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Catherine Eggleston Hackney

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## CATHOLIC SCHOOL FACULTY AS AN ADULT LEARNING COMMUNITY: A MODEL FOR CHILDREN

CATHERINE EGGLESTON HACKNEY

*Kent State University*

*Educational leaders have historically expressed belief in the importance of teacher development. They have, however, largely failed to view professional development activity as a process that lies at the very heart of efforts to create a community of learners. This article reviews the author's experiences with a Catholic elementary school faculty as that faculty journeyed toward becoming a learning community characterized by sustained inquiry, collective problem solving, and shared decision making. Implications for practice are considered.*

More than two decades ago, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops stressed in *To Teach as Jesus Did* (1973) that the notion of community lies at the heart of a Christian education, not simply as a concept to be taught, but as a reality to be lived. In this spirit, individual Catholic schools need to focus attention on the teaching and learning which occur not only among children, but also among the adults in the school.

Such a focus is also essential in order to assure the best possible success of students. In a climate of Christian care and understanding, school adults working, thinking, evaluating, and refining practice together can have a powerful effect on classroom teaching and learning. Maehr, Midgley, and Urdan (1992) even suggest that the learning which exists in the larger unit, the school, may in fact define the quality of learning which exists for children. It is among school adults, with their expressed dispositions toward teaching and learning, that the cultural distinctions of the school as a place of learning are declared. Thus, consideration of not only adult teaching behavior, but

adult learning behavior as well, must play a major role in the development of the school as a genuine community of learning.

Historically educational leaders have valued teacher growth and development. Yet they have often treated professional development as an extra, as something to be done when it can be afforded. They have largely failed to view teacher development as activity that lies at the very heart of efforts to create a community of learners, as the fiber with which the learning culture of the school is woven, and as a model that all children should be privileged to observe. As Brooks and Brooks (1993) have written:

Adult modeling and environmental conditions play a significant role in the development of students' disposition to be self-initiating problem-posers and problem-solvers. When students work with adults who continue to view themselves as learners, who ask questions with which they themselves still grapple, who are willing and able to alter both content and practice in the pursuit of meaning, and who treat students and their endeavors as works in progress, not finished products, students are more likely to demonstrate these characteristics themselves. (pp. 9-10)

## COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING

Holly and Southworth (1989) described a learning community or a "learning school" as one which fosters learning on five levels: learning which is facilitated and maximized for all students; learning that promotes teachers as continuous learners; learning which supports teachers' learning together and from one another; learning that allows the school to be responsive to internal and external pressures; and learning which expects the principal to be the head learner who models learning behavior for teachers and students. Henderson and Hawthorne (1995) extend this definition, adding the notion that the learning community is

about teachers, students, parents, principal, university faculty, central office colleagues, and interested others collaborating with one another as they inquire into, deliberate over, and make judgement about what is in the pedagogical interest of children and the democratic intentions of society. (p. 2)

In a genuine learning community, adults invest themselves in debate over what is really important. They promote understanding and appreciation of their own work as well as that of others. They create ties that bind themselves together as well as to the shared purpose and reason for the school (Bolman & Deal, 1995). As Sergiovanni (1995) notes, when adult school relationships are forged in the spirit of community, the nature of the organization develops from a focus on "I" to a focus on "we," with a stronger commitment to reflection and refinement of practice for the success of all children.

Though Catholic schools have always been concerned with sound teaching, a strong curriculum, and reasonable evaluation practices, the school's development as a genuine learning community committed to continuous inquiry is a relatively new emphasis. The creation of such a community requires a renewed focus on the adult professional as a learner. Support for open-mindedness, questioning, searching, risk-taking, experimentation, and exploration among adults for the betterment of teaching and learning needs to characterize the teaching-learning culture of the school. In such a culture, school adults consistently demonstrate collegial behavior, sharing common work values, engaging in conversations about their work, and helping each other achieve the work of the school (Barth, 1990; Warren-Little, 1981).

## TEACHERS AS LEADERS AND LEARNERS

Catholic schools have relied on good teachers to assume responsibility to model the Christian message and to support, through classroom teaching, the work of the Church among its youth. Reflective of the Church's respect for the work of teachers, the chapter on catechists in *Sharing the Light of Faith* (USCC, 1979) begins with the Gospel quotation, "There was a man named John sent by God, who came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all men might believe" (John 1:6). Traditionally, however, and contrary to this call, teachers have seldom been encouraged to assume leadership outside of the classroom. Normative referents have been such that teachers have felt safe and secure within the classroom and have not, to any significant degree, ventured out into the school at large as leaders. Yet, several groups, including the Carnegie Foundation (1986) and the Holmes Group (1986), have supported teacher leadership as a way to create in schools a more learning-centered environment for adults and children.

Warren-Little (1981) found that teachers who engage in collaboration contribute to more growth-oriented settings and engage in more experimentation for improvement of their practice. In other words, they help to create schools which foster and value learning for adults as well as children; they help create genuine learning communities.

If, then, we are to recognize the strengths that teachers, who are closest to children, bring to problem-solving and decision-making, those with positional authority need to encourage, nurture, and support teachers' active involvement in these processes. Leaders need to rethink the roles of teachers and administrators as collaborators in the creation of an ethos of continuous learning, professional growth, and valued collegiality. Such an ethos would be characterized by collective visioning, shared problem-posing and problem-solving, collaborative decision-making, and loyalty to the ethical and moral purposes "proclaimed" by the school (Schwartz, 1991, p. 186) in a climate of peace, justice, and caring.

Therefore, those spiritual, academic, and social norms which have characterized Catholic schools and served students so well must be extended to the adults in the school. The Christ-centeredness manifested in the love of children, the emphasis on the students' scholastic experiences, and the climate marked by caring, encouragement, and respect for learners must also be experienced within the adult community. Within a culture of Christian love and respect, the adults in the school must continuously challenge each other with high expectations for personal professional growth through inquiry.

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Translating theory into practice is easier said than done. Striving to create an ethos of inquiry for the development of a genuine community of learning is no exception. Though no "recipe" does, nor should, exist, the author's experiences with a local Catholic elementary school might serve as a guide to those traveling down a path toward this end.

### THE SCHOOL

The elementary school involved in this project was established in 1916 and continues to serve an economically, racially, and religiously diverse urban community in the metropolitan Cleveland area. At present the school serves 350 students with an adult professional faculty and staff of 25. This school has enjoyed a reputation of "accomplishing its mission well" (Schade, 1997, p. 1). Yet, based on internal and external review, the faculty and administration had recommitted themselves to enhancing the academic program and to making theirs a "blue ribbon school" (Schade, 1997, p. 7). The author was invited to coach them along the way.

Though solicited by the principal to help the staff develop spiritual, academic, and social goals, the author approached the charge committed to the idea that there existed a much bigger task: to help teachers and the administration assume responsibility for their own learning, problem-solving, and decision-making. The challenge was to assist faculty in developing a new mindset toward inquiry, shared leadership, and the development of a community of learning.

The initial phase of this project, which resulted in articulation of student learning goals, consisted of five two- to three-hour sessions. Though the monthly intervals permitted considerable time for the faculty's digestion of new ideas, the time between each meeting required the group's taking responsibility to remind itself of its mission, to support each other in their learning responsibilities, and to challenge each other in reflective dialogue.

## **JOURNEYING TOWARD OUR BELIEFS AND A VISION OF THE FUTURE**

The process of enhancing the academic program for the success of all students had to begin with a collective understanding of our purpose. We needed to become journeyers, not "wanderers" (Ristau, 1989, p. 60). We needed direction and group cohesion, yet room for all invested adults to exercise individual expression. We needed to create those conditions which supported an ethos of inquiry, continuous questioning, and sustained learning. To frame the substantive discussions with this group of emerging teacher leaders, the author used the modes of inquiry introduced by Henderson and Hawthorne (1995) and Henderson (in press). They identify five modes of inquiry: visionary and comparative inquiry, revisitation of the initial vision, and the ongoing processes of inquiry and caring-facilitative inquiry. Developed as part of a professional collaboration paradigm, the modes described in Table 1 provide a scaffolding which supports responsible teacher inquiry, professional holonomy, and teacher leadership practices in the school.

### **IMPLEMENTING VISIONARY INQUIRY**

As reflective practitioners (Schon, 1987), faculty needed time to think alone and together, to dialogue, to clarify who they are, and to articulate the directions they might take to make the school "blue ribbon." However, before engaging in curriculum and instructional adaptation, they needed to recognize, accept, and formally adopt those beliefs and values which would serve as the philosophical base from which they would make decisions and address problems. This form of visionary inquiry required them to examine their ways of teaching and learning in order to understand why education in the school looked the way it did and why the goals of the school would take the form that they would.

The faculty spent a first session together discussing "vision" in relation to teaching and learning in a Catholic school. They addressed such questions as: Just what is a vision? How do we know what we want our vision to be? Do we have one now? Can we grow one? Who gets to create the vision? How can we proceed to develop a vision? The questions were many and difficult: the answers were not always clear.

Sometimes it is easier to recognize the beliefs that others hold than to identify our own. Therefore, to help the faculty grow in understanding, members viewed a video presentation which highlighted another newly-established school. What most characterized this school was its adherence to a set of beliefs about children, teaching, and learning. Discussion around this school's particular beliefs and values led the group into thinking about that

**Table 1**  
**Journeying Toward Beliefs and Values**

<b>Modes of Inquiry</b>	<b>Guide Questions</b>	<b>Learning Activities</b>
1. Visionary Inquiry	<p>What has always been important to us in our school? What are we doing/not doing for children and adults in our school? What would we like to do/be in the future? How do we know what we want our vision to be? How do we proceed to develop a vision?</p>	<p>Video presentation. Large group discussion. Small group exercises and reporting to large group.</p>
2. Comparative Inquiry	<p>What does the research say about effective practice? How can we construct out of our own experience and knowledge of best practice that which is appropriate for the children and adults in the school?</p>	<p>Study of <i>The Basic School</i>. Discussion of developmentally appropriate practice. Video presentation and discussion.</p>
3. Visionary Inquiry Revisited	<p>What continues to be of importance in our school? What are we doing/not doing for children and adults in our school? What are our hopes for the future?</p>	<p>Small group activities to include ideas from comparative inquiry sessions. Categorization and prioritization of ideas in small groups with presentation to the large group. Translation of beliefs, new and existing ideas, into target goal area.</p>
4. Ongoing Process Inquiry	<p>Consideration of work holistically. Refocus on the "big picture." Review purpose of activity.</p>	<p>Discussion of the ways we, as adults, learn. Surfacing anxieties about the process. Revisiting the big picture, our objectives and purpose. Redesigning pedagogy to facilitate learning and minimize frustration.</p>
5. Ongoing Caring-Facilitative Inquiry	<p>Constructivist practice plus the ethic of care. Validation, appreciation, and nurturing of personal inquiry and learning.</p>	<p>Sharing interest, excitement, appreciation for each other's work. Maintaining a challenging but loving climate for adult learners</p>

which they as a school community professed to believe and value.

It was difficult to identify those deep, underlying beliefs which govern policies, decisions, and actions, so again the faculty asked: What has always been important in our school? What are we doing for children and adults and why are we doing these things? What are we not doing that we need to be doing? What would we like to be/do in the future?

In small groups faculty members generated long lists of answers to these questions. This was a brainstorming session. No judgments were allowed; all input was included. Faculty shared the results of small group discussions with the larger group. They preserved their work on charts for future reference, and they moved on.

## **BROADENING HORIZONS THROUGH COMPARATIVE INQUIRY**

Though the teachers were reluctant to put their lists aside, it was essential that they experience new learning. They needed to address even more questions: What does the research say about effective practice? How can we construct, out of our own experiences and knowledge of "best practice," that which is right and appropriate for our children and ourselves?

Henderson (in press) described comparative inquiry as that which is concerned with "strong reasoning and the broadening of horizons." This mode of inquiry promotes not only knowing one's self and one's ability to articulate personal beliefs, but also one's ability to translate those beliefs into action. It also involves continuous study of practice which has developed out of theory, research, and valued experience. So faculty took time to study the components of *The Basic School* (Boyer, 1995).

During this input session, members kept a two-sided list. On one side, after reviewing the recommendations of *The Basic School* (Boyer, 1995), they noted those characteristics present in their own school, those about which they felt proud. On the other side they noted those ideas which were new and interesting to them. That side became their list of possibilities, their ideas for stretching, those dreams toward which they wanted to reach (see Table 2).

In later sessions they examined the concepts of developmentally appropriate practice, as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, as well as the revised components of effective schools. As they listened to these presentations and viewed another video presentation, they added to their two-sided lists. When they finished with the input exercises, members returned to their original small groups rich with additional responses to the fourth question: What would we like to be/do in the future?



**Table 2**  
**Two-Sided List Used for Discussion**

<b>Points of Pride</b>	<b>New and Interesting Ideas</b>
Catholic faith development	Emphasis on adult professional development
Strong academic orientation	Integrated language arts programming
Appreciation of the diversity that children bring to school	Talent development among children
Dedicated community of students, parents, teachers	Acceleration
Supportive administration	Enrichment
Emphasis on respect and responsibility	Greater collaborative efforts among teachers at different grade levels and disciplines

**PROCESS INQUIRY**

Quite typically, teachers grew impatient with the focus on beliefs, values, and futuring. They expressed an eagerness to get on with the practical decisions which would lead to implementation of new programming the next school year. Therefore, there were times that the entire group had to back away, to consider their work more holistically, and to review together the purposes underlying the activity. They took time to examine their modes of learning and to discuss how they might redesign the group’s experiences together to make greater headway toward decisions about practice itself. The group talked about trees needing strong root systems before producing fruit. They were, in those moments, engaging in process inquiry (Henderson, in press), redesigning their pedagogical experiences to facilitate and sustain their own learning, and leading toward production of a rich harvest.

**VISIONARY INQUIRY REVISITED**

Faculty returned re-inspired to answer earlier questions about their beliefs and values. In small groups they consolidated their lists of hopes and dreams and extracted the most promising ideas from their collective charts. Each group offered the large group its top five choices and the group collectively began to categorize these choices into goal areas. Once the group came to consensus about the areas around which they would build their academic targets, they realized that first, as a group, they would need to be firm in their convictions. Later decisions would need to be well grounded and congruent with

these beliefs.

Returning to the charts created in the small groups, they again examined that which had always been important in the school, that which they were doing for children and adults, that which needed to be done, and that which they hoped for in the future. Small groups categorized and prioritized their lists for presentation to the larger group. Once lists were compiled, they were able to translate ideas, conditions, and behaviors into a set of beliefs upon which all agreed.

The group decided by consensus on two academic goals centering on the reading/writing process in the school and on meeting the needs of the more able learner in the regular classroom. Teachers expressed interest in one of the goal areas. They began reading curriculum material which would support their work and planning for how that goal would be articulated and managed during the coming school year. In future meetings, the group will address those considerations and plan strategies for implementation.

## **SUSTAINING THE INQUIRY**

Sustaining the inquiry that characterized the group's initial work efforts will be no easy task. It will require that all invested adults continuously stretch to reach higher levels of reflection in a spirit of caring, support, and respect; it will require all adults to become provocateurs, to dream of what might be, and to envision a community centered on teaching and learning. It will require the adults in the school to ask themselves these questions over and over:

- How can our inquiry help to create a school where all adults and children celebrate learning through reflection and refinement of practice?
- How can we nurture community members in their inquiry efforts and support them in their inquiry styles?
- How can we find balance between individual expression as learners and interdependence as a Christian learning community?
- Are we managing biases so that they do not limit creativity? Do we respond to differing points of view in caring ways? Do we celebrate imagination?
- Do we think, write, and talk about the "whys" of inquiry-based learning with respect to lifelong learning and our moral responsibilities as educators? In what ways are we leading others toward inquiry?
- How can we more effectively confront, circumvent, or redesign those structures which inhibit our growth as a learning community? Do we communicate our vision and purpose to others? Do we ask for their support?

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Building an ethos of continuous learning and inquiry requires first that teachers and administrators engage in extensive discussion of the value and need for inquiry in the school, the collective identification and clarification of beliefs, and the unique reasons for the school's existence. Reshaping the school's culture in such a direction promotes refinement of teaching and learning and provides a model of continuous study and learning among adults that can serve as a model for children's learning as well.

Secondly, the values of peace and justice need to be recognized, reinforced, and practiced in the daily operation of the school. "In the absence of justice, no enduring peace is possible" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1973, p. 8). Therefore, mutual respect for individual expression of the school's purpose is a precondition to the formation of a genuine community of learning. It is the responsibility of all members of the school community to guide others toward the expression of these values in the life of the school.

Third, positional and teacher leaders need to take the initiative to change or bend those conditions obstructing an ethos of inquiry. Scheduling, teacher assignments, student placements, the clock and calendar, the role of parent involvement, professional development, and teacher evaluation practice are often based on tradition or past practice and simply do not support collaborative study, reflection, and problem-solving. Leaders need to find ways to reconsider that which has always been. Teachers, parents, and administrators need to decide collectively what they want their schools to be for children and adults, how they want them to operate, which existing structures are supportive of their vision, and which are in need of modification or elimination.

This exploration is no quick or easy task. At times, insurmountable and terribly lengthy would seem better descriptors; yet, if we are committed to creation of an inquiry-based Christian learning community, school leaders have the responsibility for creatively dealing with that which is getting in the way of sustained inquiry and greater student achievement.

Building a learning community also means introducing new ideas, spreading the news, and inviting others to participate. Administrative and teacher leaders have almost an evangelistic responsibility to share with others the worthiness of an inquiry-based learning community. All adults in the school must receive continual invitations to participate in reflective dialogue; school leaders should make regular presentations to education commissions and other parish groups to communicate the learning and professional growth occurring in the school. Teachers and administrators should also become involved with local service organizations, nursery co-ops, preschools, and other schools to communicate the message of inquiry and learning to those out in the community.

Finally, school leaders must ensure that organizational support is provided for personal and professional inquiry. Continuous study and professional development activities must be made available to the adults in the school. Because budgets are often restrictive, school leaders and teachers need to become even more creative about pursuing professional development. Reading and study groups, peer observation and coaching, collaborative professional evaluation practices, inquiry-based faculty meetings, and school-university partnerships are just a few possible opportunities for professional development that incur little or no cost. Support for personal and professional inquiry is often more attitudinal than it is financial.

## **INQUIRY AS CARING AND FACILITATIVE**

In a Catholic school community it is only fitting to recognize the place of caring-facilitative inquiry which marries constructivist practice with the ethic of care. Not only does this mode of inquiry concern itself with promoting active adult learning, it asks all community members to validate, to appreciate, and to nurture the diversity that each person brings to the pursuit of continuous learning. Caring-facilitative inquiry is demonstrated by the interest and excitement community members share for each others' work; it is what makes a community of learning a challenging yet loving place for children as well as adults. It is inquiry supported by the Gospel values. As the National Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote in *To Teach as Jesus Did* (1973):

Christian fellowship grows in personal relationship of friendship, trust and love infused with a vision of men and women as children of God redeemed by Christ...integral personal growth, even growth in grace and the spiritual life, is not possible without integral social life. To understand this is a high form of learning; to foster such understanding is a crucial task of education.  
( p. 7)

Caring-facilitative inquiry is what brings joy to the process.

Despite the time, energy, and effort that the journey demands, the benefits of becoming a genuine community of learning are many. Teaching and learning become central to the purpose of the school. "The norm of professionalism is supported in concrete ways by placing teachers in charge of their own professional growth" (Schwartz, 1991). And, most importantly, children are offered a model of adult learning, continuous study, and sustained inquiry. Genuine learning communities support the claim, "If we want students to value inquiry, we, as educators, must also value it" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 110).

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*Catherine Eggleston Hackney served as an elementary school teacher and principal in Catholic and public schools before joining the educational administration faculty at Kent State University. Her research interests include leadership development, particularly among beginning school principals and women. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Catherine Eggleston Hackney, 401 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242.*

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