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Cooperative Professional Development: Peer-Centered Options for Teacher Growth

When districts provide supporting conditions, teachers can work together in small teams, using a variety of collaborative methods, for their professional growth.

An encouraging development in instructional supervision is the widespread interest in peer-centered options such as "cooperative development" (Glatthorn 1984), "colleague consultation" (Goldsberry 1986), and "peer coaching" (Brandt 1987). *Cooperative professional development* is the inclusive term used here to embrace these and other forms of peer-oriented systems. My experience in helping numerous school districts implement such programs convinces me of the need to clarify the concept, systematize the approaches, and synthesize what has been learned about effective implementation.

Let's begin by clarifying the concept. *Cooperative professional development* is a process by which small teams of teachers work together, using a variety of methods and structures, for their own professional growth. Small teams of two to six seem to work best. The definitive characteristic is cooperation among peers; the methods and structures vary.

In systematizing the approaches, the intent is to strengthen practice by delineating the several forms that cooperative development can take. There are at least five different ways in which small teams of teachers can work together for their own professional growth (see fig. 1). A few experts in the field advocate only one approach (usually the one with which they are most closely identified), but it seems more useful to view cooperative development broadly. After all, each approach has its own special advantages. Teachers who are reluctant to observe colleagues through the processes of peer supervision or peer coaching can begin with one of the other options.

Professional Dialogue

Professional dialogue occurs when small groups of teachers meet regularly for the guided discussion of their own teaching as it relates to current developments in education. The objective is to facilitate reflection about practice, helping teachers become more thoughtful decision makers. Other approaches, such as peer supervision and peer coaching, are concerned with teachers' skills, but professional dialogue puts cognition at the center. As Clark and Peterson (1986) note, three aspects of thinking play an important role in the teacher's classroom performance: the teacher's planning, both before and after instruction; the teacher's interactive thoughts and decisions while teaching; and the teacher's theories and beliefs.

Professional dialogue attempts to raise the level of all three aspects of thinking through *guided* discussion, which ensures that the process does not degenerate into unproductive verbal posturing. I have had some success with an approach derived from Buchmann's (1985) "conversation about teaching." In my own version, the process works as follows.

First, group members meet to decide basic questions about the struc-

ture of the dialogues: frequency, time and place of meetings. They lay out a tentative agenda for the first three months, identifying the leader for each discussion. In developing topics for the agenda, the group should focus on professional issues that (1) are important to them educationally; (2) are ones about which informed people seem to differ; and (3) are ones for which some background material is available. Some issues might be related to a given subject matter: the teaching of grammar in English, the use of controversy in social studies, the structure of the curriculum in art. Others might cut across the disciplines: the use of ability grouping, the importance of learning styles, the desirability of moral education.

Each session follows a three-stage format designed to make the dialogue productive. The first stage emphasizes external knowledge. The group leader begins by summarizing the views of experts and the evidence from empirical research. (I have found the syntheses of research in *Educational Leadership* especially useful for this purpose.) The members then proceed to analyze, *not* dispute, that external knowledge: To what extent do the experts agree? What are the specific issues that divide them? What evidence is available from the research reviews? To what extent is the research evidence in conflict?

In the second stage, the discussion centers on personal knowledge: What have we learned about this matter through our personal experience? In what ways does our experiential knowledge support or question the external knowledge? In this stage the teachers are encouraged to value what they have learned from teaching and to reflect in depth about that tacit knowing. The hope is that they will learn from each other through open listening. The intent here is to help teachers maintain a state of productive tension between the two kinds of knowledge—neither mindlessly accepting external knowledge nor foolishly rejecting it.

The final stage looks to the future: what are the implications of this discussion for our teaching? Here the teachers attempt to build connections between the professional dialogue and their future practices. They examine together how the research and their shared experiential knowledge can best inform their planning and their interactive decision making. And they reflect openly about whether and to what extent their theories and beliefs have begun to change as a result of the dialogue.

TYPE	FOCUS	DISTINGUISHING FEATURES
1. Professional dialogue	Reflection about practice	Guided discussion, focusing on teaching as thinking
2. Curriculum development	Production of materials	Collaborative development of curriculum, using naturalistic processes
3. Peer supervision	Analysis of teaching	Observation of instruction, followed by analysis and feedback
4. Peer coaching	Mastery of skills	Development of specific skills, usually based on models of teaching and supported with staff development
5. Action research	Solving of problems	Development and implementation of feasible solutions to teacher-identified problems

Fig. 1. Types of Cooperative Development

"Some time should be reserved for team-developed enrichment units, which reflect the special knowledge and interests of teachers and extend the scope of the district guide in exciting ways."

Other discussion models, of course, can be used in the dialogues. Schon (1983) reports some success helping teachers use a moderately structured approach concerned with their reflection in action—how they think as professionals. The important consideration is to ensure that the dialogues have enough direction and coherence to make them professionally productive.

Although there seem to be no rigorous studies examining the effects of such dialogues, my experience indicates that they do achieve positive results. Participants report that they find the discussions useful; they note changes in their own attitudes about the issues examined.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum development, as the term is used here, is a cooperative enterprise among teachers by which they modify the district curriculum guide. While there is obviously a need for a district curriculum guide developed by curriculum specialists and expert teachers, there is also a need for teacher-generated materials that extend the district guide and in the process make it more useful.

Teachers' collaborative work can take three forms. First, when teachers *operationalize* the curriculum, they develop yearly and unit plans for teaching. They take the general district guide, which ordinarily includes only lists of objectives and recommended teaching methods, and turn it into a set

of usable instructional plans. The teachers first sketch out yearly plans, indicating the general units of study and the time allocations for each unit. They then develop detailed unit plans, integrating certain areas of the curriculum, adding their own creative teaching suggestions, and including more recent materials.

Second, since most guides do not make sufficient provisions for individualization, teachers also *adapt* the district guide for special student populations. They develop materials that respond to students' varied learning styles; indicate priority objectives for the least able; include remediation activities for those who do not achieve initial mastery; and suggest instructional activities that will enable more capable students to achieve greater depth of understanding.

Finally, teachers *enrich* the district guide by developing optional enrichment units for all classes. As I have argued elsewhere (Glatthorn 1987), the district-mandated curriculum should not consume all available instructional time; some time should be reserved for team-developed enrichment units, which reflect the special knowledge and interests of teachers and extend the scope of the district guide in exciting ways. For example, one team of English teachers might develop an enrichment unit on local dialects; a social studies team could add a unit on religious cults in American history.

Obviously these curriculum development sessions make several important contributions. They increase teacher cohesiveness by bringing teachers together around a common task, enable them to share ideas about teaching and learning, and result in useful products.

Peer Supervision

Peer supervision is a process by which small teams of teachers use the essential components of clinical supervision to help each other grow professionally. Although there are several models of peer supervision, Goldsberry's (1986) "colleague consultation" approach seems to be the most systematic. (He rejects the term *peer supervision* because it seems self-contradictory: *peer* suggests equals; *supervision* connotes superiority.)

"Students of coached teachers had greater achievement on a model-relevant test than did students of uncoached teachers."

The Goldsberry model has nine key characteristics.

1. The process is observation-based: colleagues observe each other teach.
2. The observation is data-based: the observer records full information about the class observed.
3. There is collaborative assessment: each participant tries to identify patterns of teacher and learner behavior.
4. There is a concern for learner outcomes, both intended and unanticipated ones.
5. The collaborative assessment is based upon the teacher's "espoused platform," the learning goals and principles he or she subscribes to.
6. The process involves a cycle of observations and conferences.
7. The process is confidential.
8. The process has a future orientation: the goal of the consultation is to produce future benefits.
9. There is reciprocal assessment: just as the consultant helps the teacher improve practice, so should the teacher help the consultant improve his or her consulting skills.

Under appropriate conditions, peer supervision produces desirable results. For example, Roper and Hoffman (1986) report that the teachers involved in their program were eager to improve, had a good idea of where they most needed improvement, and learned by listening to each other and their students. When conditions were not right, however, peer supervision programs have been less than successful (see, for example, McFaul and Cooper's 1984 article and Goldsberry's critique of their research in the same issue).

Peer Coaching

Peer coaching, most clearly articulated in the work of Bruce Joyce (see Brandt 1987) and Beverly Showers (1984), is similar to peer supervision in that it includes peer observations and conferences. Yet it seems to have some crucial differences sufficient to set it apart. First, there is an assumption that peer coaching follows and builds upon staff development, in which teachers learn about the theoretical foundation of the skill, observe the skill being demonstrated, and practice the skill with feedback. Second, it seems to have a sharper focus: peer coaching teams work together to learn one of the models of teaching or to implement some specific classroom-centered improvement. Finally, the process seems to be much more intensive than most peer supervision models. Joyce (in Brandt 1987) recommends six days of staff development for the teacher to begin acquiring a new model of teaching and has found that it will take as many as 30 trials for the teacher to achieve executive control or complete command.

In her training manual for peer coaches, Showers identifies five major functions of peer coaching. The first is the provision of companionship: as teachers talk about their success and frustrations with the new model of teaching, they reduce the sense of isolation that seems endemic to the profession. Second, teachers give each other technical feedback as they practice the new model of teaching. The

Programs in cooperative professional development will enjoy a greater chance of success when the following conditions prevail.

1. **There is strong leadership at the district level: a district administrator or supervisor coordinates and monitors the school-based programs.**
2. **There is strong leadership at the school level: the principal takes leadership in fostering norms of collegiality, in modeling collaboration and cooperation, and by rewarding teacher cooperation.**
3. **There is a general climate of openness and trust between administrators and teachers.**
4. **The cooperative programs are completely separate from the evaluation process: all data generated in the cooperative programs remain confidential with the participants.**
5. **The cooperative programs have a distinct focus and make use of a shared language about teaching.**
6. **The district provides the resources needed to initiate and sustain the cooperative programs.**
7. **The school makes structural changes needed to support collaboration: the use of physical space facilitates cooperation; the school schedule makes it possible for teachers to work together; staff assignment procedures foster cooperation.**

Fig. 2. Conditions Supporting Cooperative Professional Development

feedback is objective, not evaluative, and is confined to observations about the execution of model-relevant skills. Third, there is a continuing emphasis upon analyzing the application of the new model of teaching, to help participants extend executive control. The goal is not to employ the model only once in a somewhat uncertain trial but to internalize it so that its use becomes spontaneous and flexible. Fourth, the peer coach helps the teacher adapt the teaching model to the special needs of the particular students involved. The coach assists the teacher in analyzing student responses and modifying the model accordingly. Finally, the coach facilitates early trials of the model by providing support.

"Collaborative research . . . can close the gap between 'doing research' and 'implementing research findings.' "

Preliminary studies suggest that peer coaching achieves the results intended. In one carefully designed study, Showers (1984) found that, with a relatively brief period of training, peer coaches were able to provide follow-up training to other teachers, who came to regard them as helpful and professional in their conduct. Second, peer coaching did increase transfer of learning. And, perhaps most important of all, the students of coached teachers had greater achievement on a model-relevant test than did students of uncoached teachers.

Action Research

Action research is a collaborative effort by teams of teachers to identify an important problem and to develop a workable solution. As a means of solving school problems, action research was first recommended by Stephen Corey (1953). After languishing for a few decades as a research approach, it seems to be enjoying a revival of interest.

As with most collaborative approaches, action research takes several forms. A very useful model has been developed and tested by Lieberman (1986) and her colleagues, who modified a process used initially by Tikunoff, Ward, and Griffin (1979). In general the process works as follows.

1. Collaborative research team members identify a problem they would like to research.
2. They make collaborative decisions about the specific research questions and the methodology.
3. They carry out the research design, attending sufficiently to the complexities of the classroom.
4. They use the research results to design an intervention to be implemented in the school.

While noting that collaborative research has both successes and failures, Lieberman reports that the process can:

- facilitate reflection about teaching,
- unite teachers and promote collegial interaction,
- close the gap between "doing research" and "implementing research findings,"
- give teachers an opportunity to assume new roles and gain a sense of empowerment, and
- legitimate teachers' practical understanding and professional concerns.

Implementing Cooperative Professional Development

How can a school district implement a cooperative development program? The answer involves both a general set of supportive conditions and a specific process of implementation. The general conditions needed for successful implementation, summarized in Figure 2, have been drawn from a review of literature on the several forms of cooperative development. Since the research has been limited in extent and uneven in quality, those conditions should be viewed as tentative guidelines.

If these conditions are generally present, then what specific process should be used? Clearly, several implementation strategies can work. The process explained below derives from my experience in working with numerous school districts in establishing such programs.

1. A district planning team composed of district administrators, supervisors, principals, and classroom teachers establishes guidelines to apply to all district schools. Those guidelines specify such matters as: which program options may be offered at the school level; which teachers will be eligible to participate in the cooperative programs; how schools may provide time for the cooperative programs; how the programs may be evaluated; how the program will be administered and coordinated at the district level.

2. Under the leadership of their principal, each school's faculty members review the guidelines and analyze the various collaborative options. They determine how many and which of the collaborative programs they wish to undertake, then work out the specific details of implementing those programs. One school might decide to begin with only peer coaching. Another might choose to have some teachers experience professional dialogues, while others collaborate in action research. These decisions are summarized in a proposal submitted to the district planning team.

3. The district planning team reviews the proposals, suggests modifications, develops a budget to support the school-based proposals, and makes appropriate plans for any required districtwide staff development.

4. Each school implements its own program, providing the specific staff development needed for the options chosen and conducting its own evaluation.

The implementation process, like the programs themselves, is collaborative, involving cooperation between the district and the member schools and between administrators, supervisors, and teachers.

Less a Job, More a Profession

There are, then, several ways by which teams of teachers can profitably work together to facilitate their professional growth. There is little "hard" evidence that such approaches will result in better student achievement, but there is a growing body of evidence that they are making teaching less a job and more a profession.□

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