

## *Stimulating Teacher Collaboration in the Improvement of Educational Practice\**

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LIKE other professions, education recognizes the importance of sharing ideas and methods for the growth and development of its members. Inservice training programs, workshops, consultant services, and summer schools have long been recognized as necessary provisions for the active development of education as a profession. These programs which are aimed at facilitating collaboration are, however, primarily based upon the contributions of "experts" to inservice teachers. This type of collaboration in education between experts and teachers persists, providing the conditions for some sharing of ideas among teachers. On the other hand, "on the job" collaboration, that is, the sharing of techniques and information about classroom practices between principals and teachers and among teacher peers within a building appears to be constrained and in many instances non-existent. In other words, at the point of application of new ideas and practices, support for innovation is limited.

In contrast to the tradition of inservice training which can facilitate collaboration are the professional standards of autonomy and freedom from administrative restraint which frequently act as conditions producing resistance to the joint pursuit of educational solutions. Our tradition of academic freedom carries with it non-interference provisions to protect the teacher from pressures which might restrict the intellectual opportunities offered students. That this standard of independence pervades the profession from the time

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\* The material reported in this article is part of the Inter-Center Program of Research on Children, Youth, and Family Life of the Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (grant OM-376) and the U.S. Office of Education (Cooperative Research Project No. 1167).

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a teacher enters the field is illustrated in a study by Cranmore<sup>1</sup> where she finds that new teachers hesitate to seek assistance from the principal on questions of instruction and classroom management. This strong standard of autonomy among teachers is a central factor which makes the implementation and spread of educational innovations difficult. However, the complexity of forces which restrain collaborative efforts extends far beyond this standard of autonomy as we will soon see.

### AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

The following illustrative case presents some of the factors which are perceived by teachers as impeding or facilitating collaborative efforts to improve classroom practices.<sup>2</sup>

There are thirty-five teachers at Woodfield High School, all of whom were invited by the University to participate in a project aimed at the improvement of classroom practices. About a third of the staff indicated an interest in participating in such activities. Three meetings, held prior to the one described here, were devoted to describing the service that the University is offering and to setting up a program to encourage collaboration among teachers. There were many indications of a reluctance on the part of the staff to get involved in a project which had the potential of challenging existing practices. Although the principal had endorsed participation in the project to the point of modifying the instructional practices that he used in the one class he taught, the staff still remained resistant to involvement. The participating teachers met one evening with the University consultant to search for ways in which the resistance to becoming active participants in the project might be overcome. The principal did not attend this particular evening meeting. The consultant discussed with him earlier a re-definition of the consultant's role to act as an interpreter of administrative concerns (about improved practice) to the teachers and to act as an interpreter of teacher concerns to the administration. It was with this goal in mind that the meeting with the teachers was convened.

At the beginning of the meeting the consultant clarified his newly conceived role as interpreter. Since one of the major stumbling blocks to collaboration appeared to be the coordination of staff time

<sup>1</sup> Marion Cranmore. "The Effect of Social Relations on the Beginning Teacher's Disposition To Seek Advice," unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of Michigan, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> The project of which this meeting was a part is described in "The Innovation of Classroom Mental Practices," by Robert Fox and Ronald Lippitt in *Innovation in Education*, Mathew Miles (Ed.). (In manuscript).

and efforts devoted to professional development with ongoing administrative, teaching, and extracurricular functions, the relationship between the teachers and the principal seemed to be a point at which the consultant could apply himself. An appropriate step prior to the emergence of standards legitimating collaboration seemed to be the mutual clarification of teacher and principal attitudes about working together to improve instructional techniques. A strategy was established for interpreting the principal's interests to the teachers and then the teachers' to the principal, to be followed by a joint meeting at which time commitments to one another could be made.

### PROBLEMS FACED IN IMPROVING PRACTICES

After the consultant interpreted the principal's concerns to the teachers, the group began to discuss how the principal might be more supportive of potential innovative efforts on the part of the staff. It became apparent that they did not define the principal's role to include assisting teachers in their efforts to improve classroom practices. The teachers indicated that it was indeed unusual for a principal to set foot inside a teacher's classroom. A senior teacher said, "Since I began teaching in 1937, an administrator has been in my room only three times." The teachers then asked the questions, "Do we really want him to come into our rooms?" and "Do we perceive the principal to be one who possesses resources which can be of assistance to us?" The answer to the first question indicated that the teachers were somewhat insecure and that some would be too threatened to have the principal, whom they saw primarily as an evaluator, assist them with their instructional procedures. They began to see that in order for the principal to help them, changes would have to take place on at least two levels.

*First*, the principal would have to re-establish priorities as to what activities he would devote most of his time to and, *second*, efforts would have to be made to reduce the threat that the teachers would experience if the principal were to act as a resource for improving instructional procedures. Some specific suggestions were made that could be used by the principal to assist him in re-assessing his hierarchy of priorities; *e.g.*, delegating to a staff member the responsibility for supervising the lunchroom to make the principal more readily available for collaboration with staff members.

In discussing the efforts that would be necessary to reduce the threat created by the principal's evaluative potential, it became evident that some teachers felt that they could use him as a resource

while others felt they could not. The less experienced teachers were particularly interested in getting assistance from the principal. The group then began to inventory other resource personnel who could act in collaboration with the teacher "on the job" if a teacher felt too threatened to use the principal or felt that the principal had few resources to offer.

One of the resources that they began to discuss was the other members of the teaching staff. They started by talking about the sheer administrative problems of getting together to observe one another teach and in making time available to discuss problems of technique. They soon found, however, that the real core of the problem was not the administrative arrangements, but again was a problem of defining one's colleagues as resources and then overcoming the threat accompanying an admission of failure or in making a plea for assistance. They admitted that each had a free hour when it was possible to observe others' classroom management techniques, but that this time was used for other things ranging from simply letting off steam to correcting papers. They identified a standard in their school of *not* talking about classroom management procedures, but rather about weaknesses of specific pupils, or other related areas where they were assured some measure of support.

When asked if they had ever requested the principal to take their class while they observed another teacher's class, the answer was "no," but at the same time they were unanimous in their belief that the principal would welcome such a request. They saw the source of the problem in the building of standards of noncollaboration rather than primarily in administrative barriers to mutual assistance.

One teacher indicated to another that she would really be threatened to have her visit her class, but she also suggested that *now* she might feel more free to approach her. The suggestion was made that if the request for assistance were about a specific aspect of the teaching procedure rather than a general request such as "What am I doing wrong?" the requesting teacher would be less threatened and the requested teacher would have a better "set" for observation or evaluation. There was a general commitment to this type of a procedure of collaboration.

As in their relations with the principal, there appeared to be two major points of leverage for change in teacher colleague relationships: (1) a re-definition of their colleagues' roles as those who possess resources for helping improve classroom practices and, (2) a working through of the factors which create the personal threat

of exposure that they saw as a part of a commitment to collaboration on teaching problems.

Two other factors which seemed to restrict the seeking of collaborative assistance were a lack of knowledge of availability of specialists and the potential effects on students of having an observer in the classroom. It was discovered when inventorying the resources that were available to them for collaboration that they were not aware of the existence of county personnel whose job it was to provide specialized consultants to assist teachers with management and curriculum problems. It was suspected in this situation that the information had been communicated to them, but that the teachers were so unaccustomed to thinking about using resource people that the information was not assimilated.

Concern was also expressed about what explanation one would give students for the appearance of a resource person as an observer. Many thought the students would suspect that either they or the teacher were being evaluated and that their reactions would not be natural, making it difficult for the resource person to get a realistic picture of normal classroom processes. After deliberating on this issue for some time, the conclusion was reached that it might be appropriate to tell the students the truth! Consensus was reached that it would be appropriate to tell the students that the observer was there to provide suggestions for improving the presentation of the subject matter specified for the period. There appeared to be little readiness on the part of the teachers to invite student discussion aimed at making suggestions for improving instructional practices.

It can be seen in this illustrative case of an attempt to stimulate the collaboration of teachers on the improvement of educational practices that there were resistances at both the personal and organizational levels which needed to be worked through in the process of achieving the successful spread of ideas. The nature of relationships between the teacher and (a) the principal, (b) teacher colleagues, (c) consultants, and (d) students needed to be focused upon in order to overcome the latent resistances which act as stumbling blocks to professional growth and development.