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ABSTRACT

This report presents information from the February 1997 Select Seminar on Excellence in Education. The Select Seminars have been held since 1985 as a form of professional development, offering a forum for educators to consider major issues and make written recommendations to improve the quality of education. Participants in the 1997 Seminar were educators from local schools and universities in the Albany, New York area. The Seminar discussed and debated the importance of teachers assuming the role of initiator of change and the climate in which this role can survive and flourish. Discussion groups looked at the following issues: (1) factors that inhibit teachers in acting as change agents in schools, (2) qualities necessary if teachers are to serve as change agents, (3) attributes of the climate which allow teachers as change agents to survive and flourish, (4) conditions necessary in the bureaucracy to encourage teachers to serve as change agents, and (5) Ways to nurture and support innovators within universities, classrooms, schools, and districts. (SM)

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A View from the Inside

TEACHER as Change Agent

A
Report
of the Select Seminar
on Excellence in Education

February 1997

The Capital Area School Development Association
School of Education
The University at Albany, State University of New York

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DEDICATION...

Dr. Nelson J. Armlin

to Dr. Nelson J. Armlin

Nelson Armiin would be very proud of the Seminar participants who prepared this document on the Teacher as Change Agent. Nelson believed working teachers and school administrators have critical insights concerning how we should educate our children. He liked the term, "consciously competent professionals." Nelson was a positive person. He didn't reject the many commissions and study groups telling practicing school people what to do, but he was sometimes amused by their pontifications. Nelson Armlin was convinced that front-line, thoughtful teachers and administrators often had more valid insights than more remote critics. I remember clearly when Nelson invited Ed Kelly and me to lunch to discuss an idea. Nelson knew that Ed and I shared many of his views about teachers. He suggested that we set up a Seminar to bring together teachers and administrators for enough time to talk seriously about a current educational issue. In Nelson's view, we would help in any way we could, but participants would be the experts. Ed and I liked the idea. We agreed to work with Nelson to set up something, (we weren't sure just what) and Ed and I promised we would curb our usual tendencies and listen more than we talked. We selected the title "View from the Inside" and chose the topic of teacher evaluation.

The first Seminar exceeded our expectations. In five days a group of practicing professionals in the Capital District produced a sophisticated, balanced, provocative analysis of issues in teacher evaluation. Many of the ideas they proposed came into the evaluation literature a year or two later, but we heard them first in the seminar. Ed and I took part with Nelson in several more Seminars. Each Seminar was a little different, but each Seminar has been based on Nelson's core belief in the competence of educational practitioners, and each Seminar report confirmed Nelson's faith in practicing teachers and school administrators.

Nelson Armlin died about a year before this Seminar report on the teacher as change agent was drafted, but his core beliefs live on in the report. Participants discuss beginning the process clustering in separate teacher and administrator groups. As the Seminar progressed, these distinctions disappeared. Nelson told Select Seminar participants, "Check your roles at the door." Seminar participants don't always agree. Nelson enjoyed the stage in a Seminar when spirited debate occurred, not between teachers and administrators, but between articulate people with different points of view. He enjoyed even more the stage in which Seminar participants recognize their different points of view and strive to find a reconciliation.

As I read the draft Seminar report, I found myself saying, "Yes, Nelson would agree! Nelson would chuckle here. Nelson lives on through the work of this Seminar group."

Richard M. Clark, Emeritus Professor
School of Education
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SELECT SEMINAR PROCESS

The Capital Area School Development Association (CASDA) has been sponsoring Select Seminars since 1985 as a form of professional development. These Seminars provide a forum for educators to consider major issues and make written recommendations to improve the quality of education. Reports of the Select Seminars are published by CASDA and circulated regionally and nationally. Reports have been reproduced by four State Departments of Education for use in professional development and orientation programs.

The Select Seminar process has received a great deal of attention and has been replicated across the country. It has been extremely gratifying to be credited by colleagues with developing what is essentially a quite simple format and process.

The CASDA Select Seminars follow a very simple structure based upon a set of guiding principles:

Participants need to commit adequate time—to work, to reflect, and to write. Most Seminars have been conducted for five full days spread about a month apart over the first three months with the final session being a two-day overnight retreat in the middle to the end of the fourth month.

A conducive working environment is very important. The Seminars have been conducted in "protected environments"—away from the work site, in quiet and aesthetically pleasing surroundings with special care being given to the quality of food and refreshments. We believe this clearly is a first step in communicating to participants that the Seminar is special and there are high expectations that the deliberations of its members will have an important result.

The Seminar participants are the experts. We believe these Select Seminars have been highly successful in part because of the high degree of personal and professional respect afforded participants and the central belief on which the Seminar series was founded: "that consciously competent teachers and administrators are the best arbiters of educational practice." While participants do extensive reading during the Seminars, visiting experts and lecturers are not usually a part of this experience. The participants of a Seminar are the body of experts.

SELECT SEMINAR

PROCESS

Roles are "checked at the door." One's ideas must stand on their own, be debated, accepted, or discarded without reference to one's position or education. There is never just one role group represented in a Seminar.

Seminars are self-governing entities with organizers serving the group. The coordination of the Seminar is managed by personnel from CASDA. After providingthe initial structure and on-going logistical support, they work to transfer the governance and direction from themselves to the participants. By the end of the Seminar, it is fair to say that the Seminar becomes self-governed with the coordinators taking direction from the Seminar group.

The experience is at least as important as the product. All Seminar participants agree that the process, the experience, is most important; in fact, the report might be quite different if the process continues over time, instead of representing but one point in an ongoing process when, although there is much agreement on important issues, there is some disagreement as well. Even so, the report provides an important documentation of the experience and serves to validate for each of the participants the energy and effort they expended. We also firmly believe that such an ongoing conversation can only result in better education for all of our children.

We also firmly believe that this process effectively promotes significant professional development. The use of the process in other states, the popularity of the Seminar reports, and the many testimonials from the participants over the years convince us of the viability of the process.

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INTRODUCTION

"The schools we need require different habits of work and habits of mind on the part of teachers—a kind of professionalism in the classroom that few teachers were expected to exhibit before. In addition, to get from where we are now to where we need to be will require teachers to play a substantially different role within their schools as well as in public discourse. Teachers need to relearn what it means to be good in-school practitioners, while also becoming more articulate and self-confident spokespeople for the difficult and often anxiety-producing changes schools are expected to undertake. If teachers are not able to join in leading such changes, the changes will not take place."

Deborah Meier, Dissent, *Winter 1994*

"The new standard for the future is that every teacher must strive to become effective at managing change."

Michael G. Fullan, *Educational Leadership, March 1993*

It was July. We were a group of 25 educators from different districts and diverse roles. Initially we tended to seek out and talk with those in job alike roles. Teachers clustered, sharing stories about their summer trips, their kids heading back to college, their forays into school to prepare for school's opening. Administrators compared notes on the latest news from the State Education Department and shared war stories about how busy the summer had been.

But as we embarked upon our task we realized that we were more alike than different. To a person, we all wondered where the summer had gone. But our commonalties ran far deeper. We came to recognize that regardless of our ages, career stages, school settings or roles, we shared similar frustrations with the difficulty of effecting change in our schools. As we mulled and listened and wrote, we recommitted ourselves to the ideals that had caused us to choose education. And we committed ourselves to one another as partners in our collective search for answers. Whatever our roles, we sought to better understand the role of teacher as change agent in order to more effectively nurture innovation.

Quite suddenly it was November. We had met for five days over the course of five months, and the conversations in role-alike groups had all but disappeared. We interacted as colleagues, empathizing, supporting, laughing at ourselves and our now familiar foibles, celebrating the joy of a new baby born and a house made stronger by a new foundation. And we reflected on the power of the Seminar setting.

Among us was a new teacher who had secured a job after our first session. He was only three months into his career as he noted, "I have learned so much from the people here. They have helped me to focus and have given me some direction as I begin my career. In many ways we have piloted the process necessary for teachers to become change agents. And the funny thing is it worked! I will look back at this opportunity as one that has changed who I am and what I hope to accomplish with my students."

A veteran wrote, "The experience of participating has provided me the opportunity to interact with colleagues of like philosophy and similar visions. Just as the walls of pressure appeared to be closing in on me, I have been given a fresh jolt to continue. Although the obstacles blocking change are great, the shared vision toward educating all children has been reaffirmed for me."

DEFINING OUR TASK

The invitation to the Select Seminar suggested that we would "focus on discussion and debate about the necessity for teachers to assume the role of initiator of change and the climate in which this role can survive and flourish. The outcome of the Seminar will be a published report which will summarize the Seminar experience and provide a vision together with recommendations for school buildings and districts."

In the first foggy and fuzzy stages of our work together, we asked far more questions than we proposed answers. One participant wrote, "We seem to be powerful question raisers!"

What was it we meant by change anyway? Is it truly necessary in education? And that term change agent.....is it reasonable to expect a teacher to take this role on too? Isn't the plate already too full? Isn't it critical to approach the whole topic of educational change, since the teacher is just one part of the system? But if we do that won't we drift too far afield and never get to our task? But we listened to our own voices and held fast to the belief that students look to adults as role models. Effective teachers who are tenacious and skillful participants in changing their classrooms and schools are worthy models for our students.

"I have a personal philosophy that has guided me well. Whenever something is too overwhelming, I try to reduce it to manageable components. Pirsig in **The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance** called it "looking for the brick."

Our own questions became our bricks and, practicing our commitment to constructivism, we used these questions as a foundation for structuring meaning.....personal and collective.....that became the framework of this report.

Our key questions included:

- *What factors inhibit teachers acting as change agents in our schools?*
- *What qualities are necessary in a teacher who will serve as a change agent?*
- *What are the attributes of the climate in which teachers as change agents can survive and flourish?*
- *What conditions in the bureaucracy are necessary to encourage teachers to serve as change agents?*
- *What can we do to nurture and support innovators in our universities, classrooms, schools and districts?*

Using these questions as a guide, we worked alone and in groups. We read, reviewed, reflected, wrote and rewrote in an attempt to make meaning. We shared our thoughts in the spirit of reflective practice, with the degree of humility that accompanies *a work in progress.*

WHAT FACTORS INHIBIT TEACHERS ACTING as Change Agents in Our Schools?

" One should never wear one's best trousers when one fights for truth and justice."
Seminar participant

External factors that inhibit teachers acting as change agents:

Participants noted that factors external to the school are surely among the factors that discourage school reform efforts. One participant noted that "schools are meeting what society wants right now." Another observed that "the community's ideas about what education is have an enormous impact on what a teacher or administrator is willing to adopt in terms of a new or innovative way of teaching." We found support for this view in the Public Agenda's First Things First, What America Expects From Its Schools. The authors note that on the basis of their survey research, "The large majority of Americans are uncomfortable with many (school changes). Overall the public seems to have a more traditional view of what should be happening in the classroom. They want to see students learning some of the same things, in the same ways, that they learned in school."

And yet, traditional practice flies in the face of what we have come to know about teaching and learning. An emphasis on processes of learning and different approaches to meet the multiple intelligences our students exhibit is critical. In one teacher's words, "I believe that the process is perhaps more important than the product. The excitement or pure joy that any student finds in discovering or understanding a math concept or a poem is just as significant as when the math concept was first developed or the poem created." Since many parents do not understand or support such approaches, "Our mission must be not only to educate our students, but to educate the community as well."

Innovative teachers and administrators who have attempted to make changes in schools have war stories that document the propensity of parents and the community to resist change, be it in scheduling, reporting, instructing or assessing their children. One participant noted that the "real world is unordered, fast paced, and full of decisions and obstacles to overcome" and asked, "Why is it that education is criticized when classrooms resemble that reality?"

Might it be that the public's propensity for traditional structures and approaches to instruction is due to lack of knowledge of current school and classroom realities? A Seminar participant questioned whether "society knows what a typical day or week is like from the teacher's point of view? Is the public aware of classroom management challenges and the time spent on it? Is it knowledgeable about how students act out or disrupt.....or conversely how lethargic and apathetic some students can be?" She suggests, "We need to make society aware so that they will support our changes rather than fear them. Change is happening because the students coming through our system are changing. Therefore, we need to adapt our schools to suit the real needs of all of our students, whether they are college bound or not."

At times, both the profession and the public waiver on the role a teacher should play. The **tension** has been described as the pull between two competing visions, teaching seen as a conserving activity and teaching seen as a subversive activity. Should teachers and school serve to transmit the knowledge and values of the past, an "establishment" institution, or should education act to change and reform society's ills, a "change agentry" institution? We noted that the pull and tug of these competing roles dampen and confound efforts at change.

Internal factors that inhibit teachers acting as change agents:

Though external factors tend to inhibit teachers acting as change agents, participants detailed internal factors that are powerful deterrents as well. Among these are the attitudes of other teachers and teacher unions. Anecdotes helped us understand challenges posed to the innovator by other colleagues. One participant described a situation in which stalled contract negotiations left teachers who had worked hard to construct new curriculum materials unwilling to report on their accomplishments in a public forum for fear of censorship by colleagues.

In ***The Human Side of School Change,*** author Robert Evans writes of a dangerous, dispiriting group of faculty members that resembles that experienced by many seminar participants: "At Prospect High School, a second floor faculty lounge is inhabited solely by a small group of older male teachers (no one else dares to enter). The group is known to itself and everyone else as The Naysayers —— the title appears on the door—— because its members criticize anything and everything, including all current practices and any suggestions for improving them. At inservice presentations they show overt disinterest. At faculty meetings they often laugh sarcastically and make derisive comments about the problems, topics, and proposals under discussion, reserving, it seems, particular scorn for proposals made by newer younger members of the faculty. No one challenges them. They hang over the faculty like a dark cloud."

A group like the naysayers is usually small in number, but such a group always has "disproportionate influence—proof of the power of negative cultures to resist change," suggests Evans. This negative influence is consistent with the experience of our Seminar teachers. One participant noted, "Jealousy and complacency push teachers to keep ideas to themselves in their own classroom. Unions can put further pressure to minimize individual initiatives and maintain the status quo."

The traditional role educators are expected to play also serves to inhibit teachers who tend toward innovative ideas. Stanley Pogrow (**Phi Delta Kappa**, June 1996) notes, "Professional behavior is judged by the quality with which practitioners implement established procedures, not by whether they can invent them." This message comes through quite clearly to the beginning teacher. One veteran teacher recalls admonitions from his first year: "Perhaps you should try to restrict your creativity to one day a week.....and if you must use class participation as a teaching technique, could you kindly do it with your door shut?"

Many suggest that teachers lack the necessary authority to effect change. This misperception drew the ire of one participant who asked, "Why should good teachers.....some absolutely brilliant.....need some kind of authority to initiate change? This should be a valued and natural expectation nurtured among new, mid career and veteran teachers alike."

Professional jealousy, union pressure, lack of collegial support, tensions with those who resist change are formidable barriers to innovation in classrooms and schools. A participant summed up many of these factors when he noted, "Unions, school hierarchies, public expectations, and the State Education Department can stifle debate." Another wrote of attempts to change school schedules as a part of a comprehensive school restructuring.

"Last night I spent a frustrating two hours. In the past two years our entire school has been moving toward restructuring, and now a teacher announces that his students need to cover too much material for it to be implemented. He seemed not to hear that the 90 minute blocks could be broken into 45 minute segments to accommodate his department. I worry about the negative impact a teacher who is against change can have on students. How can we encourage the naysayers to at least listen and consider one anothers' perspectives?"

A few members of the group had opinions about the impact of tenure laws as inhibitors to educational change. One participant noted, "Employment and the ability to remain employed requires thinking on your feet, and doing things differently as needed to successfully complete a task. Workers who do this well are rewarded on an individual basis. Those who do not are dismissed. Why is it that education does not follow this example?" One participant suggested, "As one who strives to inform and engage students, all I know is at this point I must do a better job within my own classroom to continue to do my job well, to strive to improve and never become complacent. When (if) I become complacent, it is time to move on."

Though the barriers faced by teachers attempting to change and reform their world of work are significant, in our Seminar group there was a pervasive optimism. One participant observed, "The process of thoughtful assessment and pilot efforts is what gives education the spirit and the hope it must have." Another noted, "It is devilishly easy to slip into pessimism, in our field, in our world, about perplexing issues such as change. However, the joy of our discussions is that we did not let ourselves wallow for long in pessimism. Each time we teetered on the edge of a defeatist discussion, one or another of us proposed a new idea, suggested a positive counter-proposal, asked a question, redirected discussion and we came back up into the light." A major force in helping us see the light was focusing on the qualities of those teachers we would all recognize as change agents.

WHAT QUALITIES ARE NECESSARY in a TEACHER who will Serve as a Change Agent?

"Perhaps a teacher, by the very nature of the profession is an agent for change. The influence of the teachers upon their students is enormous....incalculable. We foster change every moment, and it is imperative that our moral purpose be the moving force behind our choices and our actions....those areas behind which we place our energy."

Seminar participant

"To have any chance of making teaching a noble and effective profession, teachers must combine the mantle of moral purpose with the skills of change agentry."

Michael G. Fullan, Educational Leadership, *March 1993*

In our conversations, we acknowledged that there were many resilient and effective teachers around our table and in our schools, working to affect change in powerful and persuasive ways. We asked ourselves what were they like.....those who have been successful, and who have led at the local, state and national levels?

Deborah Meier personifies an educator who is a change agent in the eyes of one participant who wrote, "It is easy to reflect on this question after meeting last Friday with her. At that meeting I listened to a person with:

- ***a passion for her beliefs***
- ***a clear and simple vision***
- ***a firm grounding in what is best for kids***
- ***willingness to risk whatever it takes to do what needs doing***
- ***constancy in moving in the direction of her vision***
- ***broad and deep perspectives to inform the construct—societal, parental and professional."***

Identifying the qualities a teacher needs to be an effective change agent became the responsibility of one of our groups. As members of the group reflected, they noted it would be useful to consider what it is we feel the teacher as change agent must **know**, **be**, and **be able to do.**

What must the change agent know ?

"As I struggle with the notions of change, I think about how much we need to know and be willing to reveal about ourselves and our work."
Seminar participant

For teachers to see themselves as initiators of change represents a major shift for educators at all levels. The magnitude of this paradigm shift requires a rethinking of the relationship between administrators and teachers. Are we as teachers responsible for change or are we as administrators responsible for change? The idea of "teachers as change agent," in fact, requires a rethinking of the role of the educator.

A persistent theme in our conversations was the need to be aware of research in the field. However, members shared a refreshingly proletarian view of research. One participant noted, "We all do research every day, most of it informal and with little documentation. I believe we need to be data driven and use our skills to identify and quantify what results are effective and desirable." Another spoke of the importance of identifying a personal vision suggesting that "my vision creates my purpose and becomes my paradigm for my actions, my frame of reference as a change agent." Another stressed the importance of buttressing one's personal understanding of intuitive research in the classroom with readily accessible research of others' work and insights.

There was frequent reference in our conversations and our writing to the "wisdom of practice." This wisdom is developed by constant reflection on questions such as "how can I do this better? What is the best way to implement this new approach? How do I make this topic come alive for my students?" "Starting from a good foundation" was valued by one participant who suggested it is critical to become "more present in what we do." The foundation must include a deep and solid grounding in content, as well as "expertise on methods, materials, child development, learning and teaching styles, and assessment approaches. This foundation or mooring is shored up by studying the increasingly valuable literature of the field and continuing to seek and engage in professional dialogue."

The effective teacher as change agent must understand how students learn and be masterful at assessing and guiding growth and change in students. One participant drew a powerful metaphor portraying the student "on a springboard venturing out to the end of the board and looking over the vastness below. As the education process begins.....the introduction of information, data, facts.....the person on the board feels the first spring, and is lifted a short distance above the board. The student feels both exhilaration and fear.....newfound freedom, but the loss of security. As the student touches down, the security returns, and is enhanced by the increased potential of new found knowledge." The teacher who can successfully coach students in this academic feat must be knowledgeable about content and skilled in guiding the learning process.

What must a change agent be ?

"Some teachers can swim in the swift current; others are willing to settle into the sediment and hope things won't change."
Seminar participant

The qualities of a teacher as change agent describe what we want this innovative educator to **be.** Working to define these qualities, members of one group observed that "they are qualities that are indicative of successful individuals in any walk of life." The change agent should possess self-knowledge which leads to self-confidence. "Being a change agent requires developing personally," noted one participant.

Though "many teachers are afraid to take the necessary risks for change to happen," participants agreed that taking risks is essential.

"Teachers' efforts to change are blocked by their own peers. Maybe this is the reason why so many teachers stay in their classrooms and don't work to promote new ideas and strategies," noted one participant. However, a change agent must have the courage needed to tackle tough issues. One participant summed up the qualities of risk taking by writing, "Change is disruptive, difficult, risky, fraught with confrontation and tension. In order to meet these challenges you must be personally ready. The risk taker goes up against those who think they have something to lose (i.e. prestige, old lesson plans, habits). You will need to draw on lots of personal stamina and strength to see change through to fruition." Another likened advocating change to "a sort of civil disobedience, passive resistance to the status quo. It takes time and effort."

Leading others toward a new vision takes more than a pioneer spirit. It also requires an ability to see things in new or different ways..... to envision creative and imaginative solutions to knotty problems. Thinking and working in new ways requires the ability to withhold judgment, and a high tolerance for ambiguity. It is critical to be comfortable with "learning from failure" and to be flexible enough to model growing from mistakes.

A strong and deeply felt democratic belief system is necessary for a teacher to serve as a change agent. A focused, goal-oriented belief in children and the power of education to affect each life was seen as key. Consistent with this, participants identified compassion as a critical attribute. Being an advocate for children and keeping them clearly at the center of the work was deemed essential. "We need to keep the students paramount in all of our thinking and writing," noted one group member.

Needless to say, in addition to the above qualities, the change agent must be dedicated, hard working, organized, and willing to put in the countless and often thankless hours necessary to accomplish the mission. Stamina and energy must be among the change agent's attributes. Or as one participant said, "In addition to drawing on personal stamina, change agents need tenacity, assiduity, and an occasional obnoxious streak."

What must **a change agent** *be able to do ?*

"A change agent has to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em."

Seminar participant

The teacher as change agent is a political activist. This perspective is clear in one participant's description of life as an educator focused on change. "First and foremost I see teaching as a political act. No matter what I do or how I behave, I'm influencing the minds, attitudes and behaviors of the children in my room and the parents, peers, and community members with whom I interact. For this reason I've spent a lot of time attempting to understand my values, reflect on my behaviors, and clarify my vision for why I teach and what I want to accomplish in my profession. As I've done this I've come to recognize and respect my desire to have an influence on the aspects of the larger human context, particularly in the areas of peace and justice and respect for all forms of life." Political savvy and acumen are surely skills needed by one who works to change schools.

"Don't assume that because you are convinced a change is needed that everyone else is also convinced," admonished a perceptive participant. The effective change agent must be able to interpret, articulate and translate ideas to all constituents. Doing so involves a deep and ever-expanding knowledge of the field and the research that informs teaching and learning. At the same time, the ability to convey complex ideas to a community within and outside of education requires skills of reflective and non-judgmental communication.

One participant noted that "change begins with the individual initiative and then is fostered by group dynamics." Change "will.....indeed must.....involve everyone. Solo changes are impossible and undesirable." Therefore, the change agent must be willing and able to establish connections between colleagues, teachers and administrators, those who represent different disciplines, students and teachers, parents and communities. S/he must be a skillful listener and an astute observer.

A change agent must be able to create a balance between teacher as leader and teacher as facilitator. Change involves understanding and working collaboratively with people who have widely divergent perspectives. Negotiating and mediating between people with conflicting points of view is key, as is the importance of listening.

"Change is not for the fainthearted." One Seminar group shared "habits of mind" that enable a teacher to do what is necessary to be a change agent. One critical habit is strength.....sticking to principles and goals in spite of conflict, confrontation and challenge. Thinking win/win is yet another habit that encourages one to approach change with the goal of allowing everybody room. Developing the habit of seeking allies will carry change efforts through the difficult times. Getting the scale right is also important. A useful guideline for scale is having a working group small enough to fit around a single table.

As we defined our visions of the teacher as change agent, we noted that Michael Fullan describes constellations of qualities as critical for teachers to become change agents. These include a propensity to personal vision building, a spirit of inquiry, mastery of both content and pedagogy, and the ability to collaborate. Fullan's categories reinforced our own thinking about what teachers need to know, be and be able to do.

As we talked more and more about the qualities of change agents, we were painting this incredible portrait of the very finest quality of human being—caring, reflective, connected, inquiring, committed, evolving, passionate, courageous, imaginative and on and on. Then we asked aren't these the same qualities that we would hope to find in all members of the school community.....students, administrators, preservice teachers, all teachers and we answered a resounding yes! That led us to talk about the artistry involved in what we hope to accomplish by nurturing change and change agents. This conversation bridged to the work of another group as they discussed the environment necessary to nurture change.

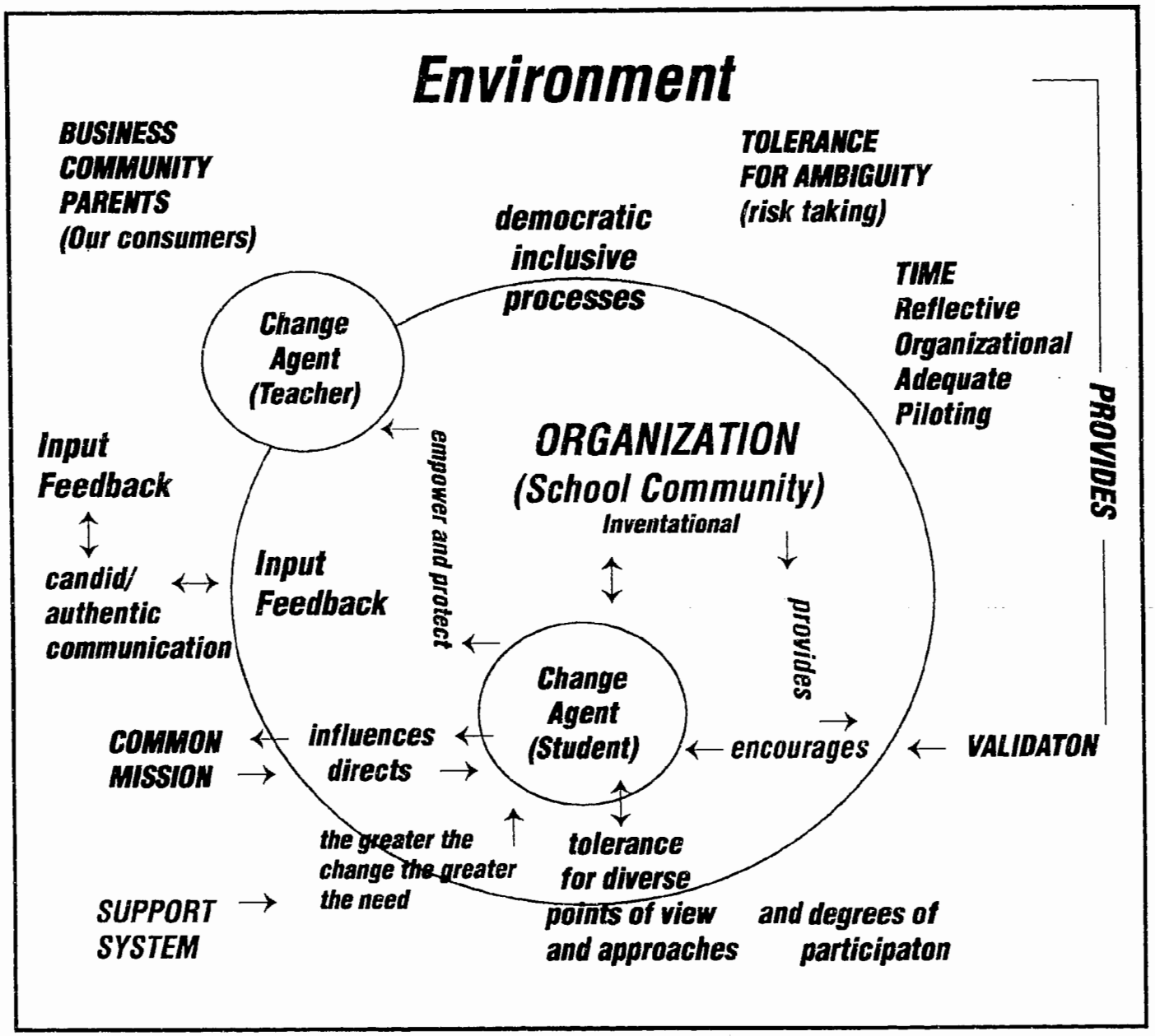
WHAT ARE the ATTRIBUTES of the CLIMATE in which TEACHERS as Change Agents Can SURVIVE and FLOURISH?

"As teacher, principal, and professor, I have always believed that school people can, working together, improve their schools-if only the conditions are right."
Roland Barth, ***Improving Schools From Within***

"Teachers operate in organized contexts which contain factors for and against change. Motivation to change is one thing, but unless the positive factors are stronger than the negative ones, we are asking too much of teachers."
Seymour B. Sarason in his Foreword to ***Stirring the Chalkdust*** *by Patricia A. Wasley*

"Teachers unquestionably can do what they do better. But what they do is largely fixed by their working conditions."
Patricia A. Wasley, ***Stirring the Chalkdust***

Over and over we returned to the context in which educators work. We asked, "What conditions should be present in the organization to work symbiotically with the change agent?" As we worked to refine our ideas, one member of the group shared a preference for visual representations of ideas, and we developed a model of the ideal context in which innovation might flourish....."a petri dish" of sorts with the nutrients necessary to create a culture for change.



Proportional growth? a ideal situation

Necessary! Sufficient?

If we had these would we need change?

Hope factor
Networking
Reculturing

Factors that surround the teacher in the school community and the surrounding environment can create a climate that fosters innovation.

The teacher who works as a change agent operates within a school community. Repeatedly, teachers within our Seminar group noted how essential it is for the school community to provide validation and support. A poignant conversation shared by a participant illustrates the impact the lack of validation can have on even an experienced professional. The setting was a faculty conversation during which this teacher, a committed innovator, was told by a colleague, "You must have a pretty high opinion of yourself to think your ideas mean so much." He was devastated by the remark and wrote, "With those words, 10 years of classroom confidence came crashing down around me. As a 'special teacher'.....one who deals with students outside of the core areas, I felt that my subject was seen by many as less valuable to the development of the student. If, after 10 years of work and commitment, no one values my work, perhaps it's time for a change."

Validation within the school setting can come from collegial support, positive student responses and administrative encouragement. Support among students, faculty and administrators allows time for reflection, a "think tank" environment in which ideas often lead to actions. The more significant and far reaching the innovation, the greater the need for a strong support network within the school community. This network must be inclusive, and have tolerance for diverse points of view. It must be democratic and invitational. And it must also respect the different degrees of participation possible for individual teachers, many of whom have limitations imposed on their time by circumstances outside of school. Candid, authentic communication must pervade the school community if change is to be nurtured and supported.

The school community within which the teacher works exists within the larger environment that includes the parents and other community members, business, and industry. This broader environment must be guided by a common mission that both supports and guides the teacher in making change. While the teacher influences this mission, a shared vision of what we want our schools to be and do is essential. "The community and the teacher should be in agreement on long and short term goals. These goals should be 'more like clay than like concrete' to allow them to develop and change over time." Shared vision building provides "ownership of ideas about change so that all in the community are invested."

Often easier said than done! How do we arrive at this shared vision.....this common mission? The process must be open to all, and tolerant of the multiple perspectives participants bring to the dialogue. We must model openness and democratic inclusive processes in the important consensus building process. Candid "authentic" communication is essential to the work of innovating. Authentic communication diffuses the "back room tactics" of those who want to scuttle an innovation.

The environment must also allow teachers time for reflection, organization and adequate piloting of new ideas. "A non-threatening environment where colleagues of like minds are allowed time to test and perfect changes and to validate one anothers' efforts is essential." "Opportunities for teachers to meet and talk, listen to one anothers' ideas and try to understand other's points of view is key." "Time is always the question—-when and where can we find the time?"

An external environment that has a high tolerance for ambiguity is another critical attribute. "Change is messy," and in the early stages, it is difficult to predict all of the potential turns and twists an innovation may take. People must feel free to make choices, to explore, and to try new things. Settings where "every 't' must be crossed and every 'i' dotted" before any plan can be put into place inhibit innovation. The external environment must nurture a "just do it" attitude and give teachers the latitude to take risks.

The somewhat elusive term "support system" was mentioned frequently as a necessary quality of both the school community and the broader environment. The more significant the innovation or change, the greater the need for a strong support system. A group member observed, "There is a direct relationship between the degree of change and the need for support and the closeness of that support. A minor change can be supported by a parent's comment.....a student response. A significant change can be supported by a principal or board. A substantial change requires all of this along with the daily support of colleagues and staff." As is true within the school, validation and support are essential from the broader community in which the teacher works as change agent.

WHAT CONDITIONS in the BUREAUCRACY can ENCOURAGE TEACHERS to Serve as Change Agents?

"A bureaucracy that is informed and courageous will allow a group of teachers with a vision, working in conjunction with parents, to educate all children."

Seminar group definition

"There are many more talented, thoughtful, committed educators, a large percentage of whom are wonderful with their students but are unable to crack the bureaucratic system to develop on a larger scale."

Seminar participant

Those in decision making positions in the educational bureaucracy must recognize the need for change, be willing to discuss innovative ideas, and help teachers to implement those ideas. Administrators must nurture the habit of a reflective school life in which professional dialogue is commonplace. Knowledge and discussion of research, national movements, educational philosophy, instructional approaches must be a part of the daily school life.

In order to create and maintain a self-renewing professional culture, the principal, supervisor or central office administrator must be informed, open-minded, supportive, and committed to learning through reflective practice. They must also, occasionally, even combat anti-intellectualism. A commitment to learning must cut across the whole of the district, involving all constituents—the superintendent, the Board of Education, teachers, staff and students.

Active, living philosophies or mission statements are key to moving a bureaucracy to change. Developing a set of shared beliefs brings teachers and administrators together in an environment that encourages all constituents to ask questions, raise concerns, and eventually come together in support of a common statement of purpose. Principals must create a culture that allows staff to feel safe and respected in this work. They must help teachers see the importance of their views and ideas in forging the common mission.

Articulating the common mission in clear, convincing language is a responsibility of both the teacher and the administrator. Communication within and outside of the school community must be direct, accessible and rigorous. Informing key constituents about impending program or instructional changes is essential.

Effective change that goes beyond the single classroom requires that the teacher and bureaucracy work together to experiment to make things better. School leaders must be courageous enough to defend and promote innovation in the face of potential political pressures. A willingness to take risks and a tolerance for ambiguity are characteristics needed in both the teacher and bureaucracy in which s/he operates.

A recurrent theme of the Seminar sessions was the need to continue to chip away at the we/they forces that seem to divide administrators and teachers. The organization is made up of people in different roles who, when acting in concert, can make positive contributions toward our goals of educating children. Participants noted "administrators need to be more available and welcoming of teacher ideas and change proposals. I think this is happening in some places, but even in my fairly progressive district cynicism arises when we discuss our shared decision making opportunities and what they really mean."

WHAT CAN we do to NURTURE and SUPPORT INNOVATORS in our UNIVERSITIES, CLASSROOMS, SCHOOLS and DISTRICTS?

" We have talked a good deal about the qualities of a change agent and the context that will foster change, but I believe the focus of our energy should be on how.....how can we foster the teacher as change agent?"

Seminar participant

Focus on preservice education

Over the course of our five days together, we acknowledged that it was critical for teachers entering the field to have greater understanding of the dynamics of change and how to make it happen in schools. We advocated that this awareness be built into preservice education in a planned and purposeful way. Case studies, simulations, discussions, views from the field, and content focused on individual and organizational change can provide this critical background.

We also noted the need, in preservice programs, to nurture the expectation that a teacher be proactive and advocate for purposeful change. This attitude is a departure from the "don't rock the boat" notion that all too frequently pervades education programs. One participant noted that "training students to develop the habits and characteristics" of change agents in preservice programs could have enormous impact on schools.

Create a school action research journal

If it became common for teachers to try something, measure and report results, get feedback, and loop back to revising on the basis of the feedback, school change would occur more easily. This cycle, often referred to as action research, can serve as a catalyst to change. Typically, action research focuses on issues, ideas and innovations designed by teachers to improve teaching and learning in their own classrooms. One participant shared an example: "My summer supervisor is trying to help us see ourselves as researchers. He worked with us to establish a goal of conducting some research with a unit we teach. We will be working together to make sense of the results."

Participants agreed that sharing action research projects and results through a journal developed by and for teachers would support and encourage others, as well as add to the growing and useful body of authentic educational research.

Tap technology

Tapping the power and potential of technology to nurture educational innovation will make a difference. Computer chatrooms, bulletin boards and other forums would allow free and non-threatening exchanges of ideas, and offer educators in diverse locations opportunities to communicate, question, consider, and collaborate. Telecommunications can create an on line teacher center of sorts, providing the support, validation and encouragement so necessary for teachers who are serving as change agents.

Create teacher led staff development opportunities

"We cannot wait for staff development to come from the district," noted several participants who had been instrumental in planning, organizing and implementing a professional development center, a school-university partnership designed to provide teachers information about new or innovative teaching methods. Teachers can identify needs, organize to obtain funding, and develop relevant and compelling programs that address what staff will need to know and be able to do in order to achieve success as they work to implement new ideas.

Organize teams

Organizing in "high quality teams made up of teachers and administrators" can foster the change process in schools. Ideally, the team approach should become a part of the fabric of the school district so that even if key players leave, the team continues, and the work can go forward. These teams provide the foundation for a nurturing and healthy atmosphere.

Provide rewards

There are many ways to provide rewards to those who seek to innovate in schools. Tangible rewards include such benefits as funds to attend local, state, and national conferences, and purchase relevant literature; and release time to participate in professional activities. Spending money on this type of professional development benefits the district as well as the individual who will invariably return to the classroom and school with new ideas and renewed commitment. Adjusted class sizes, flexible schedules, common planning time, and collaboration with college and university colleagues are other ways in which innovators can be nurtured to do their best work. Rewards can make a statement to others that a district is serious and committed to "giving staff the tools they need to get the job done."

Create opportunities for conversation

Creating opportunities in schools and other informal settings for unstructured conversations can work to foster change. One participant recalled a group of 30 teachers who met informally in one anothers' homes years ago to read and review literature about British Primary Education. The effort led to the creation of an open education option in one of the district's elementary schools. The success of the initiative inspired other groups of educators in the district to organize and work for other changes.

AFTERWORD

There were moments for each of us as individuals, and for the group as a whole, when the enormity of the task tended to overwhelm us. But we bolstered one another in our words and in our writing. One Seminar participant reflected that "our collaborative effort to respond to the topic 'teacher as change agent' has resulted in a change experience.....an inclusive process which inspired individual thought and collective action. We used different views and strengths to form visual representations and visions of change with students as the touchstones of our purpose. Our exchanges ultimately created a design and dynamic of change. The whole became greater than the sum of its parts. Through this CASDA Seminar we have modeled for ourselves the possibilities of change."

We hope this document will bolster optimism and serve as encouragement to change agents working in the field. It is our wish that readers will be inspired to respond and recommit to the spirit and process of reform. We believe that "as active change agents are encouraged to come into the light and share their vision, their process, and their results, others will be moved to respond."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Thus the topic for this Select Seminar was chosen. The preponderance of the participants came from the three school districts primarily involved in the first two Goals 2000 preservice grants to Albany City Schools, with the other participants coming mainly from a cadre of cooperating teachers in local schools who work with preservice teachers.

The mix was exciting and electric, and the foregoing report reflects that atmosphere. The positive approach of the participants should give the profession's cynics cause for hope. Perhaps educators who read this report will be encouraged to increase their change agent behavior.

The writing of this Select Seminar report was assumed by Judy Wooster, Assistant Superintendent, Bethlehem Central School. We at CASDA thank her for a most lucid, cogent, and reflective report of this Select Seminar.

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