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# Stages in the Development of School-College Collaboration

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School-college partnerships can develop more effective education when both institutions recognize that collaboration is an up-and-down process with no fixed endpoint.



A Queens College intern in music instructs Louis Armstrong pupils. Photograph by Adam Cohen

The partnership between Queens College, the New York City Board of Education, and the Louis Armstrong Middle School (I.S. 227Q) emerged out of a controversy. Two local school districts argued over which should have jurisdiction over the school, and the dispute raged on for years, with the building remaining empty. Finally, the central board of education assumed control and asked Queens College in March 1979 to join with it in developing the facility. For the last six years we have enjoyed a productive relationship: professors, student teachers, and graduate interns have been fully integrated into the day-to-day life of the school, and public school administrators and teachers have served the university as adjunct professors, student teacher supervisors, and guest speakers in college classes.

The collaboration between Queens College and Louis Armstrong School has been a success if accomplishment can be measured by:

- student attendance (93 percent),
- achievement (each year 75 to 86 percent of 8th graders read above grade level),
- applications to the school (there is a waiting list of over a thousand), and
- pupil acceptances to high schools with selective criteria (over 50 percent of each graduating class passed tests and/or interviews to gain admission to these schools). In addition, the United States Department of Education designated the school as one of the outstanding secondary schools in the nation.

Working together with the school, we have learned much about the factors that contribute to successful school-college collaboration:

- The support and encouragement of the president of the college brought with it easier access to campus resources.
- The involvement of key personnel in the School of Education, (dean of teacher education, associate dean of teacher education, chairperson of secondary education) provided the project with sources of power.
- The college staff's ability to avoid a "we the experts" approach made

them more accessible to the school staff.

- The highly visible college staff, with the director and other professors present daily at the school, showed school personnel that collegiate partners were seriously committed to the project.

- Our awareness of the complexities of implementation led us to bring new programs into being slowly.

- The understanding that individual teacher change is rarely sufficient to bring about institutional change undergirded a broader-based orientation toward school renewal.

Public school and college educators need energy, commitment, sensitivity, and good intentions to develop successful partnerships. But they also need to know what to expect. In the course of developing a collaborative relationship, our project and its participants passed through several stages of development. As with developmental stages in other contexts described by Freud and Erickson, one cannot be certain of progress, and it is possible to reach a plateau at any of the stages we have identified. A failure to recognize that such levels exist, however, may lead to unrealistic aspirations, frustration, or premature acceptance of defeat. An awareness of the stages, on the other hand, may help to encourage other universities and public schools to begin partnerships and, having started them, to persist in making them successful.

*Hostility and Skepticism—Stage 1.* Almost without exception, the initial period in school-college collaboration is characterized by hostility and/or skepticism. School people are weary of experiences in which a big-name university expert arrives on the scene, gives "solutions" to problems, and then quickly moves away. They are wary of college professors who enter the public school world to do their experiments and then disappear to publish their findings in some inaccessible periodical. They do not want colleges to impose the very remedies they feel failed to give practical preparation for their jobs in the first place. Inevitably, in the initial stages, a public school teacher will ask a college pro-

fessor, "When is the last time you were in a public school classroom?" The presumption is that university representatives know little about the real world of schools. But not always is criticism couched obliquely. At a recent meeting a principal angrily remarked: "The college worked with my school around ten years ago. They didn't know what they were doing, and it was a disaster. I'm still picking up the pieces."

The extent of the hostility colleges meet as they begin to work with public schools often depends on the conditions the public school people face. If each day in the public school is a struggle for order, and if teachers feel battered by frustrating experiences, then hostility is more likely than mere skepticism. If teachers feel patronized by their administrators, or if principals feel demeaned, unrecognized, or overly criticized by their superintendents, there is a good chance that the college will become the target of deflected hostility. But even with optimal educational environments and good intentions on the part of the college, most public school personnel will be skeptical at the outset. Prior to the opening of school at the beginning of our collaboration, the college insisted on heterogeneous grouping as part of the educational design. The board of education representatives, even as they accepted the idea, were condescendingly tolerant of professors from their "ivory tower" who "knew little of the practicalities of schools and the realities of urban education."

We have found that the best way to deal with hostility is to listen actively, sincerely, and with empathy, for often the expressed frustration is well-founded. When public school personnel feel that their words have been heard and respected, an enormous first obstacle has been overcome.

A group of principals met recently with us to discuss ways in which the college and schools might cooperate. The planned agenda was put aside as the school administrators vented their frustration born of years of not being consulted, of having to deal with new teachers unprepared for the rigors of urban schools, and of feeling that their

expertise and their experience were not valued by college people. So unexpected and so virulent was the criticism that for a time we considered not reconvening the group. We overcame our initial hesitancy and held a second meeting. As if by magic the atmosphere changed. It seemed that having expressed their anger and finding that their views were listened to respectfully, they no longer felt the necessity to maintain an adversarial stance. The principal whose remarks had been the most angry left thanking us for the opportunity to share ideas.

**Lack of Trust—Stage II.** While the opportunity to vent hostility lessens its intensity, distrust is not so quickly dissipated. Why shouldn't teachers be suspicious of the professor/expert who arrives on the scene to head a staff development program conceived of entirely by top-level administrators? Teachers often interpret the need for staff development as another sign of their inadequacy and poor education. Often finding themselves to be the subject of arbitrary evaluation and constant criticism, they can hardly be grateful for the opportunity to receive "professorial wisdom." As one teacher said, "Why are we always the ones who need development? As far as I'm concerned, the ones who need improvement are the school administrators and the college professors who teach those meaningless courses."

We discovered that a first step in gaining mutual confidence is to share experiences. In the partnership between Queens College and Louis Arm-

strong School, the school principal joined the college staff as an adjunct professor. All through the collaboration, the college sought opportunities for practitioners to teach at the college. Public school teachers taught late afternoon classes in language arts and science and were guest speakers in other college classes. As roles merged, the opportunities for dialogue increased, and people communicated out of common experience.

**Period of Truce—Stage III.** Our experience suggests that when trust is confirmed, a period of truce commences. In this stage, participants withdraw some prior negative judgments as the public school faculty members begin to sense that professors are not at the school merely to deliver sage advice but to learn and to help, and as the professors gain respect for teachers' hard-won skills. In our case, antagonism diminished when professors and teachers participated as equals in inservice programs, when they attended the same parties, went on trips, and played in student-faculty softball and basketball games.

**Mixed Approval—Stage IV.** At the next stage school and college faculty members begin to gain each other's approval. In our project, teachers began to feel enhanced by the college's presence; professors provided another source of recognition through their letters of appreciation and words of acknowledgment. A special glow surrounded the school as photographers and video technicians came to classrooms to document what was happen-

ing, as national and international visitors come to view the project, and as newspaper accounts appeared in larger numbers. Professors who know how to work with teachers in a non-threatening manner become advocates for the staff. They appealed for changes in school organization, and provided practical and useful leadership in curriculum exploration. Of course, there were professors at the school only because they had to fill out their schedules, had a research idea in mind, or had knowledge they felt compelled to deliver, but they soon met frustration and left.

**Acceptance—Stage V.** With the filtering out of uncommitted faculty, the collaboration enters a period of stability, and the college gains acceptance, even admiration. When the Louis Armstrong faculty heard that the original agreement between the board of education and the college had been renewed, they broke out in spontaneous applause.

This is the era of good feeling. It is a time in which teachers, students, parents, community members, and college personnel believe that theirs is a good school. It is also a time in which professors and public school staff see the mutual benefits of the collaboration, and the idea of the school without the college involvement seems unthinkable.

With the passage of time it becomes clear that the development of a school-college partnership is a fluid process with no absolute endpoint. Changes are inevitable. Professors leave because they find the college's reward system doesn't recognize work in the field. The project's success opens opportunities in school administration, and a former principal becomes a district superintendent, an assistant principal becomes principal, and an administrative assistant fills a vacancy for assistant principal in another school.

We found that, almost overnight, the school was being run by administrators unfamiliar with the original philosophy of the school, unclear about the college's role, and lacking the sense of ownership that comes of having grown up with a project. Other changes occurred. The support of top leaders in both the college and the board of education was lost as a new



Clarence Bunch, professor of art education, and Stacy Brooks, art teacher, talk with students about art programs at the Louis Armstrong Middle School for the Queens College cable television series, "Kids in the Middle."



When the Louis Armstrong School's Community Museum sponsored an exhibit of paintings and drawings by Russian children, Queens College faculty offered correlated seminars that were attended by public school personnel, college faculty, and community members. Here, Professor Max Eckstein compares Soviet and American education.

college president and a new board of education chancellor came on the scene.

Although it would be more comfortable if things remained the same, such personnel shifts are inevitable. Some of the energy that would normally be available for forward movement and strengthening of programs needs to be channeled into developing new relationships, orienting people, and restraining the tendency to return to traditional patterns of running a school.

*Regression—Stage VI.* In the regression stage, the original collaborative vision of the school may be blurred. Greater efforts are needed to maintain what has been accomplished, and any extensive plans for new school programs need to be postponed. New administrators, accustomed to more bureaucratic approaches to supervision, may spark a conflict simply by seeking to impose their will on a teaching group accustomed to more collegial treatment.

For us, this was a time of pessimism; it seemed unlikely that fresh energy

could be found to acculturate new administrators and to find ways to reinvigorate the enterprise. The collaboration could easily have foundered at this stage.

*Renewal—Stage VII.* In our case, Queens College faculty, aware that the project had stalled, began to meet on a regular basis. We spent a full day at a nearby retreat center, identifying goals. The hours of interaction in a pleasant, informal setting, far from the interruptions and pressures of institutional life, helped us to return to school with renewed vigor.

New people can also energize an established institution. We contacted consultants from other universities who shared their own explorations with us and helped to give us another perspective on our project. We determined that each of us would keep a log of our experiences with a particular focus on key questions of interest to all. We agreed to meet regularly to share perceptions in writing so we could eventually produce material for dissemination. We began to cooperate more with the public school staff on

writing. This period, which we might call the stage of transfusion, has reignited interest and involvement in the project.

A transfusion connotes injecting something from the outside, and that is what is needed at this stage of development. New ideas, new people, and new experiences provide a renewed flow of energy.

*Continuing Progress—Stage VIII.* Now beginning our seventh year of collaboration, we have entered a new stage of rekindled enthusiasm and renewed hope. It is once again a time of forward movement and of continuing progress. As a result of the meetings, administrators, teachers, and professors have begun to modify their behavior and to show greater sensitivity to the needs of others. Energetic and enthusiastic teachers have joined the staff. New ideas and new projects have emerged; one group is working on a dropout prevention program and another is examining the results of team teaching of a group of 7th grade mainstreamed special education students. A tone of optimism has returned.

We know now that when a public school and college work together, the process is one of constant change. Some teachers retire or go on sabbatical; others transfer into the school. Curriculum mandates are hurled at the school from state and city agencies, and budget support varies with a fluctuating economy. The attempt to control every detail of the project is like trying to bottle a cloud on a windy day. We have learned, among other things, that a collaboration moves through different stages of development and to ignore them is to invite disappointment, frustration, and possibly failure.

We have also learned that school-college partnerships can succeed, that public school personnel and college faculty can develop effective education together. We have seen how collaboration has kept professors' views of education fresh by maintaining linkages with children, teachers, and schools. Theory and practice, teachers and professors, have become less separate, and all of us have been reinvigorated by the chance to make a difference in schools. □

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