Reprinted with permission — Child Care Information Exchange
PO Box 3249, Redmond, WA 98073 • (800) 221-2864 • www.ChildCareExchange.com

# Supporting Collaboration Among Teachers

Collaboration among teachers isn't a new idea. Good teachers have always collaborated — as a strategy for solving problems, reducing isolation, finding others with like interests or concerns, and validating or celebrating successes in the classroom. Alternately called mentoring, coaching, reflecting, and even sometimes, problem-solving, collaboration is considered a successful strategy for preventing the isolation of teachers, supporting beginning teachers, reducing teacher turnover, improving the quality of care and early education, and supporting professional development of experienced teachers (Love & Rowland, 1999).

Attention is being given to collaboration in our professional literature and in practice, primarily because teacher educators are recognizing its potential for improving the education of teachers in training and helping new teachers succeed. Collaboration as a strategy for supporting teachers as they learn and grow shares in a way that enriches the learning experience for all involved.

Some kinds of collaboration are formal in nature — set up for a specific purpose; other kinds are informal — emerging from the relationships that develop in schools among teachers, directors, parents, and the community. Whether formal or informal, collaboration can be very powerful. The teachers in the programs of Reggio Emilia value the collaboration process so much that it is considered one of the most crucial roles of the teacher (Gandini, Edwards, & Forman, 1998; 1993). Although collaboration among children, parents, directors or supervisors, and specialists are important as well, this article focuses on collaboration among teachers.

Although some collaborations happen spontaneously, most are carefully planned and nurtured. Further, there are prerequisites that support collaboration. According to Tertell, Klein, & Jewett (1998), collaboration emerges when teachers:

- trust and respect each other
- have time to be together to talk, discuss, and reflect
- have worked to develop communication skills
- discover common ground (concerns, interests, needs, goals)
- are supported in the reflection process

The exciting thing about this list is that teachers can create these characteristics. Then they can use collaborations to inform and improve their teaching practice. This is professional development at its best. It is tied to individual teaching needs; occurs when the collaborators are interested in the idea, topic, or skill; and is under the control of the participants rather than controlled by an external trainer or teacher educator.

## Types of Collaboration

Some types of collaboration are connected to the structure and function of the school. These are usually planned, not incidental, experiences. They are a part of the thoughtful process of designing a work climate that views teachers as an integral part of the success of the school and creates roles and experiences for them that validate this view.

by Kay Albrecht

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D., is the former executive director of HeartsHome Early Learning Center, Houston, Texas, and senior partner in Innovations in Early Childhood Education. Her specialties include teacher training and curriculum development. Her latest book, *Innovations in Infant Curriculum*, is in press with Gryphon House. In 2000, she will serve as the academic dean of the World Forum.

Others types of collaboration are interactive experiences. Interactive collaboration can be spontaneous, real-time events — opportunities for teachers to connect and support one another as they interact during the school day. Or, they can be planned experiences that are designed to facilitate collaboration among teachers.

## Where Does Collaboration Begin?

Most agree that collaboration cannot be forced or assigned. The nature of collaboration is the voluntary participation of the participants. Nor are perfect work environments necessary for collaboration to occur. In fact, collaborations that occur early in teaching careers are usually around negative experiences or unsuccessful teaching attempts. When these occur, new teachers quickly look for support and help to, for example, validate their feelings or to get ideas about what else to try.

## Some Examples of Collaboration Among Teachers

**Participating in recruiting and selecting colleagues.** When teachers collaborate to recruit and select their colleagues, the results can be very powerful. Teachers within programs are usually able to tell whether applicants are good matches for the program. Teachers can also help applicants determine if the program is a good fit for their skills and interest.

**Orienting new teachers.** Collaboration among experienced and new teachers in the orientation process is a win/win situation. Every teacher remembers how hard it is to get in and get started in a new school. Further, feeling welcome and appreciated helps new teachers make important connections at work that enhance their feelings of success.

**Peer, mentor, and technical coaching.** These three types of coaching (Scanlon, 1988) are the heart of collaborations. Examples of the range of roles peer, mentor, and technical coaches use include listening, observing, analyzing the teaching strategies being used by a teacher, offering emotional support, encouragement for resolving interpersonal conflicts, organizing space or materials, "teaching" a new skill, giving advise, demonstrating techniques, encouraging attempts to try new ideas, copying useful materials and references, discussing relevant literature, examining children's work together, choosing a mutual topic for learning, and so forth (Carter, 1998; Love & Rowland, 1999).

**Visitations and observations.** Seeing is believing for many early childhood teachers. Visitations and observations broaden and enrich teachers' experiences. Visits can be to other classrooms in the school as well as to other programs.

**Meetings**. Viewing meetings as opportunities to collaborate takes some effort! Changing meetings to be more collaborative is really quite simple. It requires assuming that everyone at the meeting has something to offer and creating opportunities for everyone to contribute!

## Taking Charge of Creating Collaborations

Becoming a collaborator is well within the purview of each of us. It starts when we decide on a plan and take charge of the process of collaboration (Mitstifer, Wenberg, & Schatz, 1993). These authors encourage teachers to create collaborations — be the initiator rather than waiting for someone else to collaborate with you.

Try some of the following strategies to make collaboration work for you.

**Offer to collaborate.** A great way to get started collaborating is to share your strengths with others. Don't wait for a request — offer your help first.

*Michael, a preschool teacher, is a creative genius. He is always able to see new ways to use materials, has many ideas about creative art activities, and does an excellent job of documenting children's work. During his tenure, he has become everyone's creative art and documentation collaborator. He freely offers ideas, advice, help on how to create documentations, and support for using materials creatively.*

**Identify potential collaborators.** Start by identifying coworkers that you already trust and respect. Or pinpoint an excellent teacher from whom you would like to learn. Or, look within the normal channels of support in your school for someone who can help you become a better teacher.

*Shien, a new teacher, has a child who is giving her fits. Unsure of what to do, she asked her coordinator if she could call for help if she needs it. Amy agreed and took the collaboration a step further. She would come into the classroom to help Shien and then provide a follow-up discussion each time she was called to share what she did, why she did it, and what might work next time. As a result, Shien's skills in handling a challenging child have grown (and the number of requests for help have diminished!).*

**Create time to talk, discuss, and reflect.** Of all of the suggestions, this is the one most under the control of the teacher.

*Cheryl has created a ritual that makes time for her to talk, discuss, and reflect with a variety of collaborators. She spends one or two lunch hours a month visiting other classrooms during nap time to talk with colleagues. One or two days a month, she observes other teachers in action in their classrooms, usually at the end of her day. And, once or twice a month, she sits with the director to reflect on her experiences with children in the classroom. None of these are scheduled, planned collaborations — they all occur when Cheryl is able to grab the time.*

*Joanne, on the other hand, has a teen-age son at home and wants to leave as soon as she can at the end of her shift. Her strategy for creating time to talk, discuss, and reflect is a more formal one. She requests that regular discussions and coaching be scheduled when time and resources allow. She makes these requests through the system her center uses for asking for time out of the classroom. Each request is specific — i.e., meet with Gwen to discuss room arrangement, meet with Kay to understand developmental assessments, etc.*

**Discover common ground.** Most schools have their own locker rooms or teachers' lounges where teachers discuss issues, concerns, or problems. Collaborating teachers use these discussions to discover common ground and identify problems and concerns. Great collaboration comes from teachers deciding to reject the status quo and do something to address issues or solve problems.

*Kathleen and Brooke discovered they both viewed the playground schedule as a big problem! The problem was that no one saw planning and preparing the outdoor environment as their responsibility — everyone thought someone else should do it. After discussing it between themselves, they decided to collaborate to propose a solution to the problem. They met together on their lunch breaks, asked experienced teachers what had worked in the past, pulled ideas out of the staff library, tossed around new ideas, and came up with a completely new way to plan and implement outdoor curriculum. They brought their ideas to a staff meeting, discussed them with their colleagues, and got agreement to try the new ideas out. Subsequent discussions among teachers refined ideas that didn't work and formalized the planning process. The latest collaboration among these two teachers is to conduct a mini training session at staff meeting to keep the improvements going and re-evaluate along the way to see if any modifications are needed.*

**Ask for support in collaborating.** Some topics, problems, or situations require a different approach. Programs have different resources — some that teachers know about and some that they may not know about. Find out which resources are available in your school and collaborate with them.

*Dr. Farley visits the school twice a month for collaboration meetings. Meetings are scheduled during nap time and teachers can request to attend if they feel that they have a need to get expert advise on children in their classrooms, parents who are challenging, or emotional curriculum ideas for implementation in the classroom. Dr. Farley helps teachers share observations and insights, and adds new observations and insights from a supporting discipline.*

**Ask for feedback.** Most teachers want and need more feedback than they get (Albrecht, 1990). Great sources of feedback for teachers are co-teachers, parents, administrative staff, and others in the school. Collaborating to get feedback is a natural — particularly when it can be reciprocal. Ask a co-teacher to observe you and give you feedback about a specific area of your teaching and reciprocate by doing the same for her. Both will likely get good feelings about skills that are already in place as well as identifying new skills that could be practiced or learned.

*Masami's native language is Japanese. Although his English skills are very good, he is always concerned about using English appropriately in speaking and writing, particularly when he is taking dictation from the children. He has perfected several strategies for making sure that his language models are good for the children. For example, he audio-tapes children's dictation so he can listen to the recording and make sure he represented what was said accurately. He has created several collaborative relationships. The school's director serves as an editor when Masami writes notes to parents, articles for the newsletter, or completes assessments. His co-teacher serves as a real-time reviewer of the dictation on children's work and notes to parents.*

**Try new challenges.** When you see a problem, ask to be part of the solution. See if there is a role you can play in helping. If you don't have an idea about how to solve a problem, offer to discuss and review others' ideas. Plan a brain-storming session with a colleague to come up with possible solutions no one has ever considered.

*Rene felt frustrated by the frequency of scheduling problems. She volunteered to work on the schedule with the idea she could help solve the problems she saw cropping up repeatedly. She was right. But, in the process, she discovered that her point of view in scheduling, though valuable, was classroom focused and lacked the broader view a manager might take. So she and*

*her supervisor worked out an approach where each checked the other's work, insuring that the schedule met the classroom teachers' needs and the manager's needs as well.*

These few examples highlight the range and potential of collaboration among teachers. Take the first steps to collaborate now — your teaching practice and your professional skills will improve in the process.

## References


Albrecht, K. (1990). Helping teachers grow: Strategies for diversifying performance evaluation and feedback. *Child Care Information Exchange, 74,* 34-36.

Carter, M. (1998). Principles and strategies for coaching and mentoring. *Child Care Information Exchange, 120,* 82-86.

Gandini, L., Edwards, C., & Forman, G. (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio approach — advanced reflections*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Gandini, L., Edwards, C., & Forman, G. (1993). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio approach.* Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Love, F. E., & Rowland, S. T. (1999). The ABCs of mentoring beginning teachers. *Dimensions, 27*(4), 8-10.

Mitstifer, D. I., Wenberg, B. G., & Schatz, P. E. (1993). *Mentoring: The human touch.* East Lansing, MI: Kappa Omicron Nu, Inc.

Scanlon, P. N. (1988). How to implement a coaching program in your center. *Child Care Information Exchange, 59,* 35-37.

Tertell, E. A., Klein, S. M., & Jewett, J. L. (1998). *When teachers reflect.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.