

Collaborative Schools — A positive culture for information professionals

by Judy O'Connell



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Society's images of what schools do, what teachers do, who we are, and what knowledge and skills we possess, are formed from a variety of experiences, many of which are drawn from the influential childhood years. The activities of a school associated with learning and teaching are monitored by parents and community and open to comment. For the notion that schools create the future citizens of the world, and therefore are places that must be responsive to the needs of society is readily acknowledged.

As we move towards the next millenia, schools are faced with social and technological changes that have considerable impact on the role of the school, the management of the school, the role of the teacher, the role of the teacher-librarian, and the personal expectations for students, including the way students acquire, analyse and process information. That there is considerable literature on the matter is no surprise. Parents and community may simply look for and expect "results", but those involved in the profession are part of a process of change directed at growth and development in educational outcomes for our students.

Therefore, within the profession itself, there are many and varied forces at work revolving around such concepts as collaborative school management, school improvement, co-operative planning, collaborative teaching, and co-operative learning. Revolving around a transition from authoritarian to more democratic behaviour, schools and teachers recognise the need for changing patterns of behaviour. The process of change is not always straightforward, and requires a change agent, familiar with the future needs of teachers and students.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

Though collaboration at the professional level describes a range of practices that can involve some or all teachers, the characteristics of a collaborative school can be recognised as being those where

quality education is determined by what happens at school; where the instructional environment is characterised by norms of collegiality and continuous improvement; where responsibility and accountability take priority; and where teachers become involved in development and achievement of school goals.¹

The collaborative process can be described as voluntary effort by educators to improve their schools and their own skills through teamwork. This sort of process is a help-related exchange focusing on interactions leading to improved teaching and learning. It is not simply an act of friendship, but rather one where it is possible to share teaching practices or critique one another's teaching in order to improve the quality of professional practice.²

The individual having the greatest influence on both the formal and the informal relationships among the adults in a school is the Principal. Also, the importance of vision by the leadership of the school, and the importance of the Principal gaining a shared vision within the school has also been recognised.³ The collaborative approach enables those involved with school change to cope with and facilitate the change in a way that is effective in achieving the objective sought. It includes staff involvement in setting school goals, allocating resources, and taking in hand personal professional development. As the collaborative approach includes sharing responsibility for planning for the future, it also includes developing

skills through professional development so that those plans can be fulfilled.

The collaborative school is one where isolation, fragmentation and lack of harmony are no longer the norm. It is a school within which change can occur, as the framework of collaboration enables the changes to be accommodated in a non-threatening and productive manner. In such a collaborative school the Principal as leader becomes the facilitator, providing the support (time, resources, and encouragement) necessary to sustain teachers' collegial interaction.⁴

The Principal as leader can successfully set the agenda for the importance of information literacy in all areas of the curriculum, as an integrated process of education and learning. At Holy Family School, the impetus for change and development has 'come from above', removing the onerous task often left to the teacher-librarian of having to justify the need for an integrated approach for developing information skills across the curriculum. By recognising and supporting the work of the information professional in the school, the Principal signals the direction for change, and continues to facilitate the process of change through such activities as staff release for inservices; release from class for year level planning; and support during technological development of services.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

In recognising the value of the collaborative approach, many schools are adopting a whole-school and local community process of renewal. The focus is on improved classroom practice, cultural transformation and restructuring of the teaching profession.

Collaborative school improvement and development provides a meaningful context for renewal. The process engenders co-operation, removing the sense of isolation and competition that can exist between teachers. By focusing teacher endeavour on outcomes in the classroom, school development includes a conscious reflection on the purposes of classroom activities in terms of the knowledge and understandings, processes and skills that students will acquire.

At Holy Family School, the mechanism of the collaborative School Development Project involves a three-year process of survey, workshop, school inservice, team-building and curriculum review. The collaborative process is one involving voluntary effort and improvement in skills through teamwork. We are discovering that people are more committed to goals they have formulated themselves than to those which are imposed on us. Our focus of endeavour has involved an in-depth series of whole-school inservices on Genre and Functional Grammar of the English K-6 document. Coupled with this has been a collaborative development of an integrated approach to language, information processing skills and KLA. For example, planning at some year levels in Term 3 has included teacher-librarian, special education, reading recovery tutor, and class teachers, developing an integrated process of teaching language and information skills within the context of Human Society and Environment KLA.

However, the reality is that the collaborative process takes energy, initiative and commitment, with collegial work being focused by strong leadership, and support. It has been noticed that personal beliefs and contextual constraints can also combine to inhibit progress even when change goals are clearly articulated. Ultimately, the more things change, the more teachers must confront their beliefs about learning and the efficacy of their instructional activities.

CO-OPERATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Where teachers are confronting deeply held beliefs about schooling,

long-term positive outcomes are more likely to be achieved in an environment of collegiality and collaboration. This is also the sort of environment that is most likely to lead to genuine co-operative teaching practices.

An instructional model that adheres to the view that school improvement is most likely to succeed where collaboration among teachers is the rule rather than the exception must include the key concept of co-operation.

Co-operative education is a style of teaching and learning that 'skills everyone in the basic requirements for success in virtually all human activity and endeavour — co-operation'.⁵ Kennedy and O'Kelly, in the book *ALL IN* emphasise the fact that if schools of today are to fulfil their mandate of education for all, they and the teachers within them need to become skilled in the practice of co-operative education. Co-operative learning takes into account the personal and academic qualities of each individual by allowing students to be actively engaged in their own learning and being challenged to think. In particular, co-operative learning

promotes divergent thinking and problem solving, as students will use high level reasoning strategies more frequently, think more critically, and gain more insights into material being studied.⁶

Consequently, working as teacher-librarian also means integrating thinking skills as part of instruction in the information search process. Techniques from gifted and talented education hold the key to opening minds to learn, and is an integral part of the pedagogy of classroom practice of the teacher-librarian. As the students all know, a good sportsman or athlete needs exercise — so too do our brains. Brainstorming, lateral thinking, brain teasers, and plenty of fun lead to eager learners happy to go on that hunt for just the right piece of information to solve an interesting problem.

This mandate for education can be extended beyond developing co-operation as a tool of human activity and endeavour, by giving that co-operative skill a cross-curricular, global perspective, by identifying common goals and finding connections across disciplines. The



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outcome of this integrated approach across the KLA's is to facilitate co-operative learning by co-operative teaching in order to yield benefits for students which can include higher academic achievement; development of collaborative competencies; higher reasoning strategies and greater critical thinking; greater interpersonal relationships; and greater cognitive and affective perspective-taking.⁷

Genuine co-operative teaching practices will only be found in an environment of collegiality and collaboration. However, 'By working together, educators can develop their own competence in decision making and problem solving, learn new perspectives, practice a variety of collaborative human relations skills, and benefit from their interdependence with one another. In so doing, they also model for their students many of the collaborative behaviours they are trying to teach'.⁸ Co-operative learning and a team approach is just as important for teachers as it is for students.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

While the literature of teacher-librarianship reminds us that information literacy, lifelong learning, critical thinking and resource-based learning are the key themes which should occupy the proactive information professional's mind and time, reality begins with the school staff that we have.

While we may recognise that our roles encompass a broad range of responsibilities across the curriculum, including the use of technology for

information and instructional purposes, it is only in a collaborative school environment that teacher-librarians can expect to move to the level of instructional leadership with school staff.

Lachance Wolcott⁹ has offered a series of strategies for working in partnership with teachers.

- *Together, reflect on teaching and learning.* This may be formal or informal, and in the course of reflecting, remain open to new ways of looking at teaching, and help teachers to do likewise. Such collaborative reflection should reveal the teachers' planning style.
- *Approach the planning process from the teachers' perspective.* Think of planning as a series of increasingly broader-reaching concentric circles radiating out from the central focus — typically the instructional task. In this fashion, the elements identified as essential to effective instruction are taken into account, but in a process that is recursive and successively elaborate.
- *Accommodate various types and styles of planning.* Planning with the teacher-librarian is often unwelcome because it is unfamiliar. In a collaborative relationship it is possible to customise the planning to fit the teacher, while also meeting the need with literacy and language, and resource-based learning.
- *Provide the leadership.* Be active in raising expectations about the teacher-librarian's involvement in

the development of curriculum and instruction.

CONCLUSION

Living up to the challenge of the next millennia requires teacher-librarians who are ready to be information specialists; teachers; and instruction leaders. To achieve this, teacher-librarians must be proactive in planning curriculum and instruction, while working in partnership with teachers. Little of this can be successfully achieved without the positive culture for an information professional created by the collaborative school.

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