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Building Communities of Inquirers in Schools

by Myriam Shechter

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Belonging to a community of inquirers makes you keenly aware of the benefits of such membership, as well as of the problems inherent to any larger group of people working together. Our own group of inquirers, DICEP (Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project), associated with OISE/UT, includes university-based staff, teachers, and graduate students. We have created a large network of communication lines through which ideas, comments and suggestions flow freely between all participants: e-mail, meetings, interviews and, time-permitting, social get-togethers.

Almost as a natural consequence of being part of such a community of inquirers, some members of DICEP have initiated communities of inquirers in their own schools. Although the number of teachers involved in each community, as well as their particular aims, differ from school to school, all these communities have in common the desire to find efficient ways to inquire and examine topics of importance in the pursuit of their educational endeavours.

The communities of inquirers developed by members of DICEP vary in size and purpose. In one of the schools, three teachers conducted an inquiry on the learning relationship between grade 1/2 and grade 8 children, generating a large scale intergenerational project. In another school, a group of teachers followed a "spelling" inquiry throughout a school year, producing an extremely valuable learning guide that they shared with other teachers as well as with parents. Yet another group has an ongoing inquiry community focussing on a variety of topics of interest for the teachers involved. Some of the communities of inquirers include the entire school staff as well as the administration of the school.

Naturally, rewards alternate with problems along the way. One of the major problems is time management, the demands imposed on teachers being sometimes out of proportion with the time available. On occasion, teachers are not sure whether the inquiry will indeed contribute to their work. Not everyone has the confidence to expose possible professional weaknesses in their practice to their colleagues' scrutiny. And sometimes practical and theoretical approaches to an inquiry do not match.

Learning how to listen to each other and how to benefit from each other's experience and expertise is possibly one of the main rewards of belonging to a community of inquirers. Sharing findings with colleagues, parents, and the educational community at large is certainly another major benefit. And finally, applying the findings of one's inquiry to the actual teaching process justifies the time and effort invested in the inquiry.

In order to document, and eventually disseminate, the activities, successes, as well as the problems encountered by these communities of inquirers, our project team is relying on a database comprising observations in schools, videotapes and audiotapes, minutes of meetings of the various communities, and finally a series of in-depth interviews with the members of our project team who initiated and participate in these communities.

Among the main topics we are looking at are:

- History of school community (school background, initiating a community of inquirers, choosing topics for inquiry).
- The community in action (meetings, means of communication, motivation, what works, and what does not work).
- The community in the school (administration support or involvement, contact with children/parents/community, contribution of inquiry to classroom learning).
- Dissemination (findings, sharing with colleagues, writing/publishing, conference/workshop presentations).
- Future plans (short/long term plans, what has been learned from the experience, advice for other teachers planning to start similar communities).

It is rewarding for our own community of inquirers, DICEP, that members of our group felt that our common experience with inquiry deserved expanding into developing their own communities of inquirers in their schools.