

Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration
Can teacher collaboration be increased using the common
preparation period?

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Introduction

The institutionalization of collaborative working environments is widely considered to be critical to the creation and maintenance of schools as professional learning communities. Prevailing thought suggests that improved student performance may be fully realized only when teachers routinely function as teams and abandon their traditional norms of isolationism and individualism. (Leonard, L. & Leonard, P, 2003, p.1).

The above quote by distinguished professors from the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Leadership at Louisiana Tech University echoes my own belief that the time for “closing the door” and maintaining a school culture of isolation must become part of our past educational history. Teacher collaboration and the building of learning communities within schools is a must in the current high-stakes assessments and accountability policies.

As the NCLB Act places more and more importance on accountability, classroom teaching becomes an extremely demanding and stressful profession. The call for teachers to do away with a history of isolation and individualism, “toxic” school cultures, and educational policies which restrict time to work collaboratively becomes increasingly important.

This action research on improving teacher collaboration at my school was conducted as a result of mentoring fifth grade teachers as a Lead Teacher in Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools.¹

Rationale

On September 13, 2004 I began working in C.E.S. 73 in the Bronx as one of 36 Lead Teachers in District 9. One of the responsibilities of this assignment was to serve as mentor to five fifth grade teachers. One afternoon, early in the school year, as I walked the fifth floor hallway at C.E.S. 73, I noticed that during the common preparation period fifth grade teachers were scattered throughout classrooms, one or two in each.

Isolation and individualism among teachers seemed to be encouraged by the administration and consequently they did not feel collaboration was important. A few years ago, teacher collaboration wasn't on anyone's agenda. Now, teaching is no longer a solitary act behind closed doors. Teachers are calling for more resources that allow them the time to collaborate. Maintaining a positive school culture that provides teachers the time to meet, share, and discuss issues around practice has been very difficult in many of

¹ CC9 was a collaboration of seven community based organizations working together to improve the schools in District 9. In 2005, CC9 expanded to all schools in the Bronx and became officially known as Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools or CCB.

Carmen N. Vargas

Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

our schools. I realized we would need to work very hard to develop within the teachers a sense of community and trust. We used the common preparation period as the time to plan and develop “critical friends”, inter-visitations, observations, and classroom support. We tried to make the common preparation period the time by which teacher collaboration would be improved.

I was scheduled to work with teachers in their classrooms every afternoon and once a month during their common preparation period. However, as the year progressed, and different needs arose, we all agreed to meet at least once a week during their common prep.

Background/Context

C.E.S. 73 is located in District 9, Region 1, in the Bronx². The neighborhood is made up mostly of hard-working, low-income Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and African-Americans. The school has a high percentage of Hispanics (70%) and African Americans (28.3%). The school has an enrollment of 869³ with 96.7% eligible for free lunch. Our English Language population now stands at 226 students many of which are performing below standards. Student suspensions are increasing⁴ at an alarming rate and as a result teachers devote much of their time to classroom management, filling-out incident reports, and meeting with parents.

The rise in suspensions may reflect the difficulty with discipline problems fifth grade teachers are experiencing in their classrooms. The high number of students with severe discipline problems, accountability measures, and assessments increased the importance of collaboration among the teachers.

Literature Review

Mary Allan, in her online conference discussion paper, *Professional Development for School-Based Agents of Change: Going Online for Collaborative Support* (June 4 – July 1, 2001), shares some of her ideas and research findings on teacher collaboration. Allan mentions the need to eliminate individualism. She states that the importance should be on teachers’ communities of practice, rather than on individual teachers. Unfortunately, most teachers are focused on their own classrooms and time away from the classroom is not considered part of the role of teachers. Using the common preparation period to provide time for teachers to work collaboratively may help eliminate the need for individualism among teachers.

Research by Stanford’s Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching maintains that one of the most important factors in this new era of reforms and

² During the 2002-2003 school year, Mayor Bloomberg restructured the New York City school system and remapped the 32 Community School Districts into 10 Regions. District 9 and 10 were combined to become Region 1.

³ Which has been consistently dropping since 2002 when enrollment was 1,069

⁴ 2002: 3.7%; 2004: 19.0% in comparison to city school suspensions which are now at 10.2%

Carmen N. Vargas

Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

standards is the need for “a strong professional community that supports adult learning”(in Cushman, 1998, p.2). However, in many schools teacher collaboration is hindered by lack of administrative support, time constraints, and competitiveness (Leonard & Leonard, p.4). Thomas Hoerr, head of Missouri’s New City School, emphasizes that teaching is often a profession of isolation, one with an abundance of congeniality but one which lacks collegiality (1997 – 2005, p.1). Hoerr turns to Roland Barth for the components of collegiality. Hoerr states, “Barth's collegiality consists of four components: teachers talking about students; teachers talking about and developing curriculum together; teachers observing one another teach; and teachers teaching one another” (in *Improving Schools from Within* by Roland Barth, 1990).

Lack of administrative support is one of the major factors contributing to a “toxic” school culture. Leonard & Leonard define “toxic” as a culture which thrives where there is a lack of purpose, collaboration is discouraged, and there are hostile relations among staff (p. 4). Existing toxic cultures get in the way of individual efforts to improve the school and may even discourage teachers from getting involved in reform.

Time constraint is a major problem in schools because there are so many programs and activities teachers are involved in planning and conducting that there is no time left for professional collaboration (Leonard & Leonard, p. 7, Dillon, p.1). Furthermore, busy schedules, too many students, and too many classes make it difficult for teachers to formally collaborate (Dillon, downloaded 6/17/05).

Lastly, critical friends is an approach which can help build learning communities. According to Deborah Bambino, critical friends coach and a member of the National School Reform Faculty, Critical Friends Groups helps people involved in schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities (2002, p. 1).

Tools

Selecting the tools to be used in this action research became a difficult task. First, by the time the project had been identified for research fifth grade meetings were well into December. Second, there had been so much focus on collaborating to produce needed teacher skills that there was no time left for reflection and evaluation. We had all done the best we could and I decided that the work produced should be used as the first tools to reflect teacher collaboration in this research.

The tools I used this year which helped the process of collaboration among the teachers were: agendas, meeting notes, curriculum mapping, focus lessons, math lesson plans and activities, demonstration lessons, inter-visitations, and informal classroom observations.

One preparation period was used to introduce teachers to using a “critical friends” approach to their work. We read Deborah Bambino’s. *Critical Friends* and had a short discussion on the reading. One teacher said she had used it in her college class and had not liked it because feedback was taken personal by members of the class. We decided to try it but did not get to use it in the course of the year.

Carmen N. Vargas

Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

1) Common Preparation Period Meetings Agendas

Fifth grade teachers and I met for nine common preparation meetings throughout the year. In order to increase collaboration among teachers, common preparation meeting agendas were planned around teacher classroom needs such as math assessment folders, grouping for instruction, math curriculum mapping, looking at teachers' lesson plans, record keeping, academic rigor tasks, test preparation and selection of focus lessons for city math assessments, 90 minute math block, planning professional development activities, and mapping out academic year 2005-2006.

Most teachers made a real effort to be present at the meetings but of course it was extremely difficult due to the many responsibilities which hinder teacher collaboration. At the last minute, teachers would be requested to attend meetings, talk with parents, go to workshops (out of the school building), fill-out and submit incident reports, and due to what I believe was high stress, absenteeism. In spite of "road blocks" we forged ahead and I feel got a lot done.

2) Meeting Notes

One person was chosen to keep minutes and notes of meetings. Many times I was the person to keep these notes as the designated teacher, for reasons noted above, would not be present. These notes proved to be invaluable when looking back for specific conversations and details needed for clarification of ideas.

3) Curriculum Mapping

Curriculum mapping is one of the new planning techniques that have resulted from increased accountability and assessment. Teachers have been forced to map out detailed calendars of units and many times whole curriculums in order to better prepare their students for the numerous city and state assessments. Fifth grade teachers and I mapped one of the math chapters and the math curriculum for 2005-2006 during our professional development period. However, we found that curriculum mapping requires work, knowledge, and skill as lessons need to be "moved around" because assessments are not, unfortunately, scheduled to coincide with the curriculum. Curriculum mapping proved to be the most productive portion of our meetings.

4) Focus Lessons

In February we discussed the need to (re)teach our students skills which would we decided would be tested in the annual city math assessment. One of our more senior fifth grade teachers, led the discussion on how to select lessons for test preparation and which order these lessons should follow. We selected seven key lessons students would need to be taught before the city math test. Many of the lessons were not scheduled, according to the math textbook being used, until the end of the year and had to be "moved around" so that the children would be taught the skills before the test.

Carmen N. Vargas

Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

5) Math Lesson Plans and Activities

As part of curriculum mapping each of us was assigned three or four lessons to write up and submit so that they could be compiled, copied, and given to each teacher to use in their instruction. One of the teachers asked the rest of the group to please include activities to go with each lesson plan as she had noticed that very good activities were being used in the classroom but not being shared.

6) Demonstration Lessons

Demonstration lessons were done either in the teachers' classroom with their class or in my classroom with my class. Demonstration lessons focused on how to introduce math chapters because I had observed teachers were going directly to the first lesson without giving adequate attention to material in the introduction to the chapter. Demonstration lessons also focused on material management (portfolios, writing notebooks, content area notebooks, etc.), grouping, and classroom management.

7) Inter-visitations

Two teachers came to observe my classroom towards the beginning of the year and one came towards the end of the year. One teacher visited another classroom in order to observe a more senior teacher working with his class.

8) Classroom Observations

Since my responsibilities include working with teachers every afternoon, I was able to observe teachers on a regular basis. However, I was in the classroom more for classroom support than observation.

Data

Tools used in this research suggest that a scheduled common preparation period is a very valuable time for developing collaboration among teachers. This time allows teachers to discuss classroom issues, staff issues, and curriculum issues in a relaxed, informal, non-threatening environment. Teachers develop new skills from more senior members of the group and express a satisfaction of just feeling good that someone is there to "just listen." In addition to being a time to produce work this time also turned out to be a wonderful time for support.

Analysis

My work resulted in the emergence of some principal themes:

- 1) Scheduled common preparation periods are important in developing teacher collaboration

Carmen N. Vargas

Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

- 2) Teacher collaboration during the common preparation period give teachers the opportunity to discuss and complete daily tasks and classroom responsibilities
- 3) The common preparation period can be used to develop “critical friends.”

Policy Recommendations

1. Schedule time for teachers to collaborate on curriculum, assessments, and students
2. Seek ways to reformulate the roles and authority of teachers to reflect more “voice” in school decisions.
3. Consider reformulating staffing, resources, time, and space to increase staff collaboration.

References:

Allan, M. (2001). Professional Development for School-Based Agents of Change: Going Online for Collaborative Support. Technology Colleges Trust Vision 2020—First International On-Line Conference, 4 June—1 July 2001 – Discussion Paper, UK.

Bambino, D. (2002). Critical Friends. *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 59, #6. (downloaded 10/28/04, http://www.ascd.org/publications/ed_lead/200203/bambino.html).

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Hoerr, Thomas R. *The Missing Piece; Build a Stronger Faculty with Collegiality*. 1997-2005 National Association of Independent Schools, Washington DC.

Leonard, L. & Leonard, P. (2003, September 17). The continuing trouble with collaboration: Teachers talk. *Current Issues in Education* [On-line], 6(15). Available: <http://cie.ed.asu.edu/volume6/number15/>

Appendix I - Agendas

Common Preparation Meeting Agendas (9)

First Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, December 22, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

A G E N D A

- 1) *Houghton Mifflin Math*
(Please bring your Teacher's Edition with you)
- 2) *Math Assessment Folders*
 - *Chapter Pre-Tests*
 - *Chapter Tests*
- 3) *Grouping for instruction*
- 4) *Common Preparation Meetings*
- 5) *Next Steps*
 - *Looking at student assessment folders*

Second Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, January 5, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

A G E N D A

- 1) *Houghton Mifflin Math*
(Please bring your Teacher's Edition with you)
 - *Ms. Perez – Fifth Grade Curriculum Mapping*
 - *Ms. Hodgson – Math Activity*
 - *Mr. Levine - Differentiating Instruction using the Princeton Review*
- 2) *Math Assessment Folders*
 - *Chapters 1 – 4 Pre-tests and Tests should be in folders*
 - *Chapter 5- Test (Form B) End of January*
 - *Chapter 6 - Pre-Test*
- 3) *Next Steps*
 - *Providing math assessments folders*
 - *Looking at a lesson – Chapter 6, Lesson 5*
 - *On-going strategy; Grouping for instruction*

Third Meeting

Carmen N. Vargas
Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period
Wednesday, January 12, 2005
Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)
Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

A G E N D A

- 1) *Houghton Mifflin Math*
(Please bring your Teacher's Edition with you)
Fifth Grade Curriculum Mapping – Chapter 5
 - *Ms. Vargas – Chapter 5 Lesson Intro, 1-3*
 - *Mr. Morace*
 - *Mr. Levine*
 - *Mr. Mr. Jones*
 - *Ms. Hodgson*
- 2) *Math Assessment Folders – Criteria for Promotion*
 - *Chapters 1 – 4 Checklists in folders*
 - *Chapter 4 – Test (Form B) End of January*
 - *Chapter 5 – Pre-Test (Form B)*
 - *Chapter 5 Family Letter (Spanish/English)*
- 3) *Grouping for instruction*
 - *Strategies – Ms. Vargas*
- 4) *Next Steps*
 - *Completing math assessments folders*
 - *On-going strategy – Grouping for instruction*
 - *Record keeping – student grades, homework*
 - *Academic Rigor – Cognitive Development of Math Classroom Tasks, student work*

Fourth Meeting
Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period
Wednesday, January 19, 2005
Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)
Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

A G E N D A

- 1) *Houghton Mifflin Math*
(Please bring your Teacher's Edition with you)
Fifth Grade Curriculum Mapping – Chapter 5
- 2) *Math Assessment Folders*
- 3) *Next Steps*
 - *Math assessments folders*
 - *Grouping for instruction*

Fifth Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, January 26, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

AGENDA

- 1) *Houghton Mifflin Math*
Fifth Grade Curriculum Mapping – Chapter 5
- 2) *Grouping for differentiated instruction*
- 3) *Next Steps*
 - *90 minute math lessons*

Sixth Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, February 16, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

AGENDA

- 1) *Region Bulletin Board Display (Selecting and planning)*
- 2) *Chapter 6 Curriculum Mapping*
- 3) *Next Steps*
 - *90 minute math lessons (45 minutes for test prep)*
 - *Test Prep Focus Lessons*
 - *Assessment Folders*

Seventh Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, May 11, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

AGENDA

- 1) *Professional Development for Monday, May 16, 2005*
- 2) *End of year activities*
- 3) *Next Steps*

Carmen N. Vargas
Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

Eighth Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, May 25, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

A G E N D A

- 1) *Fifth Grade Math Curriculum Mapping 2005-2006*
- 2) *End of year activities*
- 3) *Next Steps*

Ninth Meeting

Fifth Grade Common Preparation Period

Wednesday, June 1, 2005

Teachers' Resource Room (Room 417)

Time: 6th Period - 12:25 – 1:20

A G E N D A

- 1) *Fifth Grade Math Curriculum Mapping 2005-2006 (Please bring your Houghton Mifflin Teacher's Guide)*
- 2) *End of year activities*
- 3) *Next Steps*

Appendix II – Focus Lessons

**Houghton Mifflin Focus Lessons for Test-Prep
Chapters 7 – 10**

**Mr. W. Jones
March 10, 2005**

1. Chapter 7
 - Lesson 9, pg. 320 ; “Reducing fractions to lowest terms”

 - Lesson 13, pg. 330; Lesson 14, pg. 332; Lesson 18, pg. 344 (T.Ed. pg. T12)
“Adding and subtracting fractions with like and unlike denominators.”
2. Chapter 8
 - Lesson 10, pg. 390 (T.Ed. pg. T13); “Reading Circle Graphs”
3. Chapter ?
 - Lesson ?; “Changing percents to fractions”
4. Chapter 9
 - Lesson 1, pg. 408; Lesson 3, pg. 412 (T.Ed. pg. T14); “Multiplying decimals”
5. Chapter 10
 - Lesson 1, pg. 454 (T.Ed. T15); “Classifying points, lines, and rays”

 - Lesson 4, pg. 462 (T.Ed. T15); “Congruence of parts and figures”

 - Lesson 5, pg. 464 (T.Ed. T 15); “Recognizing and classifying
Quadrilaterals”

 - Lesson 10, pg. 478 (T.Ed. T. 15); “I dentify rotational and line symmetry”
6. Lesson ?; “I dentify solid figures by attributes”
7. Lesson ?
 - “I ntegers and the coordinate plane”

Carmen N. Vargas
Hand-in-Hand: From Isolation to Collaboration

Houghton Mifflin – Fifth Grade Math Chapter 5 – Measurement and Integers
Lessons 1 – 8 “Using Customary and Metric Units of Measure” January 11, 2005

During the month of February, the fifth grade will be working on measurement and integers using customary and metric units of measurement. Some of the objectives for this chapter are: for students to learn to use customary and metric units and length, perimeter and area, weight and capacity, mass, and negative and positive integers.

Starting the chapter – pp. 188 – 191

Goal: For the students to become familiar with reading and writing mathematics.

Activity: Starting the Chapter worksheet (see separate handout)

Lesson 1 – Customary Units of Length – pp. 192 – 193

Objective: How to measure lengths to the nearest fraction of an inch.

New Vocabulary: unit length

Hands-on activity: Using a ruler to measure lengths.

Materials: rulers marked in sixteenths of an inch

Writing Activity: “Write About It! Talk About it!” on Page 193 – students may use this activity to write in their math journals.

Homework: Math Steps pp. 187 – 188, Practice Workbook page 50

*(two days)

Lesson 2 – Perimeter and Area in Customary Units – pp. 194 – 197

Objective: How to find the perimeter and area of rectangular figures.

New Vocabulary: perimeter, unit square, area

Activity: Give students drawing paper and have them draw a floor plan of a bedroom 16 ft. width by 12 ft. length. (Drawings can be as elaborate as they wish). Students will answer questions 27 – 30 on page 196 using their floor plan.

Materials: Drawing paper, crayons, markers

Homework: Math Steps pp. 185 – 186, Practice Workbook page 51

*(two days)

Lesson 3 – Customary Units of Weight and Capacity

Objective: How to change one customary unit of weight or capacity to another.

New Vocabulary: capacity

Activity: Assign reasoning problems 26 – 29 to different tables. Working cooperatively, each table solves their problem. Give each group half sheet of chart paper, each group charts their presentation. Each presentation includes the answer and an explanation of the reasoning.

Materials: Markers, half-sheets of chart paper

Homework: Math Steps pp. 189 – 190, Practice Workbook page 52

*(1 day)

Introducing Chapter 5 – Measurement and Integers

Part I – Reading and writing mathematics.

Directions: Write a paragraph to answer each question. Make sure you follow correct paragraph format.

1. How does reading a thermometer use both measurement and integers?

2. How do you use measurement when you travel on a train or bus?

Part II – Reviewing Vocabulary

1. Customary units of measure include: _____, _____, and _____ .

2. Metric units of measure include: _____, _____, and _____ .

Part III – Reading words and symbols

1. The basic unit of length is the _____ .

2. 1,000 m = _____

3. 0.01 m = _____

4. 0.001 m = _____

Part IV – Upcoming Vocabulary

Directions: Write these words and their definitions in your journal.

- | | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| 1. area | 6. metric ton (t) |
| 2. unit length | 7. milligram (mg) |
| 3. perimeter | 8. decimeter (dm) |
| 4. unit square | 9. millimeter (mm) |

5. capacity

10. absolute value

Appendix IV – Letter from fifth grade teacher

Letter of thanks from fifth grade teacher:

jwhodgson" <jwhodgson@ucdavisalumni.com >

To:	nery49@yahoo.com
Subject:	(no subject)
Date:	Tue, 28 Jun 2005 16:16:49 -0700

Carmen,

I hope your last day was a good one! I didn't get the chance to say goodbye to you today, so I wanted to at least send an email to say thank you again for all of your support and encouragement this year. You really helped me to keep perspective when things were less than wonderful in my classroom, and there were times that I wouldn't have gotten through all the work if you were not there helping me out!

I wish you the best of luck next year at 73, and I would love to keep in touch as I venture out to another teaching experience. Have a wonderful and relaxing summer--you deserve it!

Thanks again,

Jessica