Changing an Adult Learning Environment as Viewed from a Social Learning Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article reports observations of teachers' collaboration within an inner city elementary school located in western Canada. The study traces the school's development as a learning organization, focusing on the interplay between individual – the level at which learning and action actually occur – and social learning – a conceptual tool for considering how people learn and work together – in the teachers' professional development, and on the factors that contributed to the school's social learning. The principal's support fostered teachers' collective learning regarding unfamiliar pedagogical methods. Staff attitude surveys provided indications of increasing staff satisfaction with the work environment, professional development opportunities, and decision making compared to satisfaction in previous years. The latter section of the article formulates conclusions regarding aspects of individual and social learning among teachers in the school, as well as suggestions of interest to teachers who wish to adapt to complex educational issues collaboratively.

Over a decade ago Bossert (1988) asserted that:

... one key 'effect' always is associated with the charter of our public schools: to provide children with the opportunities to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic.... Comparisons of effective and ineffective schools have begun to identify specific school-level factors that promote higher student achievements, particularly in the basic skills. (pp. 341, 345)

In Alberta, the province-wide "Site-based management" initiative devolving considerable decision-making power to individual schools is based on assertions similar to Bossert's. In many Alberta school jurisdictions, various individuals (e.g., superintendents, trustees, business representatives, parents, and teachers) have issued challenges to school staffs to work closely together to improve their schools. Acheson and Gall (1997), da Costa (1993), da Costa and Riordan (1997), Grimmett and Erickson (1988), Hargreaves (1994), and Oberg (1989) assert that when teachers actively collaborate on pedagogically-related issues, they will reflect and learn more about the methods and content of their daily instruction, which, it is assumed, will lead to improvements in classroom teaching and student learning.

This reflective act on the part of school staff can be conceived of in terms of two inextricable processes: individual learning – the level at which learning and action actually occur – and social learning – a conceptual tool for considering how people learn and work together (Greeno, 1997). Teachers engaged in professional development activities can profitably be regarded as adult learners (Terehoff, 2002). This paper will take the advice provided by Salomon and Perkins (1998) that:

it is fruitful to view these conceptions as two levels of analysis, each of which sometimes neglects the other.... Thus, while children often practice arithmetic or climbing trees alone, "individual" learning is rarely truly individual; it almost always entails some social mediation.... Likewise, the learning of social entities (e.g., teams) entails some learning on the part of participating individuals. (p. 2)

Thus, relying on this premise, two objectives are served by this study. These objectives are to: (a) refine theory regarding how school staffs can work together to learn simultaneously as individuals and as groups–in what Salomon and Perkins (1998) termed a "reciprocal spiral relationship" (p. 18) of learning, and (b) to develop practical suggestions to nurture and enhance the relationships that are increasingly required of school staffs as they learn to address ever more complex educational issues. In the present study, these issues will be examined from within the

domain of the inner city school culture; special attention is paid to the considerations which must be made by school staff working in this environment.

Relationship to Existing Research and Literature

For more than 20 years, educational researchers have documented the isolation faced by teachers in the classroom (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Little, 1987; Gresso & Robertson, 1992). For almost as long, various researchers have been calling for teachers to work collaboratively in small teams to "break the isolation of the classroom" (Little, 1987, p. 494).

The reported benefits of teachers working in small groups with colleagues do not come as a surprise. The literature is replete with examples of instructional support teams (e.g., Sgan & Clark, 1986), clinical supervision dyads (e.g., Grimmett & Crehan, 1990), site-based decision making and management (Brown, 1994), shared decision making (e.g., Alvarez, 1992), and whole-faculty study groups (Murphy & Lick, 2001), and their advantages, not only for the participants but also for their organizations. Presumably, these advantages are gained, not only when individuals acquire knowledge and understandings, but also when knowledge, understandings, and meanings are constructed through group interactions and distributed among those interacting (Salomon & Perkins, 1998).

Learning

Several definitions of social learning appear in the literature. The present study turns to Argyris and Schön (1996), Senge (1990), and Dodgson (1993) for guidance. The focus here is on how learning takes place within groups such as families, sports teams, business employees, and in particular, school staffs. Although individuals may help each other to learn skills or knowledge, the focus is not on individual learning, but on how the "... collective acquires more knowledge, understanding, or skill, or a different climate or culture" (Salomon & Perkins, 1998, p. 5). From the business literature, Dodgson (1993) describes this phenomenon as "the way firms build, supplement, and organize knowledge and routines around their activities and within their cultures and adapt and develop organizational efficiency by improving the use of the broad skills of their workforces" (p. 377).

Salomon and Perkins' (1998) description of a sports team as a social entity capable of learning addresses the essence of learning for the collective:

A sports team attains patterns of coordination among the individuals that might be quite useless for any of the team members functioning alone...the group constitutes a collective learning system, a system that will function better or worse as learning depending on how well its structures address critical conditions of learning.

Social learning is not primarily focused on the transmission or acquisition of knowledge or skills. Although these are important functions, they fall primarily into the realm of individual learning; in contrast, social learning functions can be categorized as "advanced organizational routines" such as the policies and practices underlying organizational belief systems. Social or organizational learning is focused on enabling the collective to adapt to ever changing environmental conditions by being able to draw on the tacit knowledge, expertise, experiences, and artifacts held by individual group members (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Levitt & March, 1988). Learning in social systems occurs when individuals in the collective – what Miles (1993) referred to as internal change agents – actively (a) participate in the evaluation of current practices and goals, (b) reflect on how these can be improved given the context in which the organization functions, and (c) devise new action plans and concomitant policies and procedures. A technique often used by leaders to "speed" the social learning process of a collective is to acquire new personnel who bring with them knowledge and sets of expectations that differ substantially from those already held by the collective—a phenomenon referred to as "grafting" by Huber (1989, 1991) – this can also be categorized as an external change agent as described by Miles (1993).

Facilitating Social Learning

To facilitate social learning, as described above, leaders must build their organizations' cultures and shape the evolution of those cultures. Senge (1990) argues that the leader must not be just a charismatic decision maker but also a teacher, a designer, and a guardian of the change process. Leaders must have a strong sense of the purpose of the organization's overall mission. Furthermore, they must be committed to that larger organizational mission. Leaders should facilitate the development of organizational structures and policies to best enable the collective to achieve the organizational mission. This series of recommendations suggests that problems should always be explored through a variety of viewpoints through participation, by the members of the collective, in dialogue and discussion. Action should result from the participative function of discourse; it should not be arbitrarily imposed from above (Grantham & Nichols, 1993). This highly adaptable type of leadership is consistent with Fullan's (1993)

conception of a transformative leader.

Attention should be paid to at least three factors before engaging in active dialogue with colleagues for the purpose of stimulating social learning. First, it is critical that participants' thoughts, still-to-be-formulated ideas, and considerations be objectified, so when they are shared in the group these conceptions can be discussed, examined, and elaborated upon without personal emotional attachment (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). Second, the collective must agree on goals that it will promote (Slavin, 1994). And third, individuals must be personally accountable to the collective for their actions or inactions (Slavin, 1994).

Method and Data Source

This study focuses on staff perceptions of the individual and social learning processes they engaged in which emerged from the school principal's initiative to move the school culture in a more collaborative direction, the primary goal of which was to further develop pedagogic practice and student social and academic growth. This investigation made extensive use of semi-structured interviews with the school staff. The researchers also collected observational field notes during visits to the school. In addition to these data, the results of two, anonymous, annual district attitude staff surveys were also shared with us for the principal's first two years at the school. Prior to conducting the interviews, both researchers were given a tour of the school and introduced to the staff as well as to many of the students. The analyses of the interviews were conducted through the use of narrative accounts to support emerging themes. To enhance the internal validity of the study, an audit trail was provided so that emerging themes could be verified by a subsequent researcher.

All instructional and support staff at one inner city elementary school were asked to participate in the study. All teachers, support staff, and the principal volunteered for a total of 15 participants. Two semi-structured interviews, each of 30 to 60 minutes duration, were conducted approximately five months apart with each respondent during the principal's second school year. To supplement the researchers' understanding of what was going on in the school, informal follow-up interviews were conducted with some respondents over the principal's third school year. One of the researchers also attended two school-community meetings in which both outside and inside perceptions of what was taking place at the school were discussed. Dialogue during the interviews focused on the perceived changes that were being implemented at the school as a result of government, district, and school initiatives — particularly those initiatives having their genesis with the teachers themselves and with the principal herself. Essentially, the purposes of the interviews included exploring: (a) what this group of teachers "thought they were up to," (b) how their interactions had resulted in individual learning, (c) what teachers perceived to be group learnings and how those had emerged, and (d) what the instructional staff at the inner city school perceived as the results of their efforts for themselves and their students.

Findings

The School Context

Demographic background. Regil Elementary School (a pseudonym) caters to slightly fewer than 200 pupils of various ethnic backgrounds in kindergarten to grade six and is located in the inner city area of a large western Canadian metropolitan area. Relative to other schools in the district, Regil Elementary serves a high socio-economic needs community, ranking among the top 5% of the neediest schools in the district. Fifty-three percent of households sending children to Regil Elementary School earned less than $15,000 in the most recent economic data collected by the District). Almost half of the students attending Regil Elementary School have special needs designations. The demographic profile of the local community shows high proportions of single adult households and single males. Many individuals and families living in the school's catchment area are transient, resulting in a high turnover rate of the student population at Regil Elementary, ranging from 20% to 30% per year over the past 10 years.

In the past, the school had a community development emphasis as its mandate. Due to diminished resources and the arrival of the current principal, the school now devotes its diminished resources to literacy and numeracy. One year after the principal's arrival, Regil Elementary School was invited to become a participant in the District's "Quantum Leap Project." This project gave the staff at Regil Elementary carte blanche to improve student achievement in any ways they saw fit, but this development had to be accomplished without any additional funding. It should also be noted here that approximately two-thirds of the staff at the school had worked at Regil Elementary prior to the arrival of the new principal. Many of these individuals had spent most, if not all, of their careers working at this school.

Partnerships with the community. The school had longstanding partnerships with the local Masonic Lodge and Rotary Club. New partnerships had been established since the current principal's arrival with several local businesses and the United Way. These partnerships not only infused money into the school but also provided volunteers to work with

the children at the school. Regil Elementary School also had a "study-buddy" program established with the Department of Elementary Education at a local university. A snack program and a hot lunch program were available to all students. Student clothing needs were met through a winter clothing drive undertaken by the school council members of a local junior high school, which had partnered with the school, and by a clothing bank operated by the Regil Community Centre. In order to teach students the importance of being good members of the community, all students were involved in community service projects in which they gave back to their community.

Organizational structure. The school was organized such that the kindergarten class had a full-time program aide, and grades one to six each had half-time resource teachers who use a "pull-out" model to work with students experiencing difficulties. The school also had a full-time teacher who managed the school library and was responsible for computer technology in the facility. A teacher, funded by the United Way, had been hired to work in the school to coordinate a community mentorship program focused on increasing student achievement in language arts and mathematics. The goal of the program was to have a mentor for each child in the school by the principal's fourth year at the school. These mentors were expected to work with pupils once per week in the school. By January of the principal's third year, approximately two-thirds of students had mentors. An intern teacher was also hired to work in the school for the principal's second school year. The intern was assigned to two teachers per month and was responsible for working with children in the master teachers' classrooms. Specific instructional arrangements were negotiated between the intern and the individual regular classroom teachers. Starting with the principal's second year at the school, the timetable at Regil Elementary school was re-arranged so that all teachers would have an extra 30 minutes of preparation and organizational time on one afternoon per week after children were dismissed. This time was divided equally between staff meetings and professional development activities.

All staff at Regil Elementary School were also expected to coordinate at least one student club or sport at all times throughout the school year. The principal, Jane (a pseudonym), believed that it was healthy for staff and students to see each other engaging in activities which were different and removed from the classroom.

The principal. Jane, the principal of Regil Elementary School, utilized a leadership approach which could best be described as demanding of excellence and hard work, but not any more demanding than she was of herself. In her interactions with the school staff, she regularly acknowledged and thanked them for any contributions regardless of how minimal. This manifested itself in public as well as private ways.

Jane was very clear regarding what she saw as the purpose of education and of schools: the mandate was for literacy and numeracy. In achieving this goal, Jane was guided by the belief that everyone she dealt with was to be treated with dignity regardless of the appropriateness of the choices they had made. They were, however, totally accountable for their actions. Jane continuously reminded children – as she walked around the school before, during, and after school – to think before acting. Jane kept herself informed of school activities by regularly walking through the halls and dropping in to classrooms. Classrooms typically had an "open door" policy. Jane was described by many staff members as fair, kind, principled, and tough; she knew what she wanted and the majority of her staff and pupils responded positively. As one teacher said, "I work harder for her than anyone else I know, and I love it."

This is not to say that Jane ran Regil Elementary School without input from the staff with whom she worked. One respondent put Jane's approach to decision making most clearly:

I think that our views are heard and examined and pieces are taken out. Obviously, our opinion can't be reflected in every decision at the school level. I'm a believer. I do believe that everything [school-related issues] is brought to us and it's not token—that it's heard. She hears our opinion but I'm also realistic [enough] to know that Jane has to make the ultimate decision.

This hard work may have been partially due to Jane's talent to engage individuals in the inner workings of the organization by giving them responsibilities and the latitude to address those responsibilities. As one respondent, who had known Jane for several years prior to coming to Regil Elementary School, stated: "Jane gives everybody power. She delegates power and responsibility very well. I believe that those two kind of go together in some way."

It was also clear from the words of another respondent that with the power and responsibility delegated to staff came accountability:

I was very accountable to her the first year, but no more accountable than I am this year. I also know that if I was to do something that was wrong or inappropriate, she'd be the first one to be at my door. I don't feel that I run the roost, but I own my classroom. I think she figures out whether people should own their classrooms or not.

About the Initiative

Emphasis on literacy and numeracy for pupils. The emphasis on literacy and numeracy was evident in the programs in which students were involved. Regil Elementary School students all participated in a home reading program. Due to limited resources, basal readers from another school, which were about to be discarded, were obtained, cut apart, and rebound into individual stories. Students were provided access to these reading materials in addition to the books that were available in the school library. Students experiencing difficulty with reading also participated in a "Reading Recovery Program." Numeracy was emphasized at the school by ensuring that teachers had mathematics manipulatives available for student use to reinforce their abstract learning. Students also had computer hardware and software available in their own classrooms as well as in the school library to supplement the language arts and mathematics curricula.

The great emphasis on literacy and numeracy at Regil Elementary School was obtained at the expense of moving away from a community model of schooling in which school resources were expended not only on educating children but on their parents as well. This shift did raise questions in the minds of some longtime Regil Elementary staff members regarding the motives of the principal for instituting the shift. Some of these questions were, undoubtedly, surrounding the elimination of the position of a well-liked colleague. Those who knew the principal from other contexts accepted, without question, that she was acting in the best interests of students as she charted the course for the school. Similarly, those who were new to the school and to the principal also did not question the motives of the principal. However, some of those who had a long-standing history in the school and who did not know the principal very well were initially somewhat mistrustful of her motives.

Staff learning. Staff members were organized in two primary ways for formal professional development learning activities originating in the school. First, staff were arranged into three working groups — referred to as triads but consisting of four and, in some cases, five individuals — each spanning three grade levels. Second, staff members were also arranged into study groups such that triad members from each triad were each in a different study group. The purpose of the triads was to address pedagogical issues related to the specific students taught by the members of each triad and to develop multi-age grouping themes based on language arts or mathematics for their cluster of grades. The purpose of the study groups was to review current research on teaching and learning. A portion of all staff meetings was also devoted to discussion of learning strategies and implications of current research for teaching.

In keeping with this emphasis, yearly teacher professional growth plans were required to include specific goals related to achievement in literacy and in numeracy. Staff members were also encouraged, with coverage provided by substitute teachers, to visit other teachers both within and without the school and to attend district in-service activities to obtain new ideas for their own professional development. The principal formally evaluated all staff during her first year at the school. During her second year at the school, she formally evaluated only new staff and those *in difficulty*. Those staff members not being formally evaluated in the current school year were expected to engage in critical self-appraisal practices, peer supervision, or the development of a reflective professional teaching portfolio.

To assist less experienced staff and to infuse vitality into some of the more experienced but somewhat stagnant teachers, the principal arranged for Brenda – a star teacher, who exemplified outstanding teaching skills – to teach in the school. Some staff, however, did not readily accept Brenda because of their perception of her pre-existing personal and professional relationships with the principal. In attempts to mitigate this perception, the principal distanced herself purposely from Brenda. Brenda shared that the first eight months at the school were difficult because she could not draw on her friendship with the principal. Furthermore, many of the staff who had been at Regil Elementary prior to Jane's arrival were not willing to accept Brenda until the year was almost over. On this issue Brenda shared that:

I need to feel a sense of team. I'm creating that opportunity for team...but not everybody is buying in. People are terrified and have never had the security of working as a team and feeling that support…. The people who aren't buying into team are people who have never reaped the benefits of team.

Staff Attitude Survey

Every year, surveys are sent to various school stakeholder groups within the district to which Regil Elementary School belongs. Of particular interest in this study were the anonymous survey results obtained by the district from both instructional and support staff at Regil Elementary during Jane's first and second years at the school. For analysis purposes, responses to the district survey questions were clustered into three categories: (a) workplace environment, (b) professional learning environment, and (c) decision-making process. Overall, staff members were very positive about what was happening in their school. Staff perspectives are elaborated upon below.

Workplace environment. Generally, staff members were supportive of the perspective that Regil Elementary School had a very good work environment (See Table 1). All staff agreed that the school was a good place to work. Staff typically, with the exception of one respondent, felt that they received adequate recognition for the work they did in the school. Staff all felt that the performance evaluation process in place at the school was fair. The vast majority of staff — all but two — also felt supported by their colleagues in the work they did within the school. This majority believed that staff worked collaboratively within the school. Curiously, even though some staff indicated during interviews an initial "distrust" of the principal's motives, all staff agreed in the anonymous survey that Jane was supportive or very supportive of their efforts.

Table 1

Instructional and non-instructional Staff Attitude Survey results regarding the nature of the work environment at the school

The extent to which:	To a great extent (%)	To a good extent (%)	Not very well (%)	Not at all (%)	No response (%)
1. staff feel their school is a good place to work.	65	35	-	-	-
2. you receive support from your principal	76	24	-	-	-
3. staff are satisfied with performance evaluation at the school.	76	24	-	-	-
4. you, as a staff member, get recognition for work done	59	35	6	-	-
5. you are satisfied with the cleanliness of your school.	59	35	6	-	-
6. you feel that staff work collaboratively within your school.	53	35	12	-	-

Professional learning environment. Instructional and non-instructional staff were all very satisfied with the professional development learning opportunities they were provided at Regil Elementary (See Table 2). This satisfaction was echoed in responses to questions asking if (a) "performance planning or self-appraisal had contributed to professional growth" and (b) the extent to which staff had "participated in work-related courses, in-services or professional development activities in the past 12 months" (not including school professional development days or the annual teachers' convention). In response to the former question, all staff members but one were very satisfied with how performance planning had contributed to their learning for professional growth. In response to the latter question, all staff members but two indicated participation in professional development activities beyond what was normally expected for school and district staff.

Table 2

Instructional and non-instructional Staff Attitude Survey results regarding professional development opportunities at the school

The extent to which:	To a great extent (%)	To a good extent (%)	Not very well (%)	Not at all (%)	No response (%)
1. you are satisfied with opportunities you have for professional development	82	18	-	-	-
2. performance planning or self-appraisal has contributed to your professional growth	62	31	7	-	-
3. you participated in PD during the last 12 months (beyond expected district and school PD days).	82	6	-	12	-

Decision making. Of particular interest in this anonymous staff survey were those items related to decision making and the open sharing of information used to make decisions at the school level (See Table 3). This openness was reflected in the very high ratings staff gave to Jane as their principal. All staff agreed that Jane was an effective leader.

Table 3

Instructional and non-instructional Staff Attitude Survey results regarding decision making at the school

The extent to which:	To a great extent (%)	To a good extent (%)	Not very well (%)	Not at all (%)	No response (%)
1. the principal provides effective leadership.	82	18	-	-	-
2. satisfied with information regarding school happens	71	29	-	-	-
3. staff are involved in school planning & budget planning.	58	42	-	-	-
4. school resources for assignments are equitably distributed.	60	40	-	-	-
5. you are satisfied with the way money is used in the school.	76	24	-	-	-
6. staff, as individuals, have a say over school level decisions that affect you and your job.	44	35	15	6	-

All staff saw themselves as being kept well-informed regarding what was happening in and at the school. All staff saw themselves as having input regarding budget decisions and how school resources were used. Not surprisingly, staff members were quite satisfied with how money was spent in the school. With the exception of three staff, instructional and non-instructional, the majority of respondents believed that there were opportunities to provide input regarding school-level decisions that affected them and their jobs. Staff members saw themselves, alongside the principal, as being actively involved in making decisions and ensuring that Regil Elementary School ran the way they wanted it to.

The data obtained from the Staff Attitudes Survey paint a positive outlook on the part of the staff at the school. Although previous data are not directly relevant to the description of where the school was during Jane's first and second years at the school, it should be mentioned that when data for the year prior to Jane's arrival were reviewed and compared to those presented above, the perceptions of staff at Regil Elementary school had improved in all areas consistently and continuously since Jane arrived at the school. Furthermore, comparing data from the year prior to Jane's arrival to Jane's second year at the school, staff perceptions of the school had changed from being 16 percentage points below the district mean (all survey items averaged together) to being 11 percentage points above the district mean on the anonymous district wide survey.

Results

The findings offered here are, out of methodological necessity, held tentatively and with the proviso that the context from which the data were collected needs to be kept in mind. The results offered need to be viewed cautiously because of the uniqueness of the site and the respondents under investigation. It is not our intent to suggest that what was found at Regil Elementary School is somehow representative of other elementary schools. Regil Elementary School does, however, provide glimpses into the possibilities of how social learning can be understood by instructional and non-instructional staff forced to cope with the everyday realities of teaching inner-city children while

facing financial retrenchment and a new school leader – a new school leader, it might be added, who came with very clear ideas of the directions in which the school should move as an organization nested within a larger, policy-generating body, the school district.

The discussion focuses on four areas related to the roles individual and collective learning play in teacher professional development. These consist of the: (a) generation and transmission of pedagogical knowledge, (b) ability and inability to learn socially, (c) infusion of a star to promote social and individual learning, and (d) leadership style and support for individual and group processes within the organization.

Generation and Transmission of Pedagogical Knowledge

Pedagogical knowledge appears to be primarily transmitted and internalized by individuals, although there also appears to be evidence that this individual knowledge is influenced by the jointly constructed understandings and meanings of the group. Because of the autonomous nature of classroom teaching, it is still critical that knowledge and skills necessary for instruction be obtained and held by the individual teacher. However, understandings and meanings attributed to the knowledge and skills held by individual teachers, as these were applied in the inner-city school context, seem to have emerged through the synergistic interactions of the group members similar to what Argyris and Schön (1996), Dodgson (1993), and Levitt and March (1988) describe. These group interactions took place in an ongoing fashion and with groups varying in size and composition ranging from pairs of teachers focusing on a narrow classroom-related issue (primarily an individual learning context), to the entire school staff working through the development of a new strategic emphasis for the school (primarily a social learning context). This knowledge allowed staff to tailor their interactions with students to best suit their individual and collective learning needs.

Ability and Inability to Learn Socially

Supporting the arguments put forth by Argyris and Schön (1996) and Levitt and March 1988), what the collective – the school staff – has learned appears to be dependent on the abilities of all the group members to share their insights with one another. Fragmentation of the group seems to lead to its inability to generate advanced organizational routines.

Within the context of Regil Elementary, we would speculate that when this sort of fragmentation occurred it could, at least partially, be attributed to the group's inability to reconcile philosophical differences regarding the means to achieve the desired end. The desired outcome was not contentious; only the path to achieve it was not agreed upon. This seemed to surface questions for some staff regarding the "true" motives behind the development and implementation of some school policies. Until this questioning of motives was addressed, staff could not collectively address issues facing the school. They could not actively participate in the dispassionate evaluation of current practices and goals; they could not reflect on how to improve current practices and goals; nor could they devise new action plans and accompanying policies and procedures.

This inability to construct meaning as a group seems to best be counteracted by a leadership style, of the principal in this case, which draws staff together to work toward common goals while nurturing a supportive, collaborative culture. This process of trust-building among colleagues is one which takes considerable time to accomplish. Mutual trust (Shaw, 1997) and a capability to dialogue (Isaacs, 1999) are indispensable for such group sharing. At Regil Elementary this trust, manifesting itself in staff's ability to share ideas and understandings openly, was only beginning to emerge after two years of work on the part of the principal.

Grafting a Star

It seems that an effective means of quickly increasing socio-learning is to "bring in a star." This supports group learning through what Huber (1989) termed "grafting." In the present study, it became apparent that deep-rooted alliances to former goals of the organization on the part of teachers with long histories at Regil Elementary obscured the benefits of bringing in a star. Much of this was due, it seems, to the fact that the star had a history with the principal and was seen by some staff as an attempt to further a questionable agenda on the part of the principal. Had the star not had a previous professional relationship with the principal, we suspect that she would have been accepted by the veteran Regil Elementary teachers much more readily.

Given the relationships described above, it seems that, in the short term, grafting could not contribute to the individual learning of all group members nor to the generation of advanced organizational routines – social learning. Over the long term, grafting does seem to contribute to individual learning of those who accept the star into the group. It seems that as the size of the group accepting the star grows to include larger and larger proportions of the overall group, the potential for the generation of social learning becomes much more likely.

Leadership Style

The leadership style of the principal was seen to be critical by both teachers and the principal herself. The principal's willingness to share power and responsibility was fundamental for many of the respondents to work to their potential. Risk-taking was also a characteristic that respondents identified as important for the leader to nurture. Balancing the notion of risk-taking was the expectation on the part of the principal and the staff that they were accountable to the principal and to each other for their actions. What Fullan (1993) described as the transformative leader was heralded as an idyllic approach for enabling individual staff members to perceive themselves in a symbiotic relationship with the group.

It is noteworthy that the genesis of this symbiosis did not begin to occur for a large proportion of the group until two-thirds of the school year had gone by. Once it did commence, staff were able to talk more freely and to adapt to more contentious environmental issues by drawing on each others' tacit knowledge, expertise, and experiences (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Levitt & March, 1988). Jane clearly fit the necessary characteristics described by Senge (1990) of a leader in a learning organization. She had a strong sense of the school district's and the school's overall mission. She also saw herself as a designer, soliciting input from her staff, and as a guardian of the change process at Regil Elementary. Jane put into place policies and structures that enabled her and her staff to make changes at the school level to better achieve the overall organizational mission.

Administrative support for individual teacher learning and group learning was crucial at this inner city school. Because of the devolution of decision making to the school level, the principal, with the support of her staff, was able to slightly lengthen the school day. The additional time was then used to provide staff with one afternoon per week during which teachers working in study groups would lead seminars focused on pedagogical issues. Support from the principal was crucial in terms of providing fiscal resources to teachers enabling them to obtain needed manipulatives for classroom instruction and time to participate in professional development learning activities deemed important by the teachers themselves.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The present study highlights the importance of the leadership role in the promotion of social learning. The leader must have (a) a firm vision of the direction in which the organization will move and (b) the ability to articulate that vision. How the movement is accomplished seems to be something that is best left to the collective to decide. As a guardian of change in an organization engaging in social learning, the leader has the responsibility to ensure that policies and mechanisms are in place enabling the collective to draw on each other as they work toward accomplishing the organizational goals.

The role of trust between and among group members is of critical importance. Staff must trust each other and their leader if they are to take Salomon and Perkins' (1998) advice that individuals' thoughts and still-to-be-formulated ideas be objectified so that these can be discussed, examined, and elaborated upon. Salomon and Perkins go on to suggest that this form of discourse be conducted without personal emotional attachment. Given the nature of people, it does not seem likely that this last condition can easily be met. However, if individuals trust each other enough to know that risk taking is acceptable -- perhaps even desirable -- then novel ideas can be shared and elaborated upon in a group context. This is the situation in which social learning can take place.

Whole group learning is recognized as a valuable approach to school improvement (Murphy & Lick, 2001). Although it is desirable to be able to engage an entire staff in social learning as a single group, it was clear at Regil Elementary that this often could not be accomplished, particularly during the initial stages of trust building within the community of learners. Social learning can, as it did at Regil Elementary, continue within organizational subgroups that form alliances based on philosophical similarities regarding key issues for the participants. At Regil Elementary, these key issues seemed to be related to how best to address the learning needs of students attending the school.

The literature identifies "grafting" (Huber, 1989, 1991) as a means for quickly facilitating social and individual learning. The experience at Regil Elementary School suggests that simply bringing in a star, regardless of the star's excellence, is not a guarantee that individual and social learning – for the entire group – will progress at an accelerated rate. If the leader's goals or the means for achieving those goals are contentious issues for some group members, then the grafted individual should not have any obvious previous personal or professional connections to the leader. In such circumstances, the star, because of the existing connections to the leader, is seen as someone whose motives cannot be readily trusted. The result seems to be that a great deal of time then needs to be devoted to building trust between the star and those staff who distrust the star because of their distrust for the leader. At Regil Elementary School, this trust-building took the better part of two years, and proved to be emotionally draining for the individual who was grafted.

Closing Thought

At the center of social learning, and, to a large degree, individual learning also, is the notion of the organization with its complex networks of human interaction. In the end, it is always people that make things work rather than organizational structure or technology. If people are willing to cooperate, the system and the individuals within that system will thrive; if they are not willing to cooperate, then the organization will wither, and the individuals who make up the collective will suffer. To enable the processes of social learning is to help ensure the vitality and effectiveness of the organization.

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