Improving

Relationships Within the Schoolhouse

Relationships among educators within a school range from vigorously healthy to dangerously competitive. Strengthen those relationships, and you improve professional practice.

Roland S. Barth

One incontrovertible finding emerges from my career spent working in and around schools: The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then *these* qualities will disseminate throughout the school community.

In short, the relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within that school's culture. Teachers and administrators demonstrate all too well a capacity to either enrich or diminish one another's lives and thereby enrich or diminish their schools.

Schools are full of what I call *nondiscussables*—important matters that, as a profession, we seldom openly discuss. These include the leadership of the principal, issues of race, the underperforming teacher, our personal visions for a good school, and, of course, the nature of the relationships among the adults within the school. Actually, we *do* talk about the nondiscussables—but only in the parking lot, during the car pool, and at the dinner table. That's the definition of a nondiscussable: an issue of sufficient import that it commands our attention but is so incendiary that we cannot discuss it in polite society—at a faculty or PTA meeting, for example. (For more on this topic, see my article "The Culture Builder" in the May 2002 issue of *Educational Leadership*.)

Consequently, the issues surrounding adult relationships in school, like other nondiscussables, litter the schoolhouse floor, lurking like land mines, with trip wires emanating from each. We cannot take a step without fear of losing a limb. Thus paralyzed, we can be certain that next September, adult relationships in the school will remain unchanged. School improvement is impossible when we give nondiscussables such extraordinary power over us.

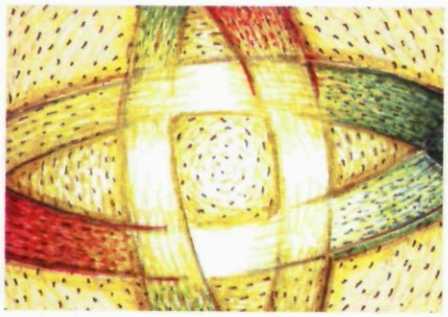
Relationships in Schools

So let's discuss the elephant in the room—the various forms of relationships among adults within the schoolhouse. They

might be categorized in four ways: parallel play, adversarial relationships, congenial relationships, and collegial relationships.

Parallel Play

Parallel play, a wonderful concept from the preschool literature, is thought to be a primitive stage of human development through which 2- and 3-year-olds soon pass on their way to more sophisticated forms of interaction. To illustrate, imagine two 3-year-olds busily engaged in opposite corners of a sandbox. One has a shovel and a bucket; the other has a rake and a hoe. At no time do they share their tools, let alone collaborate to build a sandcastle. They may inadvertently throw sand in each other's face from time to time, but they seldom interact intentionally. Although in close proximity for a long period of time, each is so self-absorbed, so totally engrossed in what he or she is doing, that the two of them will go on for hours working in isolation.



Schools are full of good players. Collegiality is about getting them to play together, about growing a professional learning community.

Parallel play offers, of course, a perfect description of how teachers interact at many elementary, middle, and high schools. The term also aptly describes the relationship between one school principal and another whose school is only blocks away. One teacher summed it up with discouraging accuracy: "Here, we all live in our separate caves." A playful(?) notice on the wall of a faculty lounge captured it even better: "We're all in this—alone."

The abiding signature of parallel play in education is the self-contained classroom, with the door shut and a piece of artwork covering that little pane of glass. The cost of concealing what we do is isolation from colleagues who might cause us to examine and improve our practices.

Adversarial Relationships

I once heard a Boston school principal offer this sage observation: "We educators have drawn our wagons into a circle and trained our guns—on each other."

Adversarial relationships take many forms in schools. Sometimes they are blatant: The 7th grade algebra teacher on one side of the hall lobs a metaphorical hand grenade into the classroom of the 8th grade geometry teacher on the other side, saying to parents, "You don't want your child in *that* classroom. All they do is fool around with blocks." Reciprocal unfriendly fire is returned: "You don't want your child in *that* classroom; it's a grim, joyless place with desks in rows and endless worksheets."

One principal concluded his remarks to a large parent group with—I think—a slip: "Here at John Adams Elementary School, we all live on the *bleeding* edge."

No wonder so many teachers engage in parallel play. Barricaded behind their classroom doors, they escape the depleting conflicts so rampant among the adults outside.

More often, we educators become one another's adversaries in a more subtle way—by *withholding*. School people carry around extraordinary insights about their practice—about discipline, parental involvement, staff development, child development, leadership, and curriculum. I call these insights *craft knowledge*. Acquired over the years in the school of hard knocks, these insights offer every bit as much value to improving schools as do elegant research studies and national reports. If one day we educators could only disclose our rich craft knowledge to one another, we could transform our schools overnight.

But I find educators reluctant to make these gold nuggets available to others. Sadly, when one educator persists in repeating the failures of the past while another next door has great success, everyone loses.

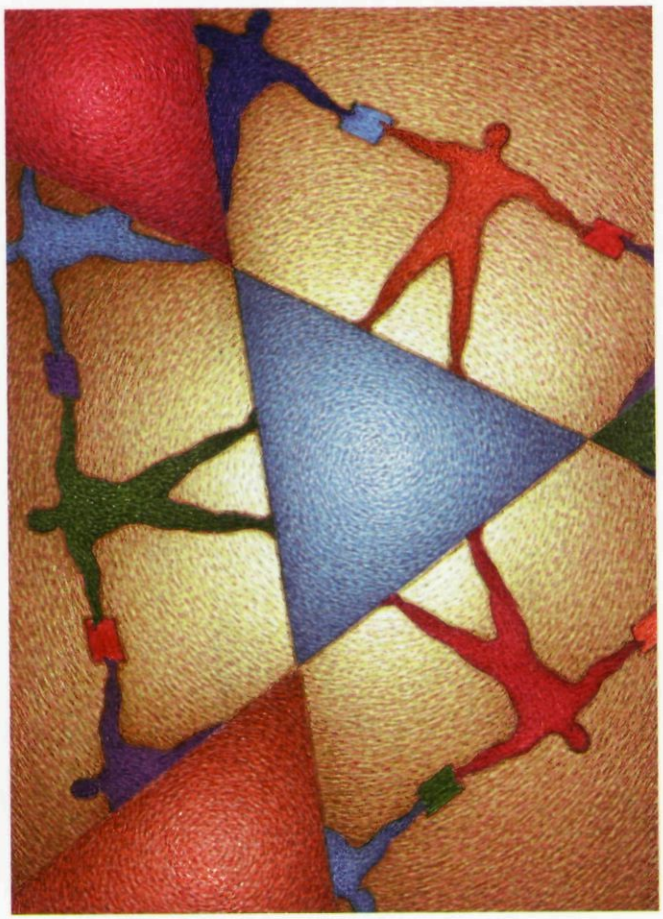
When a teacher *does* place value on what she knows and musters up the courage and generosity of spirit to share an important learning—"I've got this great idea about how to teach math without ability-grouping the kids"—a common response from fellow teachers is, "Big deal. What's she after, a promotion?" Regrettably, as a profession, we do not place much value on our craft knowledge or on those who share it.

Just think. This June, thousands of teachers and principals will retire. With them will go all they have learned over the years, forever lost to the profession. The following September, newcomers will arrive to spend their careers painfully learning what those who just left had already figured out.

We also become one another's adversaries through *competition*. In the cruel

world of schools, we become competitors for scarce resources and recognition. One teacher put it this way: "I teach in a culture of competition in which teaching is seen as an arcane mystery and teachers guard their tricks like great magicians."

The guiding principles of competition are, "The better you look, the worse I look," and "The worse you look, the better I look." No wonder so many educators root for the failure of their peers rather than assist with their success.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Congenial Relationships

Fortunately, schools also abound with adult relationships that are interactive—and positive. We all see evidence of congeniality in schools. A lot of it seems to center around food: One teacher makes the coffee and pours it for a colleague. Or around the activities of daily living: A principal gives a teacher a ride home so she can care for her sick child.

Congenial relationships are personal and friendly. We shouldn't take them lightly; when the alarm rings at 6:00 in the morning, the alacrity with which an educator jumps out of bed and prepares for school is directly related to the adults with whom he or she will interact that day. The promise of congenial relationships helps us shut off that alarm each day and arise.

Collegial Relationships

Congenial relationships represent a precondition for another kind of adult relationship highly prized by school reformers yet highly elusive: collegiality. Of the four categories of relationships, collegiality is the hardest to establish.

Famous baseball manager Casey Stengel once muttered, "Getting good players is easy. Getting 'em to play together is the hard part." Schools are full of good players. Collegiality is about getting them to play together, about growing a professional learning community.[1]

When I visit a school and look for evidence of collegiality among teachers and administrators—signs that educators are "playing together"—the indicators I seek are

- Educators talking with one another about practice.
- Educators sharing their craft knowledge.
- Educators observing one another while they are engaged in practice.
- Educators rooting for one another's success.

Creating a Culture of Collegiality

The good schools in which I've worked and observed have replaced parallel play and adversarial relationships among adults with congenial and collegial relationships. Let me offer a few examples of what I have seen teachers and other school leaders do to create a culture of collegiality in their schools.

Talking About Practice

I once had an appointment with a teacher in the faculty lounge. On the way in, I noted a sign on the door that read, "No students allowed in the faculty room." It seemed a bit unfriendly, but I remembered during my days as a teacher needing a few moments of fire-free time. When I asked the teacher about the sign, she said, "That's the *written* rule in this teachers' room."

"What's the *un*written rule?" I asked.

She replied, "No talking about teaching in the faculty lounge."

Regretfully, I find that unwritten rule firmly in place in many teacher and administrator gatherings. A conversation about the Red Sox or the Yankees can be noteworthy and lively—an example of congenial behavior. But a professional learning community is built on continual discourse about our important work—conversations about student evaluation, parent involvement, curriculum development, and team teaching.

I know one principal who boldly suggested to the faculty that for one week, they try permitting in the faculty lounge *only* education-related conversation. To everyone's amazement, this simple trial worked, giving permission to teachers and administrators alike to talk about their work. They decided to continue the practice. They banished the Yankees and the Red Sox to the hallways and the parking lot—at least until the playoffs!

Sharing Craft Knowledge

In some schools, a typical meeting begins with a participant or two sharing a front-burner issue about which they have recently learned something important or useful. A teacher new to the school might explain how students were evaluated in a previous workplace. A parent might share in a PTA meeting an idea about helping children with homework. A principal might share with other principals a new policy about assigning students to classes.

Once the exchange of craft knowledge becomes institutionally sanctioned, educators no longer feel pretentious or in violation of a taboo by sharing their insights. A new taboo—*against withholding what we know*—replaces the old. Repeated practice soon embeds generous disclosure of craft knowledge into the culture of a school or a school system.

Observing One Another

Perhaps no practice evokes more apprehension among educators than the prospect of one of our peers camping out in the back of our classroom for a few hours and watching us engage in the difficult art of teaching. Another unwritten rule in most schools seems to be, "If you want to see me, come in before school, during recess, at lunchtime, or after school. If you come in and plunk yourself down while I am teaching, you *die*!" I used to think this was a message only parents received. But I now see that we educators telegraph it to one another as well.

Making our practice mutually visible will never be easy, because we will never be fully confident that we know what we're supposed to be doing and that we're doing it well. And we're never quite sure just how students will behave. None of us wants to risk being exposed as incompetent. Yet there is no more powerful way of learning and improving on the job than by observing others and having others observe us.

In one school I know, the principal and a few teachers wanted to do away with the taboo against observing in one another's workspaces. They decided to hold each faculty meeting in the classroom of a different teacher. The host teacher devoted the first 10 minutes to a show-and-tell: "Here is my reading area. Here is my science corner, and these are student projects on the weather."

In two years' time, everyone had observed the sacred space of everyone else and had in turn been observed in their own space. Follow-up conversations often ensued: "When I was in your classroom last week, you mentioned your work with cooperative learning. Can you tell me more?" Such mild observations reduce the anxiety surrounding visits that probe a teacher's practices.

But general, unfocused "bathing" in one another's classrooms usually yields only modest results. Deeper and more instructive peer observations emerge when both parties forge an agreement beforehand. Elements of an effective contract might include some of the following:

- Our visits will be reciprocal. You visit me this week; I visit you next week.
- What we see and say will be confidential, between us.
- We will decide together, beforehand, just what I will attend to during the visit—for instance, how you are handling two students with attention deficit disorder.
- We will agree on the day, time, and length of the visit.
- We will have a conversation afterward to discuss our observations and share our learning.

These contracts increase the ownership of mutual observation, reduce the fear surrounding it, and increase the likelihood of worthwhile learning. Nonetheless, as a principal, I found that creating a school culture in which mutual visits were commonplace was enormously difficult. So I created an array of carrots and sticks, each intended to address the litany of reasons why "we can't possibly do this":

- *Time*: "I'll cover for you or get a sub."
- *Administrative fiat*: "Before March 31, I expect each of you to observe for one half-day in the classroom of each teacher to whom you might be sending students next year." It *does* make a difference with which teacher we place Johnny in September.
- *Social pressure*: A chart on the wall of the faculty room noted who had and hadn't yet observed.

Someone has to make relationships among adults a discussable. I can think of no more crucial role for any school leader.

But still nothing happened. Parallel play continued to rule. Finally, one teacher observed in a faculty meeting—with a bit of hostility, I thought!—"Well, Roland, when was the last time we saw another principal observing *you* running a faculty meeting?"

Well, duh! As the bumper sticker states so well, "You can't lead where you won't go!"

So at the next faculty meeting, a neighboring principal sat at the back of the room. At the conclusion of the meeting, she shared her observations and compared the meeting with faculty meetings at her own school. Then two teachers and I visited her school, observed its faculty meeting, and

offered our observations.

The logjam was broken. Mutual classroom observations began. You *can* lead where you *will* go.

Rooting for One Another

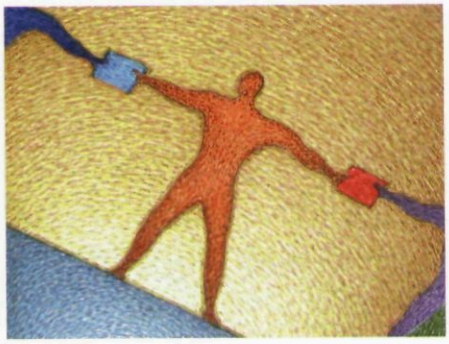
All too common in our profession is widespread awareness of a fellow educator in trouble: the principal under siege from a group of parents, or a beginning teacher being worked over by a tough classroom of kids. We monitor the situation from afar as another person is hung out to dry—and we do nothing.

Imagine, on the other hand, a school in which all 32 teachers not only are aware of the punishment that you are experiencing at the hands of those difficult students but also offer to help. To take a youngster or two into their own classes. To invite you into their classrooms so you can observe them handling these same students. To meet with you after school to reflect on the day and help plan the next. To share manipulative curriculum materials capable of engaging students with a short attention span.

Imagine each of these 32 teachers being vitally interested in the current front-burner issue of every other teacher. One teacher might be working on integrating language and social studies instruction. Another might be working on multi-age grouping. Colleagues put relevant articles into your mailbox. Others share effective practices from other schools in which they have worked. Everyone on the faculty periodically asks how things are going and what they can do to help. I suspect that every one of us would give a lot to work in this school.

What School Leaders Can Do

Leadership has been delightfully defined as "the ability to foster consequential relationships." Easier said than done. To promote collegial relationships in the school, someone has to make relationships among adults a discussable. Someone must serve as a minesweeper, disarming those landmines. I can think of no more crucial role for any school leader.



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What else can a school leader do to promote a culture of collegiality within the schoolhouse? Researcher Judith Warren Little found that school leaders foster collegiality when they

- *State expectations explicitly*. For instance, "I expect all of us to work together this year, share our craft knowledge, and help one another in whatever ways we can."
- *Model collegiality*. For instance, visibly join in cheering on others or have another principal observe a faculty meeting.
- *Reward those who behave as colleagues*. For instance, grant release time, recognition, space, materials, and funds to those who collaborate.
- *Protect those who engage in these collegial behaviors*. A principal should *not* say, for instance, "Janet has a great idea that she wants to share with us today." This sets Janet up for a possible harsh response. Rather, the principal might say, "I observed something in Janet's classroom last week that blew my socks off, and I've asked her to share it with us." In this way, leaders can run interference for other educators.

A precondition for doing *anything* to strengthen our practice and improve a school is the existence of a collegial culture in which professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another. Without these in place, no meaningful improvement—no staff or curriculum development, no teacher leadership, no student appraisal, no team teaching, no parent involvement, and no sustained change—is possible.

Empowerment, recognition, satisfaction, and success in our work—all in scarce supply within our schools—will never stem from going it alone as a masterful teacher, principal, or student, no matter how accomplished one is. Empowerment, recognition, satisfaction, and success come only from being an active participant within a masterful group—a group of colleagues. EL

[1]For my thinking about collegiality, I am deeply indebted to the work of Judith Warren Little: *School Success and Staff Development in Urban Desegregated Schools* (Center for Action Research, 1981) and "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation" (*Education Research Journal*, 1982).

Editor's note: This paper is based on the 11th Annual William Charles McMillan III Lecture, delivered by the author at Grosse Pointe Academy, Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, March 2, 2005.

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