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Teacher isolation

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Abstract

In modern educational Jargon, the discussion topic which occurred is known as teacher isolation. Teacher isolation in its simplest form is not having the time or opportunity to interact with colleagues in order to discuss techniques, problems, solutions. The purpose of this paper is to explore the existence of teacher isolation. Although few studies have centered directly on teacher isolation, many reports and studies are linking teacher isolation with problems in education. (Brodinsky, 1984; Driscoll & Shirey, 1985; Gold, 1984; Fimian, 1982; Seidman & Zager, 1986-87). This paper will be concerned with a number of topics related to teacher isolation. Does teacher isolation exist? How widespread is it? What causes teacher isolation? What are the effects of teacher isolation? What suggestions are presented in the literature of what can be done to offset the problem of teacher isolation? And, what are the implications of teacher isolation for the school principal?

TEACHER ISOLATION

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Kevin W. Flene
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There were six of us, all teachers, sitting in the faculty lounge. It should be noted that this was after contract time. The six of us touched on many different subjects, but one topic seemed to cause agreement and dismay among all of us. All six of us have been teaching for at least ten years, yet none of us have had the opportunity to watch the others teach. We had never had the opportunity to sit down and really articulate what we believed about education. Not once had we been given the opportunity to share ideas about what was working and what was not. There really never was a chance for a collegial setting at our school.

Later in our discussion, it became evident that the thing we all shared in common was the fact that as teachers, we know what is happening in our little domain of the classroom, but really knew nothing of what was happening in other classrooms. This was not only true within our own discipline, but also across disciplines. We also found that among the six of us, with a combined total of seventy-seven years teaching experience, we had the opportunity to go to another school and spend time observing and sharing with other teachers a grand total of five times.

In modern educational jargon, the discussion topic which occurred is known as teacher isolation. Teacher isolation in its simplest form is not having the time or opportunity to

interact with colleagues in order to discuss techniques, problems, solutions. The purpose of this paper is to explore the existence of teacher isolation. Although few studies have centered directly on teacher isolation, many reports and studies are linking teacher isolation with problems in education (Brodinsky, 1984; Driscoll & Shirey, 1985; Gold, 1984; Fimian, 1982; Seidman & Zager, 1986-87). This paper will be concerned with a number of topics related to teacher isolation. Does teacher isolation exist? How widespread is it? What causes teacher isolation? What are the effects of teacher isolation? What suggestions are presented in the literature of what can be done to offset the problem of teacher isolation? And, what are the implications of teacher isolation for the school principal?

Does Teacher Isolation Exist? Is It Widespread?

The problem of teacher isolation appears to be widespread. From his study of thirty-eight schools, John I. Goodlad (1983) concluded, "The classroom cells in which teachers spend much of their time appear ... symbolic of their relative isolation from one another and from sources of ideas beyond their own background experience" (p. 186). The theme presented by Goodlad reoccurs throughout the literature. Lortie (1975) found that teachers placed a very high value on their relationships with students and assigned very little value to their relationships with other teachers and with administrators. Further, teachers

do not tend to observe one another's performance, share ideas, or work in collaborative ways; making teacher isolation widespread (Chandler, 1983; Zielinski & Hoy, 1983). Bird and Little (1985) further showed teachers operated in isolation from one another and from administrators, and tended to be apprehensive of innovations in instructional techniques and curriculum.

A study at the University of Central Florida (Rothberg, 1984) was conducted to specifically examine teacher isolation. One hundred ninety-six teachers, enrolled in various graduate programs, responded to a survey instrument. Seventy-three respondents were elementary teachers, thirty-six middle/junior high teachers, and eighty-seven high school teachers. The findings of this study were: a) Over eighty percent of each group felt, "Your classroom is a private world which no one besides you and your students enter". b) Few teachers visit other classrooms to observe or participate. c) Very little "informal" observation by administration occurs. d) Eighty percent of the elementary and middle/junior high teachers expressed a desire to visit other classrooms, while sixty-eight percent of senior high teachers said they were not sure. e) All teachers indicated the best way to share ideas and problems would be informal gatherings. f) In response to, "Do you feel your good work goes unnoticed?", over eighty-five percent of the

elementary/middle/junior high teachers said "sometimes" or "frequently", and eighty-five percent of the high school teachers said "frequently" or "always". g) In response to, "What motivates you to do a good job?", seventy-five percent stated "self".

Taken together, results from these studies suggest teacher isolation exists and is widespread. What interactions do occur between faculty? Are they conducive to improved teaching? Little (1982) found that lending and borrowing materials, and occasionally asking for advice were favored means of interaction between staff members. In addition, Little's study of six urban schools showed that a new idea was accepted in four of the six schools, but actually encouraged in only one of the schools. Tye and Tye (1984) in describing their involvement in A Study of Schooling, found that when teachers do interact, it is out of the school context, i.e., at graduate classes, in-service training, etc. Little time was available during the typical school day for interaction of staff to occur. Moreover, staff interaction, where they do occur, generally tend to be on the light, personal side. Rarely are they concerned with students, professional growth or means to improve the education of the students.

Causes of Teacher Isolation

If teachers are to be considered professionals, we must identify why, unlike many other professionals, the work environment promotes isolation and inhibits collaboration. The structure of the school system itself seems to breed teacher isolation. Cox and Wood (1980) found that education falls into the bureaucratic organization trap where work is subjected to evaluation and control by people deriving their authority from their position. Cox and Wood further stated that most other professionals are governed by the professional organization where work is controlled by ethical standards determined by colleagues, rather than by supervisors in an administrative hierarchy. Sizer (1985) points out that, "... in few schools is there any time set aside for teachers to collaborate or to know what is happening in other classrooms, even those staffed by colleagues in the same department" (p. 92). Very simply, the school day is so filled with classes, activities, etc., there is no time for interaction between faculty.

In addition, recent studies indicate that teachers have been relegated to a position of secondary social status due to restrictions placed upon them by the existing system (Gold, 1984; Hoy, Blazovsky, & Newland, 1983; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). These studies identified eleven factors contributing to secondary status for teachers. Included were low salaries, lack

of work control, punitive measures, lack of resources, lack of positive reinforcement, a threatening physical environment, and lack of involvement in decision making. Other factors cited were isolation from other adults, a work load emphasizing production rather than quality, a work year that implies a teacher is a part-time employee, and a non-professional work day. Calabrese (1986) substantiated these findings with his study by describing limitations on teachers to include regulating the work day, work station, teaching materials and curriculum. Consequently, a teacher is part of an environment of little trust, control, involvement, or opportunity. It perhaps was best stated by Fimian (1982), " ... usually teachers are left alone in the classroom with their students for the better part of each day, with little opportunity to interact with colleagues or to support one another" (p. 103). Hence, the system not only does not promote professionalism, it actually inhibits it.

Another factor promoting teacher isolation is the teacher him/herself. Teachers have long valued the autonomy of the individual classroom. Tye and Tye (1984) found an overwhelming majority of the teachers indicated that they exerted "a lot of" or "complete" control as the responses to, "How much control do you have over in-class planning and teaching?" Most teachers see their roles in a traditional sense, i.e., expecting autonomy

only in their classrooms, and leaving school-wide autonomy to administrators (Krels & Brockopp, 1986). Further, Rudner (1986) found in his study of 8500 elementary teachers that seventy-six percent made most instructional decisions within the classroom, and an additional twenty-percent made some decisions. Because of this fierce devotion to keep one's classroom autonomous, overall teacher isolation is increased (Hargreaves & Woods, 1984). The overall effect of autonomy within the classroom is best described by Felman-Nemser and Floden (1986). From their review of fifty years of research on the cultures of teaching: "Teachers use little research-based technical knowledge, their rewards come from students rather than from the institution, and interactions with administrators, parents, and other teachers tend to express teachers' desire to be left to themselves" (p. 512).

There is some evidence from studies showing that in addition to the school system itself and the individual teacher, principals within a school help foster teacher isolation. Some principals appear to be ill-equipped to help teachers in matters of teaching, or they are too overwhelmed with the day-to-day bureaucratic maintenance to be very involved with the teachers (Bird & Little, 1986). Flmlan (1982) concurs, stating, "... a lack of administrative support reinforces teachers' perceptions that they are totally on their own" (p. 104). It also is

possible that many older principals come from the old school of thought where a principal is the boss and the teachers work for the principal. In this type of situation, teacher isolation would likely occur because of old stereotyped job descriptions. A principal not current with literature may very well promote isolation, and at best, not work to alleviate it.

An additional cause for teacher isolation comes from teacher preparation programs now in use by most colleges and universities. Most education programs unknowingly teach the professional ethic that it is wrong to intrude on a colleague's turf (Rosenholtz & Kyle, 1984). To further complicate matters, the most important facet of teacher education, the student teaching experience, is conducted with an experienced, isolated teacher who themselves do not provide a good model of collegial behavior. In fact, there is a sense that to seek advice from other teachers is to admit, at least to some degree, a lack of teaching expertise. Typically then, new teachers are left to become experienced teachers on their own, with less than adequate preparation. For many, their initial struggle as a new teacher is to survive and to demonstrate a minimal level of competency in order to avoid obvious harm to themselves and their students (Bird & Little, 1986). Seymour Sarason (1982), drawing on his "experience with young teachers", concluded that they " ... are quite unprepared both for the loneliness of the

classroom and the lack of relationships in which questions and problems can be asked and discussed without the fear that the teacher is being evaluated" (p. 87). It is not surprising that teachers tend to conclude their education classes were of little practical value and that they tend to rely only on their own experience in the classroom (Hargreaves, 1984). If teacher isolation is all that we know, the problems associated with isolation are being perpetuated by our teacher education process.

Effect Of Teacher Isolation

At this point, research is sketchy on the effects of teacher isolation. Without a doubt, this is the most critical aspect to consider when looking at teacher isolation. The ultimate concern in education is for the student and what they learn. One factor which may adversely affect student outcomes is teacher isolation. Various allusions are made to teacher isolation and poor student outcomes. Future studies undoubtedly will enhance what is now strongly suspected.

One area to which teacher isolation appears to be linked is teacher morale. Driscoll and Shirey (1985) report in their study that a lack of teacher/co-worker communication is highly associated with low teacher morale. In the same vein, collaboration between school personnel is difficult. Without this collaboration, teachers are left feeling powerless over

their surroundings. Isolation, in part, was responsible for the findings of a 1982 study by Turk and Litt of 360 Connecticut teachers. From their research, they recommended as "urgent" the need for administrators to develop communication skills and provide opportunities for collaboration to occur (Brodinsky, 1984). In another study of beginning teachers and experienced teachers, isolation was listed as a partial cause for lack of participation in school-wide decision making, which was the most important contributor to low teacher morale (Vavrus, 1978).

Teacher isolation has also been loosely linked to teacher burn-out. Ann Lieberman (1985) of Columbia University stated, "... Teacher isolation is incredibly important because if people are isolated from each other ... There is not very much trust ... Isolation keeps us from being excited about our work and becomes the basis for our becoming burned out and for quitting" (p. 12). More recent studies are beginning to look at teacher isolation as a factor in teacher burn-out (Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986; Seidman & Zager, 1986-87). With the increased demands made on educators, more and more research will undoubtedly follow in this area.

In addition, teacher isolation has been linked to teacher stress (Fimlan, 1982), and teacher attrition (Murphy, 1982). Bird and Little (1986) also have stated that although individual autonomy in the classroom allows for individual creativity, it

also deprives teachers of the stimulation of working with peers, and the close support they need to improve throughout their careers. Further, they note that recognition for the teacher is missed because no one is present to witness, discuss and assess teaching.

Another area where isolation appears to have a negative effect is with student identification and anonymity. Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) stated, "Few things contribute to student anonymity more than the isolation of their teachers from one another ... If teachers talked more with each other about education and students, the chances for productive exchange about the effects of their efforts would increase" (p. 144). If we allow isolation from any support or collegiality to develop a loss of self-worth, thirty to one-hundred fifty students are negatively affected every day (Miller & Johnson, 1978).

It appears more and more research will be addressing the specific effects teacher isolation has on various parts of the educational community. It seems at this point that we are acutely aware of the presence of teacher isolation, but we have not measured its effects adequately, nor have we successfully limited it.

Possible Solutions To Teacher Isolation

If education is to truly become a professional occupation, we must deal with the problem of teacher isolation. A plethora

of possibilities already exist which can be used to decrease or alleviate teacher isolation. Moreover, future research surely will point to additional new directions in this area.

The most obvious solution to teacher isolation is to restructure the school day/setting to allow more time for teachers to interact with one another (Bird & Little, 1986; Davis, 1986-87; Powell et al., 1985). The potential here is limitless. Interactions could come through in-service, observing other teachers, departmental meetings, informal gatherings, visiting other schools, etc. With these interactions, teachers could share triumphs or burdens, develop a feeling of collegiality and grow professionally.

Another often mentioned means of lessening teacher isolation is to empower the teachers, i.e., involve the teachers in the decision-making processes of the school (Bird & Little, 1986; Cox & Wood, 1980; Davis, 1986-87; Powell et al., 1985). By involving the teachers more often in the decision-making process, interaction of the staff would increase. Many current leaders in the educational reform movement see this issue as the heart of meaningful reform. When teachers are given responsibility, professionalism will rise and ultimately the students become the beneficiaries of the change.

Several other possibilities to eliminate teacher isolation were also mentioned. Included were establishment of support

groups, organization of teaching clusters, team teaching and joint planning between teachers for classroom activities (Davis, 1986-87). Special recognition programs have been used (Miller & Johnson, 1978), as well as the establishment of teacher centers (Fibkins, 1980). Also, informal get-togethers, faculty planned in-service, faculty input for staff meetings, and teacher observation of supervisors have been listed as potential ways to eliminate or lessen teacher isolation (Driscoll & Shirey, 1985).

A rather new idea merits mention as a possible means to eliminate teacher isolation. Some call it mentoring, others call it peer coaching. The idea of both is for recognized "good" teachers to work with other teachers and help them improve teaching. The possibilities here are very exciting. The concept of teachers helping teachers would go far in removing the specter of isolation and moving into a new era of collegiality. In Iowa, this idea is especially exciting because of the possibilities presented by Phase III. The concept of peer coaching can work, as demonstrated by the successful pilot program implemented at Forest View High School in Arlington Heights, Illinois (Munro & Elliott, 1987). It should be noted here that for any type of mentoring to occur, a restructuring of the school day must first occur. Without adequate time to observe and discuss, peer coaching could not work. It should also be noted that peer coaching would not be accepted by all,

Including teachers. Some people undoubtedly would feel threatened or inferior if another peer were to assist them in developing improved teaching methods. Nonetheless, some teachers would benefit from the help presented in peer coaching or in assisting others in the program.

Implications

The problem of teacher isolation is serious. If teacher isolation is to be decreased, certain behaviors must occur. The problem of teacher isolation will never totally disappear because there are those, including teachers, administrators and parents, that believe the individual autonomy of the classroom is the eleventh commandment. Some simply do not want anything upsetting their rigid routine. Moving some people out of their comfort zone is not possible. However, to the serious professional educator, isolation can and must be decreased in order to facilitate a situation where the educational team can maximize the educational opportunities for the students.

It seems that the most important lesson for me as a future principal is to recognize that a sense of teamwork must exist, or be created, between members of the educational team. Too often in education teachers and administrators spend time beating each other over the head instead of working for the same goals. Teachers need to be involved in the decision-making processes of the local school. This idea of teacher empowerment

is vital for meaningful change to occur. If teachers are given responsibility, and the time to deal in a professional manner with this responsibility, ownership of the idea/decision will have occurred and the chances for acceptance and success have been greatly increased.

Coupled with the idea of teacher empowerment is creating a collegial atmosphere at the local level. There should be a feeling of sharing among the teachers and between teachers and administrators. Creating time for meaningful interaction between professionals will go far in decreasing teacher isolation and increasing a feeling of teamwork or collegiality. If educators are to be considered professional, they must be given the time to be professional. Those schools who have successfully created a positive, collegial atmosphere give glowing accounts of its success (Little, Galagoran & O'Neal, 1984; Showers, 1983).

Without doubt, the principal must be centrally involved in meaningful change of teacher isolation or any other problem. Top down mandates, whether from the state or federal level, have not worked in the past and probably will not work in the future. Such mandates generally cause teachers and administrators to give the appearance of jumping through the hoops, then later turning around and doing whatever they have been previously doing. The rivers of local autonomy run deep. Who better knows

what things need attention in the trenches than those in the trenches, i.e., teachers and building principals? Again, the connection between teacher empowerment and creating a collegial setting under which teachers and administrators can work is readily apparent.

All of this discussion on decreasing teacher isolation is important and conceptually sound. However, the real situation in a school must be addressed. Many people may resist change. A new principal must be realistic about change because educational change occurs slowly. Any attempts to create a better situation must be considered in real, pragmatic terms. Changes must occur one step at a time. It may not be feasible to give teachers the amount of time necessary to counteract isolation and do all things necessary to create a collegial atmosphere. It is possible to do some small things that may blossom into meaningful change as time goes on. If changes occur too quickly, more harm than good may result.

In conclusion, the principal must be keenly aware of the negative effects of teacher isolation. He/she must be realistic in approaching change related to decreasing isolation, but nonetheless move forward to create the best possible situation in which students can learn.

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