Chapter 8
This Work Isn't Ready:
Lessons From an Early Childhood Intentional Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

The staff meeting is a staple of school culture and is a vehicle for everything from announcements, updates, logistics, curriculum discussions, data review, to more conceptual topics such as mission and vision and reflections on pedagogy and practice. External professional development offerings are another avenue for adult learning and can focus on a range of subjects deemed important by the school or organization providing the opportunity. However, anecdotally, teachers often bemoan staff meetings and professional development as less-than-welcome experiences that take time away from other priorities. Research shows that teachers value gatherings that build trust, provide them with control over their craft, and support the transfer of adult learning into classroom practice. This is a case study of how one group of early childhood educators created meaningful intentional learning opportunities – both within their school's staff meeting structure and beyond their school walls with a local community of educators.

INTRODUCTION

The staff meeting is a staple of school culture and is a vehicle for everything from announcements, updates, logistics, curriculum discussions, data review, to more conceptual topics such as mission and vision, and reflections on pedagogy and practice. External professional development offerings are another avenue for adult learning and can focus on a range of subjects deemed important by the school or organization providing the opportunity. However, anecdotally teachers often bemoan staff meetings and professional development as less than welcome experiences that take time away from other priorities. Research shows that teachers value gatherings that build trust, provide them with control over their craft, and support

the transfer of adult learning into classroom practice (Kuh, 2012). This is a case study of how one group of early childhood educators created meaningful intentional learning opportunities - both within their school's staff meeting structure and beyond their school walls with a local community of educators.

THE ELIOT-PEARSON CHILDREN'S SCHOOL: A LEARNING COMMUNITY EVOLVES

From Staff Meetings to Intentional Learning Community

During the early 2000s the Eliot-Pearson Children's School, a Preschool - Grade 2 lab school at Tufts University, enjoyed a stable staff of Lead Teachers (the authors were both members of this team), supported by strong cohorts of graduate student teaching assistants. The director at the time, Director, led the school via a vision of active engagement in reflective, intentional, developmental, inclusive and anti-bias practices. Initially staff meetings were primarily about logistics as well as community building and skill/knowledge transfer/building (through shared articles and presentations). However, the culture of this sacred time shifted as the desire for and demonstrated power of intentional learning structures, grounded in classroom practices and ponderings, were introduced and implemented with greater and greater frequency and fidelity.

Inspired by Rounds (Project Zero, Harvard University), a monthly educator discussion group designed and facilitated by HGSE faculty member Steve Seidel, Ben Mardell, then a Lead Teacher at EPCS, brought the first protocol to the school staff. For a year, teaching teams signed up and presented a piece of student or classroom work to discuss using the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol (CAC). This work was new and inspiring, though limited in its nature by the structure of this particular protocol. The CAC protocol begins when an educator places a piece of student work in front of their colleagues, providing no further information about the context, the tasks at hand, or the students. Colleagues then describe the work, ask questions (that are not immediately answered) about the work, and speculate about what the student might be working on. Then, the presenter responds to what they heard, sharing their own thoughts and wonderings, which eventually leads to a collective discussion about the implications for teaching and learning. Protocol use has the power to bring equity of voice to conversations, and provides structure and scaffolding that makes conversations effective and efficient (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter & McDonald (2013). Studies also show that the adoption of specific tools and structures and a focus on student work is an integral part of the development of successful learning communities (Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011). Tools that guide conversations in the form of protocols and group norms have been shown to keep teacher talk focused on student learning and make effective use of teacher meeting time (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999; Curry, 2008; Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000).

While a valuable process for upper grade level teachers who bring writing samples, posters, presentations, math journals, etc., the nature of a transportable, two-dimensional piece of preschool or kindergarten work did not afford a lot of depth and detail to describe and interpret. It turned out that a young child's drawing without context or transcription of the child's running dialogue didn't often glean enough probing and discussion to be meaningful to the presenter. This brought up the questions about the limitations of the CAC and our initial interpretation of what constituted student work, as well as questions about what other tools might serve us better.

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