Teachers Helping Teachers

Generations of teachers have learned most of what they knew about teaching by watching their own elementary and secondary teachers. Without ever deciding to do so, they learned to teach as they were taught. For most of today’s teachers, this apprenticeship of observation is worse than useless: Their own teachers taught students who looked and acted very different from those they see in their own classrooms, and they taught them in ways that reformers now criticize sharply.

How will teachers answer the challenge of reform and learn to teach in new ways? Almost certainly not through the professional development opportunities that their districts provide, which are likely to be one-shot workshops without follow through — classes which take place at a distance from teachers’ classrooms and rarely help them to build bridges between reform ideas and what they currently do.

Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s suggests that teachers can create, improve, and sustain new pedagogies far more effectively in the company of like-minded colleagues than they can on their own. Synthesizing the results of a national study of secondary schools, Milbrey McLaughlin of Stanford University writes:

"Almost every teacher we encountered who pursued notions of alternative practices for his or her classroom on a sustained basis, who felt excited about workplace challenges and engaged in issues of practice and pedagogy, and who expressed energy and continued enthusiasm for the profession was a member of a strong collegial group, a community of learners. And every teacher we encountered who was engaged in the active demanding form of pedagogy called “teaching for understanding,” in which students and teachers construct knowledge together, belonged to such a community."

This issue of Changing Minds examines the work of five such teacher groups.

Like the groups that McLaughlin and her colleagues studied, the three teachers who describe their work in “Making it Happen” work within a single school; this is also true of the members of the Elliott School Math Study Group (“The Kids Help Me To Think Differently, But I Feel Like I Am Pushed And Stretched More Here”). Situating the work of a group within one school in this way has obvious advantages: teachers can confer together frequently and at moments of crisis during the school day as well as at scheduled meeting times. They may also be able to observe in one another’s classrooms when they need to, adding first-hand observations to what their colleagues can tell them about their students and their practices. In the work of both of these groups we see the rich possibilities that physical proximity affords.

In many schools, however, the culture of the staffroom prevents teachers from openly raising questions about traditional practice. Teachers and principal treat teach-

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ing as a private matter and marginalize those who want to look critically at their own practice or (worse still) at practices that are common to most of the school’s classrooms. Thus, teachers who want the help and support of other teachers in examining their own practice often need to look outside of their school for a community of colleagues.

Good professional communities amplify the intrinsic rewards of teaching and make them more visible.

In Studying Children we see 16 members of the Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) Teachers’ Learning Cooperative (TLC) who teach in public schools all over the city examining a classroom videotape. The founders of the TLC began meeting together in the 1970s at a teachers’ center that was funded through the Philadelphia School District. Through the work that they did in the teachers’ center and through summer workshops at the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont, they became acquainted with Patricia Carini and with the formats she and her colleagues had developed for looking at the work of individual children. As they worked with Carini they came to feel that the opportunity to look with thoughtful colleagues at a puzzling child deepened their understanding of all children; in 1978, when the Philadelphia School District stopped funding the teachers’ centers, the teachers decided to continue their joint work on their own; they have been meeting weekly ever since.

The Work of Groups

Professional communities, whether they are located within one school or draw members from a number of different schools, seem to support teachers and teaching in a wide variety of ways: they address particular problems of practice; they contribute to the professional development of members; they provide social, emotional, and practical support; they nurture the development of professional identities; they craft a collective stance on issues related to teaching; they find ways to talk about problems of practice that are respectful of children and families; they enhance the intrinsic rewards of teaching.

All the professional communities profiled here address the particular circumstances and problems of practice that group members bring to the table. In “The Kids Help Me To Think Differently, But I Feel Like I Am Pushed And Stretched More Here” we see the Elliott School Math Study Group working together on a problem that fourth-grade teacher Beth Scholten puts on the table. Her students have been finding a variety of ways to solve multiplication problems involving large numbers; recently, echoing a question that Scholten had been asking herself, an adult observing this process asked Scholten when she planned to teach the conventional multiplication algorithm. The other members of the group listen to Scholten’s reflections and ask her clarifying questions. By the time the conversation turns to other matters, Scholten seems fairly clear about where she wants to go next with her math class.

The particular questions of particular teachers anchor groups and conversations in practice, creating a context for concrete discussions about issues large and small. This is important: the words educators use to describe their ideas and practices — terms like “individualization,” “basic skills,” and “process writing” — convey quite different meanings to different people. Only through careful description of the particular can we hope to communicate what we really mean.

However, none of the groups described here exist solely in order to address day-to-day problems. The teachers meet together because they believe that the group plays an important role in their professional development — which may include such matters as deepening understanding of subject matter although it is rarely limited to this. The teachers in Investigating Mathematics Teaching meet every other week to talk about mathematics teaching. Their goal is to craft new pedagogy — to learn to teach mathematics in ways that are different — and far more ambitious — from anything that any of the members experienced as students. The conversations about particular classroom dilemmas serve that agenda, but the agenda is larger than the sum of the individual problems. In the conversation described in “It’s Like Being In The Learners’ Feet,” teachers try to solve a mathematics problem and then explore parallels between their experiences and those of their elementary and middle school students. The group experience thus becomes a site for analyzing what one member calls “the discourse beneath the discourse.”
These professional communities provide emotional and practical support to their members. Teachers in all of these groups have high standards for themselves. They are attempting to teach all children in ambitious ways that have in the past been reserved mostly for the children of elites. The work is hard, support from school bureaucracies unreliable, failures inevitable; teachers are almost bound, at least occasionally, to feel frustrated, inadequate, angry, and alone. A community of teachers which shares a common vision can be sustaining – even when the group can offer no solutions. In Making It Happen, Kathy Beasley describes the help she gets from a colleague when she feels discouraged:

Carole won't say the obvious things like, 'You need more structure.' She has a sense of what I want to go on in my classroom. I don't expect Carole to give me an answer. I just want her to listen. There is something exceptionally supportive about the things she says.

Often the simple, practical ways in which group members help one another - with the name, for example, of a picture book that might connect a child who loves trucks and large machinery to reading - are emotionally supportive: they make group members feel less alone.

Most teacher groups nurture friendships and create networks of social support as well. When teachers expose their doubts and difficulties and give and receive help, they develop bonds that are personal as well as professional. The social support and friendships that teacher groups foster are often vital to their members' ability to develop and sustain positions as dissenters in the conformist culture of their schools. For in many schools teachers who teach in non-traditional ways - and especially those who change their practice in ways that reformers urge - find themselves experiencing strong pressures both from colleagues and from administrators to conform to the dominant practices of the school. Some begin to feel as though when they leave their own classrooms to visit the staff lounge they are moving into a war zone. To those who work in such contexts, the friendship and respect of other teachers is vitally important.

For many teachers, learning to teach in new ways - perhaps especially if these new ways involve talking ideas more seriously - means developing a new professional identity and sometimes a new personal identity as well. Often membership in a teacher group can play an important role in an individual teacher's effort to construct a new kind of professional identity: we know who we are partly by looking at other people in the groups with which we identify, by noticing where we seem to belong. In Teachers Like Us, Deborah Harris describes how the Learning
Community Sharing Circle helped six beginning teachers to figure out who they wanted to be as professionals. Individual members of other groups tell stories of professional development which give membership in a collegial group a central role in their story of who they have become. Part of the work of a teacher group is to craft a stance — either some tentative working answers to big questions about teaching and learning or a way of talking and thinking about them. Crafting this stance helps group members to create a kind of collective identity.

Intimately connected to the task of constructing a new professional identity is that of finding ways to talk about problems of practice that are respectful of students and families. A recurring theme in the conversations of the novice teachers who belonged to the Learning Community Sharing Circle — and of other groups of novices as well — was the pain and frustration they felt as they listened — usually silently — as more experienced teachers disparaged children and parents. These beginners knew that they did not want to join this sort of conversation; in the Sharing Circle they found a place where they could practice other ways of talking about children’s difficulties. After analyzing data generated in the national study of high schools mentioned earlier, Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert (1992) conclude that the nature of teachers professional communities — they were looking mainly at high school departments — “has much to do with how teachers respond to students and how they construct their practice.” In the schools McLaughlin and Talbert studied, teachers in cohesive collegial departments were more likely to abandon traditional practices if these were not working for their students and to search together for better ways to connect these students to subject matter. Teachers in departments dominated by norms of privacy were far less likely to experiment with new pedagogies; instead they complained despairingly about the young people in their classes.

Good professional communities amplify the intrinsic rewards of teaching and make them more visible. A Philadelphia teacher explains the effect of doing a descriptive review with her colleagues in the TLC:

Children’s work feeds us. The energy in the drawing, writing, refreshes us. Spending two hours with a child’s strengths and interests has a very different effect on the participants than two hours spent at a faculty meeting going over test scores for areas of deficiency.

Teachers often feel like victims: They must cope, in the classroom, with difficulties caused by society, by school administrators, by parents, and by children themselves. Yet if they allow themselves to feel powerless, they are unlikely to find solutions to classroom problems. Teachers in strong communities, reports McLaughlin, “locate control in the profession rather than outside of it.” In searching out (and finding) solutions to the problems that rob teachers of the potential pleasures of fostering children’s learning, teacher groups affirm the power of their members. In A Close Look at Tami we see how the TLC helped Tami’s teacher to find ways to build on the child’s strengths. In “Making it Happen,” three teachers use observation, conversation, and writing to figure out what one of them can do to diffuse the anger in her classroom and build a better learning community.

If a teacher group is to flourish, or perhaps even to survive, someone must be paying attention to the health of that group and to the processes that sustain it. Someone must think about where the group is going, whose needs it is meeting and not meeting, who seems to have fallen silent or marginalized herself, and whether the conversations are continuing to address issues that matter critically to those present. In many groups, a few people do this work quietly behind the scenes; one group makes some of it visible by building a time for “critique” into its regular meetings and by setting aside one meeting every couple of months for planning.

**Inherent Difficulties**

Although the work that collegial communities do can be vital both to the professional development of their members and to their day-to-day morale, teacher groups are not all warm and fuzzy. Most teacher groups go through tough times when even their survival is in doubt; even in good times they manage inherent tensions.

- **Who should belong?** Groups have a history and a discourse. Often they have crafted a position, or at least a way of thinking about important issues. It can be hard for them to welcome new people and make them feel like full-fledged members of the community. And it is not just the newcomers who find induction difficult: when new people join the conversation, members of the original group have to make changes in what they do and say. This can be more difficult and disturbing than it looks. In one group where conversations follow an agreed on format, veterans disagree about what to do when newcomers violate established norms. In many others, veterans struggle hard — and not always successfully — to communicate the bases for understandings that have evolved over years of talk and joint work. New
members can bring new ideas and usefully question accepted truths. By seeking entry they testify to the group’s health and to its continuing relevance to the work of thoughtful teachers. But they can also disrupt the existing community, raising questions of safety: some members wonder whether they can trust a relative stranger not to repeat what they say in the privacy of the group, for example, or to understand what they mean when they use the telegraphic language of old friends. The difficulties play out differently in different groups.

- **Whose ideas are valued?** Explaining her decision to drop out of a group, one teacher said, “In most groups I’m a member of, people lean forward eagerly when I begin to say something. That doesn’t happen here.” Although most teachers hope that everyone in their group feels valued and important, it is not unusual for some group members to feel that others command more attention than they do, that the group seems to “belong” to certain teachers — often to those who joined first or to those who attend meetings most regularly.

- **How should the group spend meeting time?** Groups, like other living organisms, sometimes need to change: the activities and processes that serve a group well in 1989 may seem a good deal less useful in 1994 — the reform climate has changed, the teachers’ practices have changed, and most of the members are 5 years older. But a group does what it does partly because some group members find this particular sort of meeting helpful. The changes that work well for some members come at exactly the wrong time for others.

- **How important is a planned agenda?** When teachers arrive at a group meeting at the end of a long school day, full of the problems and pleasures that have arisen for them over the course of the week, they often want to air their feelings and get advice and emotional support. Few colleagues want to push a friend’s troubles under the rug and insist that the group go ahead with the planned discussion. Yet if the group sets aside its agenda, work that is of great importance to some of the teachers will get short-changed. If this happens regularly, some group members may feel that the meetings no longer stimulate their minds and feed their teaching.

**The group working together will see far more than any individual teacher working alone.**

**The Search for Common Ground**

For many of their members, group meetings provide precious moments for talk with colleagues who share many of their assumptions and goals. Yet none of these groups are homogeneous. The teachers’ classrooms differ visibly from one another; they describe what they do and what they struggle with differently.

Both the differences and the similarities are vital. The power of the TLC’s descriptive processes resides in the certainty that different people will hear and see different things in the stories and artwork of one child: because this is true, the group working together will see far more than any individual teacher working alone. It is important, however, that all participants share a desire to discover and build on children’s strengths. Similarly, members of the IMT group feel that they are making important discoveries — or at least formulating important conjectures — about the emotional side of mathematical discourse both because each teacher is describing a somewhat different experience and because all group members believe in the value of classroom conversations about mathematics.

Conversation is the means through which teachers connect with one another, it is the medium in which they both find and create common ground. Through conversation they support, invent, theorize, problem solve, nurture, and create. In addition, some of these teachers argue, it is through these professional conversations that they learn how to help children to conduct and appreciate substantive conversations about academic subject matter. Conversation is teachers’ work.
“Making it Happen”:
Teachers Mentoring One Another

by Kathy Beasley,
Deborah Corbin,
and Carole Shank,
Averill Elementary School,
and Sharon Feiman-Nemser,
Michigan State University

Carole and I have started working together. My role is still very unclear to me. I am not sure that what I am doing is helpful. Carole has questions about her classroom. Where do I fit in? I have tried to follow Carole’s lead in what we talk about. I went in and observed but I wasn’t sure what to observe. Is there something she is working on that I could especially observe and take notes on? I don’t think Carole lacks a clear understanding of her vision. I think she is having trouble making it happen in her classroom...Maybe that is what Carole would like to work on...her role in making her vision happen. I think I could help maybe just by listening and letting Carole sort through her ideas and problems...I know I have a tendency to back away from difficult situations, but there is no more time for that. I feel I must confront this head on. There is not enough time to be cautious.

Kathy Beasley’s journal.
January 12, 1993

We are three second and third grade teachers and a university teacher educator who were, in 1993, working together at Averill Elementary School in Lansing, a Professional Development School (PDS) associated with Michigan State University. Two years earlier Debi had student taught in Kathy’s classroom. During that time the two of them worked with Sharon, a professor at Michigan State, exploring new ways for Kathy to share her expertise with Debi. The mentoring project we describe here built on what we learned that year about the power of focused observation, writing, and practice-centered talk to promote teacher learning.

After Debi graduated, Averill hired her as a “co-teacher” to provide restructured time for Kathy, Carole, and the other second and third grade teachers. Kathy had decided to follow her second graders into third grade, so Debi already knew her students. Carole decided out what the PDS principles—teaching for understanding, learning community, restructuring, educating all children—might mean in their own classrooms. Together they joined a math study group at the University (see “It’s Like Being in the Learners’ Feet!” in this issue of Changing Minds). Strangely drawn to the reform ideas, Carole determined to become a different kind of teacher. But having a vision is not the same as making it happen.

As Debi and Kathy became involved in Carole’s practice, they realized that she was really struggling. They heard it through the movable wall that divided the classrooms. Debi saw it when she went to Carole’s classroom to pick up her students. Carole talked about it at lunch. The more they heard, the more concerned they became for both Carole and her students.

Kathy wanted to deepen the relationship with Carole so she suggested that the three of them go out to lunch on Saturday. Away from school, they talked quite personally about themselves and their teaching. At one point the subject of tolerance came up. Kathy said that she didn’t know how to teach tolerance. “Yes you do,” Carole replied. “And I want you to tell me how you do it.” That launched our mentoring project. We decided to write about the lunch conversation and to continue working together.

By calling our joint work “a mentoring project” we highlight the ways in which it challenges norms of teaching that are often taken for granted: the belief that every teacher’s practice is her own and that outsiders ought not to intrude or raise questions about it; the personal that all teachers are equally competent and that differences are a

matters of "style." When we acknowledged openly that two teachers with less experience were helping a veteran, we knew we were taking risks but we hoped we were striking a blow against professional isolation.

Initially Kathy felt quite unsure about her role and about the prospects for success. How could we get the real problems out on the table? Would we be able to talk about them openly? Would the work jeopardize our friendship? What if things in Carole's classroom did not improve?

The kind of intensely personal work that we have been engaged in requires a lot of trust and openness. Close-to-the-classroom work is close-to-the-bone. In the culture of teaching, the question, "Why are you doing that?" is often construed as a criticism. Much of our energy during the first year went into developing our professional learning community. Debi and Kathy needed Carole's reassurances that it was ok for them to question, probe, give advice. Carole needed to reassure herself that she was entering a new phase in her teaching in which past practice was not always a reliable guide. After reading Kathy, Carole, and Debi's journals from the first year of work, Sharon wrote to them:

It seems you are really getting to a place where you can count on trust and openness and get on with the work...I think you are creating a precious and rare culture of mentoring and collaboration characterized by intensity, respect, specificity of language, and clarity of purpose.

Throughout this time Kathy, Carole, and Debi kept journals which they shared with one another and with Sharon. The excerpts that follow deal with one of the major themes of our joint work: "making it happen." They also reflect the concerns we had as we tried to figure out how to work together.

April 20, 1993
Kathy: Carole and I have spent some more time together. It feels like we are talking more concretely. Still I'm not sure this is helpful to Carole...Clearly Carole is deeply upset about what is going on in her classroom. But what specifically is troubling her? We can't seem to focus on specific instances with specific children or specific issues...I need to help Carole do this. But it is hard for me. I don't want to come off too critical. I don't want to hurt feelings...I want to focus on Carole's role, the part she plays in shaping her classroom. As I think about it, Carole wants to focus more on the children and the part they have in shaping the classroom. Maybe we are at odds...We have to talk about this if we are going to work together.

February 4, 1994
Kathy: I feel that Carole's confidence in what to do and what to say is fragile. I sense an uncertainty and the children sense it, too...What do children believe Carole will make happen and what don't they believe she will make happen? Will she insist Kyle stop tapping on his desk in that dreadfully annoying way? Will she insist that he write sentences? Does he have to be polite about it or can he act out? What is allowed in this classroom? What are the limits? But there is more to this. Why are there limits? Can the other children figure out why there are limits by what Carole says? I think this is crucial. How to state and restate your expectations and why they are your expectations without laboring the point...Maybe this would help -- thinking of many examples of clear pointed things to say in different situations.

February 7, 1994
Carole: I have felt that same defiance from Kyle, but also from others in my class. What is it? What is the cause? Am I contributing to it by something I am doing? I am not sure. I do not have many strategies to pull on when I come in contact with that kind of defiance. I am worried and am wondering about what to do about it. Kathy said to me the other day, while watching the class meeting when Sean was uncooperative, "What are you going to do? They're waiting for you to do something?" That phrase has moved into my head several times. Maybe I have let too much go, so now each time becomes a struggle to see who will win. When Kathy and Debi are in the room, they help me focus on what behaviors are going on that need more attention, both negative and positive. They both have a way of talking about what needs to happen in the classroom that makes a better learning environment. What is it that they do? I need to figure this out...There was one point last week when I felt clear about my role. I was making the situation happen, letting students know what we were doing, how to proceed and I was carrying it through. I felt good. Next time I must write it down and see if I can get clearer about what I was doing.

February 8, 1994
Kathy: I was relieved that I had said everything to Carole that I wanted to say and that we were still friends. I was very relieved to have Carole tell me that my intervention with Kyle had not overstepped any bounds for her. I was so worried...Carole, I am in awe of your hard work, courage and thoughtfulness.

Carole has exposed her practice to Kathy and Debi and they feel a professional obligation to help her. The "joint work" is underway. There are difficult issues to talk about and the stakes are high. At the same time, the writing and talking are becoming more concrete and specific and this is starting to pay off.

February 10, 1994
Kathy: Carole has taken charge...She told us how she had gone home and written up what she was going to say. She read aloud to us what she

3 All children's names in Changing Minds are pseudonyms.
had told the children about how things were changing and they
weren't going to ignore her anymore. That there was important learning
and work to do... She took back her authority and her job and she told
them. It was GREAT! I am sure it won't all be easy sailing from here on
out, but this feels like a major
change.

Carole was working incredibly hard to communicate her expecta-
tions clearly. Despite her persis-
tence, the same six students con-
tinued to ignore or defy her and the
whole class seemed angrier than
ever. Carole felt very discouraged
and Kathy and Debi were worried,
too, but they tackled the problem to-
gether and wrote about the results.

February 24, 1994
Kathy: Last night Carole and Debi
and I were talking. I knew from her
tone that Carole was upset and frus-
trated and discouraged. I've been wor-
ried because I knew that there was
something wrong with the way that
Carole and the children were interac-
ting and feeling about each other but I
was stumped... My previous feelings
about what the problem might be just
didn't seem to fit here... The amazing
thing is that once we started talking I
realized the something important that
we had missed. I remember getting the
idea when Carole said something
about the children not believing her
when she told them she wanted to help
them. We had all agreed that Carole
needed to do something to make them
believe her. She waited and waited
until they did it. She did something so
that they would believe her. The same
is true for caring. So we tried to figure
out how you could show the children
you care with your actions. Another
thing I remembered about putting ac-
tions with your words had to do with
looking at children, really looking deep
into their eyes when they talk to you. It
is sort of startling the power this has.
Children respond to this because they
can feel your attention and your car-
ting by your concentration on them.

And you can feel the connection, too.
At the end of the conversation I felt bet-
ter. I knew that the amorphous un-
named positive that we have been try-
ing to add into the formula had been
touched on.

March 3, 1994
Carole: Another thing that we talked
about - I said I have learned new
ways to say things to my class, but
they don't seem to believe me. What
does that mean? The words, just say-
ing them isn't enough. I must be clear
about what I want my class to be like.
I think I know and then when I'm in
it, it's not happening. I have to make
it happen, but that isn't what I wanted
to write about. We talked about
adding a dimension of play. Get
down with them and be
involved-trace, build with blocks,
swing, throw the football - whatever it
takes... I have done this and I love it.
The kids love it and I feel I get to
know them better. I also have been
paying attention to when I look right
into kids' eyes when they talk to me
and stop doing something else. Last
week Sarah laughed right out loud.
She came up to tell me something
and noticed I was looking right into
her eyes.

Appreciating that the teacher is
responsible for "making it happen,"
be it thing; making it happen is
quite another. While Carole was
clear about what she needed to do
and how that was different from
what she used to think and feel and
do, making the changes was hard.
Often she felt like she was taking two
steps forward, one step back.

March 8, 1994
Carole: Today I blew it... Things were
not calm. It was messy and not quiet.
So I decided to watch Debi teaching
my class this afternoon and see what
would happen. Things seemed calmer
than in our room all morning. They
were waiting for each other. Nobody
refused to help or sit down. Sean and
Tom were having the hardest time.
Debi kind of played with them. Who
am I going to find when I turn around
to put on my happy face list? She
turned around and was smiling, real-
ly big. Debi has a very even voice,
talking calmly, waiting, telling them
what she needs for them to work.
How can I get this to happen? What
do I need to do to make this happen?
How do I get this clearer in my head?

By coming to observe Debi
working with her children, Carole
was taking charge of her own learn-
ing. She knew what she wanted to
find out, she knew how to look
and she was not afraid to do so. This
was a major turning point. Instead
of looking to Kathy or Debi for speci-
cific things to do or say, Carole recog-
nized that teaching requires ongo-
ing inquiry and problem solving
and she directed her own learning.
She brought these insights to her sec-
ond year of teaching the same
group of students. We began to see
real changes.

September 1, 1994
Kathy: Carole told an important
story about Tyrone. As she told it, I
realized it was a beautiful example of
Carole's changing practice. I got the
sense that Carole was acting on some
beliefs that she has been articulat-
ing- that she wants the children to
work hard and be respectful and to
listen to their teacher. She wants to in-
teract with children in non-confronta-
tional ways, not get involved in power
struggles, and let children do what
they need to do. She doesn't want to
ignore unacceptable behavior. She
told of talking directly, explaining
what she wanted Tyrone to do. When
he didn't do it, she tried another ap-
proach, focusing on children who were
doing what she wanted, describing it
and rewarding it. She didn't just let it
go. She persisted and he did do what
he was supposed to. Success in more
ways than one. Carole held to her be-
liefs about how to talk to children and
she got Tyrone to do what he needed
to do. The class witnessed this. What
messages did she send, I wonder? It is
interesting that when Carole told the story, I got very excited, but Carole said that she hadn't really recognized the event for what it was until we began talking.

Our conversations had become occasions for recognizing and celebrating accomplishments as well as for getting help. Nonetheless, there was still difficult work left to do.

September 25, 1994
Debi: Last week I was in Carole's room to pick up her students for the morning. They were finishing a math lesson so I sat down quietly in a chair near the computers. Carole was in the back of the room directing the conversation and a student was up at the board sharing an idea. Peter was near the window tossing a red toy up and down, up and down. Carole didn't say anything to him. Jason was in his seat at the front of the room banging on his desk. Ross was near me moaning about a toy that I assume Carole had taken away. I was sitting there thinking that I hadn't seen Carole's room look like this in a long time. She was continuing with the lesson even though she had these three boys acting out and other children in the room seemed uninterested. I can remember thinking, "Why doesn't she stop and say, 'This is your first warning, Peter'?" I can also remember thinking, if I was the kid at the board, I wouldn't be able to even think. It was driving me crazy...I wasn't sure what to do...I haven't been in there much this year and I didn't want to interfere without prior conversation...I went home and wondered about my brief time in the room. I hated the feeling in there...I wondered what Carole had been feeling and why she let things go so far...I was debating what to do when Carole called...I told her that I wondered why she had let Peter toss the toy, had she seen him. She had and she knew it was his birthday so she didn't want to confront him.

September 26, 1994
Carole: Last week when Debi asked me why I had let Jason, Peter, and Ross keep disrupting the learning, it really brought me up short. Why did I do that? Sure it was Peter's birthday and I really didn't want to remove him, but by letting him go how could I stop Jason and Ross? The whole thing was out of hand. I felt those old feelings sneaking back in...Her question really helped me think about what I needed to do. It brought back our discussion from Monday and helped me to refocus again.

Clearly change is difficult and uneven. Yet this interchange between Carole and Debi shows just how sturdy their relationship is. Debi writes honestly about specific things she saw and what she thought and felt about them. Nothing is cushioned or couched in generalizations. Carole can hear what Debi has to say and use it to regroup. Debi's honesty and Carole's courage pay off.

September 26, 1994
Kathy: I am elated. Carole is making it happen in a way that she never has before. Tonight as we talked, she was smiling, animated, leaning back in her chair, explaining her decisions and stating emphatically, 'I am determined.' I asked her how this has happened and she looked at me like I was nuts and talked about the work we have been doing together as making the difference. Then she added that Debi's question about her room during the math lesson had brought her up short. She realized that she was letting things go and that she didn't want to. The difference, though, is that now she has tools, strategies to use, and I think last year she was making sense of these tools that she now pulls up. She says she has words, as well, things she is comfortable saying that fit with her beliefs and that manage the incident, child, or event. I asked her again why she was able to do this now. What was different? She said she thinks it has taken her until now to realize that Tyrone and Jason and the other two boys especially are not her fault. That she didn't make them act the way they did. Then she stopped herself and said "that probably sounds strange, because I know that it is up to me to make things happen." She also said that my experience with Kristal [a student I have had to work very hard with this year] had helped her. That seeing the way I approached the problem, not in terms of "What is wrong with me?" but "How am I going to work with Kristal?" I am so pleased and energized. Frankly, I have felt a little lost, fearful that we were not going to make it. Now I am filled with energy again. If we just keep at this, we can do it. Debi's intervention seemed crucial.

October 1, 1994
Carole: I felt I worked very hard today. I didn't realize why until I talked with Kathy and Debi after school. Things seemed in a real uproar this morning, but what I kept trying to do was to bring order and calmness and accomplish some work at the same time. I know I am different in what I'm doing in my classroom. I am no longer angry when children come in and don't get to work. What I am doing is firmly and softly telling students what they need to do: "Look at Maria—she has her journal out and is writing. Mark is sitting quietly in his seat and thinking about what to write. Thomas is fishing for an idea. I can tell because he is seriously thinking and not talking. If you don't know what you should be doing, you should look at Nicole, she has her journal out and is thinking and writing." Then to the diehards that aren't taking the hint, I go over and whisper, "What do you need to be doing right now?" or "Where is your journal?" If the noise level goes up, I stop everyone with 1-2-3-4-5 timer, while saying, "It needs to be quiet to write and think up your ideas. We need to be serious learners." I am trying to speak more slowly also, making sure that people know what they should be looking and sounding like and what they should be doing.
The thing I think that is significantly different for me is that I am learning that I am not making these children act their feelings out in these ways. Now my job is not to blame but to find ways that I can help them feel successful and productive in this classroom. I am figuring out ways to create a classroom where this can happen... Going over plans with Kathy and identifying the possible pitfalls and how to handle them and talking out loud about what I'm going to do has been invaluable because it helps me get my strategies in the foreground and become proactive instead of reactive.

October 25, 1994
Carole: One thing that is clearer is my vision of what I want learning in my class to look like...having children engaged in the task of learning by digging into what it is they understand. I now see clearly that this is not just going to happen because I present a task. I have to choreograph the whole task by breaking it down into simple steps. For example, in math I want people to listen to each others ideas, so I am insisting that people look at the board, and write down what others are doing and saying because for us to be able to find out if we understand an idea, it is important for us to hear it and think how it relates to what we are thinking. I have become more aware of what it takes to do these things so now I'm becoming more verbal about them with my students. So they hopefully know why we are doing this, what is important for them to do so they can make it happen and be serious about learning. I am learning to give many verbal clues to my students. By doing this I think I am learning to ask for what I want in ways that are not punitive but more positive.

Another thing that I’m identifying is that I am understanding better what children need in order to learn. One approach I try is listening to them, asking them what they need and identifying for them what they may be feeling... Like the day Tyrone came in very disturbed. I went over and said, “You are very angry” and he just opened up and said his mom hit him for not bringing his coat home. I told him I’d be upset if someone hit me because I forgot where I put something, because I lose things all the time. Then I told him to remain on the couch and join us when he was ready. Pretty soon he came and sat down and went to work and had a good day.

Carole has also become an “intentional” learner, aware, articulate and proactive in her own learning.

Carole knows what she wants to happen and how to make it happen. She is the choreographer, breaking the task down into simple steps. She listens to children and relates to them in direct and powerful ways. She does not blame the children, their home life, or herself. Instead she makes personal connections that bring the students back to learning.

Carole has also become an “intentional” learner, aware, articulate and proactive in her own learning. She no longer needs Kathy and Debi to provide the focus and ask the questions. All these changes have produced a new kind of professional relationship. We have moved from mentoring to a more collegial form of collaboration, especially in the area of curriculum. This year Kathy is working with a very challenging class and she regularly turns to Carole for support.

Kathy: When Carole and I started working together, Carole thought I had the answers and I just wasn’t telling her. This time around, I don’t think Carole has the answers. She has the answer for me – support, caring, pushing me to think about options. I don’t expect her to figure it out. That’s not what I’m searching for. I go to her stricken, I come away shored up. Not thinking I have the answer but thinking that I can do this. The most hopeful thing is seeing Carole. She is happy.

Kathy: The thing that’s unique about this relationship is that Carole won’t say the obvious things like, “You need to give the kids more structure.” She has a sense of what I want to go on in my classroom. I don’t expect Carole to give me an answer. I just want her to listen. There is something exceptionably supportive about the things she says.

Carole: The things I say to Kathy are the things that she said to me over and over again... Kathy is making very public to me that things don’t always work out, no matter how hard you plan and how well you set them up. There are times when things don’t work out. It’s ok to share that with someone you trust who has the same vision and values. I hope I am doing that for her. I find myself saying, “What did you want them to learn? How did you get them into that?” It’s those things that she said to me. It’s not reassuring her that she’s had a bad day. It’s getting at another layer, not the surface layer, but a deeper layer of conversation so that you can get clearer in your head and figure out those things that will get you closer to your vision.

Kathy: I go to Carole with this stricken look on my face. Carole hugs me. This is so awful. Then Carole tries to think of something to help.

Carole: I don’t have any answers.
"The Kids Help Me to Think Differently, But I Feel Like I am Pushed and Stretched More Here"

"Today," begins Beth Scholten, launching the weekly meeting of the Math Study Group at Elliott Elementary School in Holt, "another adult who works in my room asked me, 'At what point in your way of thinking about math do you get to the algorithms?'"

The question Scholten brings to her five colleagues is a variant on one that they have all asked themselves at some point during the past few years as they have worked, individually and collectively, to invent new ways to teach mathematics — ways that differ dramatically from anything they experienced as students in elementary and secondary school and that reflect the vision of the NCTM Standards (NCTM, 1989, 1991, 1994).

Scholten backs up, in order to provide a little background on what she has been doing in her fourth grade classroom for the past few weeks. "We've been working on multiplication and I have been amazed that the kids had so many very concrete ways to solve problems. Each of their ways seems to be really owned by them. I mean, each of the kids had a favorite representation, or a way that really made sense to them, and we're solving some pretty complex problems."

"What would be some examples?" asks one of her colleagues.

"We've been doing multi-digit multiplication, which I think is something that is almost always traditionally done by using an algorithm. Some of the kids have been solving problems by making groups — repeated addition. But also lots of the children were using strategies to break up the numbers — decomposing numbers."

"We had spent a lot of time working with coins as a way to think about breaking down numbers," she continues, "and it seemed like about half the class was using that strategy — using the coins and breaking down problems. It seemed like we were working towards a time when the algorithm would make sense to them, and when they would be ready to learn it."

Scholten pauses, looks around, then takes her colleagues back to the question with which she launched the meeting. "But I think that was sort of a big question, too — when do you teach the algorithm?"

"It is a question she has been thinking about herself. "Both are valued," she says. "I think you need to know the algorithms, or at least be familiar with them, but I think first kids need to understand the processes, to see that this makes sense."

"Would you say that the majority of the class was to that point?" asks second grade teacher Danise Cantlon.

"Making sense of the algorithm?"

Cantlon nods.

"Definitely," Scholten nods. "And some are inventing their own version of the algorithm. But some are not. But I guess I'm satisfied because they do have strategies for solving these problems. In the past it was all or nothing: You either had the algorithm or you had nothing."

The group falls silent for a minute as the members considering Scholton's question: Should she teach the multiplication algorithm to her fourth graders now? In order to help her, they need to decide why children would need to know the standard algorithm if they have invented other ways to multiply large numbers. Knowing that the algorithm will, very likely, provide children with an answer more quickly than their personal strategies will, Cantlon investigates the fourth graders' need for speed, asking "Is there anything on the MEAP that is timed, where they would have to use the algorithm?"

"No," Scholten shakes her head. "They could use their invented strategies."

"This adult was rather surprised when I said that the algorithm will probably come from the kids," contributes Carol Crumbaugh, a graduate student at Michigan State University who spent the morning in Scholten's room. "Somebody will say, 'My mom — or my dad, or my older sister — showed me how to do it.' Last year it was 'my dad' who said, 'This is the way you do multiplication,' and even though the child thought she knew how to do multiplication, several times she did do it that way, and then other
children started wondering and they went home and they asked their parents, their older brothers and sisters, and came back the next day and there was a really interesting discussion that lasted several days about this algorithm and how it was 'supposed' to be done. But time and again the kids fell back on their sense of number and what made sense to them."

"When you think about what the algorithm is, it's really just the more conventional way to do something."

"It is interesting and very telling that we talk about the algorithm," observes Pam Schram, a math educator from Michigan State University's College of Education who has been working with the Elliott Math Study Group since soon after it began in 1989. "It's like there's only one algorithm. But when you think about what the algorithm is, it's really just the more conventional way to do something. I think we just mean it is the more standard way. Because there isn't really anything to say that they couldn't go on using one of their strategies and become just as efficient with it as other people are with the algorithm."

Cantlon comments that, looking at her second graders' homework papers, she can tell which children worked on the mathematics with their parents, "because they have neat little rows of numbers" instead of the pictures and diagrams that her students usually use when they are trying to figure something out.

"I think that, ideally, each child would make up their own algorithm," special education teacher Karyn Hunt offers. "Because that is what will make most sense to them and be easiest for them to use." She goes on to explain, however, that she has to take account of the expectations of her students' other teachers — who sometimes tell children that their invented strategies are not "the right way." She imagines that Scholten must make a similar calculus: will the fifth grade teachers expect her students to use the standard algorithm when they multiply?

Scholten emphasizes that she believes her questioner was raising a serious and important point: "She really values what the kids are doing that they can reason. But she was questioning whether we were doing the kids a disservice by not ever teaching them the standard way. Will that affect them in later years in math: will they be shunned," Scholten laughs, "and told, 'no one solves problems like this with coins?'

Hunt and Scholten are struggling to figure out how the fact that their students need to succeed in traditional classrooms ought to influence their teaching. Most teachers who have heeded the call of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics for decreased emphasis on skills and algorithms and increased attention to problem-solving face a similar dilemma.

For the next few minutes the teachers talk about the ways in which they have seen students deal with the transitions to and from traditional mathematics classrooms. Cantlon fears that in a classroom in which their thinking is not valued, students will "just shut down." Hunt hopes that youngsters will interpret the different expectations of the traditional math class as just "a rule to adapt to." Then Scholten brings the conversation back to the teaching of multiplication, explaining that her students understand that "ten dimes equals one hundred cents" and use this information to solve problems.

Pam Seales, who has been listening silently to the discussion, now suggests a way out of Scholten's dilemma — a way, perhaps, to resolve the contradiction between old and new pedagogy: "You bring in so many rich problems in your class, could you also bring in the algorithm — 'Does this make sense? Prove it as a conjecture.'"

Scholten nods. "One girl has written in her journal a couple of times, 'I know another way' — meaning the algorithm — and she's tried to explain it. I wanted her to really flesh this out in her journal so she could explain it, so that she'd feel really good about it.

'And at a point where everyone has had plenty of opportunities to make sense of multiplication in their own way," Seales adds.

"Yes," Scholten agrees. "And I think that's the point: At a point

"I felt that there should be more to it, that children should be making better connections."

where it's not viewed as this is the way. It's a way that you might see your parents or other people use."

"It's an opportunity to talk about what is conventional," observes Schram, turning to Seales.

"Your idea is so interesting — to think of doing it like a conjecture."

A Bit of History

Pam Seales, the only Elliott teacher who has been involved in the Math Study Group since it began in 1989, remembers that when the Group met for the first time — shortly after her school linked up with Michigan State University as a professional development school — all the teachers in the room said they were uncomfortable with math. Seales herself had a masters degree in science and in reading; she felt
good about what she was doing in those areas of the curriculum. But math was a different story: "I felt that there should be more to it, that children should be making better connections. Even though I was using a relatively innovative book — Math Their Way — I still felt that there was something missing. And so did some of the other teachers."

Schram recalls that in 1989 most of the teachers were teaching math fairly traditionally. During their weekly meetings, in addition to talking about math teaching, they did math problems that she brought in. Although the teachers were, at the outset, uncertain that this would be helpful, they worked hard on the problems and came, after a while, to use this experience as a resource for thinking about alternative ways to teach math to children. "They began to think about how I interacted with them — 'Yeah, when we asked her, she didn't just tell us the answer...' And they remembered how frustrated they felt when they were grappling with a hard problem. Until someone put an idea on the table that they could connect to."

These safaris into mathematics and the reflections that they prompted encouraged the teachers to think about trying something similar in their own classrooms. Both Schram and Seales emphasize that these ventures into the unknown were tentative and uncertain. Seales remembers seeing a videotape of Deborah Ball, a professor at MSU who taught math everyday in a public school classroom (see Changing Minds I "A Community of Young Mathematicians"), orchestrating a long mathematical conversation with her third-grade students. Seales could not imagine her own students — at the time she was teaching a "transition" class for children who had completed kindergarten but were not yet ready for first grade — having such a discussion. "It just didn't seem within the realm of possibility," she recalls with a grin.

Instead, she and the other teachers decided to try to design together some activities that would help their students make sense of measurement. Six years later she recalls:

It was nice to plan with others. It cut through the isolation. But we weren't comfortable planning a unit from scratch, trying to create something entirely new that would help students see measurement differently. It was really difficult, and we were upset with Pam because she wasn't giving us answers. We kept asking each other, 'What's she there for?'

I think that part of what made it hard was that it was not just planning something for your own class, but putting your ideas out for all these other teachers — feeling like they might sound dumb. And also feeling as though Pam already had the answers. It was so frustrating.

It seems strange now.

Both Schram and Seales — the only people who have continued with the group since the beginning—remember some difficult discussions early on. "Any time you are implementing change," observes Seales, "there will be resistance and there will be fear. People are worried that they will have to change. Even though that wasn't the idea." She would like the Holt School District to designate one school as a PDS and invite teachers who want to try new things to apply. "Most of the people in study groups — whether they be literacy, math, social studies, or science — have changed the way they think about children as learners. That has kind of rippled out into the rest of the curriculum."

As Seales sees it, having at least one member from the university has been critically important to the success of the group. The diversity of membership affects the substance of conversation at the group's scheduled meetings. In addition, because Elliott is a professional development school, university and school-based Study Group members have been able to work together in elementary classrooms in a variety of pairings. Both Schram and Seales claim to have learned a great deal from these collaborations. "The university people notice little tiny itos of change," Seales explains. "They could catch something and bring it to our attention and say, 'Oh, you might try that again.' That encouraging, that noticing, can be so helpful." For one year Schram and Seales worked together, and Schram describes this year as a time of great learning for her. "I had never worked with young children before. I had lots of ideas but no experience. It was a safe place for me to try things — I knew that if they didn't go well Pam wouldn't run down the hall and tell everyone else."

"Why Don't You Try Experimenting?"

After school on a rainy March afternoon, Seales reconstructs, for a visitor to her classroom, the development of her math teaching over the course of the early years of the Math Study Group. "During the first year," she recalls, "it was nice just to have support. I didn't make big changes in my math teaching. I maybe tried to find more interesting mathematical things for my kids to do. We had some discussions, but the answers were more pat."

"The next year," she continues, "I was trying to get them to understand place value. That's pretty hard for first graders. You'd be surprised how many kids can't tell you what the 'teen' means in 13. Twenty-one is easier, they can say 'Oh, that's 20 and 1.' So another teacher encouraged me to teach how numbers got started."

"What did you teach?" inquires
her visitor, intrigued.

"Just the basics — how we count on our fingers, counting by tens, trying to get them to bundle. I was talking in the Study Group about the difficulties and another teacher said, ‘Well, why don’t you try experimenting with different bases? Then it would be as if the kids were inventing the number system.’ I thought, ‘Well, sure —’” Seales grimaces, eloquently conveying the skepticism she remembers feeling.

“But you know, we tried it and it was fun. The kids loved it and I got totally confused.” Seales grins delightedly. “And when the kids were explaining it to me I thought, ‘Now we’re getting somewhere: They’re explaining something they have discovered — how they figured out how something worked. And their explanation is making sense to this other kid over here: He’s listening carefully because he’s like me, he’s lost. This kid is really doing the explaining, he isn’t just answering my question and having me say, ‘Well, maybe...Does anyone else have a different idea?’ and clueing everyone that this is not the answer.”

“So that gave me the beginning of how I could involve them. It was an eye-opener for me, showing me that I needed to make myself ask more of these questions — ‘How does that work?’ ‘Can you explain to us how you figured that out?’ ‘Did someone else figure it out in a different way?’ — and let the kids do more of the teaching. Because all of these approaches came out that I would not have taught them.”

A Book For Other Teachers

By September 1991 several of the group’s first members had dropped out, leaving Karyn Hunt, Pam Seales, one other teacher from Elliott, and Pam Schram and a few others from MSU. Cantlon and Scholten, both fresh out of college and newly hired at Elliott, were very interested in trying to think more about the alternative images of math teaching that they had encountered in their education courses, but because MSU’s agreement with Holt stipulated that untenured teachers could not be involved in PDS, neither were eligible to be full-fledged members of the Study Group. Nonetheless, 1991-92 was a year of learning and consolidation.

At the end of that year, as the group took stock and identified questions and concerns to pursue in the coming year, they decided that they would like to write a monograph about what they had learned from other Study Group members. She emphasizes that the writing never came easily, “It was very exhausting work. We each felt we had learned a lot by thinking so hard, but it was a relief to get back to what we enjoyed doing — sharing ideas, talking about our teaching.”

Seales’ lack of enthusiasm for writing may be partly a matter of temperament. “I always hesitate to give anyone else advice. I always hesitate to say, ‘Here’s the way I’m doing it, isn’t it better?’ I don’t feel like an expert. I enjoy trying things.”

She also has misgivings about the art form. Her students’ excitement about math and about their own mathematical ideas delights her. “But,” she says, “it’s hard to convey the excitement in a book.” She communicates it eloquently in conversation.

Learning to Teach Math in New Ways

In the Study Group, the discussion of the ways in which children manage the transition from one sort of mathematics classroom to another leads naturally into teachers’ memories of their own schooling and of the paths they traveled to a new math pedagogy.

Both Scholten and Cantlon were introduced to the NCTM Standards in their math methods classes. Scholten remembers feeling skeptical of traditional mathematics instruction even earlier: “I came into math methods wanting to do something better for kids.” Even though she had always gotten good grades in math courses, she did not feel she had developed any understanding of the ideas behind the rules and procedures. “With anything I’ve wanted to teach in math, I’ve had to sit down and think about ‘why do we do this?’”

Karyn Hunt’s experience was different. “My first year in the Math Study Group,” she comments, “I didn’t understand what this new
way was. Then the next year I began seeing it in Danise’s room and Beth’s room. You have to see it to believe it."

"I don’t remember having any math methods classes," volunteers Seales. She recalls her first efforts to teach her students to represent numbers in different bases. "I was so confused. We were starting to make sense of it together and they were as good as I was. They’d say something and I’d say, ‘Well, maybe. Let’s try it! It might be right??!’"

Schram asks the other Study Group members how they think teachers who do not belong to a group like this one might learn to teach differently.

"I need the support of this group," replies Hunt emphatically, "I have my colleagues to prod me and help me along." After listening to Scholten and Cantlon describe the resources they had tapped in the year before they joined the Study Group, she shakes her head. Thinking about how difficult she would find it to continue to improve her practice if she did not have a group to talk to and work with, she says, "It would be just such a missing piece. Because, to me, what we have here is such an important part of the whole concept of learning community. The kids help me to think differently, but I feel like I am pushed and stretched more here."

Critiquing “Math Literature”

Seales slips quietly out of the room to do bus duty. The others turn their attention to a collection of children’s books that Karyn Hunt has brought to the meeting. Hunt has been interested for some time in using children’s literature in conjunction with her math program. Because these books have been advertised as "math literature," she wants the group to examine them and to think about which ones might be valuable and how she might best use them to support her math curriculum.

Scholten leafs through one of the picture books Hunt has piled on the table, observing, "Often it seems that, when people are putting together lists of books that link math and literature, they include any book that mentions a number."

Cantlon asks about The Doorbell Rings.

Members of the Study Group work hard to convince their students that math is not a mystery, that it is a subject that can and should make sense.

"It’s a great way to extend division into fractions," remarks Schram, picking up the Hutchins book. She explains the story: two children are preparing to share a dozen cookies when the doorbell rings; they must divide the cookies a second time to accommodate the friend. "It’s a very predictable book. The doorbell rings each time, and you don’t know how many children will be there." At first all the divisions yield whole number solutions, but it is easy for the teacher to extend the story to include problems with fractions in the solution.

"It’s nice for kids who love literature and stories to extend their love of literature to math," Hunt muses, "but I’d like to see them write their own versions of the stories."

“Oh, yes!” Heads nod appreciatively around the table as other members of the study group consider the possibilities.

Scholten examines The Mysterious Multiplying Jar and concludes, "I guess I can think of a lot of better ways to have kids multiply 1 times 2 times 3 times 4 if that was what I wanted them to do."

"I wondered about the word ‘mysterious’ in the title – I’m not familiar with the book – whether it isn’t contradictory to what we are trying to communicate," Schram adds. Like many other math educators, members of the Study Group work hard to convince their students that math is not a mystery, that it is a subject that can and should make sense.

Hunt’s brow wrinkles in apparent puzzlement as she examines 17 Kings and 42 Elephants. "I don’t see any math in this."

"Well," laughs Cantlon, "It has 17 in the title."

"That’s what Beth was cautioning about," Schram points out. "It reminds me of people who plan a thematic unit and throw in a math story problem and say they’ve done the math."

"I do like One in a Million: It does a good job of dealing with a concept," notes Cantlon as she joins Hunt in examining 17 Kings.

After a couple of minutes in which everyone silently studies the books, Scholten asks, "What did you find in 17 Kings?"

"Nothing!" Hunt and Cantlon reply in unison, disgustedly. "It has the numbers 17 and 42. Unless we missed something." The group turns its attention to The Half Birthday Party Book.
“Teachers Like Us”: Conversation, Community, and the Construction of a Teaching Self

by Deborah Harris

The June meeting of the Learning Community Sharing Circle marked the successful completion of a year of teaching for its members, three first and three second-year teachers, all recent graduates of the Learning Community Teacher Education Program at MSU. It was also our last meeting as a group. For most of that year, the novices and I, one of their former instructors, had been meeting for three to four hours monthly, usually over supper at my home. I had started the Circle in order to extend—for this group of teachers—membership in the education community to which they had belonged during their two-year teacher preparation program. I had tried to create a supportive conversational setting in which the novices could come together, not as students this time but as young professionals, to read, write about, listen to, and tell narratives of their experiences as beginning teachers. I hoped that, in so doing, they would think through different teaching philosophies and their implications for their developing sense of themselves. Since the teachers were working at different levels (1st through 8th grade), in districts throughout Michigan, they always had a richly diverse supply of stories to share.

The novices came to this last meeting with lots to talk about, so the topic of conversation shifted often. They updated each other on problems they had discussed at previous meetings, shared a number of anecdotes both funny and poignant, and solicited ideas for bringing closure to the school year. There was then a brief discussion on the value of year-round schools, which turned to the problems with the state budget and its impact on school funding and on their own continued employment. With only probationary status, three of the six were certain that they would soon be laid off.

Perhaps reflecting the novices’ uncertainties about the future, the conversation took a retrospective turn, focusing on what they had discovered over the year (about children, about the role of the teacher, and about themselves) through their interactions with students.

Throughout the year, the novices had talked about their students a great deal. As I analyzed the transcripts of their conversation, I observed that their talk highlighted four different and sometimes conflicting dimensions of the teacher role: (1) the need to be an authority (both in terms of subject matter and classroom management); (2) the desire to be perceived as a humane person (someone “friend-like,” and a co-learner); (3) the desire to be a nurturing caregiver (someone warm, giving, and understanding of individual differences) and (4) the need to be a realist (to prepare students for the “real world” and recognize that they cannot simultaneously meet all students’ needs). These young teachers often brought their struggles to reconcile these competing aspects of their role to the Sharing Circle.

In the June meeting, for example, Claire and Val wrestled with the tension between their desire to empathize with an individual child’s situation, working with him “where he’s at,” and their obligation to prepare him for the “real world.” When Val observed that, as a result of their behavior, some children exerted great power over their parents and teachers, Claire commented that her student Ben, who was frequently in trouble at school and constantly “yelled at home,” had no power at all.

Claire: That’s why when you, when you said “It’s amazing how much power kids have” I was thinking, at the same time, how powerless they are. Like this kid, you know, he’s kind of powerless in a way.

Amy: Yeah.

Val: He’s been slotted into—does he get yelled at in your room or—

Claire: I don’t. Or I try not to. But the music teacher does, and he really does—when other kids are really trying to do their writing or their other work, he will disturb them a lot just by, like hitting them or teasing them.

Claire reminded the others that Ben’s father had died soon after getting divorced from his mother and that Ben was having a difficult time adjusting to his new home situation. She explained that while she could empathize with and accept some of his behavior—the crying, yelling, or constantly wrapping his sweatshirt around his head—after a certain point, tolerating this sort of thing

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1Names of Sharing Circle members are pseudonyms.
made it impossible to attend to the other students' needs.

Claire: And the kids are constantly coming up to me, saying, "Ben's done this, Ben's done that." A lot of them are genuine. They don't want him there, bugging them. But I feel so sorry for the kid at the same time.

Val: Sure.

Claire: 'Cause he's extremely intelligent, very intelligent. I just, sometimes I feel like he's not being challenged enough in my room, but, I don't know.

Deb: He's had two incredible losses. If you think of the divorce and the death —

Claire: Yes, and he writes and he talks about his mother, and says very mature things. He's been to see the counselor. He said he wished he was dead, that he wants to die.

The Weight Of The World

Collectively, the teachers gasped. Every face registered the pain of hearing that a second grade child was this unhappy. Lauren also had a student who talked seriously about committing suicide. She said that while Shane sometimes went out with the older high school students, he seemed primarily to be a real loner.

Claire: That is so sad. The weight of the world - these children - the world is on their shoulders sometimes.

Val: Is there anyone close to him? He has no friends his own age?

Val's question launched a discussion of Shane and Ben's particular situations, of what — if anything — Claire and Lauren could do to help them. Each teacher talked about adaptations she had already made. After a while, Val identified a key dilemma facing them all:

Val: And the thing that I tussle with, and go back and forth on, is: How much slack do you give those kids? Like I think sometimes I give too much. 'Cause you really empathize

Those in the Sharing Circle often listened with dismay as their colleagues criticized children and their families and dismissed reforms to which the novices were committed.

a lot with the problems that they're having, and what they're going through, and so you're like, you know, you don't get on them quite as much to turn the assignments in and do these things in class. Yet on the other hand, you're doing them a disservice by not making them buckle down and do these dumb things. So I just, well, they're not dumb things. If they were dumb, you shouldn't have given them. But do you know what I mean? Like they seem dumb compared to the trauma they're dealing with —

Claire: 'Cause you think of the real world.

Val: Yeah, I think, well, okay, I'm empathizing for this situation and he's going through this at home and this is happening and this is happening and that's happening. But on the other hand, I mean, there are certain things that you really need to do and it's just, I don't know, I tussle with that, back and forth. 'Cause I'm worried about next year. I'm worried about what's gonna happen in the future, you know, that they're just gonna be put in a corner and people are gonna not put up with that garbage and some teacher will just say, "Too bad. It's gotta be done or you flunk."

The tension between Nurturing Caregiver and the Realist resurfaced a few minutes later when one of the young teachers mentioned the practice of medicating children who "acted out" in the classroom. Her listeners agreed with distaste that "drugging" students had become the "answer to everything now," and condemned the practice of "giving pills" for being overactive. Still, several confessed that medication did seem to help many of their students who had been diagnosed as having an Attention Deficit Disorder (A.D.D.). Moreover, it made the novices' jobs much easier by allowing them to focus on all of the students in their classes, not just one or two.

Battling Isolation

More than most other professionals, teachers do their work away from the company of other adults. Current school structures provide few opportunities for teachers to confer about curriculum or plan together. Beginning teachers are often more isolated than their experienced colleagues: Age and other differences can keep them from sharing pleasantries about child-care, vacations, and cholesterol; concerns about how their colleagues see them can prevent them from asking for help or advice. Novices' own feelings can also set them apart: Those in the Sharing Circle often listened with dismay in the lounge as their colleagues criticized children and their families and talked dismissively about educational reforms to which the novices were committed. But, although they did not want to be like these older teachers, they did want their approval, so they often refrained from saying what they really thought.

The Sharing Circle provided
these six novices with a place where they could really connect with other teachers—where they could say what they really believed without forfeit-

The Sharing Circle gave novices a place where they could give help as well as get it.

ing another person's good opinion. It also gave them a forum in which they could argue and disagree with other teachers—an activity which, though important both for intellectual development and for crafting convincing arguments to support beliefs, is usually unwelcome in faculty lounges. In addition, the Sharing Circle gave the novices a place where they could give help as well as get it. Because they were recent college graduates, they tended to be the least experienced teachers present. In other professional gatherings, they got many more chances to receive advice than to give it. Being able to share tips and experiences with other teachers helped them to see themselves as competent professionals.

A Painful Problem

Near the third hour of our meeting, Nina asked the group for help with a particularly painful problem: for the only time in her experience, she did not much care for a student in her room. These feelings, she explained, resulted from the way this student treated other children—she physically and verbally hurt them quite deliberately. This was the first time that any of the teachers had brought this up and, even though they felt quite comfortable with one another, it was difficult for Nina to admit to these feelings. In a conversation with me a few weeks later, Amy noted how surprised she had felt when Nina raised this issue in the group, observing that it was something teachers (especially Learning Community teachers) never discussed.

When she said that, I thought, ‘Oh how good of her,’ because I would have never said that if I had a child like that in my room. And I would never say that about a child even now to just anyone. You know? Because it’s like geez, you’re a teacher and you don’t like a kid—that’s kinda bad!

Although Nina had gone to a colleague and to the school counselor for advice about how to learn to like the child, she had not yet found a solution. Lauren described a similar problem with a student who “drove her crazy.” She worried that her feelings about Brandon would affect the way she treated him in class. Both Nina and Lauren wanted students to like them. Moreover, like others in the group, their sense of themselves as good teachers was, in large part, based on successful interactions with students.

Soon these teachers were discussing the challenge of attending to students like Brandon without neglecting the rest of the class, eventually concluding that sometimes some compromise of ideals was necessary. They would need to accept that, given the way schools were currently structured, they couldn’t succeed with all students. Lauren and Claire together suggested an explanation that seemed to absolve both teachers and students of blame. They argued that the problem wasn’t necessarily the students’ fault: Some children simply had a harder time adjusting to open-ended approaches that were centered on group work, or needed smaller, more-individualized attention. Nor was it the teachers’ fault: They had many students to attend to simultaneously, and had to base decisions about what to do on what helped the largest number. In their view, the school system was responsible for providing more alternatives for children (e.g., much smaller classes) and more support for teachers (e.g., full-time aides for some students).

A little later in the evening Val mentioned that she was concerned about a student with A.D.D.: Her assigned work didn’t get done, nor did homework, notes, and progress reports get home; Val felt she was disorganized and noted that her desk was “a disaster.” The group’s response to Val’s comments was swift and strong. I joked that my desk was a disaster. Nina commented that her A.D.D. student “wasn’t like that at all”; she worked hard, always had her writing folder organized, and always remembered to bring something to share. Claire and Amy agreed that their A.D.D. students generally functioned well in the class. Val explained that her main concern was how to help these students be successful in small group situations.

It was Lauren who was able to speak with the most authority to this issue, because of the composition of her class.

Lauren: If your groups are structured, then you can still do it. Because, I don’t know how to explain what I’m trying to say. ‘Cause the group that I have is hand-picked. We have all the kids in 6th grade that are on medication for A.D.D., plus we have other kids mixed in. So we’ve got, you know—

Val: They really did put all the A.D.D. kids in your room?

Lauren: In our class, yeah. It’s split up between another teacher and myself and then we switch those kids in the afternoon. Like she teaches the science and math. I teach the English and social studies. And then we switch. And they’re, the group work for me has worked out fine, with all those kids. Just as long as your group work is very—
Amy: Very structured?

Lauren: Very specific. You know, you give them the instructions. They have, you know, first you do this, then you do this, this, this. And if you get done early, you do this, or this. You know what I mean? So if you make sure that they know what to do and what their job is, then they'll do fine, more than fine. But if you just say—

Claire: “work together”–

Lauren: “This is the assignment, go do it,” they won't do it.

Amy: And there’s nothing wrong with going over and seeing what someone else, or what another group, is doing, but then sometimes they can lose their focus.

Lauren: Well, that’s one of the things that we were learning in doing group work. We need to say, “Okay, you’re in your groups, talking with your groups. As of right now, you can’t talk to anybody else besides the people in your group.” And we need to be specific about that. Then it works fine. Then the only people they can talk to are people in their group.

The novices worked hard in this conversation to balance issues of management and student control with realistic goals for their learners and themselves. They recognized that compromise is sometimes necessary. Amy noted, for example, that although she wanted her students to be able to move around the room freely, she found this ended up distracting some students from their work, so she has chosen not to permit it during certain subjects.

In many ways, the Learning Community Beginning Teachers’ Sharing Circle served as a support group for its members. There they could vent frustrations over failed lessons or challenging students without worrying, as Val said, “that someone was going to second guess us or critique us or think that we were bad teachers.” They could share classroom successes and triumphs with people who “really understood” and exchange ideas, resources, and problem solving strategies (“How do you make long division fun?”). The Sharing Circle enabled these six teachers, who had dispersed to many parts of the state upon graduation, to stay connected to the philosophies and approaches to teaching they had learned in their teacher preparation program. As Amy Roberts explains:

It’s so nice to be able to get back with people who thought like you thought, believed like you believe and just almost like touch ground with your beliefs, like ‘Yes, what I’m doing is okay.’

Even though everyone else in the school might be looking at me like I’m strange, what I’m doing is okay and it is right, and I can keep trying it.

This sense of connection was important to me as well. Because of the way the Learning Community curriculum was structured, I had been able to work with students throughout their two years in the program. When they had graduated and set off to find teaching jobs, I was left wondering, “What kinds of experiences will they have? Which of their program experiences will they take with them? What kind of teachers will they become?” The Sharing Circle gave me a chance to listen to and learn from our graduates’ experiences, in order to understand how I (and other teacher educators) might help future teacher candidates better prepare for, and learn from, their early experiences in the classroom.

But in my view, the most important aspect of the Sharing Circle lay in its potential to help its members articulate and begin to craft their professional identities as teachers. Constructing an identity as a teacher involves, among other things moving from the teacher you are at a given moment to the kind of teacher you hope to become. This identity work is an ongoing, complex process of composition in which a novice constructs a coherent sense of herself as a professional by combining bits of her past (her personal history, her own experiences in schools and in her preservice program) with pieces of her present (like the particular school context in which she works) and her visions of the future (e.g., the kind of teacher she’d like to become, or the kind of classroom she’d like to create). Telling stories of teaching to other young teachers whose opinion they valued, hearing and seeing their responses, and listening to their stories all helped these beginners to “try on” different teaching selves.

That the teachers were willing to drive long distances in bad winter weather to attend the Sharing Circle meetings says a great deal about how much they valued membership in such a study group. It also shows that, even as beginners, they were able and eager to take an active role in their own professional development.
Six-year-old Marcus taps his teacher, Rhoda Kanevsky, gently on the arm to get her attention. "How do you spell 'three'?"

"You know how to spell it, Marcus. You know from reading In the City. What first two letters do you hear?"

"T," Marcus pauses thoughtfully, "and H."

"Good," Kanevsky looks pleased. "Now, go and find it in In the City."

Marcus locates a copy of the pre-primer and carries it to his desk where he places it between his science journal and the cardboard shoe box which houses his silkworm.

For the past few weeks, the children in Kanevsky's first grade in the Powel School in downtown Philadelphia have been studying silkworms. Every April, when leaves begin to appear on mulberry trees, Kanevsky brings silkworm eggs to school so her students can watch them grow into caterpillars, spin their cocoons, pupate, emerge as moths, mate, and lay eggs. In June she puts the eggs in the back of her refrigerator where they stay until she is ready to hatch them with next year's first grade. Until they begin work on their cocoons, the silkworms eat voraciously. Their dietary requirements are even less flexible than those of the average six-year-old: they eat only the leaves of mulberry trees.

"Hey, the silkworms are eating your state!" exclaims Britani, grinning impishly at the visitor from Michigan. Chuckling at her obvious confusion, Britani's friend Sharifa holds up one of the mitten-shaped mulberry leaves; it's the same shape, they explain, as the state of Michigan which the visitor had pointed out on the classroom map a little earlier.

Having solved the problem of spelling "three," Marcus writes in his science journal: "My silk is tring to eat three at a time." He surveys his words with pride, then locates a ruler, measures the silkworm, and records his results: "my silk worm is 4 1/2 inch."

Next to Marcus, Lamar has drawn an elaborately detailed picture of a baseball diamond with a game in progress. On the page opposite he has written "its 1 to 1. Keri picH. Marcus hit a home run." Lamar looks up from his drawing and together the boys watch the silkworm devour mulberry leaves. "When silkworm eat they look like a car," Marcus concludes.

Their writing completed, Marcus and Lamar are free to choose among a variety of activities that the room offers. Marcus joins several other boys who are dismantling a child-size fort constructed from five-foot-long notched boards. A team of four boys works doggedly for 10 minutes, disconnecting the boards from one another and stacking them neatly on the shelves that line the corner.

A few feet away Lisa and Keritha struggle with the intricacies of the classroom computer. After a detour into Greek letters, which they recognize from their study of myths and greet enthusiastically, they choose an Olde English font and begin their story: "Once..."

At her desk, Audrey watches through a magnifying glass as one of her silkworms begins his cocoon. Kanevsky, pausing to see what Adrienne has noticed, summons several other children from nearby to share her discovery.

On the floor near the chalkboard two boys play chess, substituting small plastic cubes — some black, some white — for missing pawns. Five children play Chutes and Ladders on a homemade board whose squares are numbered 1 to 100. In their midst, but oblivious to the drama of the game, a girl reads a book aloud to herself. Three other girls dismantle a take-apart kaleidoscope, remove a few of the pieces they find inside, reassemble it, and admire the new view.

The story on the computer screen now reads:

Once upon a time there lived a widow named Erin. She had three daughters name Linea, Maya, Natalie, Magdad.

"Hey," objects Keritha, "that's not three. We gotta do it all over!"

"It's so important for them to have this choice time," Kanevsky tells the visitor. She nods toward one of the children working on the kaleidoscope. "At the beginning of the year, she couldn't play with anyone."

Noticing the time, Kanevsky directs those who are taking silkworms home over night to get bags of mulberry leaves and bring their boxes to her to be checked. As the buzzer sounds the end of the day, children collect boxes and bags and head out the door.

Fifteen minutes later, Kanevsky..."
A Chain of Words

Lee Quinby remembers:

"Once, in my first year of teaching, I let a child kick me and spit at me and I did nothing about it. When I told people what I'd done, Susan was indignant. "You let him do that?" That opened the door to many important and enlightening discussions. I learned about anger, and other strong feelings and how to deal with them, including my own anger. Initially Susan gave me the words to use. They worked and I felt confident. Susan told me later that they weren't her words originally, but Lynne's—... only Lynne got the words from Peggy!"

Lynne Strieb remembers:

"When my oldest child was four and a half he went to the parent cooperative nursery where Peggy was the teacher. It was so hard for me to get three children dressed in order to take one child to school, but once I got him (them) there, I was so interested in what was going on that it was hard for me to leave. I learned a lot from watching Peggy, about the range of activities that children need, about specific activities which work across ages (and which I still use in my first- and second-grade classroom). I was intrigued, in general, by the way Peggy spoke to the children—how she gave them words when they needed them—and in particular by the kinds of questions she asked. They were simply phrases or questions. Not, "Why did you do that?", but "What did you do that made you angry?" "You may not hit. Use words," "What should you say if you don't like what she's doing? Say, 'Stop it!' And say it loudly, like you mean it.""

Pat Carini comments:

"...There is something in the unbroken chain of these "words used by teachers" that seems really important. Not only do they launch the novice, they reflect a deep knowledge of children and children's need for personal safety and for a school setting they can trust... This is a kind of teacher knowledge that needs to be more visible to teachers and to others."


and her visitor follow the children down the stairs, carrying the few unclaimed silkworms.

After School on Thursdays

Because it is Thursday, Kanewsky stops only briefly at home. After depositing the silkworms in the kitchen and leaving quickly through her mail, she gets back in the car and drives to the home of Lynne Strieb. Strieb teaches first grade at Greenfield School. This afternoon, the Philadelphia Teacher Learning Cooperative (TLC), a teacher study group that has met every Thursday afternoon for the past 18 years, will convene in her dining room.

The TLC meeting isn't scheduled to start until 4:30, but many teachers arrive early to see friends and catch up. At 4:35, the 15 teachers who have assembled in Strieb's dining room move chairs into a circle. Susan Shapiro, tonight's chairperson, calls for announcements.

"If anyone has any left over silkworms at the end of the year, I'm happy to take them for July," volunteers Betsy Wice, the reading teacher at Frederick Douglass Elementary School. "Then I get the eggs and the cocoons." More than twenty years ago, another teacher gave Lynne Strieb some silkworms in early June. For the next few weeks—until the public schools adjourned in late June—Strieb and her students watched fascinated as the silkworms completed their life cycle. Strieb saved the eggs for the following year. She shared her success with colleagues in the Teacher Learning Cooperative who in turn have shared theirs in workshops across Philadelphia. Today silkworms can be found in the classrooms of almost all the teachers in the TLC and in many other Philadelphia classrooms.

Shapiro lays out the agenda for tonight's meeting: Linda Bean will show videotape of project time and student presentations in her second and third grade class. Shapiro presents Bean's focusing question: "How do children teach children?" She turns the meeting over to Bean.

"At the core of our meetings," explains the one-page handout that TLC members give to interested outsiders, "is a particular kind of conversation, guided by the descriptive formats developed by Patricia Carini and colleagues at the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont." These formats include procedures for describing and thinking about one child, or one piece of work (a child's drawing, perhaps, or her explanation of a mathematical idea). They concentrate attention on children's strengths and encourage careful observation and loving attention to detail (see A Close Look at Tami).

The format of the Descriptive Review (or Staff Review, as it is sometimes called) was developed in the 1970s to help teachers to look closely at children and their work. The Review has five parts. First, the chairperson gives the name (a pseudonym) and age of the child and the teacher's guiding question. The presenting teacher then describes the child, using five headings: physical presence and gesture, temperament, relationships, activities and interests, formal learning. Next, the chairperson summarizes the themes she
hears. Fourth, the participants ask questions which they hope will help to clarify the descriptions and the context. Finally, returning to the teacher's original question, group members make recommendations and the chairperson summarizes.¹

Starting with the essential features of the Descriptive Review, the TLC has created new formats for looking at aspects of teaching practice. Whatever the focus, certain features remain the same: describing within a format, with a focus in mind; taking turns; summarizing themes and patterns; asking questions; looking at implications; taking notes. Since 1979, the group has kept notes from every meeting in an ever-expanding collection of three-ring binders. The notes provide a vehicle for reflecting on past work and planning for the future.

A Videotape of Project Time

Project time, Bean explains, usually lasts from 12:30 to around 1:30; once a month each child is expected to "teach" the class something related to what he or she has been working on. "They don't," Bean adds, "have to work on the project they teach about for that whole month." This afternoon she intends first to show a few minutes of a video that she has made of the children working during project time and then to show clips of three children teaching. She wants to think with her TLC colleagues about what value this part of her program has for children.

"I'm just learning to use the camcorder," comments Bean as she starts the videotape. The camera pans the room, showing a small group working at the chalkboard on 3-digit addition problems, then zeroing in on two girls who are sorting through a washtub full of mulberry leaves. "This is her first day," the taller girl tells the camera. "She showed me how to look for silk-worms," adds the newcomer.

Two girls are writing place names on a plastic-covered map of the United States.

A boy looks up at the camera, "Hello, how're you doing? I'm reading a book."

At a table near the sink several of his classmates work with paper mache.

Bean stops the VCR and Shapiro takes charge. "I'm going to ask for first impressions — and rewind the tape, I'll start with Lisa."

"I was excited by the realism — like when the little boy said, 'Oh, the flour pack is missing,'" observes Lisa Hantman. Moving around the circle, other teachers make their comments in turn.

"Every child knew what he was doing. They were purposeful."

"I really liked the range of kids: the age variation, the ethnic variation."

"I noticed Linda's voice. It was so calm."

When everyone has had a turn, Shapiro summarizes what she has heard. She then signals Bean to move the group on to part two: short video clips of three children teaching their "projects."

Janine, who Bean describes as "a handful," presents her "tile rod quilt." Janine's construction paper quilt squares replicate the work she has been doing on multiples of 1, 2, and 3; with considerable stage presence, she presents and explains each one — "One is easy; even if it is 43, 1 times 43 is 45. Two is doubles..."

Opal, who moved to Philadelphia from Cambodia, demonstrates a Cambodian dance to her classmates who watch in rapt silence. When the school bell interrupts, they vote to give up recess in order to extend her performance.

Brian presents a wagon that he and some friends constructed after hearing a story. He seems pleased with his creation, but has difficulty fielding his classmates' questions.

After going around the circle several times, eliciting increasingly precise descriptions of the children's presentations, Shapiro restates the themes she hears. She then opens the floor for the questions that will give other teachers a feel for the broader context of Bean's classroom — and the features of Project Time that she has not thought to mention. Tamar Magdovitz, who teaches in the parent nursery program at Shawmont School, asks Bean where the ideas for her students' projects come from.

Different places: I had a heavy hand in the multiplication one; Brian's came from a book we read. The dance just happened: After the class saw a Cambodian dance in assembly Opal said, "Oh, I know how to do that," and I said, "Oh, show us." There is a mask-making project that has been ongoing, with a fifth grader in charge — his teacher sends him down to help younger children because he has been out of school for four years.

"What I really like about this," says Strieb, "is that it feels so true to life. It's like writing for real people."

"Yes," Bean agrees. "Some kids take a great deal of trouble writing up their project because they are going to present it."

In answer to a question about cleanup, Bean mentions the children's project journals. "It really helps that everyone who isn't a designated cleaner is writing — what did I do? what did I see? — and then they read it aloud."

As chairperson, Shapiro restates Bean's focusing question and summarizes what has gone before:

There are bridges between different parts of the children's school day: Linda's formal teaching feeds into Project

Time and into children's project journals. Writer's Workshop and Project Time feed each other.

Children have many different avenues for having their voice heard. If they aren't comfortable presenting as a teacher, they have the chance to do less formal explaining, and they can also be heard— in their written voice— in their journal.

Children's projects come from many different sources—the knowledge they come with, older kids who work in the room, the environment of the classroom that provides things for them to get interested in. Here's what Linda requires, what they owe her. But the motivating force isn't her imposed requirements: the kids want to teach each other— they give up recess in order to do it.

Shapiro surveys the room and asks whether the teachers are ready to move to "critique," the part of the meeting that gives participants a chance to reflect on and evaluate the work they have just done.

"I think we still haven't figured out how to do video," comments Wic e. "This was really interesting, and crucial for what we were doing, but we didn't describe in detail. It wasn't the same as when you work for two hours to describe a single drawing or story."

"It's hard," another teacher concurs. "We have done video before, but not this, exactly." After 18 years the group continues to develop formats for new kinds of work.

Magdovitz turns to Bean. "Did you feel satisfied? How did it work for you?"

"Yes and no," replies Bean. "I did get a lot out of this, but I missed going deep with one child. It's a trade off, presenting the whole room versus focusing on one child in it. I think I still have questions about my role. Maybe that's just ongoing. I know that real teaching is going on in project time, but I don't think I could do more than one and a half hours of it each day."

"I think this may have been more satisfying for us because we got to see your class," comments Magdovitz. "But for you it might be more satisfying to do a review of practice. You could see so much."

Karen Bushnell, who teaches at the same school as Wice, follows up on Magdovitz's suggestion: "This is a powerful tool for reflection on Linda's practice. It felt like a topic for an all-day Saturday meeting, with time to do a descriptive review of Janine, and one of Brian, and a descriptive review of a piece of work."

"One thing I really learned by videotaping," Bean concludes, "was stepping out and stepping back. I'm usually up there emceeing. And it helped me to step back."

A Little History

The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (TLC) has been meeting every Thursday afternoon during the school year since 1978. Many of the founding members had met in the early 1970s in a Teachers' Center that was funded through the public schools as a part of the federally-funded Follow-Through Program. In this center—and also at summer workshops at the Prospect Archive and Center in Vermont—they met Pat Carini and began to use the formats that she and her colleagues had created for looking at children and their work.

In 1978 funding for the Teachers' Center dried up, but the teachers saw no need to give up the conversations that had become so important to them. Six years later, in an article about the group, they wrote:

We couldn't let go of the experiences we had at the Center at those Thursday night gatherings at dinner. We found we didn't have to have a Teachers' Center to do it. Teachers' Learning Cooperative was ours, and we didn't have to answer to anyone. And we didn't have to worry about funding any more.2

Since 1978, the Cooperative has met in the homes of its members—a different one every week.

After the Meeting

The visitor asks the nine teachers who have stayed after the meeting about two unusual features of the group: that it has continued to meet for 18 years and that it meets weekly— rather than once or twice a month as many other groups do. What keeps members coming year after year? How do they find the time to meet so often?

"One answer is that most of us are in different schools and we feel isolated," replies Wice. "This is the place we come to find lifelines day to day. And it does play an important enough role in our lives that we need it more than once a month. A core of six to eight people come every week, but most people come a couple of times a month. There's an easy in and out."

Another teacher elaborates: "If you miss one, and the group only

meets once a month, then you have to go two months between meetings. This way, you get another chance a week later.”

Stribe observes that creating a written schedule — something the group started doing in 1979 — has made the “in and out” easier. “You could know what you were missing. And you could know that it wasn’t the last time the group would meet.”

The teachers begin to talk about the range of ways that the TLC has supported their teaching. The visitor has participated in several descriptive reviews and has seen how much a group’s painstaking, respectful efforts to describe a child can help a teacher to support that child’s growth. But several group members emphasize the less obvious ways that this work helps all of those present. One notes that spending two hours discussing a child’s strengths and interests refreshes her spirit and helps to counteract the depressing effect of school faculty meetings. Another talks about the way in which the energy of children’s drawing and writing, examined in this context, feeds her practice.

Because the members set the agenda every six to eight weeks, it responds to their current concerns.

All the teachers seem to agree that the descriptions of one child, one drawing, one classroom yield insights into other children, and into teaching’s endemic dilemmas. Wice speaks of the power of descriptive reviews of “children who reappear over the years, in many different classrooms — the child who teases, the child who gets teased, the child who is hard to see because she is so quiet, the child who doesn’t learn to read but does powerful drawing, the child who lies, the child whose spirit makes a place for other children to get along.”

Some conversations open up difficult ideas and help teachers to deal with recurring stresses — around report cards, for example, or the decision to retain a child in grade. Two mid-winter meetings celebrated teachers’ accomplishments and growth: To the first meeting each participant brought a success, a recollection of a time when she felt she had made a difference; to the second teachers brought examples of professional growth — times when they had made a lasting change in their practice. The TLC examined these stories with the same care that they had, on other occasions, taken with a child’s painting or story.

Because the members set the agenda every six to eight weeks, it responds to their current concerns. "When we readdress topics over time," Wice points out, "it is because teachers are continuing to puzzle about them, not because some university professor or school administrator has decided that they are important."

The TLC also serves its members in practical ways. For example, the group collectively owns a number of classroom sets of children’s books — bought with a small bequest from a former member of the group — and they pass them around. “It’s a little hard to administer,” adds the teacher who describes this arrangement.

“How does it work?” asks the visitor innocently. Peals of laughter answer her question.

“Not well,” chuckles Stribe. “Not well.”

“When we started,” Kanevsky explains, “it was really important to us not to have anyone in charge, not to have an administrator, not to be dependent on others for money, not to have people organizing us. There’s a price for that: We do things on our own, but these sorts of things are hard to coordinate.”

With much merriment, group members recall the confusion of an organization that had once given the TLC an award. “They kept saying, ‘Where is your office, so we can send the award there?’ And we couldn’t get anyone to understand that there was no place. They kept asking us in different words, because they thought we didn’t understand their question. They just couldn’t imagine that we really didn’t have an office or a president.”

In order to avoid the perils of leadership, the group rotates the task of chairing meetings, encouraging every member to take his or her turn.

“And that wasn’t always easy,” notes Kanevsky. “People were reluctant. Maybe they saw other people running them who knew how to do it better and they hesitated...”

“We encourage new people to chair meetings because you hear a lot more when you chair — you listen with a different ear. And now, with new people, we do it in pairs. The new person does the summary first, and then her partner has a chance to add to it. If you do it a few times with an experienced person, it becomes less daunting.”

Setting the Agenda

The TLC devotes one meeting every other month to setting up a schedule for the next seven weeks. They launch this session by going around the circle, putting ideas on the table, figuring out what people want help with. Two or three teachers may ask for descriptive reviews of particular children. Another might suggest devoting a meeting to the teaching of writing. Sometimes public events, local or national, demand attention. In 1995, for example, the superintendent of the Philadelphia Schools had adopted the slogan “children achieving”; TLC members raised questions about what the phrase meant and scheduled a meeting in which to explore it.
A Close Look at Tami

by The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative

Staff Review of a child is one of the most useful formats. A month or two ahead of time, one of us asks for a chance to look more closely at a particular child in her class. The chairperson for that week works with the presenting teacher to develop a focusing question. The teacher prepares a description of the child according to the following headings: physical, emotional, social, academic, and interests and activities. She or he also collects work that will help the group to see the child more clearly — paintings, stories, homework papers, workbook pages, observations, the teacher’s own anecdotal records. Last March Lynne was concerned about Tami. “She seems to be very dependent on her friends and not at all assertive.” We passed around two years of Tami’s writings and drawings. We began to visualize a tall, pastel-shaded eight year old as Lynne described Tami according to the headings and detailed her strengths and vulnerabilities. The chairperson summarized for us. We took turns asking questions so that Lynne could fill in more details. The chairperson summarized again. Patterns began to emerge. Tami’s stories were coherent and exciting. The pictures revealed a sharp eye taking in everything from her detached vantage point. Tami was not a colorless nonentity. In fact, when she and her friends played “school,” she was often the teacher. We gave Lynne recommendations: Continue to support her role-playing. Let her participate in dramatizing popular tales and her own stories. Start a dialogue journal between her and the teacher. Have her come to see the teacher first thing each morning to make contact. We had a recommendation for the teacher herself. Realize that not all children are assertive. Look for other strengths.


which had reduced him to tears “because he was confronted with all the things he couldn’t do.”

Bean observes that an hour earlier, as she watched her student Brian evade his classmates’ questions, she had felt uncomfortable because there was much more to Brian than was visible on the videotape. She was troubled, she explained, “to think that those few minutes would describe Brian. That’s why it’s so important to stop the tape and talk. And that’s what we do here.”

“That’s another reason we need this group,” Wice points out. “Because it is very hard to find a place to have a serious conversation about teaching that lasts more than a few minutes. And here we can get one that lasts a few hours.”

“And that continues over time,” adds Strieb.

“It’s really about looking at a whole lot of things differently,” Kanevsky says. “Looking at something, and having so many perspectives, means we can turn it and see it from different angles. And that is so unusual. Everything we experience in the school system is just the opposite. It is so cut and dried. People get nervous if you can’t attach a number to something you are describing.”

Kanevsky’s point reminds Strieb of a recent conversation with a second grade teacher she likes and works closely with. “She has a little girl in her room who is an extraordinary writer. She writes in all different genres. I’ve seen a lot of writers and she really is extraordinary. But she doesn’t pay much attention to handwriting or spelling and recently her teacher said to me, ‘I have to give her a C or a D!’”

A gasp of protest echoes around
the table.

Strieb shakes her head sadly. "Well, she's getting a D, which is a little better. But this child has inspired so many other children to write. My colleague said, 'Lynne, I've talked to the reading teacher and I've talked to all my other second grade colleagues: If you are part of the school system, you have to go by the standards they have set. You just have to. The teachers expect you to, the administrators expect you to, and the parents expect you to.'"

"Some of us use narrative reports along with grades. In a narrative report we can describe what a child does," observes Bean.

The Discipline of Process

The format of the TLC meetings — the custom of going around the circle, getting everyone's comments in order and discouraging cross-talk — strikes some newcomers as confining and artificial: Why discipline the spontaneous back and forth of good conversation?

"I really liked the format from the very first," recalls Wice. "I am a person who gets a lot of air time. I talk a lot. But here there are strict rules: You only talk when it is your turn. I liked the discipline: I listened more, and I learned a lot. I always got surprised. I tend to make snap judgments about people — about what they are like, or how they teach — and then I'd hear something I didn't expect: 'Oh, you do that in your room?' And I'd learn something."

Describing the way in which the TLC has used the critical ingredients of the descriptive review, Kanevsky argues, can create an entirely new kind of conversation even in a group with a troubled history. "We did descriptive reviews in my school — two different times — and everyone loved it. It was a moment when everyone spoke to each other in a different way and there was common ground in a different sense. The structure made it comfortable for everyone. It showed how the structure of the review can be really good for organizing people who would fight otherwise."

"We Speak With Authority"

Several teachers mention that the TLC has taught them about leadership as well as about teaching. "For one thing," explains one long-time member, "I've learned how to run a meeting so that people can be heard, so people understand what is being talked about. A meeting where there's — not a conclusion necessarily — I'm not sure how to say this —"

"A meeting where people feel they've been heard," offers another teacher.

As an instructional support teacher, Susan Shapiro works with other School District staff in a variety of ways. She describes the way in which strategies she had learned in the TLC enabled her to reshape the discourse in a principal's group in which she participates. "The first meeting I went to, two people dominated the whole meeting. I took copious notes and I went home and typed them up and sent them to all the principals.

"Then, in the second meeting, one of the two people who had dominated said, 'Today we're all going to take turns.' And those two people tried not to dominate and," Shapiro pauses and makes a face, "it was better, but there was still a lot of crosstalk and venting. So I took notes again and I got them out on Tuesday. And here's what I noticed: As a note taker, you have a lot of power.

"So, as a member of this group, I take these structures to other groups."

Kanevsky notes that Shapiro's documentation gave the group the power to understand not only the content of the meeting, but also its process.

"You see, it isn't just about classrooms and schools," concludes Strieb. "It's also about leadership: We speak with a voice that gets listened to when we speak elsewhere. We speak with authority. And people will ask us, 'Where did you learn to do this? How did you learn to run meetings like this?' It has to do with a different arena than the classroom. It has to do with working with other adults. And people get to practice it here."
“It’s Like Being in the Learners’ Feet!”

On a Thursday evening in mid-February, a group of teachers – some from various elementary and middle schools, others from Michigan State University – prepare to watch a videotape of an earlier meeting of the group in which everyone worked on a mathematics problem. As the teachers pass bread, cheese, and fruit around — since the group meets from 5:30 to 8:00, someone usually brings food — and speculate about what they will be able to see on the tape, Carole Shank, who teaches third grade at Averill Elementary in Lansing, volunteers to read something she wrote a few days earlier about her experiences with last week’s mathematics problem.

Shank explains that her journal entry was sparked by the events of the group is about to revisit on the videotape and by a subsequent conversation with Kathy Beasley, another member of the group. “It has to do with questions, basically,” Shank continues:

Kids’ questions direct what we need to teach. But do we allow time for them? Feeling safe enough to ask until you understand isn’t easy for learner or for teacher. I think back to the last group meeting when I asked Joan to explain her solution. I asked in three different questions, but how could I keep asking — what was I, stupid or something, not to get it? Was she ready to keep explaining? Was she becoming impatient with me because I didn’t get it? At one point she was talking to Steve and she asked, “Do you get it?” And I mumbled something, “I don’t get it, but that’s okay.”

As a teacher, when my students keep asking questions, I bet I give messages like, “Okay, come on, let’s go. I explained it twice, come on, we’re ready to move on.” Sending really strong messages that it’s not all right to ask. Teachers have an agenda, certain things have to be covered. Asking questions becomes messy. And if you don’t get it, is it safe to keep asking? If I don’t get it, how can I ask a specific question about the content or what is it I don’t get? Do kids know what they need in order to “get it”? If Joan had asked me, “What would help you?” would I have been able to answer her?

Was there something in the room or the group, or a sense of urgency on my part or on her part to share her exciting solution with someone who really understood it? I certainly didn’t want to inconvenience her and take up her time or have her tell me again about her solution. Do my kids feel that way? I bet they do. How can I prevent this in my room? How can I be aware that questions are real? They gather information so we can learn and be ready to listen. Seek out questions, that is something I can do; model asking questions about things I don’t understand. Honor these questions, give them status. Learning is the important thing, and questions lead the way.

Shank closes her notebook. Looking around at her colleagues she observes, “It’s really making me think about questions we squelch, or encourage.”

“And how hard it is, when you are teaching,” Beasley picks up the thread, “to listen to the question when you want to get on with the agenda.”

“It gets too messy,” Shank agrees.

“It’s hard to make it relevant to everyone when you are focusing on one person’s question — is that what you are saying?” asks Jan Derksen, who teaches third grade in Bath.

“We’re saying it’s hard to do,” Beasley agrees, “but we’re saying that it sounds like it’s pretty important. If you don’t get your questions answered —”

Investigating Mathematics Teaching

The members of Investigating Mathematics Teaching (IMT) group have been meeting every other Thursday evening since October, 1991. Helen Featherstone, Stephen Smith, and Lauren Pfeiffer of Michigan State University's College of Education originally organized the group as part of a research project, in order to explore what teachers could learn from an opportunity to investigate a collection of videotapes and other materials which documented one year of mathematics lessons in a third grade class.1 Four of the seven members of the original group signed on as participants in a masters level teacher education class; the other three had seen a few examples of this teacher’s teaching and wanted to learn more about it.

All seven teachers were interested in teaching mathematics in ways that were very different from anything they had experienced as students in elementary schools; they all

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1 Deborah Ball, an associate professor at Michigan State University, taught math daily in a public school classroom from 1988 to 1992. During the 1989-90 school year, with the aid of a grant from the National Science Foundation, she documented this teaching with videotape and other media for use in developing curricula for the preparation of teachers.
accepted the MSU researchers' invitation to continue meeting after the term — and the course — ended. In the months that followed, the group spent less and less time watching the videotapes and more time talking about their own classrooms and the NCTM Standards. At the end of the academic year, group members decided to reconvene in the fall — a decision that they repeated in June of 1993, 1994, and 1995.

In the IMT, most group discussions of mathematical ideas have grown either out of teachers' efforts to describe the difficulties that students in their classes were having with particular mathematical content or out of the discussions of curriculum. In January and February 1995, however, the group decided to do some math problems together in order to study the "mathematical discourse" in their own group. They hoped, through this investigation, to develop conjectures about the relationship between mathematical tasks and discourse in their elementary and middle school classrooms; they planned to present what they learned at a conference in Philadelphia.

How Many Squares?

The group decided to start its investigation by working together on an extension of a math problem that one of the teachers had given her second and third grade students several months earlier. (See Figure 1.) Because they wanted to study their own discourse, members decided to videotape this meeting; they also agreed that, after they had discussed the math problem, they would write about the discourse and take turns reading aloud what they had written.

The first parts of the program went much as math lessons did in the teachers' classrooms: everyone worked alone on the problem for awhile and then individuals began to confer quietly with one another. Twenty minutes later, the group moved into a general discussion and several members volunteered to explain their solutions. After a 40-minute discussion everyone wrote about what had just happened.

Featherstone noted with satisfaction in her journal that the problem had felt "about right" — neither too easy nor too hard — and that in the discussion members had succeeded in putting a number of ideas on the table and in asking each other good questions that highlighted mathematical patterns.

Then Beasley volunteered to read what she had written:

I felt completely miserable the whole time we worked on this problem. I wanted to disappear. At several points I wondered if anyone would mind if I just slipped out of the room and didn't come back...

Teachers and researchers looked at one another in consternation. "I didn't realize..." "That's terrible. I had no idea...." Silently those present contemplated their own astonishment: they all knew Beasley well — several had lunch with her almost daily (see "Making it Happen") — and had assumed that they knew what she was experiencing over the past hour; how had they missed these feelings?

In the discussion that followed, several teachers made connections between the feelings Beasley was describing and the experiences of their own students. One wondered whether the behavior problems that sometimes erupted during math class might reflect the feelings of panic, confusion, and despair that Beasley had described.

At the end of the meeting, Beasley astonished the rest of the group a second time by announcing determinedly, "We have to do this again!" After some conversation everyone present agreed to go home and write some more about what had happened, to meet in a week to share these reflections, and to watch and discuss the videotape of tonight's meeting. They also agreed to tackle another math problem — Featherstone volunteered to find an appropriate one — and to videotape again.

In fact, discussion of the videotape entirely consumed the next meeting. On February 2, however, the group was ready for a second math problem: (See Figure 2.) They followed the routine they had used four weeks earlier: members worked quietly on the problem for about 20 minutes and then volunteers presented their solutions to the group. When Beasley offered to go to the
white board first, the rest of the group cheered and congratulated her!

This time the surprise was Shank. As Lisa Pasek, a third grade teacher from Lapeer, finished describing the way in which she had approached the problem, Shank announced: "I'm lost!!! I don't get it at all. I don't understand Lisa a bit!!" Later, she described in her journal the confusions she felt from the first moment that she saw the problem; she made connections between what she had experienced and the difficulties she saw her eight-year-old students confronting:

I didn't like this problem. I re-read it three, maybe four, times before I even got what it wanted. I felt panic setting in because everybody else was just scratching away on their paper. I could see Joan writing numbers and I thought, "What is she writing?" I heard Debi and Kathy in conversation about what they were doing...Then I tried to think about what we did last time with the squares and moving them and looking at the patterns of one row, two rows, three rows.

Then I decided to start drawing the ten steps staircase. I counted and got 58. So I was going back and thinking...10, 50...there's ten 10s in a hundred. What is the connection? Two of my students came to mind right away. The two who always have trouble beginning. I'm going to get around to them sooner than I ever have before. Finally I re-counted and I find that I even drew the 10-step stairway wrong. Drawing a hundred would never happen. I wanted to ask Joan what she was doing, but then she asked me. Oh, no. "I don't know," I said. Then she started to explain her idea. I could hear the words but I didn't get it.

Then, when Lisa went to the board to explain what she did, I was lost. Then Joan got up and explained hers again -- I think it was the third time I heard it -- I was finally getting it. Steve's solution surprised me. I understood how he was moving things around, but I knew it was nothing I could accomplish. How are my students understanding each other? I knew I was lost, but I didn't feel I could ask for help again. What a bother. How do third graders feel when they don't get it? Do they know enough to ask or do they feel, "What a bother" and want to hide and hope no one will notice?

In the days that followed, Shank continued to think about her experience; it was, she had said to the math group near the end of the meeting, "like being in the learners' feet!" All week she found herself making connections between what she had felt and what she needed to do as a teacher. The journal entry she shared with the other members of the group at the beginning of the next meeting captured some of her reflections.

"I Almost Wanted to Disappear"

On February 16, as the IMT group continues its discussion of Shank's new journal entry, Featherstone observes that it has made her aware of another problematic feature of questions: "When you said, 'Did Joan want to explain her solution to someone who really understood it?' it made me think about how, yeah, I guess it is more validating to have someone understand you."

Shank agrees. "When she explained it to Steve, I remember that I almost wanted to disappear into the background, because she had a listener who could really understand her. And when she asked me if I understood I said, 'No, but that's okay.' " "You make yourself invisible," Derksen nods.

"Yes, because I couldn't validate her solution at all."

"But that wasn't your responsibility," protests several others.

"It wasn't my responsibility," Shank concurs, "but I think I felt the sense of responsibility in there somehow."

"You obviously didn't feel completely safe," worries Derksen. "I don't know if I've ever been in an environment that is that safe," Shank rejoins, "that if you can't get something after three times you'd go to the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth."

Derksen's thoughts turn to her classroom: "There are a few kids who, if they really want to understand it, they'll come up later in the day and say, 'I still don't get that.' But there aren't very many who will do that. I think for the most part they will drop it, unless we happen to notice, to see that blank look on their faces."

A few minutes later the group turns to the videotape of the meeting two weeks earlier in which they had attacked the "stair-step problem". Corbin remembers that about

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Figure 2. The second problem that the IMT Group worked on.
ten minutes after she started work she noticed that Pasek seemed to have finished and wondered “How could she have done that so fast?”

“We worked on it for a long time, didn’t we?” observes Beasley as Pfeiffer fast forwards through the first part of the tape. “It didn’t feel that long.”

Shank laughs. “That’s because you were working with someone!”

“Did it seem like a long time when we did that first problem?” Smith asks Beasley.

“It seemed like a really long time,” responds Beasley.

The group falls silent as the action on the screen changes and they see Beasley volunteering to explain how she had approached the problem. The real Beasley shakes her head incredulously, remembering that she had become confused a few minutes later as she copied the solution from her notebook onto the whiteboard, and wonders aloud, “Why did I ever volunteer to go up?” Although Beasley looks self-possessed and confident on the screen, everyone present knows how much she regretted coming up because she had described those feelings the previous week. As group members watch the scene (several people have responded to Beasley’s confusion with suggestions) they comment on discrepancies between what they experienced at the time and what they see now.

Pfeiffer remembers that although she had at first seen her own questions as helpful, she had eventually realized that Beasley was feeling “bombarded.”

“When I’m watching it now,” responds Beasley, “I’m thinking, ‘They weren’t really bombarding me. Look, there are long pauses when it’s quiet.’ But when I was up there, it felt like I was being bombarded.”

Juxtaposing the scene on the monitor with Beasley’s memories of her own feelings helps group members to understand why it is so hard to help a child who becomes confused at the board: However calm and well-intentioned the voices offering suggestions, as the recipient tries to remember her original idea, to respond to each new voice, and to reconcile each new idea with what she has written, she may well feel as though she is being peppered with grapeshot.

But for Beasley the video is prompting a different sort of reflection. She agrees with Featherstone, who suggests that she would not have felt “bombarded” had the context not been math.

“No,” Beasley agrees, “I think it really does have to do with my relationship with math. There’s something that happens to me, I just lose all ability to think and reason.” She describes an occasion when this happened in her classroom. As others ask her questions she works to define the problem for herself. “I sort of suspected for a long time that I had a learning disability with numbers. I don’t think that anymore….I actually think I can reason pretty well. It’s just something happens to me and it has to do with confidence.” A few minutes later, as she tries to understand—and explain why she didn’t just sit down, or ask for help, when she became confused, she concludes, “I think the word ‘panic’ really describes what I was feeling.”

Turning back to the videotape, the group watches Pasek—who is home with a sick baby tonight—explain how she solved the 100-step problem by pairing columns in such a way that each pair summed to 101. After considerable discussion of this strategy, Beasley asks Shank to try to reconstruct what she was thinking and feeling when she announced that she was lost. “Were you saying, ‘I give up!’ or ‘Help me!’?”

“I don’t know,” Shank replies slowly. “I don’t think I was saying, ‘Help me’; at that point, I was really confused.”

“So it was like there was a norm in the group?”

Shank nods. “It was okay to admit that I didn’t get it. That was a norm here that’s not out there in the real world.”

“I was glad you said that, because when I saw it on the tape I felt more comfortable asking about the pairing,” volunteers Derksen. She explains that because she had arrived late at the previous meeting she had been reluctant to seek help with a strategy which she partly understood and assumed others were completely clear on. But when she had requested — and gotten — another explanation this week she had understood it far better.

This experience convinces Derksen of the value of taking substantial amounts of time on new mathematical ideas. “I sometimes think I spend too much time on things, because of all the stuff I have to cover. But just to really understand the concept — so I could go up and explain it and feel comfortable about it — I’d probably have to hear it even one more time.”

A Few Months Later

Four months later, in a conversation with Smith about her own ongoing efforts to find resources and people that support her own learning, Corbin recalls the intensity of the IMT group’s January and February meetings. “I just felt like I gained so much. We would go home exhausted. We stayed so much later than we usually stayed and yet I didn’t want to leave, because I was having conversations that had substance, that were interesting and made me think.” As a teacher she has worked hard to find people with whom she can have such conversations.

Corbin was struck, as well, by the turbulent emotional universe beneath the smooth surface of the mathematical discourse. “It was interesting to me just to dig really deeply into how everybody came away feeling. I know Kathy better than anybody probably, and I didn’t
know she had a miserable experience.

"How well we hide that stuff! And how well kids could fool us, and hide it, too. How do we reach those kids? That was probably the most meaningful thing to me: thinking, well, if we feel this way, this tells us something about how some of our kids are feeling."

For Derksen the meetings provided various sorts of reassurance: "I could do the math, and the kids can do it. There are patterns and meanings, and there is a reason for everything. It's not just, you know, numbers coming from nowhere."

The winter conversations strengthened Derksen's determination to give her students mathematical experiences that she had not had. "Just relating my own insecurities about doing math to their insecurities was useful — and feeling so hopeful that I can have some impact on how they feel about math. Because I feel like for the most part they feel good about themselves as mathematicians."

"It's Been Hard"

The change in agenda that excites some group members can, however, leave others feeling frustrated. On a warm May afternoon Lisa Pasek remembers the IMT group's February meetings. The year — Pasek's sixth as a teacher — has been hard. She had a baby — her first — in September, and when she returned to school in November it was to a new grade level: after four years in sixth grade she was reassigned to third — with, of course, an unfamiliar curriculum. Moreover, her school's new principal, concerned about coverage of the curriculum, had been urging all teachers to move efficiently through their mathematics textbooks, leaving little time for the discussions that had become the cornerstone of her mathematics pedagogy.

Featherstone asks whether it has been hard to keep coming to the IMT group this year, given the pressures she was experiencing.

"It has been hard," Pasek agrees ruefully. "Because in the fall I was out on maternity leave. And then in the winter IMT meetings we were getting ready for the conference and that was not what I needed at the time. And since then in the spring we have talked a lot about classroom culture and I just have a beautiful bunch of kids so that's not what I was concerned about. It's been real hard to find common ground.

And with all new curriculum, and all the pressures from outside, there have been more than a few days when I thought, 'Let's just let it go for now.' It never feels like the right thing to do, but — "

Pasek's thoughts return to the group's winter meetings. "The first meetings we had, where we were kind of 'getting into their feet' — Pasek uses Shanks' phrase to recapture the work the group was doing in the months before the Philadelphia conference — "I was interested and I was very optimistic that there were things I could glean from this." She pauses, trying to recapture the complex mix of feelings.

"But I was feeling frustrated because there were other things that I would like to be talking about that are more practical: I've never taught third grade math before and Kathy and Deb and Carole and Jan have and I really wanted to pick their brains.

"But there was this one meeting where we were talking about other things and nothing very helpful was said, and I was so frustrated I literally burst into tears when I left the meeting. But even then, I knew that if I had said 'Hey! I really do not want to talk about this! Listen, this is what I need,' I knew that everyone would stop —" She straightens up abruptly— "and say, 'Lisa! Oh, okay, tell us about your day,' and I would get what I needed. I did think about doing that, but I felt conflicted: I didn't want to change the course of the group's conversation based on my own individual agenda."

"So the next time I went I thought, 'Well, let's see what happens this time.' But that was the week, I think, where Lauren was laying out this progression on the board: First we did this, then we did that, and then we did this, and now look what we are doing' and I was like 'What?!?!? I'm out of here!' And I was literally not going to come back if that was the way it was left. Because it had gone from practical valuing of what's going on in your classroom to this kind of meta-stuff. I was thinking it was like, yes it is valuable for a farmer to know about the psychology of the cow, but if he doesn't know how to run his farm, it won't matter what the cow is feeling."

"So that was a very tense couple of meetings for me."

Featherstone nods. She had felt Pasek's uncharacteristic disengagement during the winter meetings, but had not perceived the depth of her frustration. "Well, it kind of brought home to me that people really do have different needs. And at any given time the intensity of the needs varies, too."

Pasek nods emphatically, remembering a conversation that the group had had the previous summer on just this subject. "I remember even at that July meeting, we were very conscious that we wanted this year to be different, that we needed to be aware that people are at different spots. And we were being very honest about how we are all in different places. I was very excited by this honesty.

"And I knew that I was going to be drawing on all that Kathy and Carole know. I knew that I was going to be calling on people in new ways. Before, I couldn't ask, 'What do you think the big ideas are in sixth grade math?' because the other teachers hadn't taught it. But now in a very real way I wanted to say, 'What are the big ideas? What are the things I'm not seeing in multiplication? What are the subtleties in multiplication?'"
"I really have not had a chance to do that, and it seems like a huge waste because Kathy and Carole have been teaching second and third grade in this way for a number of years and they have spent a lot of time thinking about the subtleties and the interesting misconceptions. And, yes, it's exciting to discover it for yourself and hear your kids say it, but why invent the wheel if I can learn some things ahead of time? Because, when I'm dealing with pressures here and pressures there, I need all the help I can get.

"In my own classroom I feel like the quality of our discussions is good, but not as good as it could be. I remember saying in one of our IMT meetings that I knew that there were questions about division that I didn't take the time to dig into. I feel like if I had some deeper understandings, instead of kind of floundering around for three days and getting frustrated with myself, if I had places I could go..."

"So, what has helped this year?" asks Featherstone.

Pasek considers the question silently for a long time, then describes the ongoing practical help and emotional support she has gotten from the other third grade teachers in her school.

"And the IMT group has helped.

Just having that connection. Even if I just leave there feeling less frustrated than when I got there, it's still a help. Even if I still leave feeling frustrated, if it's a little less, that's a bonus. Going there on Thursday nights, I felt, was something I did for me." Again she falls silent.

"It was a long way to drive," observes Featherstone, "when it wasn't giving you the help you actually wanted."

Pasek nods, apparently pondering her reasons for making the 140 mile trip to East Lansing and back every Wednesday night. "In the middle of a long school week. I guess a lot of what kept me going was to keep that access. Because even if I wasn't getting anything at that moment, I wanted to keep it going, keep it alive. I felt like, with everything else going on, if I let go of that, I'd be a goner."

Pasek's language is strong. Hoping that she will explain what the connection to the other IMT members means to her — and what she feels she would lose if she severed it — Featherstone leans forward. Pasek answers her unspoken question: "To never see anyone else who was bothering to struggle — I'm afraid that if I let go of the sight of people who are struggling with the same issues I am, I would just forget what that looks like."

Her eyes fill with tears.

"You have this vision of what you want to accomplish, a vision of what you are at your best. This year has been about trying to hold onto that. And it has been about asking, 'What are the pieces that are crucial?' And about coming to terms with all this."

The IMT group is nearing the end of its fourth year of life. Pasek will soon have two small children as well as a full-time teaching job. Featherstone poses a question she has asked at the end of every meeting since 1992: "Should the group continue?"

"Yes!" Pasek's affirmative is quick and definite.

"Why?"

Pasek thinks for a moment.

"Finding a group of people who are thoughtful, people who are willing to dig deeper and not just say, 'Well, if they score 80% they understand it,' who are willing to ask, 'What am I doing — not just 'what are others doing?' — that makes it hard for kids to learn?' that doesn't happen in masters courses, it doesn't happen very many places."