement. In Risko, V., & Bromley, K. (Eds.), *Collaborative for diverse learners* (pp. 348–368). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Bean, R.M., Trovato, C.A., & Hamilton, R.L. (1995). Focus on Chapter I reading programs: Views of reading specialists, classroom teachers, and principals, *Reading Research and Instruction*, 34(3), 204–221.
- Brody, C. & Davidson, N. (2000). *Professional development for cooperative learning: Issues and approaches*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Clark, C. (1995). *Thoughtful teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clark, C. (2001). *Talking shop*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Clark, C. & Florio-Ruane, S. (2001). Conversation as support for teaching in new ways. In C. Clark (Ed.), *Talking shop: Authentic conversation and teacher learning* (pp. 1–16). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J. (1995). Narrative in education. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 1(1), 73–85.
- Cook, L. & Friend, M. (1995). Co-teaching: Guidelines for creating effective practices. *Exceptional Children*, 28(3), 1–6.
- Deci, S. & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Douville, P. & Wood, K.D. (2001). Collaborative learning strategies in diverse classrooms. In V. Risko & K. Bromley (Eds.), *Collaboration for diverse learners* (pp. 123–152). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Florio-Ruane, S. (1991). Conversation and narrative in collaborative research: An ethnography of the written literacy forum. In N.C. Witherell & N. Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative dialogue in education* (pp. 207–233). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (1998; originally published in 1969). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1976). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Adine.
- Gudmundsdottir, S. (1997). Introduction to the themed issue of “narrative perspectives on teaching and teacher education.” *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9(5/6), 443–456.
- Hamilton, R.L. (1993). Chapter I reading instruction: Exemplary reading specialists in an in-class model. Unpublished dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.
- Hargreaves, A., & Dawe, R. (1990). Paths of professional development: contrived collegiality, collaborative culture, and the case of peer coaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 6, 227–241.
- Henderson, J.G. (1996). *Reflective teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill Press.
- Irwin, J. (1996). *Empowering ourselves and transforming schools: Educators making a difference*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kriesberg, S. (1992). *Transforming power: Domination, empowerment and education*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Little, J. (1981). Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions of school success. *American Education Research Journal*, 19(3), 325–340.
- Little, J. & McLaughlin, M. (1993). *Individuals, colleagues, and contexts*, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lyons, C. (2001). Developing successful collaborative literacy teams: A case study. In V. Risko & K. Bromley (Eds.), *Collaboration for diverse learners* (pp. 168–187). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Menuchin, P. (1996). *The psychological impact of school experience: A comparative study of nine-year-old children in contrasting schools*. New York: Basic Books.

- Meyers, J., Gelzheiser, L.M. & Yelich, G. (1991). Do pull out programs foster teacher collaboration? *Remedial and Special Education, 12*(2), 7–15.
- Osborne, S. & Schulte, A. (2001). A school-university project on collaboration and consultation. In V. Risko and K. Bromley (Eds.), *Collaboration for diverse learners*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Postman, N. (1995). *The end of education: Redefining the value of school*. New York: Knopf.
- Richardson, V. (Ed). (1996). *Teacher change and the staff development process: A case in reading instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Risko, V. & Bromley, K. (2001). New visions of collaboration. In V. Risko & K. Bromley (Eds.), *Collaboration for diverse learners* (pp. 9–19). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Rust, F. & Orland, L. (2001). Learning the discourse of teaching: Conversation and professional development. In C. Clark (Ed.), *Talking shop: Authentic conversation and teacher learning* (pp. 82–118). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schmuck, R. (1998). Mutually sustaining relationships between organization development and cooperative learning. In C. Brody & C. Davidson (Eds.), *Professional development for cooperative learning* (pp. 223–242). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Sergiovanni, T.J. (1999). *Rethinking leadership*. Arlington Heights, IL: Skylight Professional Development Press.
- Shaffer, C.R. & Anundsen, K. (1993). *Creating community anywhere: Finding support and connection in a fragmented world*. New York: Jeremy Teacher Press.
- Shannon, P. (1989). *Broken promises: Reading instruction in 20th century America*. E. Granby, MA: Bergen and Garvey.
- Spaulding, C. (1992). *Motivation in the classroom*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Strauss, A.C. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tonnies, F. (1957). *Community and society*. (C.P. Lomis, Ed., & Trans.). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. (Original work published in 1887).
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Buffalo, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Walmsley, S.A. & Allington, R.I. (1995). Redefining and reforming instructional support programs for at-risk students. In R. Allington, & S. Walmsley (Eds.), *No quick fix: Rethinking programs in America's elementary schools* (pp. 19–44). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wells, M.C. (1996). *Literacies lost*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Copyright of Reading & Writing Quarterly is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.