collaborative learning communities

The power of teacher research and collaboration

by Kristi Cheyney

The orchestra is playing a familiar tune; the chorus is singing familiar words. If you look around the audience, some are quietly mouthing the words or humming along, and a few are just singing out boldly. But many are staring straight ahead, with no recognition registering on their faces. Do they know the song? If so, what prevents them from singing along? The early childhood community is a lot like this concert. If 'theory' represents what we could be, then 'practice' represents what we actually do. In the case of educating the young, our nation is standing at a precipice between the two, unsure of how to make the leap.

Kristi Cheyney has been a teacher for 13 years, working primarily with adults since 2002. She holds a Master of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction and currently works fulltime as a trainer and educational consultant providing professional development in the areas of curriculum development and implementation, online/technology tools, and childhood social/emotional development. A frequent speaker at local and national conferences, Kristi also provides services for local homeschool groups and private schools.

Mrs. Cheyney is presently wrapping up the facilitation of a professional development project for early childhood programs that serve low-income families in Gainesville, FL, called *The Connections Early Childhood Professional Development Project.* She developed the project, wrote and was awarded a $50,000 federal grant to fund it, and spent the past 18 months working with 20 teachers from some of Gainesville's poorest neighborhoods. Additionally, Mrs. Cheyney is spearheading a new project in early childhood online credentialing support that offers a distinctive self-reflective/collaborative foundation.

As a facilitator of professional development for preschool teachers, I am continually faced with questions related to the great divide between theory and practice. Although most child care professionals learn that developmentally appropriate practices support the holistic growth of young children during their initial training, many teachers feel ill-equipped to implement these practices in their classrooms. Many even feel that school structures (i.e., policies and procedures, curriculum, assessment, etc.) are not set up to support this type of teaching.

So here is the million dollar question, the one that should be on the mind of every child care center director who desires to increase the quality of care and education in their facility: How can we support teacher development in a way that allows teachers' knowledge base to permeate their day to day practice? There are no easy answers to this question. No quick fixes. One area that shows promise, however, is in the development of Collaborative Learning Communities (CLCs).

Collaborative learning communities: A primer

CLCs are groups of professionals (caregivers, teachers, assistants, directors, and other stakeholders), whose learning and development is facilitated by an experienced and knowledgeable mentor as well as by each other. The direction of learning is based on teachers' inquiries, not on a pre-determined agenda. Looking closely at their own students, teachers determine the questions they most need to investigate. Then the group works together to find answers under the guidance of the mentor. Developing a CLC is a purposeful effort to build a school's *internal capacity* to improve their practices. This is very different from the traditional mode of workshop training where people are sent out of the building and return with knowledge, but little or no support to implement what they have learned.

Developing a CLC can be a valuable tool for practical, site-based professional development. In recent years, the effectiveness of using a collaborative inquiry model of teacher preparation

has been well documented (i.e., Bickmore, 2005; Burke & Egawa, 2000; DuFour, et al., 2002; DuFour, et al., 2004; and DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Of all groups of teachers in the workforce today, child care workers are most in need of this type of support.

What do successful CLCs look like? Hughes and Kritsonis (2006) lay out five attributes of effective CLCs:

- supportive and shared leadership
- collective creativity
- shared values and vision
- supportive conditions
- shared personal practice (p. 2).

Many child care centers already have the beginnings of CLCs in place. However, a true CLC is formed through a purposeful plan for self-reflection, classroom research, and staff collaboration that cannot be built through regular staff meetings alone.

An excellent resource for preschools that want to create CLCs is the book *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Practitioner Inquiry* (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003). The authors contend that educational research has traditionally existed in two domains. The first sphere of research views the process of teaching as technical and straight forward, where teachers look to outside experts to frame their curricular and instructional choices. Schools that reflect this sphere's culture do not encourage teachers to identify problems or to seek solutions, and are often punitive in addressing classroom dilemmas. The alternate domain, stemming from qualitative research designs, views teaching as an intricate and complicated process where context is extremely important. According to Dana and Yendol-Silva, both are framed by outside experts and neither tends to recognize the voices of teachers. The authors assert that a third type of educational research has emerged out of this lack of recognition: a paradigm of educational research that is centered on individual teachers and their own experience. "The ultimate goal is to create an inquiry stance toward teaching. This stance becomes a professional positioning, owned by the teacher, where questioning one's own practice becomes part of the teacher's work and eventually part of the teaching culture" (p. 6).

Collaboration and reflection: The new cornerstones to staff development

The ability to collaborate is not easily crafted (Meagher, 2006). Developing collegiality is a prerequisite in order to establish the types of collaboration that lead to lasting improvements in teaching. Barth (2006) proposes that the relationships between adults in a school filter down to the children, and thus form the basis of a school's climate and it's ability to change. "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" (p. 9).

Real change in any organization must begin with individuals, especially teachers themselves. By approaching difficult situations like a team, teachers can find the support, encouragement, advice, and validation they need to sustain them for a career. CLCs are most effective when all stakeholders are represented: teachers, administrators, parents, district officials, universities, community colleges, and anyone concerned about the wellbeing of children. Without these mechanisms, the reality of teacher burnout and turnover is heightened exponentially (Schlichte, et al., 2005).

CLCs model the importance of life-long learning

As adults, how we approach our own professional development provides a model for children's emerging view of learning. Ultimately, the strength and success of CLCs may rest in its relationship to the most familiar and comfortable format for human development: the family. In the model of family life is a picture of safety, connection, and learning. Parents cannot separate the child's mind from her heart or soul as she learns to talk, or to ride a bike. Mothers do not create multiple-choice tests on how to bake cookies or require textbook readings on how to interact with imaginary friends. In the same way, truly lasting professional development may be most effective when heart, mind, and soul are engaged together in the process of growth.

The idea that mind, heart, and soul can be separated in the learning process is endemic in American educational culture and can be seen in our treatment of learning for both children and adults. Eisner (2006) poses this question, "Can a child be anything but whole" (p. 16)? Well, of course not. Human beings are made up, in a biological sense, of a myriad of parts that all work together to keep a person alive. There are also the inner workings of the human being that cannot be visually observed and analyzed (the psyche, the spirit, the mind, the heart). All of our educational pursuits should rest on an accurate view of the whole child, his needs, his rights, and his undeniably unpredictable nature. To view children as anything less than complex, multi-faceted, and somewhat capricious little beings, is to disregard the glaring truth of our human genetic make-up. To engage in teaching, leading, policy-making, research, or professional development that disregards this truth is ludicrous, if not reckless.

Is the same not true of teachers as learners? How absurd the notion that teachers might learn about attachment theory, multiple intelligences, or cooperative grouping strategies by viewing a power point presentation! "People behave better when they feel known and welcome rather than anonymous and alienated" (Johnson, et al., 2005). When teachers and administrators model this ideal in their pursuits of professional growth, children are more likely to choose this powerful path for themselves.

Critical steps to developing CLCs in child care settings

The best way to begin is with teacher reflection. While working on a federal grant funded project in Gainesville, Florida in 2007-8, I asked teachers to reflect on the one child in their class that was most challenging their present skills and knowledge base. Teachers drew pictures and brainstormed about these challenges before coming up with the one question they most wanted to answer in order to better deal with this child's needs. This question became the centerpiece of their yearlong professional development and collaboration. In this way, each teacher was able to engage their minds on what was most critical for their own professional growth and wellbeing.

I suggest the following foundational steps for those wanting to experiment with CLCs in their center:

- Develop and articulate an accurate view of **children** as inherently whole.
- Develop and articulate an accurate view of **teachers** as inherently whole.
- Work with teachers to develop the collegial skills necessary to collaborate about professional growth.
- Establish a plan for staff self-reflection and collaboration that hinges on teachers' own questions and wonderings.
- Be there to support, encourage, facilitate, and mentor.

Empowering teachers through classroom research

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of CLCs in professional development for this group of teachers, is that it restores a sense of efficacy to a group of people who are likely to feel disenfranchised by low job status, low wages, high stress, and few, if any, vacations or special privileges. Because few people seem to be listening to what they have to say, the fact that their voices are heard and valued in the context of collaboration is a significant event. Too often the sum of a teacher's work is reduced to words and numbers on a page, muffling their valuable observations, ideas, and insight.

Collaboration allows teachers to come out of hiding and ask difficult questions in a safe and supportive structure. Increasing teachers' accountability and training requirements without supporting them through the process keeps the swinging door perpetually propped open for talented teachers to leave the school yard in pursuit of more profitable employment. "Teachers cannot fix everything even if we hold them accountable for everything" (Cochran-Smith, 2006).

Fortunately, there is another option. Creating CLCs in child care centers offers an alternative to the status quo, and allows teachers to make their voices heard, initiate their own discussions, pursue answers to their own questions, take initiative for their own change, and ultimately grow as professionals for the benefit of the precious young children in their care.

Young children deserve our action: our best and brightest ideas! Twenty-four years ago, Ron Edmunds (1982) said, "We can, whenever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than what we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far" (p. 2). If Ron Edmunds could say this in 1982, shouldn't we be even more confident about our ability to teach effectively today? We can. We should. We must. Today.

References

Barth, R. S. (2006, March). Improving relationships within the schoolhouse. *Educational Leadership, 63*(6), 8-13. Retrieved September 10, 2006 from the ERIC database.

Bickmore, S. T. (2005, November). NEH Seminars: Collaborative Communities for Professional Development. *English Journal, 95* (2), 35-40. Retrieved October 6, 2006 from the ERIC database.

Burke, C., & Egawa, K. (2000). Inquiry into Inquiry: Exploring Educational Practice. *NCTE Reading Initiative.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 478851). Retrieved July 8, 2006 from the ERIC database.

Castleman, B., & Littky, D. (May 2007). *Learning to Love Learning, 64,* 8, Educational Leadership, p. 58-61.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2006). *Ten Promising Trends (and Three Big Worries), 63,* 6. Educational Leadership, p. 20-25.

Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Silva, D. (2003). *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to learn Through Practitioner Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (2002). *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning*

Communities. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn.* Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Edmunds, R. (1982). Quoted by L. Lezotte in "Revolutionary and evolutionary: The Effective Schools movement." Okemos, MI: Effective Schools Products, Ltd. Retrieved May 18, 2006, from www.effectiveschools.com/freestuff.asp.

Eisner, E. (2005). *Back to the Whole, 63*, 1. Educational Leadership, pp. 14-18.

Hughes, T. A., & Kritsonis, W. A. (2006). A national perspective: An exploration of professional learning communities and the impact on school improvement efforts. *National Journal for Publishing and Mentoring Doctoral Student Research, 01*(01), 1-12.

Intrator, S. M., & Kunzman, R. (2006, March). Starting with the soul. *Educational Leadership, 63*(6), 38-43. Retrieved September 10, 2006 from the ERIC database.

Johnson, G., Poliner, R., & Bonaiuto, S. (2005). *Learning Throughout the Day, 63*, 1. Educational Leadership, pp. 59-63.

Meagher, S. (2006). Don't Hesitate, Collaborate. *Teaching Pre K-8*, *36*(6), 66-67. Retrieved October 6, 2006 from the ERIC database.

Schlichte, J., Yssel, N., & Merbler, J. (2005). Pathways to Burnout: Case Studies in Teacher Isolation and Alienation. *Preventing School Failure*, *50*(1), 35-35. Retrieved October 7, 2006 from the ERIC database.