COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION, AND COLLEGIALITY IN SCHOOL REFORM

Odyssey Toward Connections

Nina G. Dorsch

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C O N T E N T S

WELCOME TO
CONNECTIONS:
AN INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Connections! Your child is about to embark on a
journey that few have taken before.
                                    —*Connections Newsletter*, 1993

Change is a journey, not a blueprint.
                                    —Michael Fullan, *Innovation, Reform,*
                                    and Restructuring Strategies

As the clarion call for school reform issued by *A Nation at Risk*
(1983) has reverberated over the years, multiple strands of
research have examined the attendant and continuing waves of
reform and restructuring. One current, cutting across the waves
like a riptide, courses through studies of such diverse initiatives as
site-based management, inclusion, and interdisciplinary curricu-
lum. All of these innovations associate their successful implemen-
tation with at least one of a trio of terms—community, collabo-
ration, and collegiality.

Linked by alliteration and as descriptors connotative of a
quality of relationship, these three terms seem at times to be used
interchangeably. Yet each of the "three Cs" imparts a different
shade of meaning. And all three shadings are necessary to define
the contours of a relationship seen as integral to the success of so
many reform efforts.

Community suggests bonds of "shared values, purposes, and
commitments" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 46) that become the defin-
ing center for any reform initiatives. Dewey (1916/1966) also
points to shared interests and goals in his standard of community:
"How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously
shared?" (p. 83). With this understanding, the work of building
community becomes that of achieving goal consensus, often
through the development of an articulated statement of vision to

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which all members of the school community would subscribe.

Collaboration involves supplanting the traditional norms of isolation and autonomy, creating opportunities for interaction among educators. Provisions for shared planning time and staff development, for example, permeate plans designed to promote collaboration among teachers. While such arrangements foster increased teacher interaction, they are critiqued as most often generating only a surface collaboration that Andy Hargreaves (1993) labels "contrived collegiality." Collaborative structures *do* provide the *opportunity* for collegiality; but more than opportunity is necessary to collegiality.

That "something more" distinctive to a collegial relationship is elusive in both definition and implementation. For Judith Warren Little (1990), it is interdependence. For Susan Rosenholtz (1989), it involves "a stable, evolving, reciprocal relationship" (p. 67). For Joseph Kahne (1994), the collegial relationship is marked by a dynamic, ongoing, deliberative process of democratic communication. These principles of interdependence, reciprocity, and democratic communication find a unifying voice in a discussion of community by Robert Bellah et al. (1985): "A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussions and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it" (p. 333). It is *this* sense of community, collaboration, and collegiality that I believe is at the heart of the relationship deemed essential to many reform efforts.

A collegial community, then, is characterized by a reciprocal relationship between the community and its individual members—each must promote the growth of the other. Notwithstanding this very Deweyan rejection of the dualism of individual and community, reconciling the traditional individualism of school cultures with the collegial community implicit in many educational reforms is not an easy task. As Little (1990) noted, "Tenacious habits of mind and deed make the achievement of strong collegial relations a remarkable achievement; not the rule, but the rare, often fragile, exception" (p. 167).

Such an exception may occur when teachers are engaged in work of sufficient complexity that a collegial relationship is essential. Huberman (1993) suggests that innovation may provide the

catalyst that allows the usual cultural norms of teacher isolation, autonomy, and mutual noninterference to be suspended. In the concrete help colleagues can offer when their professional contexts overlap in the work of implementing reforms, there lies an incentive for individual teacher artisans to join together in collegial communities.

Yet the relationship between innovation and collegial communities is not unidirectional. Collegial communities also create a collaborative environment that supports a high level of innovation, high levels of enthusiasm and energy, and support for professional growth and learning (McLaughlin, 1993). Nor are the dimensions of community, collaboration, and collegiality tied together in a one-way linear path. Just as collaborative opportunities do not assure collegiality, acknowledging interdependence does not guarantee opportunities to work together for mutual benefit. These complexities render problematic attempts to neatly package implementation of those reforms which, by their very nature, demand a collaborative, collegial community among their implementors.

Further complicating the implementation of such reforms is the dynamism and unpredictability of the change process itself. Despite the abundance of reform recommendations, mandates, and initiatives, "School organizations have not been fertile ground for innovations suggested either from within or without . . . Proposals for curricular, instructional, or technological improvements have struggled and, in too many cases, gone by the wayside" (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993, p. 4). Furthermore, implementation studies suggest that the reform process is more often incremental and fragmented than total and systemic. In most schools and districts, many partially implemented innovations and pilot programs operate at any given time, while pervasive, systemic changes are rare.

Not only is change incremental and fragmented, it is also context-bound. As Milbrey McLaughlin (1991) reexamined the findings of the Rand Change Agent Study, she concluded that a process of mutual adaptation influenced the outcomes of innovations across implementing schools. Local implementation choices occurred within and through a local context of capacity, will, expertise, organizational routines, and resources. Moreover,

within each local context, multiple and sometimes competing or conflicting environments existed. A complex web of communities within schools as well as structural conditions of teacher isolation and independence served to mediate a school's priorities and perspectives on change (Little & McLaughlin, 1993). Context matters, and understanding a complex dynamic like collegial community requires a lens that can focus light on local environments.

Fullan (1993) believes the first among the lessons of change is that local will and capacity cannot be mandated. The complex goals of change require new skills, creative thinking, and commitment. These elements cannot be coerced. Furthermore, the idiosyncrasies of local context preclude one-size-fits-all formulas for implementing innovations. Given these lessons, some policymakers have looked beyond mandates to incentives to encourage schools to undertake change.

In Ohio, both mandates and incentives served to advance educational reform and innovations agendas. Among the provisions of the Omnibus Education Reform Act of 1989 were mandates for a performance-based accreditation system, open enrollment policies, business advisory councils, and student proficiency testing. More than issuing mandates, the legislation also created the Commission on Education Improvement, which was empowered and funded to distribute incentives for innovation. As part of its duties, the commission was to select and evaluate pilot projects initiated by school districts and/or universities. Grants were made available to local districts through regional teacher training centers and venture capital grants.

Concurrently, the Ohio Department of Education's Division of Special Education developed an action plan for reform in the area of special education. This plan, entitled *Ohio Speaks: Working Together to Shape the Future of Special Education* (1990), identified eight goals and the strategies for their implementation. Along with mandates for new rules and regulations governing special education in Ohio, the plan issued incentives in the form of requests for proposals. Waiving regulations and allowing school districts to develop and implement pilot programs of collaboration between regular and special education, these requests for proposals encouraged innovation in the form of model programs of inclusion.

Thus Ohio responded to the clarion call for reform issued at the national level by creating mandates and incentives designed to encourage schools to take up the reform challenge. In 1993, one school district in southern Ohio, a school district I call "Cedar City,"[1] took up the challenge, applied for grants and waivers, and announced a new program: "Connections."

That spring, as Cedar City's eighth-grade students registered for their next year's courses as freshmen, one of their enrollment choices took the form of a new program encompassing the content areas of English, science, and social studies. This option, "Connections," would also include students identified as having learning disabilities. The four teachers who formed the Connections teaching team represented each of the three content areas and special education. Within a school organized and operated to honor the traditional view of teaching as primarily an individual craft, the Connections teaching team was, indeed, an innovation.

The interdisciplinary and inclusive nature of the program would necessarily affect the way the Connections teachers made daily teaching decisions about, for example, content emphasis, instructional strategies, and student assessment. Formerly the province of individual teacher discretion, such decisions would now often need to be made collectively. The ability of the Connections teachers to collaborate as a collegial community would play an important, indeed essential, role in the program's success.

In the newsletter that welcomed students and parents to the program, the Connections teachers likened the year that lay before them to a journey. The journey metaphor is one with precedents in the domains of change (Fullan, 1993) and interdisciplinary curriculum (Drake, 1993). But as I traveled with the Connections teachers, two other metaphors emerged as more appropriate. As this book recounts the Connections' teachers experiences, those two metaphors frame the story.

As apt as the metaphor of a journey is, the metaphor of an odyssey seems more suitable for telling the Connections story. An odyssey suggests adventures, obstacles, detours, and discoveries—evoking images of Scylla and Charybdis, Cyclops, and storms as well as battles won and a triumphant homecoming—all of which were part of the Connections experience. As an epic narrative, the metaphor of an odyssey also suggests a quest, a destination.

Within the Connections saga, this sense of direction, or vision, emerged as the story unfolded.

The second metaphor framing this telling of the Connections odyssey—ecological systems—also has precedents. Such luminaries as Bowers and Flinders (1990), Eisner (1988), Goodlad (1994), and Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (1993a, 1993b) have offered ecological systems as a conceptual framework for understanding life in schools and classrooms. The ecological metaphor also gets at the process of mutual adaptation, competing and conflicting environments, and contextual dynamics inherent in the process of change. Even more appealing, the ecological metaphor mirrors the interdependence, reciprocity, and interaction implicit in my understanding of collegial community. More importantly, inherent within the ecological metaphor is the notion of equilibrium—an environmental state in which all appropriate systems within an ecosystem connect and contribute to enable an enterprise to be functional, healthy, and productive (Yinger & Hendricks-Lee, 1993a). Because I wanted to understand how Connections (an organism) would evolve as a collegial community in particular environment (the four teachers, Cedar City High School, the 1993–94 school year), the metaphor of ecological systems offered an appropriate conceptual framework for telling the Connections story.[2]

Within the ecology of a program, school, or classroom, meaning and action are produced and composed in the mutual and dialectic interaction of physical, cultural, and personal systems. Just as Connections evolved as a collegial community during the course of its initial implementation, the systems within the Connections ecology would be dynamic, rather than static: individually, in combination, and in webs to Connections' surrounding environment. In essence, there was not *one* Connections ecosystem, but many. At various times during the year, the Connections environment would change—sometimes dramatically, sometimes more subtly. So as this book recounts the Connections' teachers' experiences, the story is framed by a mixed metaphor. At various turning points and ports of call in the Connections odyssey, attention will be given to the various ecological systems operating at that time and in that place—a charting, as it were, of where the Connections teachers traveled in their odyssey toward collegial community.

A Prologue to the
Connections Journey

We hope you and your child are as excited about the coming
journey as are we!
                                    —*Connections Newsletter*

In literature, the epic tales of odysseys began with prologues.
Before the pilgrimage, journey, or adventure began, such salient
facts as were necessary for the audience to know in order to
understand the story were announced in the prologue. This chap-
ter is the prologue to the Connections odyssey.

PORT OF ORIGIN: CEDAR CITY AND ITS SCHOOLS

At the north edge of town, where residential subdivisions give
way to the rolling hills of southern Ohio farmland, a municipal
water tower proclaims Cedar City as "Home of the Chiefs."[1] Such
a proclamation is particularly apt since the tower is neighbor to
the sprawling, single story edifice that is Cedar City High School.
The proclamation also reflects the prominent place of the schools
in the life of the community.
    Located within commuting distance of three urban areas,
Cedar City and the surrounding township served by the Cedar
City schools is a postcard prototype of small towns of the Amer-
ican heartland. With a heritage whose origins coincide with
Ohio's statehood, Cedar City is described in the local Chamber of
Commerce's visitors' guide in Norman Rockwell-ian terms: "Rich
in history [Cedar City] tempts you with its picturesque 19th-cen-
tury ambiance." Cedar City's location and atmosphere have con-
tributed to the population growth and economic expansion the
community has experienced beginning in the 1960s and continu-
ing into the current decade. In coping with the changes growth

brings, the community has faced the challenge of maintaining the stability of its historic character. The Cedar City schools have faced the same challenge.

Not surprisingly, the community's growth has had a pronounced effect on the school system. As a district newsletter pointed out, "It is practically impossible to drive in any direction in our district and not see new construction . . . And new houses and new apartments mean new students" (District keeps growing, January 1994, p. 4). Indeed, as the district's 1992–1993 annual report indicated, enrollment had been growing at the rate of about 150 students per year for the last seven years. This pattern of growth led to the current year's addition of eight science classrooms to the high school as well as the beginning of construction of a new building to house grades four and five.

This growth has challenged the district's finances.[2] The current building projects were financed through a bond levy passed in 1992, and a permanent improvement levy was passed in November of 1993. But because the district had not sought an operating levy since 1980 and because state funds to the district had been cut in recent years, a cash balance comparison included in the district's 1992–1993 annual report showed that the general operating budget had experienced a declining balance since 1990. It is not surprising, then, that the district's finances would be a concern during Connections' initial implementation.

The changes in Cedar City Schools had not been confined to physical facilities. Several changes in administrative personnel were made in the three years prior to Connections' implementation. In 1990, Martin Young assumed the superintendency; the next year brought Mike Davis to Cedar City as the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; and 1992 saw several changes in building leadership, including a new high school principal, George Cerny. Under this new leadership, the district adopted a new vision statement and each school created a building mission statement (appendix A), an extensive staff development program was initiated, and curriculum innovations (such as hands-on science for grades K–4) were introduced. All of the changes were envisioned as enhancing an educational program that enjoyed a reputation for excellence (Mike Davis interview, May 11, 1993). The 1992–1993 annual report pointed to the dis-

trict's North Central Accreditation and the many awards the schools had received, including Blue Ribbon Schools and state recognition for an outstanding drug-free education program. So it was against this backdrop of change within the context of a stable reputation for excellence that Cedar City schools announced the creation of the Connections program on March 10, 1993.

THE CONNECTIONS JOURNEY SHIPMATES

As Mike Davis and George Cerny prepared for Connections and moved for its adoption, both administrators knew selecting the members of the teaching team would be of great consequence. As Davis put it, "It was critical . . . the teachers needed to be enthusiastic . . . Having teachers that parents would recognize as top-notch was important" (May 11, 1993). With only one year as principal, George Cerny's selection of the Connections teaching team was guided by three factors: the opportunities he had had for observing the teaching and interaction of his staff, the interested teachers' areas of certification and experience with the district's ninth grade curriculum, and the advice of the department chairs. Cerny also knew that he wanted at least one female teacher as part of the team. Given these considerations, the principal chose the Connections teaching team: Sheryl Hart, Tim Schwartz, Bernie Lyons, and Dan Centers. Their introductions will focus on their life and work outside of Connections, but they may also shed light on the stories told in the chapters which follow.

Sheryl Hart, English Teacher

With twenty-five years in the district, Sheryl was the veteran teacher of the group. During her tenure, she had already taught both English and art and worked in all five buildings in the district.[3] Living and working in Cedar City for so long, it seemed that Sheryl knew everyone, and everyone knew Sheryl. Prior to coming to the high school three years earlier, Sheryl had been part of a close-knit group of teachers at the junior high. It was this "family" that saw her through her divorce and new marriage nine years ago. And family was a theme that surfaced often as I talked with and came to know Sheryl.

The joys of family and home were the focus of Sheryl's life. Homey touches—a pink bud vase with a few artificial pink flowers, a pink and white two-peg coat rack, a personal desk fan, and a thermos for her herbal tea—distinguished Sheryl's desk area. Most prominent on Sheryl's desk was a smiling picture of her three-year-old granddaughter, Katie. The portrait was there not only because Sheryl unabashedly doted on Katie, but because of its inspirational power—"Who could look at that face and not smile?" Sheryl's devotion to family was particularly evident in a May 1994 interview for the local newspaper's weekly "Teachers speak out" feature. Asked for "family information," Sheryl took care to mention each family member: her parents (retired and living in Cedar City); her husband, John; her stepson, Adam (a senior at Cedar City High School); her son, her daughter-in-law, and her two granddaughters.

Balancing her devotion to home and family with her commitment to school, students, and colleagues was not always easy. At times the two blended well—as when John and Sheryl attended Adam's wrestling matches or chaperoned a school dance, or when Sheryl brought Katie along to "'cool" for an hour's work during a weekend. Sometimes they didn't—being a teacher at the school her stepson attended at times cast Sheryl in the role of "wicked stepmother." And often, the finiteness of time brought home and school into conflict. When a teacher friend asked Sheryl to participate in a student-faculty retreat scheduled for a weekend in January, Sheryl, acknowledging that "This is just the kind of thing I enjoy" and that she hated to disappoint her friend and the students who wanted her to come, recognized her need for time at home apart from school was stronger and she declined the invitation.

The conflicted feelings Sheryl expressed in this incident revealed her deep concern and interest in her school family of teachers and students. I often heard and observed these feelings for her school family during the Connections year. Students often visited Sheryl's room, sometimes to work as a student aide or on business related to her role as a class advisor, but at times for no other reason than just to visit. One student in particular, Steven, was a frequent morning visitor. Steven shared Sheryl's interest in science fiction and was in the process of writing a story to be sub-

mitted for publication. Half-glasses perched on her nose and her neatly coifed red head bent to the task of editing Steven's efforts, Sheryl spoke with the student about his writing, his thoughts on current events, the books he had read lately, and his plans for the future. This mentoring type of relationship with students was one Sheryl valued. When asked (in the "Teachers speak out" interview) to recall the "proudest moment in your career," Sheryl replied, "Two of my former students that I still correspond with have become English teachers and credit my influence as being the reason for their career choices."

Just as her relationship with students was important to Sheryl, she also valued her ties to her fellow teachers. Often, as fourth period ended, a female teacher would meet Sheryl in the hall or peek into Sheryl's room to ask about plans for lunch. And Sheryl, speaking of her colleagues in the English hall, referred to them as "neighbors." When a teacher survey about staff morale was circulated in November, Sheryl shared her responses with me. Asked to identify her role among the staff, Sheryl had circled "mix with many" rather than "isolated"; she had circled "no" when asked "Do you feel isolated from other teachers?"; and in response to "What can we do to improve interaction between departments?" Sheryl had written "More social get-togethers . . . especially in the A.M. when we're not so tired." As she joined the Connections teaching team, Sheryl's sociable nature would be distinctly evident in the way she built her relationship with Tim, Dan, and Bernie.

Perhaps Sheryl's introduction is best summarized in her own words. The local newspaper profile included Sheryl's comments when asked why she is a teacher: "At the risk of sounding totally corny, I love it. I think it's what I do best. Except for the paper work, I love every aspect of it. I enjoy the reading, sharing, planning, writing, and working with students. I've always wanted to teach."

Tim Schwartz, Learning Disabilities Teacher

Tim came to Connections with fifteen years of teaching experience, the last eight within the Cedar City system. Most of his teaching experience, and all of his years at Cedar City, had been as a learning disabilities teacher. But like Sheryl, Tim also had a

background in art education. Also like Sheryl, he had taught at the junior high before coming to the high school five years ago. And again like Sheryl, it appeared that Tim knew everyone and everyone knew Tim in this small community. His strong community ties came of being a native son: he was a graduate of the Cedar City Schools.

A look at the area surrounding his teacher's desk revealed much about Tim. What was immediately noticeable was the number of calendars and schedules—among them a desk calendar, a schedule for IEP (Individual Education Plan) conferences, a memo about an upcoming meeting from the local teachers association president, basketball scouting and winter sports schedules. The calendars and schedules reflected Tim's multiple roles at Cedar City High School.

The IEP conference schedule reflected Tim's role as a special education teacher. During the spring of 1993, Tim was honored at the annual county work-study banquet as "Teacher of the Year." As a special education teacher, Tim implemented the IEPs for eighteen learning disabilities students, ten of whom were ninth-grade students enrolled in Connections. But contact with parents and concerns that student goals and educational programs were being addressed were not confined to the week of formal conferences held in April. Regular documentation of student progress in mainstream classes meant constant conversation with other faculty members who taught learning disabilities students. Tim needed to set aside time, at times in blocks of two days or more, for academic assessment using instruments such as Key Math. Tim's "study skills" class, held the last period each day, derived its content from the needs of his students. It was a time for assisting students with their assignments, for providing tutoring or alternative instruction in difficult concepts or tasks, and for working with students individually or in small groups to develop strategies for success with the various elements of the high school curriculum. Filling the role of learning disabilities (LD) teacher had created two professional habits that Tim saw himself as bringing to Connections: "I see myself as one who keeps records; I write a lot of stuff down. And then I see myself as flexible. I can jump off and go wherever I'm needed. I'm used to that as an LD teacher" (September 17, 1993).