The collaborative prescription: remedy or reverie?

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If the reforms currently transforming public education are to be sustained, it is commonly believed that they must be founded in new conceptions of schooling. Compelling among them is the recurrent edict that teachers and other educators must learn to work together in ways heretofore considered to be discretionary and, consequently, largely a matter of personal and professional preference. Notwithstanding its rising recognition as an essential ingredient of successful schools, collaborative practice remains an erratic and elusive enterprise that is fraught with uncertainty. The literature and the authors’ own research experiences are used to explore how and why the wide-scale establishment and nurturance of so-called professional learning communities may continue to evade realization. Despite habitual rhetoric to the contrary, a fundamental problem may be a lack of evidence that there is strong and manifested valuing of teacher collaborative practice as an integral component of schools as morally bound communities.

The conception of professional collaboration has become a common parlance (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991, Friend and Cook 1996, 2000, Telford 1996, DiPardo 1997, Koehler and Baxter 1997) of perceived effective schooling. In fact, for some, the infusion of teacher collaborative practices is considered to have had an immense and unprecedented impact in the field of education. Advocates of such joint work (Little 1982) claim that it is an important key to the development of so-called professional learning communities, where moral interpersonal relationships, collective learning, empowerment, growth, and self-efficacy are the mainstays of school life. Indeed, the very word community, as derived from the Latin word communis meaning ‘common’ or ‘sharing’ (Welch 1998: 26), is habitually used in references to collaboration.

Pugach and Johnson (1995) advanced that collaborative schools are more likely to become ‘communities of learners’ in which all participants would contribute to their own and each other’s growth (1995: 12). Louis et al. (1994) identified collaboration as one of five important elements of...
practice in a professional community. Sergiovanni (1996) was persuasive in his endorsement of the school as community metaphor as opposed to the school as an organization. He defined community as ‘a collection of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a set of shared ideas and ideals’ (1996: 48). Thinking of schools as communities, Sergiovanni asserted, changes the interpersonal relationships of its members from the individualistic ‘I’ to the collective ‘we’, and helps to create a school culture where people are morally bound to collective goals. The practice of collaboration, then, is seen as an important key to the development of schools as moral communities.

Those less enamoured with the idea of teacher collaborative practice being elemental to school success tend to view it as yet another touted remedy to the persisting problems and challenges associated with school- ing: an antidote for a systemic condition that defies solution. Resisting the urge to dismiss such a disparaging perspective out-of-hand may lead to further consideration of the commonly noted barriers to teacher collaboration, and a look beyond the rhetoric and the reverie. This contribution attempts to clarify our understandings of collaboration and its potentialities and limitations in transforming schools from organized hierarchies to moral communities. Accordingly, the ensuing discussion is comprises four parts: (1) a discussion of the major trends undergirding the collaborative thrust embedded in reconceptualizing schools as moral communities; (2) an overview of collaboration in terms of its various definitions and its challenges and benefits for establishing schools as moral communities; (3) a presentation of research findings examining perceptions of school collaboration; and (4) a discussion of implications for theory, research, and practice pertaining to the collaborative dimension of schools as moral communities.

The collaborative thrust of schools as moral communities: major trends

Increasingly, school administrators and teachers are encouraged to challenge traditional ways of thinking about schools as organizations. Historically, schools have been metaphorically conceptualized as knowledge-producing factories, with teachers being the producers and students being the product. Consequently, schools have been fashioned to reflect and perpetuate cultures of individualism, competitiveness, and isolation. This organizational fragmentation pre-empts the creation of new school cultures that reflect a more covenantal dimension of schools as moral communities. Schools modelled on the qualities of community values supplant contractually based precepts, and foster cultures of collaboration grounded in strong moral ties. The increased interest in collaboration (Friend and Cook 1996, 2000, Jordan 1999) is rooted in changes in thinking about what makes an organization effective and what constitutes leadership.

The foundation of current collaborative practice may be examined by applying lenses of organization and leadership theories. Traditionally,
organization theory rooted in business and industry attributed the power of leadership to those assuming formal roles legitimated by hierarchical structures. For example, classical theorists, representing Taylor’s (1916/1996) ‘principles of scientific management’, Weber’s (1922/1996) characteristics of the ‘ideal bureaucracy’, and Fayol’s (1916/1996) ‘general principles of management’, relied heavily upon hierarchy, one-way command structure, top-down decision making, compartmentalization of units, and specialization of responsibilities and tasks. In later years, in response to the changing and complex needs of contemporary society, recognition of the value of collaboration for achieving organizational goals grew (Friend and Cook 2000: 14). Scepticism emerged surrounding organizational and leadership practices perceived to deny the importance of human resources, community building and collaboration. For example, some students of organizational behaviour began to turn their attention to the importance of participative decision making (Follett 1926/1996) and of tapping into workers’ expertise and potential (McGregor 1957/1996). Early in the 1930s, the Hawthorne studies demonstrated that workers have strong social needs, and that they value cooperation, creative relationships, and feelings of belonging. According to Miles (1965), creating opportunities for workers to share their creativity and expertise would improve decision making and increase their participation and satisfaction. These ideas retain their currency in recent organizational literature. Senge (1994), for example, wrote of learning organizations where organizational members are encouraged to channel, cultivate, and learn from each others’ ideas and expertise. Leaders, therefore, have been encouraged to jettison traditional management practices for non-hierarchical ones whereby all workers would contribute, share in the decision making, and achieve their potential in the workplace.


Collaboration, coordination, internal and external stakeholder feedback, change orientation, development of stakeholder leadership skills, and a democracy-based workplace are all aspects of facilitative leadership.

Blackbourn further suggests that a facilitative leadership style is appropriate for developing collaborative partnerships.
Non-educational organizations adopted notions of collaboration primarily because a shift to shared leadership and participative decision making ‘increases their productivity’ (Leithwood 1992). Friend and Cook (2000: 15) determined that as collaboration is increasingly recognized in ‘business, industry, and general society, we are also learning to do it schools’. In school organizations ‘the role of the principal would remain important, but would take on an investment character aimed at purpose and capacity-building’ (Sergiovanni 1996: 7). In this manner, new teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders become bound by a set of ‘obligations result[ing] from common commitments to shared values and beliefs’ (1996: 34). Increasingly, in the context of education, shared governance and democratic decision making have emerged from various studies as constituting a condition that promotes the development of a professional learning community (Horn 1997). Consequently, hierarchy, top-down management, and control have given way to considering other ways of viewing schools as organizations that include the practice of facilitative or transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and shared decision making—the so-called ‘moral’ community. In other words, ‘community is ... seen as an antidote to bureaucracy, which may be efficient but depersonalizes the important developmental processes and ethical or moral dimensions of organizational life’ (Kruse and Louis 1997: 261).

Collaboration may be the key to this reconceptualization of schools as moral communities. DiPardo (1997: 100), for example, suggested that collaboration ‘may promote the creation of school communities ... places that celebrate risk-taking, that encourage teachers to assume the habits of interdependence and shared leadership’. Research findings suggest that this is a valid assumption. For instance, the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) at the University of Wisconsin conducted a 5-year study and concluded in 1996 that ‘the most important factor in successful school reform is the presence of a strong professional community’ (cited in Horn (1997)). In that study, the professional community was determined to be the one where teachers: (1) were clear that student learning was the priority; (2) worked collaboratively; and (3) took collective responsibility for achieving that purpose.

Reconceptualizing schools as democratic, professional, collaborative learning communities has significant implications for both the leader and the led in the school community (Horn 1997). While there is general acknowledgement that there is no one best way to lead (Blackbourn 1999–2000), advocates of the school-as-community metaphor assert that professional learning communities are more likely to flourish when administrators have an affinity for a non-hierarchical leadership style (Horn 1997, Koehler and Baxter 1997, Blackbourn 1999–2000, Fauske 1999, Leonard and Leonard 1999). In other words, a leader can be ‘a principal, a teacher, a parent, a student, [and] a supporting staff member ... as long as they have the capacity ... to influence task objectives and strategies, influence commitment and compliance in task behaviour to achieve these objectives, influence group maintenance and identification, and influence the culture of the organization’ (Telford 1996: 10). The
potential for leadership is distributed throughout the organization, thereby fostering empowerment and moral commitment to a collective purpose.

Conceptualizing and contextualizing collaboration

Although collaboration has been given much consideration in the organizational and educational literature, there is limited consensus regarding its actual meaning in definitive terms. The following is an attempt to explore the various and often ambiguous definitions of collaboration, some of the many forms that collaboration appears to take in schools, and the challenges inherent in attempts to create a collaborative professional learning community. It is notable that the discourse about collaboration often tends to meander in the proximity of its value-laden and moral dimensions.

Defining collaboration

Defining collaboration may be as difficult as achieving it. For instance, Welch (1998: 27) believed that ‘most educators neither know what collaboration is nor how to practice it’. Indeed, at least some of the confusion may be attributed to the complex nature of collaboration itself, as delineated in Schrage’s (1995) analogy. Writing from an organizational management perspective, Schrage compared the concept of collaboration with that of romance. Romantic relationships, he suggested, have no clearly defined boundaries but rather exist on a continuum of interaction from ‘the simple flirtation to a deep abiding love’ (Schrage 1995: 29). Much the same way, collaborative relationships also span a continuum of interaction ranging from momentary cooperation to deep and abiding commitment. Unlike romance, however, collaboration is a purposive relationship based on a need or desire to solve a problem, create, or discover something (1995: 29). Schrage defines collaboration as ‘the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own’ (1995: 33). The relationship, therefore, is dynamic, creative and generative, and it may or may not be long lasting.

In the field of education, Friend and Cook (1996, 2000) suggested that collaboration is a style of interpersonal interaction which is distinct from other styles. Other styles include being directive, accommodating, compromising, and competitive. Interpersonal collaboration is ‘a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal’ (Friend and Cook 2000: 6). Friend and Cook emphasized that authentic collaboration must be voluntary and, although you can force a group to work together, you cannot force group members to adopt a particular style of interaction. Along with being voluntary, collaboration has specific defining characteristics (Friend and Cook 2000: 6–13):

- parity among participants;
- mutual goal(s);
shared responsibility for participation—a ‘convenient’ (not necessarily equal) division of labour;
• equal participation in the decision making;
• pooling the resources; and
• shared accountability for outcomes, whether results are positive or negative.

Similarly, Tiegerman-Farber and Radziewicz (1998: 70) described the characteristics of a collaborative style in terms of co-equality and coparticipation, reciprocity, common goals, and accountability. Along with the defining characteristics of collaboration are ‘emergent’ ones: a ‘belief’ in the value of collaboration, a growing ‘trust’ among collaborative partners, and an evolving sense of ‘community’. These characteristics are considered to be both prerequisites and outcomes of collaboration and, although they must be there to some ‘discernible degree at the outset of collaborative activity, ... they typically grow and flourish from successful experience with collaboration’ (Friend and Cook 2000: 11). In other words, they are both the seed and the harvest of collaboration.

Other definitions are less pithy and assist in obscuring our understanding of what collaboration is. This circumstance is due at least partially to the synonymous usage of terminology. For example, Smyth cited in Brundrett (1998: 305) defined collegiality as teachers conferring with other teachers. Riordan and da Costa (1996) suggested that collaboration is an aspect or form of collegiality. Similar to Friend and Cook (2000), they asserted that teacher collaboration is characterized by joint work and shared responsibility. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of high levels of trust, respect, and mutuality for fostering collaborative relationships.

Some common conceptions of teacher collaboration illustrate various component approaches. Typically included among them is the requisite that collaborative group members: maintain a clear purpose (Knop et al. 1997); be committed (Knop et al. 1997, Jordan 1999); be selfless (Knop et al. 1997); value diversity (Knop et al. 1997, Jordan 1999); be both trusting and trustworthy (Jordan 1999, Walker 1999); and be willing to share power (Mankoe 1996). The moral dimensions of collaboration are evident in these characterizations. In addition, Knop et al. (1997: 177) differentiated between collaborative structure and function, with the former being that which ‘represents the framework within which two groups come together to form the foundation while the latter, function, is the process connecting these groups into a cohesive, working entity’. For Welch (1998), collaboration was ‘working together [and] involves nothing more than sharing or exchanging tangible and intangible resources to meet a common goal’ (1998: 28). This exchange of resources is a dynamic interaction that can occur across various subgroups within the school organization (e.g. grades, departments, programmes). Pugach and Johnson (1995: 29) provided a broad definition of collaboration, stating that ‘collaboration occurs when all members of a school’s staff are working together and supporting each other to provide the highest quality of curriculum and instruction for the diverse students they serve’.
While consensual agreement on the precise nature of collaborative practice may be elusive, there is an apparent general accord among advocates that it has significant potential for fostering the evolution of community, connectedness, empowerment and moral obligation. Moreover, definitional ambiguity has failed to constrain discussion of the forms of successful collaboration.

**Challenges/inhibitors**

There is convincing evidence that achieving measurable success through collaborative initiatives is often a demanding venture. Despite the intense interest, ‘collaboration is acknowledged to have been one of the most glaring, persistently absent characteristics of teachers’ work, and the one most in need of being implemented’ (Pugach and Johnson, 1995: 11). Such an assertion—given the varying definitions and forms of collaboration and, by extension, the attendant requisite knowledge, skills, and values teachers, administrators and other stakeholders must acquire in the interest of creating a collaborative culture—is not particularly surprising; nor is the widely held conviction that teacher collaboration is a challenge (Johnston and Hedeman 1994, Brundrett 1998, Jordan 1999, Leonard 1999a, b). Still, it is necessary to understand why collaborative practice is seemingly so difficult. Without understanding the nature of those inherent barriers, ‘teachers and teacher educators are doomed to failure and frustration in their efforts to promote collaboration’ (Welch 1998: 31).

One reason for the challenge of collaboration may be found in the teachers themselves. Sergiovanni and Starratt, cited in Koehler and Baxter (1997: 8–9), asserted that teachers may be ‘found on a continuum that ranges not from hierarchical to collaborative but from most hierarchical to least hierarchical’. Therefore, decentralized structural arrangements implemented in schools are, in and of themselves, insufficient for fostering collaborative practice. Effective collaboration involves a ‘sophisticated set of skills that enable people to share ideas in accepting and non-threatening ways, to be encouraged and cooperatively analytical, in essence to create the kind of synergy that results in increased organizational effectiveness’ (Koehler and Baxter 1997: 12). It is important not to underestimate the level of skill required to maintain ‘an autonomous identity … [while yielding] some autonomy in the pursuit of partnership goals’ (Mankoe 1996: 12). Without doubt, this requires considerable ‘micropolitical’ (Riordan and da Costa 1996) astuteness, a condition that may not always be existent in school leaders.

Leonard and Leonard (1999) reported that a majority of teachers actually considered ‘collaboration-by-design’, i.e. that which is undertaken in formal structures such as school committees, to have minimal effect in terms of promoting innovation and programme improvement. Additionally, in an examination of the collaborative process in the implementation of team teaching and committees at an elementary school, Leonard (1997, 1999b) uncovered a number of inhibitors to collaboration. These inhibitors, or barriers, centred around issues of teacher efficacy, time
constraints, fragmented vision, competitiveness, and conflict avoidance. Other studies of collaboration addressed similar findings (Louis and Kruse 1995, DiPardo 1997, Knop et al. 1997, Kruse and Louis 1997, Welch 1998). Moreover, burnout, not sharing the workload, insufficient budget allocations, and limited resources (Knop et al. 1997), feeling threatened and reluctant to open up one’s classrooms (Allen and Calhoun 1998), and lack of support from administration (Lehr 1999) all constitute potential barriers to collaboration. The variety of barriers reported in the research into collaboration underscores the range and intensity of problems teachers face when confronted with collaborative initiatives.

Another aspect that is instrumental to successful collaborative practice—and which to this point has been addressed only in terms of being a prerequisite and emergent characteristic (Friend and Cook 2000)—is the magnitude of the role trust plays in such human relationships. However, as Short and Greer (1997) cautioned, this is not a simple task:

> Trust building is a slow process that requires disclosure, authenticity of work and action, following through with meeting the needs of each other, respect for diversity, enabling teachers to take action in a risk-taking environment without fear of reprisal, and basic ethical actions that demonstrate a concern for the wellbeing of others. (Short and Greer 1997: 45)

Short and Greer further contended that it is the school principal who plays a key role in building a trusting environment, and that administrators have to ‘walk the talk’ by encouraging teachers to be risk-takers, by being genuine in their belief in participative decision making, and by actively working alongside the others as true colleagues. Principals with such a leadership style ‘trusted others and earned reciprocal trust’ (1997: 53).

**The role of the teacher in establishing cultures of collaboration and community**

Emerging from the literature is the recognition of the vital role of teachers in achieving and maintaining a collaborative school culture. As noted earlier, traditional teacher practice has been characterized more by individualism and isolationism than it has been by collaborative orientations. There is also an accompanying widespread recognition that, when teachers have common educational goals and hold similar beliefs and values about education, there are greater tendencies to move towards collaborative practices; for examples, see Midley and Wood (1993), Louis (1994), Mitchell (1995), O’Neill (1995) and Hord (1997). Consequently, careful consideration needs to be given to the nature and extent of teachers’ fidelity and commitment to a collaborative professional culture. Although numerous studies and ruminations have addressed the apparent benefits of professional sharing, in terms of organizational improvement, professional development, and student outcomes, there seems to have been limited inquiry into how teachers themselves perceive the power of collaboration for establishing a culture of community, connectedness, and moral commitment. This gap in the literature was the impetus for the present authors’ most recent
research, reported in Leonard and Leonard (2001), which focused on teacher beliefs and practices pertaining to the collaborative dimensions of school culture.

Central to the premise of the Leonard and Leonard (2001) research into teachers’ collaborative beliefs and practices is the pivotal role of values in the lives and interactions of educational stakeholders (Greenfield 1986, Campbell-Evans 1993, Beck 1996, Begley 1996, Hodgkinson 1996, Roche 1997). Moreover, these values are considered to be manifested in both tangible and as well intangible ways (Schein 1990, Caldwell and Spinks 1992) and, conceivably, beliefs and values pertaining to the benefits of collaboration may differ widely among members of a school community. Additionally, respective beliefs may not only differ, but may be incompatible with establishing a collaborative culture. Teachers who espouse a commitment to collaboration may merely, in Senge’s (1990) and Fullan’s (1992) terms, be compliant. Therefore, in order to etch a clearer picture of how to arrive at a ‘culture’ of collaboration, the authors deemed it important to understand better if teachers actually ‘value’ the collaborative process. An initial step in understanding the nature and function of values in the success or failure of collaborative initiatives is to examine how and to what extent those beliefs are reflected in actual, common practice in the workplace. Consequently, the aforementioned study of 565 teachers in a Western Canadian setting was guided by two main questions:

1. To what extent do teachers value collaborative practices in schools?
2. To what extent do teachers perceive collaborative processes are actually occurring in their schools?

Schein’s (1984, 1990, 1992) framework for understanding the underlying dimensions of organizational culture was considered to be a useful tool for structuring this study into teachers’ value orientations toward collaboration. Using Schein’s framework, the researchers developed a 55-item survey questionnaire which contained Likert scale items addressing four major dimensions of collaborative culture. Paired questions addressed teachers’ beliefs and practices pertaining to collaboration in terms of these four dimensions: the nature of teacher activity, the nature of teacher relationships, the nature of decision making and conflict resolution, and the nature of teacher time.

The investigation was designed to provide a vehicle for teachers to voice their perspectives both in terms of what they believed about professional collaboration as well as the extent to which they considered it to be an actual factor evident in their schools. Comparisons of espoused beliefs to teacher perceptions of actual conditions in their schools reaffirmed some popular conceptions but also revealed a number of disturbing factors and circumstances which may act to curtail severely the realization of intentions. An analysis of the emergent data allowed the researchers to identify four essential findings pertaining to the selected collaborative dimensions.

1. Teachers perceived less collaboration occurring in their schools than they considered desirable.
(2) Teachers espoused the desire for expanded roles and professional relationships in terms of decision making and collaborative practice, but felt that current school circumstances were curtailing such developments.

(3) With the possible exception of sensitivity to individual student needs and interests, the teachers felt that inadequate worth was given to school diversity in terms of values, beliefs, conflict resolution processes, and consensus building.

(4) Although teachers demonstrated strong convictions that professional collaboration was an appropriate use of their time, they felt that they were unable to partake in such processes to the extent desirable and necessary.

Participants in this study professed robust support for the overriding concept that professional practice and teacher activity should be highly collaborative. This is an important revelation. Articulating a belief in the value of collaboration is at least a good starting point from which to establish a collaborative culture. Arguably, collaboration would be less likely to occur if teachers did not desire to collaborate. In terms of teachers’ beliefs about the nature of professional relationships, teachers in this study believed that teaching should be based upon cooperation and teamwork. However, they perceived their schools to be characterized by competition and individualism to greater degrees than desirable. Teachers also saw the condition of people ‘liking’ each other as being important to collaborative ventures. Accordingly, they felt that professional collaboration would be enhanced if there were a greater affinity among teachers. Yet, they were less inclined to see evidence of that in their own schools. Moreover, the data suggested that the respondents’ schools were not characterized by the kind of trusting, caring environments deemed conducive for collaborative activities.

The findings in this study regarding teachers’ beliefs about decision making and conflict resolution suggested that, although they believed that schools function better when teachers share common values and beliefs, they also agreed that divergent opinions and practices were indicative of a healthy organization. Moreover, there was substantially low inclination that the wishes of the majority should be imposed upon the individual. The implication embedded in this finding is significant: although teachers believed it was desirable to hold common beliefs, the importance of which is supported elsewhere in the literature (Midley and Wood 1993, Louis 1994, Mitchell 1995, Oden and Wohlsettel 1995, O’Neil 1995, Hord 1997), they did not express agreement that majority beliefs should be imposed. This would indicate that respondents in general believed in a democratic process for negotiating and reconciling conflicting beliefs and values that may be reflected in diverse groups.

Furthermore, there was strong support for the notion that expending time on collaborative practices was appropriate. Not surprisingly, in light of findings from previous studies, there was also emphatic recognition that teachers were not allotted sufficient time to partake in collaboration. Teachers believed that they were not expected to use their time in collaborative ventures to the extent most regarded to be desirable.
Implications of findings for theory, research, and practice

Inasmuch as theory, research, and practice inform one another in complex and dynamic ways, the following implications of the reported cumulative research findings and consequent deliberations are also interrelated. This synthesis and evaluation have significance for those interested in creating collaborative school communities, suggesting that we need to focus on the following: (1) increasing our knowledge of collaboration, i.e. what it is and what it looks like; (2) articulating our understanding of collaboration skills, i.e. what they are and how to develop them; and (3) uncovering our values and beliefs about collaboration, i.e. what they are and how they influence the collaborative process.

Knowledge of collaboration

A review of the literature on collaboration highlights the varying and often ambiguous definitions of collaboration. It is important for advocates of collaboration to continually clarify, define, and refine the concept on the basis of theoretical discussions, research findings and informed practice. A working conceptualization or definition of collaboration is necessary for focusing our continued research efforts. We know from previous studies of schools that norms of collaboration need to be encouraged by site principals (Rosenholtz 1989) and that principals are deemed pivotal for influencing a school’s culture (Deal and Peterson 1991). Additionally, the implications of the findings suggest that additional research is needed in terms of addressing the role of principal in setting expectations for creating collaborative cultures and facilitating teacher commitment to as opposed to teacher compliance with organizational goals (Senge 1990). Furthermore, if schools are to emerge as truly moral communities of mutual commitment and democratic principles, it is those in administrative standing who must provide the thrust towards the institutional vision founded in member empowerment.

Increasing demands for heightened teacher involvement in decision making and its attendant acceptance of both the inherent obligations and responsibilities necessitates consideration of applicable skills which would prepare practitioners with limited related experience to assume these emerging roles. Horn (1997), for example, suggested that the ‘transformation of teaching from an occupation into a profession creates new leadership roles for teachers who wish to stay in the classroom but are willing to take on additional assignments’. Horn recommended that teachers be provided with necessary leadership development opportunities and that they be compensated for their extra work and responsibilities. Moreover, creative structural and operational policies that promote and support such high-density involvement and the development of schools as professional communities need to be adopted.

It is also necessary to increase understanding and knowledge of how to address the ubiquitous issue of time, or the lack thereof. It is important to consider seriously ways to counteract the microsystemic influences such as
the highly bureaucratic structure of schools (Welch 1998) that result in rigid scheduling of timetables and insufficient time for teachers to collaborate. If, as the authors’ research suggests, teachers have the will, there remains the necessity to explore further the means, customized for maximum local potential.

**Skills of collaboration**

Effective collaboration requires sophisticated skills that do not simply materialize when teachers come together, either voluntarily or otherwise. Collaborative skills need development. If collaborative endeavours are to meet with any degree of success, then teachers need to develop proficiency in consensus building, decision making, and the processes of conflict resolution, whereby the means become as important as the ends. How teachers interact with each other to resolve differences to arrive at consensus and share visions have significant implications for the endurance of collaborative relationships. In the effort to collaborate, principals and teachers must work together to clarify their vision, and intensify efforts to be reflective, develop problem-solving skills and concentrate on improving their conflict resolution strategies (Fullan 1992).

It is important to persist in the development of theory and to conduct research designed to improve our knowledge and understanding of collaboration, but it is also imperative to continue to examine current practice, particularly in teacher preparation programmes. Although commonly it is felt that college and university pre-service programmes have made notable strides in providing opportunities for students to become immersed in teaching, it remains to be determined how effectively they are being prepared to collaborate with other practitioners. The manner and extent to which opportunities are provided for prospective teachers to balance the largely autonomous goals of empowerment and self-efficacy with community goals of joint work and collaboration may yet be largely undefined. Such considerations remain mostly in the domain of how schools are perceived in terms of actor relationships, the nature of the roles individuals assume, and the extent to which schools are valued as professional communities.

**Values of collaboration**

The reported survey research (Leonard and Leonard 2001) into teachers’ espoused beliefs about collaboration and their perceptions of practice may be an initial step in understanding the nature and function of values in the success or failure of collaborative initiatives. The findings suggested that teachers in general espoused beliefs that are deemed conducive to the development of a collaborative culture. However, the findings also suggested that teachers, in general, did not perceive their schools to be characterized by collaborative practice. This may be because teachers’ espoused values are in conflict with their basic assumptions about
collaboration, or perhaps the barriers to collaboration may have inhibited collaborative practice. Further research is required to understand better the relationship between espoused values and basic assumptions, and their influence on collaborative practice and the development of schools as moral communities.

Moreover, the relationship between establishing a climate of trust and creating a culture of collaboration also needs researcher attention. If trust is indeed ‘the foundation for shared governance and teacher empowerment’ (Blase and Blase 1994: 18) then we need to focus our attention on how trust may help overcome many of the previously described barriers to collaboration, particularly those issues related to self-efficacy, conflict avoidance and competitiveness. The implications of the significance of trust for dismantling barriers to collaboration are fairly obvious: explore ways to engender trust in collaborative partnerships.

Teachers play an important role in the gradual development of trusting collaborative relationships (daCosta and Riordan 1996). Maintaining one’s personal integrity in interacting with colleagues spawms trust. Demonstrating loyalty to colleagues does not have to be at the expense of sacrificing or compromising one’s pedagogical beliefs. When teachers are collegial and loyal, they will more likely trust each other to disagree on the basis of ideology and pedagogy, not personal characteristics. Moreover, as Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) suggest, teachers need to cultivate their sensitivity to others’ perspectives and circumstances.

**Conclusion: the credibility factor**

It is said that the best leaders lead by example (Kouzes and Posner 1987). When people act upon the values they espouse, they lead by example, and they are credible. Credible leaders are able to engender ‘trust and commitment’ in others (Ulrich 1996: 215). Accordingly, in order to realize schools as moral communities and collections of individuals bonded together by ‘natural will’ (Sergiovanni 1996: 48) and shared knowledge, skills, and values, all members, and particularly principals, will need to practise their espoused beliefs about collaboration. Principals will need to engender trust, be facilitators of decision making, and provide support in the interest of developing a safe environment where members are encouraged to take responsibility and be accountable. Teachers will need to do the same if they are to gain credibility for the values they espouse or try to impart to their students. How to arrive at this collective goal requires continued deliberations about and research into collaboration as the key to the development of a professional learning community.

In conclusion, and in consideration of the preceding discussions, we offer a provisional prescription for school success through collaborative practice that may allow us to move past the *reverie* and further into the realm of *remedy*. The prescription is in three parts, but only together can they comprise a cogent whole. First of all, decide what professional collaborative practice is in its most basic and its most sophisticated forms. Then, strive for only the latter. Second, make collaborative practice in
schools a genuine priority, not an add-on. Provide teachers with substantial and ongoing development in the conceptions of shared professional work as well as substantial opportunities for meaningful application. Third, believe strongly that professional learning communities can exist only in an environment that not simply espouses values of collaborative practice, but also is committed to cultivating a climate of trust founded in professional regard, personal respect and shared commitment to common goals. Without freedom from fear of failure and retribution, without assurance that support and encouragement are implicit and explicit, without confidence that what teachers are doing through collaborative practice is both admired and beneficial, sustained teacher collaboration as a norm of behaviour (not just normative behaviour) is doubtful. The emergent effect may be the sustenance of schools that are characterized less by true elements of the moral community than they are by those that reflect a desire to create the image of being so.

References

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