Improving Collaboration: teaching teachers effective communication skills.

When we look at transforming schools into the 21st Century, communication is a common competency in multiple frameworks. We know that to be an effective teacher, we must be able to communicate well with our students and other professionals in the field. I feel that more formal education towards improved communication methods and a more balanced usage of formal and informal professional collaboration would be foundational in building an effective learning environment for students and teachers alike.

The Teaching-Family Model is a tool that provides a prescribed dialogue for individuals and groups to use throughout different situations. It’s most basic application is used within home environments, though it has the ability to be transferred to all institutions. There are several social skills that contribute to effective communication skills. As a Family Specialist, I have worked with many families in order to develop necessary communication skills for individuals to be active contributing citizens with the ability to conform to societal norms, at any age and in all institutions. When children learn the basic communication skills at home, before they enter into the schooling system, they seem to be more successful students. When children are taught these skills at home, they are able to transfer their skills to the school environment to better their learning. The Teaching-Family Model addresses the teaching of these skills. The Model “focuses on teaching and learning but incorporates a strength- and relationship-based orientation” (McElgunn, 2012, p.40) that allows empowerment and student voice in the development of skills. The Model has been pre-dominantly used in family homes and
community homes, but I believe there is a practical application to the school environment, especially with regards to the development of communication skills. McElgunn (2012) discusses the Model and its components of training, consultation, evaluation and facilitative administration. The Model focuses on teaching its practitioners how to communicate with their clients (students) in any environment. The students’ and teachers’ skills are matched to ensure consistency across various institutions and involvements. The Model provides teachers with a dialogic application to teach students about specific behaviours and skills that are essential to communication. The Model is founded in behaviour science with the assumption that, “behaviour is learned, and therefore, can be unlearned and replaced,” which would contribute to extinguishing behaviours and skills that were previously learned and replacing existing communication and leadership skills with new ones. This process has the potential to support the development of students’ communication skills because,

“Practitioners were given the tools to support a client’s needs while ensuring effective care. These focus on teaching methods, self-determination, relationships, diversity, family-style living, and professionalism. All of these elements have been studied extensively and contribute to creating a lasting positive change” (McElgunn, 2012, p.41).

This Model also has the ability to provide teachers with the skill set to address the skills and behaviours of their students to affect change where needed, to support and encourage the development of appropriate skills and to maintain change. All of these learning processes have the ability to support the development of communication skills and empower youth to be leaders and social activists in their communities. Further
A study of the Model is needed to create a specific application for teachers to use in the classroom, enabling them to achieve ‘positive change’ according to Model practices while simultaneously meeting day-to-day needs of teaching the curriculum.

Research has shown that communication skills are an important part of being a 21st Century learner. The Teaching Family Model is an effective application for teachers to help their students enhance, develop and change (where needed) their communication skills, creating an environment where student voice can be heard and teachers and students can relate through empowerment, respect and consistent values.

The Teaching-Family Model also has an application that could enhance the communication in teachers' professional learning environments of teachers. The dialogic approach to communicating taught in the Model lends itself to professional relationships and improving their effectiveness. Within a professional learning community (PLC) where sharing and joint work are workable goals in a school environment, the Model has the ability to encourage greater use of the limited time teachers have in order to use a PLC effectively.

Summary of Professional Culture
If we look at a summary of professional culture as described by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), the highest level of collaboration is achieved when teachers work in PLCs and clusters, networks and federations with the goal of sharing and creating joint-work. I would add to this summary the need for effective communication skills in order to achieve the most effective outcomes of collaboration. With the Model’s dialogic approach to communication, teachers would be able to work in an environment that reduces tension and defences that tend to arise when joint-work is being done, thereby promoting successful collaboration.

The unfortunate resistance that is always present with many teachers is the issue of time. Teachers often say that they just don’t have enough time to do effective planning (collaboration in PLCs) with all the other constraints felt in their work day. Speaking with a colleague of mine, I asked the questions, ‘How does collaboration between teachers happen in your school?’ and ‘Some researchers say the best school is one where teachers collaborate in professional learning communities regularly and plan co-curricular lessons and evaluations together – do you think this is possible to achieve? If so, how? And if not, why?’ I wanted to hear others’ opinions on collaboration to see if they had similar feelings around the lack of time to commit to the type of collaboration Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) outline in their book. They revealed that collaboration took place most often in their department office between colleagues teaching similar subjects and it most often occurred informally. I wondered about the effectiveness of this type of collaboration and questioned whether, as compared with collaboration as outlined by Hargreaves and Fullan, it really counts as effective collaboration at all? In their book, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggest that collaboration takes place both
informally and formally. As my colleague continued to discuss her experience with me, she admitted that formal collaborative time provided by school administration was not used successfully or “use(d) a bit… but people usually get wrapped up doing their own stuff during this time (i.e. not using the time for what it is intended).” (K. Nicholls, personal communication, March 30, 2014). If teachers are given time, but then don’t use it effectively, can they confidently state that they don’t have enough time to collaborate when research clearly shows that it improves the learning of our students? In discussing how time can be addressed, it was suggested that particular subject-area teachers should share non-teaching periods within the timetable in order to complete joint-work and sharing. I thought this was a good suggestion since non-teaching periods are considered prep periods anyway; why not collaborate preparations? Quickly though, my colleague countered with further resistance to the time issue: teachers are too busy with the ‘other’ parts of teaching (co-curricula’s) and their own lives too.

Personally, I find it hard to accept that teachers constantly resort to not having enough time to collaborate and develop joint-work while sharing. Teachers alone cannot achieve this balance; they require support from administration, networks and federations. I want to believe that it can be achieved, an environment where teachers can work together to create better learning experiences for their students while maintaining work-life balance. In order to minimize the issue of time, perhaps a better balance between formal and informal collaboration is needed for teachers to create joint-work and share their planning, ideas and inspirations. Concurrently, if teachers are educated to communicate better with each other during collaborative opportunities, can
effective collaboration be achieved? Research shows that, “collaboration with others to design robust learning tasks and obtain feedback about instructional planning from colleagues and mentors” (Friesen, 2009, p.12) is an important tool for creating better learning environments for students. Teachers working together in PLCs while completing joint-work and sharing contribute to successful collaboration when effective communication occurs; strengthening the PLC outcomes. Friesen (2009) stresses the need for teachers to work in an environment with “frequent professional conversations” (p.6) to be effective educators; strong communication skills and abilities would, perhaps, ensure that formal, professional conversations are occurring regularly. Naturally, communication and collaboration within our educational systems are important competencies for 21st century learning and teaching and together may improve student learning.

References
