How Do Teachers Learn with Teachers?

Understanding Child Study[1] as a Case for Professional Learning Communities

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In the wide world of educational research, the hopeful concept of teacher as learner has gained currency among a number of authors and provoked useful questions about the nature of professional development for teachers.[2] Called by different names, *collaborative professional development* and *professional learning community* (PLC) both refer to a way in which teachers learn with teachers to become better teachers. These kinds of initiative recognize that collaboration is a demanding, uncomfortable, participatory process in which teachers may ultimately be required to take responsibility for each other's learning.[3] This image of what we expect from our teachers may look exactly like what we expect from our students. The rewards are potentially profound, although they are not easy to measure.

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A fundamental characteristic of a community that learns together is well described by the phrase *essential tension*.[4] Drawing on the work of Engeström[5] and of Wenger,[6] Barab et al. describe how grappling with apparent dichotomies moves a community of practitioners forward. What is important is not the resolution of a particular conflict, and certainly not a resolution that lands on one side or the other. Rather, as Grossman et al. describe, in an essential tension two foci are "brought into relation" with each other and through this relationship generate growth. They are at pains to specify that ideas such as "combine" and "integrate" are unable to describe the dynamic, creative interplay of poles within a community. *Teacher as learner* is a prime example of this kind of essential tension: In a school whose very purpose must be for student learning, how do we bring attention to the learning of the adults in the community? Our premise must be that one does not occur at the expense of the other, or that one must preclude the other, but that, in maintaining both, in relationship, at the foci of our attention, a better school is created.

For me, this way of thinking can transform many of the tensions we experience. Consider these apparently contradictory juxtapositions: material as process, depth as breadth, or content as structure. This view of conflict, which sees conflict as generative, seems to me to be the appropriate one for a group engaged in the difficult work of creating a community. A competitive, win-lose approach to conflict might work well in an authoritarian hierarchy, but it would prove barren in a professional learning community. Grossman et al. are emphatic that conversations among teachers in a group must be viewed as ends in themselves. "As we have tried to make clear, we do not regard discourse as a proxy of something else but as a powerful achievement in itself."[7] This point of view may indeed lie at one end of a spectrum, but anyone dedicated to the work of a professional learning community needs to view discourse as necessary, if not sufficient.

The Child Study

The sections that follow contain an account of the Child Study Group at the Rudolf Steiner School in Manhattan (I currently serve as Chair of the group). In recent years, I have grown increasingly interested in deepening the discourse among the members of this long-standing professional learning community. My methods of working draw heavily from the example of Jon McAlice, a co-founder of two other professional learning com-

munities in which I have participated: the Young Waldorf Colleagues Circle and the Advanced Studies Initiative (ASI). In a letter to new ASI participants, McAlice describes the way in which this group works:

> The way of working striven for in meetings of ASI members can be described as a focused dialogical approach with a dynamically evolving content and structure. Teachers need to be able to engage one another in dialogues which challenge each to reach from the known through reflected experience into the unknown. This is a method of discourse which lies at the core of Steiner's work on the creative social encounter. It rests upon the three archetypal gestures of the engaged self: focus, listening, and speaking, and challenges participants to speak of rather than talk about the topic at hand. In general, the dialogues serve to lead all the participants to a deeper pedagogical understanding of the question or topic being addressed, although not necessarily to answers to the questions or explanations about the topics. The latter tend to move one to a cognitively safe distance from the unknown, whereas the goal of this approach is to engage more closely with the focus of attention. This shared striving to move towards rather than away from a question or pedagogical riddle can lead to those rare moments of grace in which one has a deep consciously moral experience of the inner nature of what one has striven to understand.[8]

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The account that follows will describe what this process actually looks like in the Child Study Group, the kinds of structure that facilitate it, and my reflections on the fruits of this endeavor.

The Purpose of Child Study

Our Child Study Group has these three purposes: to understand and better meet the needs of individual students in the school; to deepen the participants' understanding of anthroposophy; and to improve the teachers' professional practices. These purposes demonstrate a recognition that professional learning communities need to balance *process* with *content*.[9] As Lieberman and Miller describe in their third chapter, professional learning communities need to study *something*—the content. In our case, the content is twofold: the individual child, and the philosophy of anthroposophy.

The first purpose of our group, articulating how to meet the needs of individual students, is common to nearly every school. Whether we look to the committees that write Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) in a public school, an educational support team in a private school, or a care group in many Waldorf schools, these groups devote themselves to finding and describing how to better meet the needs of students who are perceived to be struggling in, or disturbing to, their classrooms. These groups may be described as providing diagnosis and prescription. A common assumption concerning their work, however, is one of expertise: Those who diagnose and prescribe are qualified, and usually certified, to do so. While it may be expected that their skills will be honed by practice, there may be little conscious effort to explicitly develop new skills within the committee's process of diagnosis and prescription.

Child study is unusual in turning this assumption on its head. As we study a child, seeking to understand how to meet her needs, we are simultaneously and consciously working to develop new skills and capacities as classroom teachers and as colleagues. First-year teachers and experienced colleagues work side-by-side, and insights can come from either. Expertise is judged during the process of work. Experienced teachers may more frequently contribute valuable questions or offer fruitful insights. It may also be, however, that an experienced teacher is more fixed in her opinions and modes of seeing. Every teacher who joins the work of child study, therefore, must be simultaneously committed to the children and to her own growth. This growth is necessarily both professional and personal. In the work of teaching out of anthroposophy, the first cannot be divorced from the second.

Since my first encounter with child study in 1995, when I arrived as a teacher new to the Rudolf Steiner School, I have seen the balance between providing for the needs of exceptional students and providing professional growth change in emphasis. My current emphasis for the group is toward masterful teaching. In particular, my interest lies in the interactive relationship between the teacher and the students in his class, what I might call the art of teaching. As David Schon describes it,

> I have used the term professional artistry to refer to the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice. Note, however, that their artistry is a high-powered, esoteric variant of the more familiar sorts of competence all of us exhibit every day in countless acts of recognition, judgment, and skillful performance.[10]

In the classroom, I argue that "unique" and "uncertain" situations arise daily. A teacher's professional artistry lies in the ability to do the right thing at the right time. When do you throw the lesson plan out the window and do exactly what the class needs at that moment? What do you choose to do? Certainly, teachers may improve through trial and error, but that can be slow, frustrating, and damaging to both teacher and students. Indeed, many teachers leave the profession long before they become masterful, or rest content at a certain level of competence. Child study works from the basic assumption that teachers can consciously and deliberately develop skills that will enable professional artistry in their classes. Master teachers have a wide variety of effective styles, and artful teaching is highly individual. Our study thus avoids training in particular methods or techniques. Rather, we educate ourselves in careful observation, disciplined reflection, and responsible experimentation.

The Process of Child Study

Child Study has met every Thursday afternoon for more than twenty-five years. Meetings last between about 60 and 90 minutes. Typically, they include an opening exercise, study of a text, work on the riddle of an individual child, and a closing. Membership is entirely voluntary and is open to any teacher or administrator in our Nursery–12 school, although the majority of members have historically tended to be early childhood teachers. Every second week an anthroposophical physician joins our work.

Observation

Our first step in studying a child is to observe that child as fully as we can. What is the physical form of the child? Is he short for his age, or tall? Are his limbs rounded or linear? Have the secondary teeth descended or are the milk teeth still intact? What are the child's habits? Does she suck her thumb? Tap his foot? How does the child move? Can he jump rope? Catch a ball? Walk a balance beam? What is the child's speech like? Are the sounds clear? Where are they placed in the mouth? What does the child eat? Does she prefer foods that are white? Foods that are crunchy? How is the child's health? Are there allergies? Does the child tend to get headaches or stomachaches? What is the character of the child's handwriting? Is it angular or rounded? Are the pages messy or deliberate? Are the pencil strokes light or do they make grooves in the paper? These are only a scant handful of the many, many observations that a teacher might make about a child of interest.

Good observation is typically characterized as *objective*, and it is essential that the observer remain completely faithful to the truth. I have found, however, that objective observation, rather than distancing me from the phenomenon at hand, brings me increasingly closer to it. As a young teacher, struggling to work with a student I disliked, I was advised simply to observe that student. Then, as now, I found that the more closely I observed, the more interested I became in the phenomenon. Each observation called for more observations: *when* did the child start staring out the window? How *often* did she drum her fingers on the desk? And, surprisingly, the more I observed, the more I found myself liking a formerly irritating child. Observation leads to interest which leads to sympathy. Experience can occur anywhere on a spectrum from fleeting and superficial to intense and profound. An impoverished experience must necessarily allow only shallow reflection and

greater likelihood for an erroneous hypothesis. Because our work is in teaching children, our hypotheses take on a deeply moral character.

Because of this emphasis on observation, we spend some time during each child study meeting training ourselves to be better observers. This is helped by our fifteen to twenty minutes each session working through an artistic exercise. Over the years, these have included sketching, speech work, eurythmy, and clay sculpture, rotating through this opening time in blocks of about twelve to sixteen weeks. Our intention is not to become artists, but rather to use each medium to sharpen our capacity for observation. This time also serves to center us, allowing us to slowly shed the busyness of the day and to slow down, breathe, and fully arrive in the room.

Our first step in studying a child is to have the presenting teacher simply describe that child to the group as completely as she can while withholding further interpretation as much as possible. This initial presentation takes only ten to fifteen minutes, a long time for pure description. The other teachers listen as attentively as they can, working hard to form a picture of the child in their mind's eye. Then a few minutes are given for the listeners to ask questions that fill out that picture, details that the presenter overlooked. I typically schedule this presentation at the end of our agenda, so that we are not tempted to chat about the child, but we can close the meeting with a picture of the child living in our imagination.

Diagnosis

One week later, Child Study returns again to that same child. During the week, every member has made an effort to observe the child for himself or herself, visiting classes or simply watching the child play in the park. During this week, the school's anthroposophical doctor is also in attendance, and by now he has observed the child on two separate days.

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We return to the child by recollecting her in our collective imagination. Taking turns around the circle, each teacher mentions what "struck" her about the child, either from her own observation or from her memory of the last week's presentation. At this point, other information may be introduced: paintings, written compositions, educational assessments, a house-tree-person picture. The presenting teacher has also usually been in contact with the child's parents, and anything the parent wishes to share about the child's early years and home routines is now brought to the group. From this comprehensive description of the child, a question, or "problem" may begin to emerge. The question, we hope, suggests a more fundamental riddle in the child's constitution. Beyond superficial problems of inappropriate behavior or academic underachievement, we try to discern the imbalance or disjunction in the picture of the child. The wisdom of the practiced teachers is especially important at this stage, for while a novice can discipline herself to careful observation, those observations do not always "speak" to her.

This is the stage at which conceptual schemas enter, and we must proceed gently indeed. A learning community needs a shared language. But the concepts expressed by that language must be deeply penetrated and alive for each member in the circle. Superficial frames and unexamined jargon have no place here. As McAlice describes it, our intention is to approach closer to the riddle at hand rather than to distance ourselves by explaining it away. In the work of the Child Study, an explanation serves to situate the question in such a way that we can begin to make sense with it.

Toward this end, a substantial portion of each meeting is spent in studying Rudolf Steiner's work. For four years we have worked with *Foundations of Human Experience* (*Study of Man*).[11] We typically spend several weeks on each lecture, working through about seven lectures each year.

Our work with these lectures is by no means finished, and I expect that we will return to them many times in future years. This slow, ongoing, recursive work with Steiner's ideas enables us to move beyond catch-phrases and jargon so that unfamiliar words and difficult concepts slowly become part of a deep, enduring understanding and a meaningful, shared vocabulary.

Our intention is to come to a place where we can speak "out of" rather than "about" the lecture at hand and toward that end we work slowly and deliberately. Steiner's work is difficult, and it would be easy to come to the table with a collection of highlighted passages, ideas we don't understand, or statements with which to agree or disagree. What we have in mind, however, is learning that transforms us. Instead of merely bringing our current skills and capacities to analyze the text at hand, we intend, through working with the text, to develop new skills and capacities. Rather like learning a new language, say French or mathematics, exercise in reading that language develops the language itself, as well as the thoughts contained within the language, thus bringing process and content as dual foci of our work.

One of the exercises that I learned through my work with McAlice is to begin with a collective remembering of the text, thought by thought, without notes or book to glance at. Either progressing in a sequential manner around the circle, or freely opening the floor to whoever wishes to volunteer, we try to simply summarize the thoughts of the lecture in the order in which they were given. This is a remarkable challenge not only as a memory and concentration exercise, but as a social exercise in listening and speaking. As the participants in the group speak, they build together a picture that everyone recognizes and yet one that looks different from what anyone alone would have created. Something shared is brought into existence, and from that shared co-creation a different level of dialogue may emerge.

With Steiner's concepts at the heart of our shared vocabulary, we offer explanations that remain tentative and malleable. Thoughts often emerge in the form of images or metaphors about the child, and they can have an almost dream-like quality. Occasionally, one of these speaks of the child with profound power and truthfulness. It is these insights for which we strive, which McAlice calls "those rare moments of grace in which one has a deep, consciously moral experience of the inner nature of what one has striven to understand."[12]

Treatment

This stage, a natural evolution of the previous one, sees that the dream-like image we had of the child holds up to the light of day. McAlice's "experience of the inner nature" needs to be articulated. Insights are formed into words. We search to see where this image fits with our observations of the child, and where it does not. Finally, this new understanding of the child is translated into a recommended course of action. This may consist of apparently small changes in how the teacher meets the child in the classroom, or it may involve substantial changes to the child's educational program, perhaps requiring the agreement of many teachers within the school. The presenting teacher implements the proposed course of action and reports to the Child Study six weeks later and again at the end of the year. Occasionally there is a dramatic change in the child, usually there are subtle changes, and sometimes there is little change at all.

Conclusion

Reflecting upon my work with the child study, I am brought back to the helpful idea of *essential tensions.*[13] To reiterate my earlier description, this concept recognizes apparent dichotomies within a collaborative enterprise that, when brought into relationship which each other, generate growth. When the relationship lacks a healthy dynamic, however, these are exactly the fault lines along which collaboration can be split asunder and which therefore cause an enterprise to fail.

The first tension I have found is that between keeping the group voluntary and maintaining the consistency—and depth—of the work. A remarkable circumstance of this particular learning community is its voluntary nature. There are few extrinsic motivators for teachers to attend. Teachers are there because they wish to be there and they consider that this commitment of time and effort yields some real benefit to them. This creates the ideal atmosphere of working with people who want to work. It also means that attendance may be dropped whenever the intensity of

the rest of the week becomes too great. This means that, in any given week, the size of the group can vary between five and seventeen participants. Inconsistent attendance means that the work cannot build and deepen, and those who attend regularly may grow irritated. I have found that it takes devotion and patience to maintain an open and welcoming gesture of freedom while at the same time expecting higher levels of work from the group. Ultimately, however, I believe that this uncomfortable tension generates a deeper level of engagement from those who are able to bring it.

The second tension is between helping the child and furthering our own self-development as teachers. As a younger teacher, I was impatient with the time we "wasted" reading Steiner's texts, and I was eager to spend more time talking about children. The texts were so difficult and their meaning so esoteric that I was able to find little that was "practical" or "useful" in understanding how to work with a living, breathing problem in my second period class. Over the years, I have increasingly come to appreciate the study. Now, I recognize that I cannot create meaningful change in the way a child behaves in my class without profoundly changing myself in relationship to that child. My experience of wrestling with Steiner's ideas changes me. I recognize, however, that different members of the group ascribe different weights to "study" and "child," and I believe that this essential tension is indeed generative. The more deeply we study children the more profoundly we change ourselves, which enables us to meet children in a new way with new capacities for studying them. We need the different members of the collaborative to pull our work first deeply in one direction and then deeply in the other so that, through our dialogue, something new emerges.

The third tension is between what I will call the "insiders" and the "newcomers." Some participants have been engaged with Steiner's work for more than twenty-five years while others are encountering anthroposophy for the first time. Those with deep familiarity may be frustrated if they feel that they need to speak at an introductory level and that dialogue hinders a deeper examination of the ideas. Newcomers are equally frustrated if they find themselves unable to understand what the insiders are saying. It is difficult work to allow profound conversation to occur while enabling newcomers to understand, and contribute to, increasingly more of that conversation. It is essential that neither group be allowed to dominate the conversation and to find ways to demand and recognize some participation of every member. Every teacher is able to observe children, however elementary those initial observations may be, and every teacher can participate in some way in text-based exercises. These are ways to begin. Ideally, the collaborative is able to arrive at the place described by Grossman et al. where teachers take responsibility for each other's learning. In this dimension, that includes the insiders encouraging the newcomers, and the newcomers recognizing when to hold their skepticism in abeyance.

Community is hard work. Intentional community is harder still. Nevertheless, my own experiences in professional learning communities have made me resolutely optimistic about their potential for transforming the nature of teaching and learning.

Endnotes

1. Editor's note: The term "child study" describes an international movement, linked to the birth of developmental psychology, of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Germany and the United States, in particular. In Germany, Wilhelm Preyer's *Die Seele des Kindes* (1882; translated as *The Mind of a Child*) stands as the first published research in child development. In the U.S., in the 1880s, G.S. Hall of Clark University—who later introduced the concept of "adolescence" to discussions of child psychology—introduced to child development the biological idea of recapitulation ("ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny"—the development of one individual recapitulates the development of the species or type). These developments contributed to an enthusiastic "child study movement" and, in the U.S., the formation of the Child Study Association of America (CSAA). A typical publication of the time is Benjamin Gruenberg's *Outlines of Child Study: A Manual for Parents and Teachers*, published in 1922. The CSAA also published a journal, *Child Study*, from the 1920s until 1960. Between 1960 and the 1980s, the CSAA gradually dissolved, and it exists no longer.

   All of this occurred in the period during which Rudolf Steiner introduced his educational ideas to the world and during which the first Waldorf schools were founded. Early Waldorf school educators, following Steiner, therefore naturally adopted portions of the then-contemporary discourse on education, including the term and concept of child study. The term is now somewhat archaic.

   It is in this context that Waldorf educators should see the use of the term "child study." They do well to remember and acknowledge its roots, and even to consider adopting a less archaic formulation to describe their work.
2. Barab, Sasha A., Michael Barnett, and Kurt Squire. 2002. Developing an empirical account of a community of practice: Characterizing the essential tensions. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 11 (4):489–542. See also Borko, Hilda. 2004. Professional development and teacher learning: Mapping the terrain. *Educational Researcher* 33 (8):3–15. See also Franke, Megan Loef, Thomas P. Carpenter, Linda Levi, and Elizabeth Fennema. 2001. Capturing teachers' generative change: A follow-up study of professional development in mathematics. American Educational Research Journal 38 (3):653–689. See also Grossman, Pamela, Samuel Weinburg, and Stephen Woolworth. 2001. Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record* 103 (6):942–1012. See also Little, Judith Warren. 1993. Teachers' professional development in a climate of educational reform. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 15 (2):129–151. See also Schon, David A. 1987. Teaching artistry through reflection-in-action. In *Educating the reflective practitioner: Educating the reflective practitioner for teaching and learning in the professions.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
3. Grossman, Pamela, Samuel Weinburg, and Stephen Woolworth. 2001. Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record* 103 (6):942–1012.
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9. Lieberman, Ann, and Lynne Miller, eds. 2008. *Teachers in professional communities, The Series on School Reform.* New York: Teachers College Press.
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13. Barab, Sasha A., Michael Barnett, and Kurt Squire. 2002. Developing an empirical account of a community of practice: Characterizing the essential tensions. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 11 (4):489-542. See also Grossman, Pamela, Samuel Weinburg, and Stephen Woolworth. 2001. Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record* 103 (6):942–1012.

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