

# **Peacemaking Circles: Creating Professional Communities in Which Teachers Make Decisions Collaboratively**

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## **Introduction**

This research explores how interactions among teachers can facilitate the development of professional communities in which teachers make decisions about peacemaking education. It focused on collaborative decision-making among teachers at two inner city schools in the Toronto District School Board.

I explored the interactions among teachers that facilitate the development of professional communities. Professional communities are ideal sites for teacher learning because they strengthen teachers abilities to question ineffective teaching practices, examine new concepts about teaching and learning, find new ways to generate and respond to difference and conflict as well as support the professional growth of each member (Little 2003). One feature of strong professional communities is collaborative decision-making (Silins & Mulford 2001). This paper investigates how collaborative decision-making related to peacemaking education encourages the development of professional community among teachers. Specifically, how do teachers negotiate how problems will be explored and make decisions that encourage the development of community, as well as change the peacemaking education practice of the school. In addition, this paper searches for how the interactions among teachers and the processes used to make decisions facilitate the development of professional community. Finally, the study begins to explore how teachers' participation in a collegial group, where they engage in controversial discussions and manage dissent, supports the development of their capacity to facilitate interactions with their students.

The results indicate that teachers collaborating in teams to make decisions around shared concerns can develop professional community. Developing agendas for discussion increased teachers' commitment to implementation. Working together to develop a safe process for interacting, and defining a decision-making procedure, seemed to include more voices as well as encourage teacher learning. The constructive dissent that emerged, encouraged teachers to share about their instructional practice, reflect on school and classroom approaches to peacemaking, and implement some changes.

## **Democratizing Classroom Practice through Collaborative Decision-Making within Professional Communities**

Participatory decision-making is a crucial part of any democratic process in which members of a community dialogue across different viewpoints and manage conflict in order to make the best decisions possible. In schools, teaching students the skills to make effective decisions can help prepare them as citizens who will participate in democratic society. Some authors (Osler & Starkey 1998, Warren 1998, Avery1988, Hahn 1998, Gladden 2002, Bickmore 2001) advocate that students should practice problem solving,

choice making, conflict resolution and critical reflection, all of which are aspects of participatory decision making in their classrooms. Students should “have the opportunity to experience living within a school community based on human rights culture”(Osler & Starkey 1998 p. 315). Students involved in classrooms with an open climate atmosphere (where they are encouraged to express opinions) are more likely show an interest in and commitment to active social and political involvement (Hahn 1998).

Social exclusion of certain groups (eg. women, people of colour, lower socio-economic classes) in political decision-making is prevalent throughout North American society. Schools as North American institutions are no exception. For example, recent studies suggest that special needs students, students of colour, and those from lower socio-economic classes are disproportionately suspended and expelled from school (TDSB 2004, Gladden 2002, Jull 2000). Therefore, the challenge for educators, who wish to foster the development of school communities that address systemic inequities and foster inclusion, is how to teach the skills and processes that will help students, staff and parents to articulate shared interests, deliberate across differences, manage conflict nonviolently and make decisions which reflect the interests of all parties.

Conflict is a vital aspect of any decision-making process. When different points of view are expressed, there is potential for those whose culture and values dominate political discourse to hear and incorporate the perspectives of those whose voices are often silenced.

At its best-the democratic process resolves conflict not only by majority will, but by discovering answers that integrate the interests of the minority. Thus ‘a deliberative democracy’ does not simply register preferences that individuals already have, it encourages citizens to think about their interests differently. (Mansbridge 1998 p. 142)

The incorporation of a range of perspectives into the decision-making process enriches the dialogue and encourages us to make decisions that truly represent the interests of all stakeholders. The marginalization of conflict limits the range of perspectives explored in the discourse and often reinforces the status quo in terms of power relations and social fragmentation (Merelman 1990, Schutz 2001, Engle & Ochoa 1988).

Bickmore (2000) describes three types of approaches to managing conflict: peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding. Peacekeeping procedures in school are those structures that manage conflict through enforcing the practice or avoidance of certain behaviours. Students who do not comply are punished, often by being excluded from class or school. Peacekeeping can help to establish a certain level of safety in the school community (Bickmore 2003). Excessive or violent conflict will limit the ability of members of a community to participate in democratic decision-making (Merelman 1990). In addition, peacekeeping procedures can protect the victims of bullying or harassment, conflicts in which the one set of disputants have more power than the others. However, over reliance on peacekeeping procedures as a method of maintaining a safe school environment can marginalize conflict by suppressing its symptoms. Such procedures also use coercion to enforce dominant culture values and therefore can strengthen existing power structures in schools, thereby creating an impediment to the broad participation necessary for democracy (Bickmore 2003, Gladden 2002). Peacekeeping can be part of democratizing school culture when it limits violence and victimization to make space for teaching more proactive models for managing conflict and addressing power imbalances in the school community.

Bickmore defines peacemaking as “attempts to facilitate conflict management and resolution through dialogue, deliberation and problem-solving.” ( 2003 p.5) Conflict resolution programs and practices, including peer mediation, help individuals learn to express different positions, hear the viewpoints of those with whom they disagree and work together to invent solutions. In peacemaking, students (participants) are encouraged to imagine multiple solutions that focus on the common interests of all the involved parties instead of finding compromises that ask each participant to give up some of what they want in order to achieve resolution (Fisher et al 1991). The programs described above are illustrations of peacemaking, in which individuals or groups in conflict are encouraged to communicate and resolve their conflicts through improving their understanding of the various perspectives involved and solving the problems together (Bickmore 2003).

The prevalence of conflict resolution programs in schools has allowed researchers to gather evidence on how some of these programs can help students develop the capacity to resolve conflict nonviolently through providing models for problem-solving and developing communication skills. Peacemaking programs have been successful at helping students of roughly equal social status to resolve conflicts through the practice of using dialogue and collective problem solving (Bickmore 2001, Jones 1998, Oppfer 1997). Those students who are taught mediation and conflict resolution skills directly often benefit the most in terms of improving their social skills (Hall 1999, Jones 1998). These programs may contribute to the development of more safe and inclusive learning communities in the school and classroom (Hall 1999, Deutsch 1993, Jones 1998, Bickmore 2003). The more broadly implemented programs result in greater benefits for the school population (Bickmore 2003, Jones 1998). However, some conflict resolution education programs emphasize the dominant culture’s communication practices, in terms of manners, and attempt to be a quick ‘fix’. In these contexts, students may reinforce the inequities already present in schools (Berasgaard 1997, Oppfer 1997). The most effective peacemaking programs encourage broad participation of all students in conflict resolution as way to engage in dialogues that include different perspectives and ultimately make decisions that reflect the needs of all stakeholders (Bickmore 2003, Oppfer 1997). Conflict resolution education programs are most effective at teaching students a process for resolving conflicts between peers, who have roughly equal social status. Other approaches are necessary in order to include participants who have unequal positions in the social structure, in democratic decision-making processes.

Expanding the participation of those involved in democratic deliberation requires that we examine the inequities in our social structure that exclude and oppress some groups (Young 1998). Peacebuilding addresses more directly conflicts between groups that are complicated by an imbalance of power through restoring relationships that have been damaged by practices which silence the voices of some groups and exalt the perspectives of others (Bickmore 2003). These initiatives are designed encourage constructive conflict and prevent violent disagreements, by helping individuals build community and address inequities in the social structure such as racism and bias. Through engaging in controversial discussion where different viewpoints are explored, students, or by implication, teachers, can learn to articulate their positions, clarify their thinking, and understand the perspectives of those whose viewpoints differ from their own. In particular, they are challenged to consider unpopular positions, reflect on the

underlying concepts, and consider the value of allowing all participants to express their viewpoints even if they disagree with their message (Avery et al 1997).

The role of teachers in democratizing the classroom is important. Given that schools are not democracies, but hierarchies, it may be important to provide teachers with opportunities to examine their current teaching practice and learn new strategies that will help them teach their students the skills involved in democratic decision-making (Raywid 1976). Professional communities may enable teachers to engage in the critical reflection necessary to help them reform their instructional strategies (Smylie 1994). In addition, working together to make decisions within these communities may provide a model for students as well as frequent opportunities for teachers to practice these skills, thus enabling them to work more effectively with students (Sehr 1997, Oppfer 1977). However, developing professional communities, where teachers collaborate to improve their own practice in relationship to their students' learning needs, is a complex undertaking. Opportunities for teachers to meet and work together in schools are often infrequent due to tight timetables and large workloads. In addition, large group meetings, such as staff meetings, often do not provide sufficient opportunities for a variety of voices to be heard. Schools may need to support teacher collaboration by creating schedules that enable small interdisciplinary teams to meet regularly.

Making decisions regarding school reform initiatives and their classroom practice in these small teams may help teachers engage in constructive dissent which may encourage them to reflect critically on school and classroom practice. Unfortunately, the processes that govern teachers' interaction in schools can make open communication difficult (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991, Shed & Bacharach 1991, Smylie 1994, Bickmore 1998). Specifically, teachers often tend to avoid interfering with each other's practice for a variety of complex reasons. They may be afraid to share successes because they may be perceived as boasting and they are also often reluctant to admit mistakes or ignorance because they may be perceived as incompetent. They may have difficulty distinguishing between constructive critique and destructive criticism when they comment on each other's classroom practice or ideas (Keedy 1991). Often teachers are concerned with maintaining a harmonious culture with polite interactions, and thus avoid conversations that focus on their classroom for fear of interfering with a colleague's autonomy (Smylie, 1994, Little 2003, Fullan & Hargreaves 1991). This is not the kind of environment that fosters the expression of dissent and diverse viewpoints.

However, this does not mean that schools are free of conflict among adults. Instead of being openly expressed, dissent is often relegated to backstage conversations (Grossman et al 2001) or those who disagree simply cease to participate (Bickmore 1998). Occasionally, disagreements can surface in rather explosive episodes, in which feelings are hurt and authoritarian decisions may be made to "solve" the perceived problem or at least silence the dissenters. Participatory decision-making process can provide spaces, but are no means guaranteed to reinvent teachers' culture of non-interference (Rosenhaltz 1985, Liethwood et al 1997, Little 2003, Grossman et al. 2001, Gallego et al 2001).

Shared decision making is not a magic tool that automatically creates an atmosphere where dissent can occur, because the reinvention of culture is complex and time consuming. However, if groups can encourage members to take small steps towards constructive disagreement and provide support through listening, then it is possible for

those involved in the conflict to reflect and potentially reexamine and expand their positions (Grossman et al 2001). In other professional development studies, openly expressed constructive conflict among teachers assisted them in negotiating stronger relationships in which they risked sharing problems and concerns with each other in terms of their own practice (Rosenhaltz 1985, Liethwood et al 1997, Little 2003, Grossman et al. 2001, Gallego et al 2001). The more open sharing of concerns regarding their own instructional strategies and the honest feedback provided by colleagues supported them in finding new ways of perceiving their problems and thus encouraged them to think about solutions that they would not have considered independently. Consequently, they were able to use the group as a site for critical reflection on their own practice and were more likely to change their instructional strategies.

Knowledge about how to integrate constructive conflict and its value in developing strong social relationships may also support teachers to rethink the importance of harmony at any cost. In addition, successful conflict resolution processes can be explored. However, learning to practice conflict resolution, like developing good communication skills, takes time and practice. It will only be effectively applied if teachers have the opportunity to use it in real conflicts with colleagues and students. In this way, they can also model these strategies for their students (Opffer 1997).

However, participation in shared decision-making alone may also not be sufficient to enable teachers implement innovations in their school or classroom (Weiss 1993). Teachers may need to develop a collectively negotiated agenda that is focused on school innovations that they consider important Gallego et al. 2001, Stein, Silver & Smith 1999). In addition, they may benefit from a school climate that will enable them to implement the decisions they make (Marks & Louis 1997, Sins & Mulford 2001, Keedy and Finch 1990). There is also some evidence that suggests that teachers engaged in collaborative decision-making may profit from developing a collectively negotiated process that creates a safe environment that enables them to participate in constructive dissent (Grossman et al. 2001). Given, that the culture of many schools encourages teachers and students to avoid conflict, developing a meaningful agenda and negotiating a process for interaction may support them to openly express their disagreements, hear unfamiliar points of view, and learn new approaches. It may also help them to develop the strong relationships characteristic of supportive professional communities.

A peacemaking circle is an example of such a structure that teachers could use in order to meet the collectively identified peacemaking and peacebuilding needs of the school. Peacemaking circles are a decision-making structure and a peacemaking initiative that can support teachers and students to explore diverse perspectives, managing conflict and invent solutions to common problems. This particular kind of decision-making process has been most commonly applied in the justice system to deal with the issue of sentencing offenders, where the whole community (including victim and offender) is involved (Pranis et al 2003).

Peacemaking circles promote values of inclusivity and justice and attempt to build and repair relationships among individuals in a community (Bickmore 2003). In a circle, all participants are welcome regardless of status and all opinions hold equal weight (Pranis et al 2003). It is the responsibility of the group members to ensure that any barriers to participation experienced by some individuals are acknowledged and removed (Pranis et al 2003). For example, if one person cannot participate because of lack of

childcare, the community finds away to solve the problem so the parent can attend the meetings.

The turn-taking structure of a circle meeting ensures that only the individual who is holding the talking piece speaks (Pranis et al 2003, Brazemore & Umbreit 2001). The use of the talking piece promotes equal participation because no participant can speak until it is their turn and all participants without the talking piece are obliged to listen. The use of this simple tool creates space in the dialogue for those whose voices are often silenced as a result of systemic inequities and it encourages those who usually dominate the dialogue to hear these other voices and perspectives (Pranis et al 2003). The use of the talking piece supports individuals to listen carefully and consider their responses because they often cannot react immediately to a comment that triggers an emotional reaction. When participants do have an opportunity to speak, the intervening comments and the space to consider their response may have helped them find a way to express themselves without blame or judgment (Pranis et al 2003).

Peacemaking circles show promise as a new innovation in schools to address conflict and injustice. As a decision making process, circles include all participants in a democratic process that encourages them to work together to make decisions when the needs and wants of the individuals involved differ (Bickmore 2003, Pranis et al. 2003). The group assumes responsibility for decision-making. Thus the individuals involved may experience increased efficacy in terms of improving their social environment (Bickmore 2003).

Using peacemaking circles as a way to facilitate collaborative discussion and decision-making among teachers around peacebuilding and peacemaking initiatives in the school can serve several purposes. First, peacemaking circles provide a process for interaction, which enables dissent to emerge and be addressed in a safe and inclusive environment. McCauley (2002) argues that instruction that focuses on changing behaviour in a sustained and systematic manner is more effective than instruction that focuses on changing attitudes. He cites research on dissonance, foot in the door, sales techniques and reciprocity that suggests it is more powerful to change behaviour directly than change behaviour through changing attitudes. Therefore, teachers may benefit from opportunities to try new behaviours in real contexts in order to perfect growing skills. Based on this research, using peacemaking circles can be expected to encourage teachers to have the courage to share problems of practice, examine their own instructional strategies, give and receive feedback, and try new approaches in peacebuilding and peacemaking. Second, teachers working in peacemaking circles will be practicing the behaviours and skills they wish to foster among students as part of the peacemaking and peacebuilding needs of the school: if teachers practice using this model amongst themselves, they may provide a persuasive example for students. Finally, peacemaking circles may be a process that can illuminate and enhance the preexisting peacebuilding initiatives in the school.

More research needs to focus attention on understanding the ways that the relationships among staff in a school contribute to and impede the development of effective participatory decision-making. It is particularly important to explore the interactions and interventions that facilitate the development of positive group dynamics in professional communities among teachers. The bulk of the literature on shared decision-making among teachers focuses on the structures that will enable teachers to

become involved in decision-making in schools. Very little research focuses explicitly on the group dynamics that occur in groups when teachers collaborate (Little, 2003). Specifically, what kinds of interactions among colleagues serve to allow dissent to emerge and solutions discovered to resolve differences?

In addition, the impact of shared decision-making practices among teachers on the democratization of classroom practices has not been explored. It is important to identify the specific mechanisms that support teachers in using techniques and behaviours with their students so that the hidden and the explicit curriculum around democracy are more aligned. In other words, researchers and school personnel often comment on the need to educate students for democratic citizenship. Democratic citizens need to be able to embrace conflict and use it constructively to find innovative solutions to problems. They need to be willing to struggle with dissent and maintain the ability to include all voices in the decision-making process. Making decisions in a democracy requires an ability to collaborate with others. However, in schools, a single individual or a small group often makes decisions. Obedience and a willingness to follow the rules may be more valued than dissent. Teachers often experience school communities in which they are isolated from one another, participate in relatively superficial interactions, make the decisions regarding their classroom alone and follow the decisions made by the principal that affect the school. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991) The hierarchy of schools and the isolated context in which many teachers work contradict the kind of skills and abilities we want to foster in future citizens.

This research fills a need by focusing attention on understanding ways that relationships among staff in a school contribute to and/or impede, the development of effective participatory decision-making (Little 2003). My research adds to the small body of studies that have explored the interactions and interventions that facilitate the development of positive group dynamics in professional communities among teachers (Grossman et al. 2001). Specifically, what kinds of interactions among colleagues allow dissent to emerge and solutions to be discovered that resolve conflicts as well as facilitate teachers' learning? In addition, the impact of shared decision-making practices among teachers on the democratization of classroom practices has not previously been explored. Specifically, how does participating in participatory decision-making around peacemaking initiatives in the school support the development and implementation of those programs? This study begins to identify the specific mechanisms that support teachers in using techniques and behaviours with their students that would develop their ability to involve their students in controversial discussions, conflict management and collective decision-making.

### **Research Methodology**

The research questions address the development of professional community among teachers, and the effect that collaborative decision-making among teachers may have on these teachers' ability to foster democratic practices among their students, specifically those practices that affect the implementation of peacemaking initiatives in the school.

1. How do teachers engage in making decisions related to a new initiative to integrate peacemaking circles with existing peacemaking and peace building activities already practiced in the school?

2. What interactions and interventions among teachers involved in shared decision-making facilitate the development of professional communities that engage in effective collaborative decision-making?
3. How do teachers who are involved in shared decision-making become able to create classroom communities in which students use peacemaking circles to engage each other in constructive dissent and make decisions together?

The study focuses on the adult staff in two public elementary schools in Toronto, Garden School and Churchill School (pseudonyms). Both schools are large urban schools with ethnically diverse student populations consisting largely of relatively new immigrants to Canada. Most of the students in both locations come from families with low socio-economic status. Some teachers in both schools participated in a workshop on the use of peacemaking circles in the classroom. The workshop was designed to teach how to use circle processes to build classroom community as well as to understand how to use a peacemaking circle to explore and resolve conflicts among students. After the initial workshop, 8 teachers from Garden School formed two smaller working groups with the intention of making decisions related to implementing what they had been trained to do in the context of the whole range of peacemaking initiatives in the school. The two groups met together as one large group twice, once after the workshop and again at the end of the project. The primary (Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers) working group met four times and the senior (Grades 4-8 teachers) met three times over a period of three months.

The peacemaking circle workshops with larger groups of staff members in the two schools allowed me to observe the introduction of a new innovation in the school related to peacemaking and observe the teachers' discussion of how this innovation might contradict, coexist or be integrated with other peacemaking education initiatives in the school. Similar to other projects designed to study teacher learning in collaborative contexts, a new instructional approach to the subject was introduced to the teachers in order to stimulate their reflection on their instructional practice (Grossman et al 2001, Stein, Silver & Smith 1999). In addition to the first interview, which occurred before the first meeting of the working groups, the large circle workshops provided some baseline information around the school's peacemaking education needs as perceived by the adult staff, the peacemaking education practices already used in the school and particularly in some classrooms and the dynamics among staff members related to school decision-making.

As in other projects intended to learn more about the conditions necessary to facilitate the development of professional learning communities, the observations of the small working groups was the corner stone of the project ( Little 2003, Grossman et al 2001). It gave me an opportunity to directly observe the development of a professional community as well as document how the staff members made decisions related to peacemaking education in the school. The interviews were helpful in providing me with both initial and final data that I could use to document any changes that might have occurred as a result of the study in addition to what I had observed in the small groups. My analysis of the transcripts and field notes revealed some patterns that gave me some insight into the interactions among these teachers that facilitated the development of



professional community. I was also able to document the decision-making process they developed as well as the decisions they made and how they collaborated to implement those decisions. Finally I was able to analyze the data for evidence of teacher learning in relation to peacemaking and peacebuilding education and gain some insight into how that learning impacted teachers' work with students.

The project design had several strengths as a structure that was intended to reveal more about the decision-making process within professional communities in relation to peacemaking education in the school. It allowed me to observe teacher interactions as they formed a professional learning community designed to address specific instructional needs in the school. In contrast to other previous projects, it focused on peacemaking education instead of the more academic instructional concerns such as language and mathematics (Grossman et al 2001, Stein, Silver & Smith 1999, Little 2003). I also emphasized collective decision-making as part of professional community by supporting staff to discuss peacemaking in the school as opposed to having discussions that encouraged them to primarily make individual decisions about their instructional practice.

Observing small working groups in more than one school site in order to compare the way conditions in the school supported or impeded the ability of teachers working collaboratively to impact school level peacemaking initiatives would also have enhanced the project. In addition, observing teachers in their classroom and interviewing students would have helped me learn more about how classroom practice in relation to peacemaking might have changed as a result of teachers' participation in collaborative decision-making. Relying on teachers' reports of classroom practice during interviews as well as the working group meetings is fairly limited given that many teachers often disclose very little about their work with students to colleagues (Little 2003, Fullan & Hargreaves 1991). The brief duration of the project is another limitation in that it may not have provided teachers with enough time to form a community that would adequately challenge the school norm of non-interference with each others' actions (Bickmore 1998, Grossman et al 2001). In addition, projects designed to study the impact of professional learning on changes to classroom practice are usually much longer (2-5 years) because it takes time for teachers to become comfortable with implementing new approaches in their classrooms (Oppfer 1997, Grossman et al 2001, Stein, Silver & Smith 1999, Little 2003).

### **Participatory-Decision Making Inside a Teacher Community**

The results of this study seem to indicate that teachers working together in small teams to make decisions around shared concerns can help to develop a professional community under certain conditions. Choosing the agendas for discussion increased teachers' commitment to implementation and also helped them to adapt current peacemaking and conflict management practices to make them more effective in addressing their concerns. Working together to develop a process that created a safe structure for interacting, as well as defining a decision-making procedure, seemed to support the inclusion of more voices as well as encouraging teacher learning. The constructive dissent that emerged in the conversation, about both what decisions to make and how to make them, encouraged teachers to share about their instructional practice, reflect on school and classroom approaches to peacemaking, and implement changes to current programs and strategies. The extent of the impact on students, in terms of

democratizing classroom communities, is not fully known. However, there is some evidence that some teachers who participated in the working group did use peacemaking circles to involve their students more in decision-making. In addition, new programs proposed by the working groups for the following school year may have an impact on students' opportunities to engage in democratic discussion and make decisions.

### **Building Social Capital- Working in Small Teams on Peacemaking Initiatives**

I initially proposed, based on the research that has explored the impact of strong social capital among adults on student success in education, that helping teachers to create deeper connections with colleagues would enable them to challenge each other in order to critically examine peace education strategies in the school and within their own classroom (Putnam 200, Gladden 2002). These kinds of relationships have been defined as 'social capital', a resource that enables a community to increase its productive capacity (Putnam 2000). High social capital is characterized by greater trust among adults, who are more willing to intervene when problems arise in the community. Putnam's (2000) examination of research shows that increased social connectedness among adults has been associated with students' success in education as well as a lower incidence of violence and crime in communities (Gladden 2002). In other words, in these communities people feel safer and are more productive.

How would improving the interactions among teachers help to build professional community? Reports from teachers suggest that their relationships with the colleagues within the working group and in some cases with other colleagues teaching in the same division did improve as a result of participating in regular meetings with colleagues. It is also significant that the teachers involved did not report that they anticipated connecting with colleagues as an advantage and yet at the end of the project almost all of them (7 out of 8) said that improved relationships with other teachers was one of the most important benefits of participating in the project. The context in which they reported this benefit suggested that Garden School was similar to many other schools in which teachers, before the study, felt isolated from all but the most superficial contact with other teachers (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991). This indicates that creating opportunities for teachers to work together in small teams may be an important step in increasing the social capital among adults in the school (Brost 2000, Shed & Bacharach 1991, Fullan & Hargreaves 1991). We can only begin to try and develop strong professional communities in which teachers challenge each other and develop contexts in which meaningful learning can take place, if we first create opportunities for those educators to develop connections with each other.

However, working in small teams could also have led to the phenomenon called balkanization, described by Fullan & Hargreaves (1991). Working together in small teams "might result in highly isolated and insular groups- in effect replacing the isolated classroom teacher with the isolated teacher group and balkanized workplace" (Little 2003 p. 939). The fact that the decision-making task for the groups was peacemaking education encouraged them to interact with other colleagues outside the group to discuss matters beyond their individual classroom practice. Based on my observations and reports from teachers during the interviews, the teachers in the working groups at Garden School did not seem to be isolated from other teachers nor from other groups of colleagues or from the administration. In fact, the discussions in the working groups

seemed to create reasons for the teachers within these groups to initiate discussions with colleagues and administrators. I can think of some reasons why this may have been truer in my case than it may have been in other cases (Little 2003).

First, the teachers' experience with the Tribes TLC decision in which colleagues were expected to contribute time and energy to implementing a decision they were not all entirely committed to, persuaded them to include their colleagues in the decision-making process. They were well aware of how teachers not sufficiently involved in the decision-making process around a peacemaking initiative could block the implementation of that program. In addition, peacemaking education may be unique in a schools' instructional program because all teachers may need to be involved in order to create an effective program for students. Since students' interaction outside the classroom is more difficult to control, the most effective peacemaking programs are ones that attempt to affect students' ability to manage conflict when adult supervision is lowest, in the hallways and in the schoolyard. This makes it more essential for teachers to cooperate and collectively take responsibility for the quality of student interactions outside the classroom. This is not true of educational reform initiatives that focus on language, mathematics and other academic subjects in which the most effective place for teachers to intercede and impact student learning is within the classroom. In other words, the choice to focus on peacemaking education may have made it more likely that teachers would engage in conversations with colleagues outside their small working groups in order to elicit support for their initiatives and to ensure the successful implementation of those programs in the school. In contrast, teacher learning groups that focus more on learning how to teach academic subjects do not necessarily encourage teachers to discuss the conversations from within the working group with others outside the conversation because the impact on those colleagues' work may not seem as apparent.

Given that the quality of student interaction was a prominent concern for these teachers and that they believed they needed to create a unified, whole school approach that would educate students to manage conflict more appropriately, they were motivated to find time to meet with colleagues despite the structures in schools that isolate teachers. However, their work would undoubtedly have been more effective if some of the structural barriers were removed. For instance, if the senior teachers had a scheduled time within the instructional day to meet, the larger junior/senior division could have explored many of the proposals designed by the senior working group and the implementation of some of those changes may have happened earlier.

### **Expanding Teacher Agency to Implement Decisions Outside the Classroom**

In addition to preventing the working groups from becoming isolated and balkanized, involving teachers in decision-making about peacemaking, as opposed to other instructional concerns, may have also supported these teachers' to extend their authority outside the classroom. This includes the types of peacemaking decisions teachers made and how they implemented those decisions by integrating new practices in to existing peacemaking education programs within the school. Making decisions about peacemaking education also may have supported the development of teacher agency which made it possible for teachers to implement many of their decisions in the school (Ingersoll, 1996; Osler & Starkey, 1998; Marks & Louis, 1997; Smylie, 1994, Silins & Mulford, 2001; Brost, 2000). Since effective peacemaking education necessarily extends

beyond the borders of the classroom, teachers in the working group may have been motivated to implement decisions on a school level.

The opportunity for teachers to participate in a collective decision-making process that allowed them to create an agenda around a specific issue (peacemaking in the school) seemed to increase their commitment to implementing the peacemaking initiatives on which they collectively decided to focus. In contrast, decisions about at least one peacemaking initiative in the school that did not involve staff sufficiently in the decision-making process was poorly implemented. In the case of the working groups, an opportunity to not only voice dissenting opinions, but remain with the decision-making process until consensus had been reached, made it more likely that all staff, at least those involved in the working group, would feel some ownership of the decision. As a result, they may have felt some responsibility to their colleagues for ensuring its successful implementation.

These findings suggest that it may be important to involve teachers in the decision-making process especially when the decisions made will require significant time and energy for teachers to implement. More importantly, it may be wise to take time to invite teachers in at the beginning of the process when the problem is being discussed and allow them to work through diagnosing the cause of the concern and find solutions to the problem collaboratively. It may also be important for teachers to have an opportunity to express dissenting opinions, test proposed solutions and continue to dialogue around the concern until they reach consensus. In the Garden School case, reaching consensus around decisions seemed to motivate teachers to support each other to implement the decisions as opposed to questioning the choice of the majority, which can result in less effective implementation of peacemaking programs (Oppfer 1997).

This insight re: decision-making and dissent has some implications for how decisions might be made in a school. Since this type of decision-making can be time consuming, it may not be possible or even necessary for teachers to be involved in the large decision-making process for every choice the school makes. However, it may be prudent to include them in peacemaking education decisions that may require their support in order to be implemented successfully. Due to the time consuming nature of a consensus decision-making process, it may be more efficient to allow much of the discussion to occur in smaller groups of teachers, who are motivated to be involved in resolving the issue. These team members can include the broader staff when they have created some proposals. However, if there is significant resistance to their suggestions, it might be helpful to invite the dissenters into the small group discussions so their voice can be adequately represented in terms of proposed solutions.

It is also important for a school administration to support the development of a collegial atmosphere in which teachers can make decisions collaboratively. Scheduling committee meetings and creating other structures that enable teachers to meet and discuss issues important to them may be crucial. As in the case of Garden School, it is important for the administrator to support the decisions made by the collective through working with the staff to implement their ideas (Silins & Mulford 2001, Shedd & Bacharach 1991). Although it is important to delegate responsibility to the staff, it may also be crucial for the administrators to be involved in the decision-making process in order to model the behaviours that facilitate successful group work (Shedd & Bacharach 1991). Administrators, who have this kind of role and support structures in the school that

encourage staff to make decisions collaboratively, may help to transform the status and power relationships between themselves and the teachers as well as among other staff members. In other words, they may help to democratize the school in terms of adult relationships. As teachers' agency within the school increases, teachers may well feel more comfortable supporting students to have increased agency as well.

In Garden School, there was some indication that the transformation described above might be in the beginning stages. Certainly the teachers in the working group felt empowered to implement many of their decisions. In addition, they were advocating for school structures, such as the reinstatement of active committee and division meetings, in order to create more spaces for staff to be involved in making some of these decisions. The administration at the school seemed to support the decisions made by the teachers in the working group although they had not always included all the staff in the full decision-making process. However, the duration of the project was too short to determine whether some of these changes will actually take hold in the school and it is not known what effect these changes may have on the power imbalances between staff members in the school.

### **The Role of Decision-Making in Collaborative Teacher Learning Groups**

The teachers involved in the working groups at Garden School were charged with more than having collaborative conversations with colleagues about their instructional practice (Little 2003, Grossman et al. 2001, Gallego et al. 2001, Stein, Smith & Silver 1999). They were assigned the task of making decisions that would improve the peacemaking education practices in the school. Both the content of their decisions and how they made them are addressed in this section. The explicit introduction of decision-making into their collaborative work seems to have had some benefits in terms of their learning and their ability to develop a more democratic discussion in which more voices were heard. First, teachers may have been more motivated to engage in constructive dissent earlier in their conversations with each other because they were making decisions that would necessarily impact their work in the school. Usually storming, the group development stage where members engage in openly expressed conflict, does not occur until the group has spent a considerable amount of time together. For example, in Grossman's study the teachers involved in the professional learning group moved towards engaging in the open conflict in the second month of the study, after they had met once a month all day as well as participating in after school meetings twice a month (2001). In contrast, dissent in the working groups at Garden School started to emerge shortly after we began to meet (the second forty-five minute after school meeting). Their investment in the decisions being discussed may have encouraged them to voice dissenting opinions earlier in their work together. If their conversations had only focused on their own instructional practice they may have been more reluctant to challenge each other. These discussions in which teachers disagreed with each other stimulated their ability to critically examine school practices in particular.

Second, in addition to agreeing on an agenda for their discussions, teachers also collectively negotiated norms for interaction and developed a decision-making process which facilitated their work together. The importance of professional communities focusing on the process of their collaboration as well as on the content of their discussions has also been found by other researchers to facilitate learning (Grossman et al

2001, Munro & Laiken 2003). Despite the prevailing culture in the school, which did not support teachers to confront each other's action or beliefs, the work of developing an agenda of problems to solve and a decision-making process that supported collaboration encouraged teachers to engage in constructive dissent. The dissent that evolved out of the decision-making process seemed to enable teachers to share more freely than has been reported by other authors regarding their classroom practice (Little 2003, Grossman et al 2001). This enhanced teacher learning because they confronted each other and themselves as they shared experiences and in some cases this produced changes in instructional strategies. In many instances it resulted in the modification of school practices from peacekeeping approaches to peacemaking education initiatives.

Nevertheless, collaboratively developing a decision-making process seemed to not only help the teachers learn how to make decisions with each other, it also encouraged them to share about and reflect on their own classroom practice. For example, when the teachers were discussing potential solutions to a perceived problem, they would test the solution against their own experience. The resulting discussions were rich in constructive dissent because they not only helped teachers refine the solutions but they also encouraged them to reflect on their own experience and reexamine their work with students.

The development of a collectively negotiated process for interacting and making decisions together seemed to facilitate a discussion in which the voices of staff who have less power (educational assistants, who were women of colour, and new teachers) were more often included. However, the school culture norms of not interfering with each other's behaviour and avoiding conflict were also evident. To some extent they may have been a factor in silencing the voices of more oppressed staff. Participating in making decisions together had the potential to encourage teachers to confront and change ways in which their own professional culture perpetuated social inequities. However, the experience at Garden School suggests that more work together may be necessary in order for those educators with less status to risk persisting in confronting more experienced teachers until their voices are more fully heard and their perspectives incorporated into the decisions made by the group. Those deeper confrontations may have occurred if teachers had had more time together.

### **Participatory Decision-Making: Changing Attitudes and Behaviour in Relation to Peace Education**

This section focuses mainly on how teacher capacity to support students to make decisions collaboratively was impacted by their own collaborative work together. When this study began, my initial interviews with teachers, and my observations of the adult staff during the peacemaking circle workshops, revealed that Garden School had largely used a peacekeeping (control) approach to managing student behaviour. Although they wanted students to resolve conflicts independently and they intended to focus on healing relationships when they helped students manage conflicts, their perceived need to be in control of the mediation process and to assign punitive consequences to students who caused harm undermined their intent. The attitudes underlying their approach reinforced the implied messages to students that the responsibility for conflicts rested solely with the few individuals directly involved in the dispute, that it was best to avoid openly expressed conflict and that punishment (usually exclusion) was an effective way to

change the behaviour of individual students, who are involved in violent behaviour (Bickmore 2003, Brazemore & Umbriet 2001). However, participation in the peacemaking circle workshop as well as a collaborative decision-making process seemed to help some teachers begin to question these attitudes. In addition to two teachers' claim that our work together helped them rethink their belief that it is best to avoid open conflict, four teachers seemed to become more willing to delegate the responsibility of resolving interpersonal conflict to their students. These same teachers reported that they were either more inclined to include students in choosing appropriate restitution for their actions or they did not assign consequences to students involved in conflict. This demonstrates a substantial shift away from using a peacekeeping approach towards a peacemaking approach in which students work together through dialogue to solve interpersonal problems. In addition, when the teachers in the working group examined school peacekeeping practices, such as reward systems, in light of the problems related to student behaviour that they wished to resolve, they discovered that these approaches were limited in terms of teaching students how to behave differently when they interacted with each other. Therefore, they proposed changes to these practices that would make them more effective and engage students in discussions around these issues.

That is not to say that as a result of participating in the working groups and the peacemaking circle workshop that the teachers at Garden School totally abandoned peacekeeping approaches to dealing with inappropriate student behaviour. In fact, the primary working group invested a substantial amount of time and energy into creating a collectively agreed upon set of rules and consequences to regulate student behaviour in the primary schoolyard. However, some of the teachers involved in the working groups did seem to learn that peacekeeping approaches, while useful in terms of limiting violence and victimization, are most useful when they also make space for more proactive approaches that teach students appropriate models for managing conflict. More dramatic changes might have become apparent if I had had the opportunity to observe the teachers' participation in the working groups over a longer period of time, because the reinvention of attitudes within a culture can take significant periods of time.

Due to the short duration of the study (5 months), it is difficult to determine fully how the shared decision-making process experienced by the teachers will impact their ability to facilitate the use of peacemaking circles as a shared decision-making structure for their students. Nevertheless, there is some indication that in a few cases the discussions teachers had around these issues encouraged them to work differently with students. For example, a few teachers who were very resistant initially to using peacemaking circles in their classroom tried them with some success because of encouraging reports they had from colleagues. Others claim to use peacemaking circles regularly to resolve conflicts. The use of peacemaking circles in at least one classroom has supported the students to be more involved in making decisions around their own conflicts instead of relying on teachers to mediate, assign blame and determine consequences. Teachers, who did not experience sustained success using peacemaking circles, may need more opportunities to use the tool as well as chances to share the problems they have in implementing it and to elicit collegial support to resolve those concerns.

The discussions in the working groups did seem to keep returning to the topic of peacemaking circles and their potential use in the school as well as in individual

classrooms. These meetings may have kept the use of circles as an innovation at the forefront of teachers' conversations and helped them maintain their interest in implementing them despite the difficulties they encountered. Continued discussions as well as more opportunities to use them to facilitate their own collegial decision-making process may have resulted in more teachers using the structure more regularly. Certainly all the teachers involved suggested that they would be more likely to use peacemaking circles in the future. In addition, several decisions have been made which focus on the implementation of peacemaking initiatives for the following school year (2004/2005). The administration and the larger staff have supported these new programs and some structures have been put in place to insure that they are indeed put into practice next year.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This project added to some of the research that has attempted to discover how professional communities can support teacher learning. Some of the findings in this study are congruent with the results of other researchers. Namely, in order to develop professional communities among teachers it is important for the teachers involved to develop their own agenda related to instructional concerns that they identify as important. (Stein, Smith & Silver 1999, Little 2003, Grossman et al. 2001, Gallego et al. 2001) In addition, it is also important for teachers working together collaboratively to pay some attention to developing a process for interacting, which includes developing norms that encourage respectful interactive behaviour (Little 2003, Grossman et al. 2001, Gallego et al. 2001). However, my research also introduced two elements to the study of professional learning communities that had not previously been explored in this type of project. First, the teachers involved in the working groups at Garden School participated in discussions about peacemaking education as opposed to discussions about academic subjects. Second, they explicitly made decisions intended to improve the school's approach to peacemaking education and managing inappropriate student behaviour. The subject of their conversation and the task of making decisions seems to have had an impact on their commitment to implement proposed changes as well as encouraged them to engage in constructive dissent with each other. This led to some reflection on instructional practice and resulted in some changes to school programs and teachers' work with students.

However, the results of this study although interesting, are inconclusive for three reasons. First, the duration of the study was too brief to determine whether the learning that teachers claim to have experienced will be implemented into their classroom practice regularly, especially with regard to the use of peacemaking circles. There was also insufficient time to determine whether the inclusion of educational assistants, often women of colour, and less experienced teachers might result in raising the status of these educators in relation to that of more experienced, accredited teachers in the school. A longer study might have allowed deeper dissent to emerge, which may have challenged teachers to critically examine how they perpetuate social inequities in their own professional community as well among their students. If I had been able to observe the teachers in the working groups at Garden School over a longer period of time, I would have also been able to determine whether the proposed changes to existing school peacekeeping practices as well as the introduction of new initiatives actually occurred. In



addition, I might have been able to observe whether the school decision-making structures at Garden school did become more inclusive of teachers.

Second, I was unable to observe teachers at work in their classrooms or interview students. As a result, I cannot be sure whether the changes in teachers' attitudes and practices around conflict and conflict resolution, that I observed in the working groups, actually made a significant impact on students. Other researchers have found that teachers do not necessarily share freely and honestly about their classroom practice (Little 2003). Despite teachers' claims of learning and their stories about how their work with students had changed, direct observation of classroom practice and conversations with students might confirm or contradict my findings.

Third, I did not anticipate that the Garden School teachers, who participated in the two working groups, would be so effective at instituting actual or proposed changes to school practice in such a short time. In five short months, they had made significant modifications to all the reward programs in the school. They designed a bullying prevention program and a cadre peer mediation program scheduled to be implemented on a whole school level the following year. They had collaboratively, with all the primary teachers, created a set of rules and consequences for inappropriate student behaviour in the primary school yard as well as ordered new play equipment for that yard and advocated to increase the adult supervision at recess for the younger students. I cannot say that their success, while encouraging, would occur in another school. In other words, I am not sure how much the Garden school staff's success at making changes to the peacemaking education practices in their school is unique. Without an opportunity to compare the impact of those teachers' collaborative decision-making around peacemaking education to a comparable effort at another school, I must assume that the results of this study are not generalizable or replicable.

Therefore, I believe that future research in this area should include some of the components of this study, including the use of collaborative decision-making intended to improve peacemaking education. It may also be useful to use peacemaking circles as a new initiative and encourage teachers to use it more explicitly to structure their own conversation. This would begin to add to the very small body of research that is attempting to explore the impact of restorative justice techniques on democratizing school culture. However, it would be useful for future studies to observe teachers working collaboratively over a significantly longer period of time (2 years or more). It would also be helpful to observe teachers in their classroom and interview students in order to more fully understand how participating in collaborative working groups that make decisions around peacemaking education, might expand teachers' capacity to involve students in participatory decision-making. Finally, future studies in this area should observe teachers' participation in democratic decision-making in more than one school in order to understand how differences in school environments might impact teachers' abilities to work together, make decisions and implement new initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the results of this study suggest that teachers who engage collaborative decision-making with colleagues in order to improve peacemaking education in their school may develop increased social connections with colleagues and resist the tendency of teacher groups in some schools to become isolated. Making

decisions together around peacemaking education may also help to extend teacher authority outside the classroom and increase their sense of agency within the school as they implement decisions that impact the school community. In addition, participating in making decisions may make it more likely that teachers will engage in constructive dissent with each other (which creates an opportunity for learning) because they may be motivated to voice their opinions about changes to practices that will affect their work with students. In addition, involvement in shared decision-making may encourage teachers to share about their classroom practice as they work to diagnose the cause of problems and test proposed solutions against their own experience. This may provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of their own instructional practice as well as on wider school programs, in order to better understand whether they fully address the problem, as they comprehend it. This type of reflection and critical examination of instructional practice and school structures may result in changing teachers' attitudes and behaviour in relation to conflict and conflict resolution practice with colleagues and with students.

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