Professional Community: Facilitating Organizational Cultures in Support of Inclusion

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Abstract: A major problem in the effort to help students with disabilities understand and exercise their rights lies in the lack of community between parents and children on the one hand and the schools on the other. This article outlines the concept of professional community and how it can be useful. We propose that a school culture that is in support of inclusion will be a school culture that will be more likely to engage effectively with parents and students, a primary step in the process of teaching students how to effectively exercise rights as adults.

Introduction

Berger & Luckman (1967) describe how everyday life takes on its own reality. The "reality of everyday life" (p 19, ff) is not a philosophical position or a perspective or lens through which to view the world, but the existing reality - the privileged reality - for each of us. This reality is intersubjective (shared by others) and is completely taken for granted. What we experience is "the" reality, not just "a" reality. Any change, especially a substantive one, to our experienced reality of everyday life is very hard to make precisely because it transgresses on the only reality that those sharing the experiences believe is, indeed, "real."

When working with students with disabilities and their families in the public school, we propose that there may be missed communication or conflict because neither parents or other advocates on the one hand nor teachers and school personnel on the other hand share the same reality of everyday life. For example, children with disabilities may know and wish to exercise their rights (after reaching the age of majority), but a child who does this can be an extremely disturbing presence to school personnel who are used to a collective, bureaucratic, and hierarchical approach to student-teacher relationships. Until there is an understanding of the different social realities of school personnel (their "reality of everyday life") and parents and children with disabilities (who experience a different "reality of everyday life"), students will not be able to experience the empowerment and freedom that come from making one's own decisions about one's own destiny.

One approach to this problem involves focusing on the creation of strong and meaningful communities that are committed to a new reality of everyday life. The balance of this paper is primarily the work of the first author, based on her particular interests and should be useful for those new to this area. Parents, advocates, and allies who understand the nature of current school

culture and can assist in the understanding and development of new ones, that can encompass and accept the major premise of the disability rights movement (Nothing About Us Without Us) will find that they are meeting with colleagues instead of feuding with enemies, in our view.

Creating Professional Communities

Creating strong professional communities holds several potential advantages for schools engaged in work with children with disabilities. Among the positive outcomes that writers on professionalism and community have asserted are the growth of increased responsibility for performance (including instructional expertise), increased personal commitment to work, the replacement of bureaucratic, rule-based controls over teacher behavior with values that promoted self-regulation, and the promotion of a climate of inquiry and innovation that lead to greater organizational learning and effectiveness for all students. The hypothesized outcomes of increased professional community can be categorized under three broad headings: (1) an increased sense of efficacy relating to work that results in increased motivation in the classroom; (2) an increased sense of satisfaction with the personal dignity of work; and (3) greater collective responsibility for student learning. While these are conceptually distinct, they are also related, as will be apparent in the discussion below.

Increased Efficacy

Teachers' sense of affiliation with each other, with the school, and their sense of mutual support and individual responsibility for the effectiveness of instruction is increased by collaborative work with peers (Louis, 1992b). Emergent professional communities increase opportunities to improve classroom practice by expanding the number and quality of feedback mechanisms available to teachers. In general, teachers will only seek out and accept serious reviews of their work when there are more open and supportive relationships among staff. Thus, the importance of frequent reactions to performance from peers and supportive school leaders is a consequence of its strong relationship to sense of efficacy among teachers (Louis and Smith, 1992), and sense of efficacy is, in turn, related to personal commitment to teaching and students (Louis, 1992c).

Satisfaction Emerging from Personal Dignity

One issue that frequently arises in talking about teachers' work is the discouragement that many of them feel when they believe that their best efforts are neither respected nor valued by peers, supervisors, or the public. However, when it is combined with other strategies for improving teachers' work, it appears to contribute to teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning (Lee and Smith, 1993) and also their sense of efficacy (Louis, Marks and Kruse, 1994). It is hypothesized that this occurs because some strategies for increasing teacher influence validate teachers' perception of their own value as social agents. Newmann (1991a), for example, suggests that giving teachers more individual autonomy, discretion and control in conducting their work will encourage a greater sense of ownership of and responsibility for quality in student learning. Johnson (1990) suggests that teachers obtain the greatest satisfaction from empowerment that focuses on teachers and classrooms and that involvement in policy-setting that is not directly related to their own work is viewed as a distraction.

Collective Responsibility for Student Learning

Any professional is, by definition, expected to be responsible for the quality of his or her own work. Good teachers, for example, typically view themselves as accountable for their students' learning, even when there are no external systems that would hold them up to some performance standard. This private sense of accountability is, however, an ineffective means of maintaining organizational performance (Mitchell, 1993). In addition, however, it is suggested that publicly acknowledged collective responsibility for performance is an important outcome of increasing professional community in schools (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995).

Furthermore, developing effective school-level accountability systems depends on professional community. At minimum, limited professional community may allow teachers to agree on standards for assessing their individual performance. At a more advanced level, when they work as a unit, members of a school may take on the joint responsibility for considering and monitoring the effectiveness of the school. This may involve setting informal or formal standards for performance related to instruction, pedagogy, and student learning as well as the willingness to confront and/or mediate poor performance of teachers in the school. The collective responsibility for performance may manifest itself in increased assistance between teachers in instruction, volunteering for additional assignments and putting forth extra effort in creating opportunities for student learning (Little, 1990).

Just as there is a link between efficacy and dignity, there is also a link between dignity found through meaningful participation in school-wide decisions about teaching and learning and individual accountability. Teachers' engagement with the school community can stimulate more concerted efforts to resolve the dilemmas and problems associated with student development, and, in turn, reinforce a shared sense of purpose for the education of all students. Without this base faculty may reject the development of standards for judging teaching performance or implementation of those standards may be largely mechanical and lacking insight.

Characteristics of School-Based Professional Community

Professional school communities share five defining characteristics: shared values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning, and collaboration. Each of these is defined below and how current discussions of school reform portray them is discussed.

Shared Norms and Values

Shared norms and values are the fundamental bedrock upon which all other aspects of professional community are built. Kruse, Louis & Bryk (1995) assert that professional communities are based on moral authority derived from the central social importance of teaching and socializing all children. But this moral authority is fragile and hardly akin to other broadly shared assumptions of American society, such as the sanctity of the lawyer-client relationship or even the right to medical care. Without entering the debate about the relative importance of medical care versus education, the lack of social agreement around educational goals means that teachers and school administrators need to reinforce their own understandings about children, learning, teaching and teacher's roles, the nature of human needs, activity, and relationships

(Schein, 1985) and also the school's extended role in the broader community and society (Giroux, 1988).

Without a core of shared beliefs about institutional purposes, practices and desired behavior, the other elements of professional community cannot emerge. Even if teachers want to form more tightly connected social and professional relationships, the absence of a core of shared values will produce, instead, misunderstanding, conflicts, and may also lead to interpersonal mistrust. This does not mean that teachers need full consensus about all aspects of their work because it would erect an impossible standard against which to measure professional community. However, a delimited core of value positions in the school permits teachers to begin the task of developing a moral community that ultimately allows them to become advocates for teaching and learning.

This may start with very concrete behavior. For example, when teachers explain their specific actions, they often appeal to their values concerning children, but fail to make these values explicit or to follow through on the implications of their values. Thus, mandating after-school study sessions for failing students suggests that teacher's value student achievement and performance. This action also implies a belief that teachers are responsible for providing additional help for failing students and conditions that support additional student efforts. If an explicitly shared value base exists that reflects these assumptions, it is also easier to discuss the way in which they must be woven throughout other school policies in ways that support student learning. In this specific instance, teachers must also agree about a variety of other value-based policies, such as providing some credit for late work, for such time to be considered productive.

Reflective Dialogue

Growth of the school-based professional community is marked by conversations that hold practice, pedagogy and student learning under scrutiny (Clift, Houston and Pugach, 1990; Liebowitz, 1991; Little, 1990; Osterman, 1990, 1993). Rich and recurring discourse promotes high standards of practice and both generate and reinforce core beliefs, norms and values of the community. In other words, talk is the bridge between educational values and improved practice in schools.

Reflective practice denotes a self-awareness about what one does, and, according to Schon (1983), is a condition toward which all professionals should strive. By engaging in reflection, teachers become students of their craft as they puzzle through the assumptions basic to quality practice. While typically identified with self-analysis and critique, in organized settings reflection becomes a joint responsibility as teachers' work toward a better understanding of their own learning and abilities. School-wide commitment to reflection further implies a joint interest which in turn suggests the value of public conversations that advance reflection.

Public conversation concerning practice within the school needs to focus on four topics: academic content, the intelligent use of generic teaching strategies, the development of students, and the social conditions of schooling and issues of equity and justice (Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1991). In an effectively functioning "traditional" setting, teachers may prefer to delegate responsibility for school organization to administrators. This is not unreasonable since, in general, reflection is more likely to result from talk that starts with classroom work and later

moves out toward school organization than by beginning with school organization as the focus of discussion and reform (Crandall, Eiseman and Louis, 1986). However, these discussions necessarily take on a broader focus when teachers and administrators decide to rethink fundamental issues of teaching that bears directly on the school's routines (for example, the schedule). In restructuring schools, conversations must also turn to the school organization itself, since this is viewed as problematic and connected with the main topics of concern to the community of teachers. Conversations therefore demand that teachers expand their thinking beyond those areas that are familiar parts of their repertoire and daily experience.

Reflective dialogue expands the teachers' world in other ways as well. It reduces isolation by asking teachers and administrators to genuinely "walk in each other's shoes" during intensive interaction. This empathetic collaboration leads to deepened understandings of the processes and products of teaching. In the end, reflection becomes a form of both individual activity and social interaction carried on between all members of the school community to create joint understandings related to students, learning, and pedagogical practice.

Deprivatization of Practice

Teachers within professional communities practice their craft openly. Teachers can share and tradeoff the roles of mentor, advisor or specialist when providing aid and assistance to peers (Lieberman, Saxl and Miles, 1988; Little, 1990). Within these relationships teachers work to define and develop their own practice in public, deprivatized ways. Many schools - as a method to improve both classroom practice and collegial relationships - have accepted peer coaching relationships, based both in the mutual solving of problems through discussion and in classroom observation. Moreover, bringing real teaching problems to the table and engaging in mutual observations provides a richer context for discussions of practice because it is specific and event focused and thus encourages new forms of conversation among teachers. It allows teachers to be analytic in their planning and thinking and to use observations from others about student effort and achievement that cannot be obtained while in the act of teaching. Through discussion of specifics, teachers grow in their teaching practice by developing skills for describing, analyzing and executing the instructional act. They also develop a shared common language with which to discuss these tasks. In other words, their instrumental and technical expertise advances.

Previous research has shown that deprivatization, where it is accompanied by frequent feedback about performance, augments the individual teachers' sense of efficacy (Louis, 1992c). There is also a significant social consequence for the community. Teachers deepen their levels of mutual trust and respect thereby creating greater openness to further improvement within the school community. The dialogue around publicly shared practice allows teachers to display their successes, but more importantly to learn from their disappointments in a low-risk environment.

Collective Focus on Student Learning

Many programs that purport to improve teaching emphasize techniques, skills and delivery strategies. Even where teachers are presented with research showing that these techniques affect achievement, they are rarely taught how they can monitor the connections between their use of these practices and learning. Under these conditions, practice remains mechanical and

unexamined (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin and Hall, 1987). In contrast, when teachers begin to place sustained attention to students at the core of school-wide professional community, the emphasis shifts to how pedagogy is linked to the process of student learning and professional actions increasingly focus on choices that affect students' opportunity to learn and provide substantial student benefit (Abbott, 1991; Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 1992; Darling-Hammond and Goodwin, 1993; Little, 1990). For this to occur, teachers' beliefs and values must wholeheartedly support notions of children as academically capable, and provide learning environments responsive to and supportive of student achievement. Thus, the central focus on student learning creates a sense of moral authority in both private practice and public conversation. Members of the school attend to this as their primary voice of conscience (Green, 1985).

Collaboration

Much has been written about the need to promote greater teacher collegiality and more cooperative work settings as part of restructuring schools. There are several related but conceptually distinct ideas here that merit clarification.

Teacher actions that focus on student learning may be considered cooperative, collegial or collaborative (Hord, 1987). Cooperation represents a very basic level of social interaction among teachers: teachers cooperate when they group students across classes for academic purposes, assist in parent conferences, or help each other out with lesson planning. Cooperation, however, does not necessarily entail a shared value base about teaching practice, students and learning, but focuses on mutual aid in order to get work done more efficiently.

In contrast, mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance characterize collegial relationships. Collegial teachers may share lesson plans around interdisciplinary theme units or work toward common expectations concerning student work and behavior. Time spent together in joint planning sessions focuses less on classroom war stories and more on issues related to future teaching activities or ways that the school can support improved learning.

The most advanced forms of collegiality evolve into genuine collaboration, the essence of which is co-development. Faculty may call on each other to discuss the mutual development of skills related to the new accomplishments in practice or to generate knowledge, ideas, or programs that will help advance their expertise or contribute to school performance. Complex and confusing data, including classroom experience, can create shared understandings, as well as enhancing the community in which the members work. This stands in sharp contrast to Hargreaves (1990) descriptions of contrived collegiality where teachers go through the motions of peer coaching or other administratively imposed practices, yet have little real connection with each other around their practice. True collaborative efforts, on the other hand, have not only tangible products but also lead to voluntary commitments between teachers that stimulate "richly substantive discourse" (Little, 1990 p. 522).

There are probably few schools where one cannot find some instances of collaborative bonds between pairs of teachers. However, central to the idea of school-wide professional community is that collaboration is a generalized attribute of the school. Collaboration among many professionals, including across groups, is critical for the development of school-wide professional communities. It is important, for example, that teachers in the first and fifth grades, in science and math departments, and even administrators and teachers view themselves as part of the same endeavor. Role and department boundaries, which often serve as rigid barriers, become more permeable (although these groupings may remain very meaningful sources of professional engagement). This flexibility helps to shape information, routines and the transfer of knowledge between grade levels and departments - an important feature of any organization that is adaptable and open to change (Cohen, 1988). Individual skills and knowledge provide the foundation of the school's capacity, but a school's ability to manage complex cycles of innovation depends on the ingrained habits of learning from colleagues both within and across work groups.

What Conditions Support School-Based Professional Community?

Professional communities are supported by autonomy from a centralized bureaucratic structure, e.g., site-based management and school-based decision making. In our view, however, the current focus on school-based management has obscured the wide variety of other conditions that help to promote professional communities in schools. In the remaining pieces of this section focuses on two broad categories: structural conditions and the characteristics of human resources within and outside the school. In tandem these conditions can serve to support the classroom teacher as her or she works in a more inclusive environment.

The design of the school as a work setting either nourishes or impedes the formation of a strong professional community. Structural and social and human resource conditions that create interdependent work settings foster interdependence in other parts of the school creating connections between different aspects of teachers' academic work. Issues of time, size, physical conditions, and coordination among teachers affect practice as does the development of trust, respect and access to expertise. Together these conditions can create the needed foundation for professional community to emerge.

Time to meet and talk: Louis (1992a) and Raywid (1993) suggest that time is not only necessary to carry out change agendas, but essential if innovation is to be maintained. A decade ago, Goodlad claimed that schools could not remain both static and exceptional. He argued that an institutionalized ongoing self-renewal process is necessary for the maintenance of school effectiveness and that this, in turn, implies a need for considerable and regular blocks of time devoted to professional learning and school improvement. Teachers need opportunities to consider pedagogy within department or grade level gatherings and in the context of all-school efforts. However, tacking additional voluntary time onto the ends of already tiring school days rarely works: it must be built into the school day and calendar. Consequently, the use of professional time must be understood in two ways. First, teachers must be provided the means to meet on a daily basis to address issues of concern to immediate work groups of faculty - departments, grade levels or teams. Second, provision must be made for cross connection among

smaller work groups that emerge in the full faculty. By doing so the inclusion teacher benefits as the work of the classroom becomes the primary focus for discussion related to learning.

Physical proximity: Structures that provide opportunities for informal communication can be important in promoting teacher effort on school improvement projects. Teachers need places in which to interact, but physical conditions, especially in large schools, are often a barrier to the exchange of ideas and the establishment of a sense of identity relating to common interests and goals (Louis and Miles, 1990). Creating common workspaces, such as team planning rooms, is one way to provide relief from the classroom isolation and pressured work schedules found in most school buildings. Moreover, when teachers are physically close, occasions for sustained observations and conversations related to teaching and student learning increase. Over the long run, this offers teachers more chances to learn about the effects of their work. Teachers interacting in new roles - mentors, advisors, and specialists concerning classroom practice - create feedback mechanisms to learn.

Interdependent teaching roles: Professional communities are marked by reciprocal influence among the teaching staff. A hallmark of mutual leverage is the presence of recurring and predictable situations in which teachers work together on teaching. Team-teaching and integrated lesson designs are two examples of formal interdependent teaching roles. Collaborative teaching teams, another common characteristic of "restructuring schools," work toward both short-term and long-term goals related to student learning by addressing curricular content, instruction, and other teaching practices. Teachers who work in interdependent settings act as professionals when their interactions support a shared value structure rather than reinforcing artificial boundaries between their roles (Kanter, 1982; Meyer and Rowan, 1983; Miller, 1985). In turn, interdependent teaching develops closer relationships and have more opportunities for dialogue, feedback and discussion of specifics of practice all of which, produces a greater certainty about their pedagogical practice (Louis, 1991).

Communication structures: Creating school-wide professional community requires structures that encourage exchange of ideas within and across organizational boundaries. Regular meetings with agendas focused on teaching and learning provide opportunities to discuss instruction and curriculum, personal and professional growth experiences, and the establishment of discourse communities that encourage the exchange of ideas. Teacher networks within the school may help to foster an environment where talk about pedagogy, school organization and student learning is common. Communication does not, however, need to be face-to-face to be effective: technological advances such as electronic mail can help teachers whose schedules do not mesh. By linking teachers engaged in similar work (such as the inclusion classroom) or with similar interests (such as increased academic achievement for all students) communication networks of every sort promote discussion and reflection.

Trust and respect: Trust and respect from colleagues inside the school and key members of relevant external communities, such as parents and the district office staff, are necessary conditions for developing commitment (Cohen, 1988; Firestone and Rosenblum, 1991; Louis 1992a) as well as professional community. Respect refers to honoring the expertise of others, while trust refers more to the quality of interpersonal relations. Trust is an essential ingredient of the recipe for collegiality because it helps to induce a sense of loyalty, commitment and

effectiveness necessary for shared decision making and the establishment of collegiality. Without trust among faculty, change efforts may become contrived and without lasting impact (Hargreaves, 1992).

Hargreaves (1992) argues that trust involves both predictability and common goals. The common goals are most central to trust because they are a reflection of the foundation of shared values. Trust manifests itself as confidence "invested in persons or process" (p. 22) and may emerge when responsibility is delegated to either people or processes created for school improvement. Trust may be particularly important in a school where practice is changing and is more widely shared because it permits teachers to overlook many behavior and activities that may not parallel their own. Teachers can trust someone whose actions they do not always agree with if their actions are knowable and they do not violate our common values and goals.

Access to expertise: Professional community is based on an intellectual and practical grasp of the knowledge base and skills underlying the field. Normative practices that are not grounded in expertise are often unprofessional involving an unspoken preference to avoid confronting the poor functioning of the group. In other cases, however, teachers may discuss practice, but persist in affirming the value of poor pedagogy because they lack access to information that would suggest otherwise (Louis, 1995). Part of the problem is lack of access to the expertise of peers and structures need to be devised to increase sharing around issues of practice. Ideally, the sharing of expertise will result in collaboration and the construction of new knowledge, as richer and more complex problems are resolved.

The bottom line is that the quality of the school, as contrasted with the individual classroom, can only be maintained when individual teachers improve learning for their own students, but also make their expertise available to their colleagues. Thus, the practice of teaching becomes understood, generated through development, and enhanced through innovation in schools with strong cognitive and skill bases (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Without continued individual growth in teachers' knowledge and skills, in concert with supportive leadership to mediate existing poor performance, it is unlikely that a collectively rewarding environment can be established (Louis, 1992b).

Conclusion

Leadership, whether provided by school administrators or site-based teams, needs to focus efforts on the core issues of shared purpose, continuous improvement and structural change (Fullan, 1992; Murphy and Louis, 1994). Leaders are crucial for organizational innovation as they act as a constant source of pressure to think in ways that deviate from the current culture (Miles and Huberman, 1984). In addition, supporting a shared vision acts to create coherence and unity and establishes a sense of "internal quality" (Vandenberghe and Staessens, 1991).

School leaders stimulate general commitment of participants to organizational effectiveness by creating meaningful interaction among faculty that focuses on a supportive environment and a climate for learning (Angle and Perry, 1983; Caldwell and Spinks, 1992). What leaders say and do expresses what they value for the organization and the behavioral expectations that they communicate on a daily basis either reinforce or call into question these basic values and

assumptions (Staessens, 1991). Principals who focus on classroom practice demonstrate through their actions that pedagogy is important which, in turn, supports the expectation that conversation around these issues is worthy.

Development activities need to focus not only on training in new curriculum practices and instructional techniques, but also on the development of the staff as an effectively functioning group. Collective work is the vehicle for clarifying the expected and possible as well as the prohibited and unthinkable. These interactions become, therefore, a form of social control as certain behavior is accepted and other is dissuaded in a daily process aimed at creating a common social reality. The education of the whole student, not just academic subject matter, must be the primary driving force.

Finally, as schools begin to work toward this new reality of everyday life, the rationale for including the parent of a student with a disabling condition and/or the student him or herself in planning and in the new community becomes clear to those who may previously have resisted it.

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