Changing the School Culture from

Competition to Collaboration

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Abstract

How can an individual teacher create and maintain a classroom community if the school in which the teacher works does not value collaboration and community? Student teaching in Japan forced me to move from an individualistic culture into a group-oriented culture. The most important element of school culture in Japan is collaboration, and I became part of a school community where teachers and students were learners. An attitude of teamwork and collaboration permeated all areas of school. This paper illustrates how cooperation occurred in Katoh Elementary School. I provide examples of cooperation that American educators might incorporate in our educational system to move the collective community away from competition and toward collaboration.

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From late August to mid-November 2007, I completed my student teaching abroad in

Numazu, Japan. I worked in the English immersion program at Katoh Elementary School, an

accredited Japanese private school that provides students an opportunity to learn the Japanese

curriculum through two languages, Japanese and English. In the immersion program, students

spend time each day with both Japanese teachers and foreign teachers from around the world.

The students develop their academic English language skills while still maintaining native

fluency levels in their first language. The school promotes bilingualism and bi-literacy, as well

as an appreciation for becoming citizens of the world. I worked with three mentor teachers,

Gerard, Lindsay and Geoff, and I was based with 52 second grade students but also had the

opportunity to teach the upper grades as a science specialist.

Living and teaching in Japan provided me with a unique cultural perspective as an

American. In my previous experiences in Iowa schools, I found that teachers were focused on

their classrooms and their individual roles as teachers. Communication between staff, while

often supported in theory, was not always evident in practice. Japanese culture, as opposed to

American culture, is group-oriented. Everyday activities in the home and in the school are done

for the best interest of the group, and there is a spirit of collaboration and cooperation that

permeates interactions. While students are still pushed to achieve at high levels, the

responsibility for their success is shared by teachers and family members. At Katoh, the

classroom environments promote group work and cooperative learning – there are tables instead

of desks, group activities are encouraged, students eat lunch in the classrooms with teachers, and

there is a genuine sense of working together, whether in class or during cleaning time.

While my experience was in the classroom environment, I learned that these cultural attitudes were not limited to the individual rooms; that is, the culture of the school was based in collaboration. Even though the English classroom teachers held diverse perspectives, while we were working at Katoh we gained an understanding of the Japanese values because they became our values as well. I was in an interesting position, as I found myself focusing on the team, whether through rich staff meeting discussions or assisting with teaching strategies and self-learning. The environment that the school and teachers established influenced the classrooms, and it is through the collaboration of the staff that I had the opportunity to grow and further establish my constructivist teaching pedagogies and interest in cooperative learning.

It was this learning experience and environment of trust and cooperation that led me to wonder why I had not experienced this in American schools where I completed practicum. My initial reaction was that my experience in a Japanese school was a direct result of the broader cultural factors. I also began to consider the influence of competition and individuality in American culture. However, because the value of collaboration is not limited to only Japan, I would like to take my experiences with me and apply them to any school environment I enter. I began to think about how I can influence a school's culture, especially if I come into an established environment that may not hold my values. While it is possible to create a constructivist classroom as an individual teacher, in order to thrive in the educational setting I believe it is fundamental to have a school culture that also values collaboration.

How can a teacher effectively influence the culture of a school to promote collaboration over competition?

Literature Review

I structured my research to develop my background knowledge in cultural ideals and how these play out in educational settings. First, I examined the differences between American and Japanese ideals of living. Bill Graves (1991) illustrated the Japanese culture in the article, "The Japanese Success Story in U.S. Schools." The article focused on the achievement and adaptations that Japanese students make when coming into an American school, but also discussed the curiosity that American teachers have in the Japanese educational system. One teacher interviewed believed that Americans value individualism, while the Japanese "train their children to work more in groups." Japanese educators, on the other hand, often look to America to see how the individual student is valued; however, the extreme focus on individual success is seen as "near chaos" (p. 11, 14). There is a struggle to find commonalities between the cultures, and while both ideals may be appropriate in certain situations, Americans can find it more difficult to reconcile their individual character with a group-centered approach. This difficulty in the broader culture also translates into the school culture. As Joseph Cirasuolo (2001) explained in "A Sinking Feeling about Competition," American schools are reluctant to give up the focus on standards and competition, since competition "is allegedly one reason why the United States has been so successful economically" (p. 38). The general mindset of schools in America is that students, when competing to achieve, will eventually be successful. This mindset relates to the individualistic ideal that everyone has a chance to pull him or herself up and become a winner.

Cirasuolo continues to describe the atmosphere of competition and its effect on public schools in America. In his opinion, a school culture in which students are placed into groups of "winners" and "losers," there is a loss of a safe environment. Students who have little chance of success tend to disrupt the environment. The claim that "competition will produce a system in which everyone will be a winner – something that competition has never produced" worries

educators who wish to provide all their students with equal opportunities, something standardized tests and competition can only theoretically provide (p. 38-9).

Given the characteristics of American culture, and the negative influences that competition has on many students, how can the school environment become an open, safe learning community? In individual classrooms, one possibility is establishing cooperative learning environments. While studies show that a cooperative learning environment is beneficial to students, Alfie Kohn (1998) provided awareness of the struggle that cooperative learning faces in American schools. In "Resistance to Cooperative Learning," an essay from *What to Look for in a Classroom*, Kohn acknowledged that cooperative learning "challenges our commitment to the value of competition," setting students against each other in situations where one must win and the other lose. Kohn acknowledged that the opposition to cooperative learning by American teachers might even take the form of the belief that not having competition is "un-American, radical, and subversive" (p. 55-6). With the struggle that the ideology of cooperative learning has faced in America, Kohn's sentiments may not be exaggerated.

Another important element in establishing cooperative learning environments is the teacher. Anderman, Urdan and Midgley (1992) argued that the environment of the classroom depends on students' perceptions of their teacher's values in their study, "Classroom Practices and Perception of School Culture: An HLM Model." Students in classrooms that "foster a competitive classroom environment that stresses grades and performance" were more likely to believe that competition was a value held by the entire school. On the other hand, when students believed learning tasks were not competitive, they were likely to place less value on the spirit of competition and intrinsic motivation took on more importance (p. 4, 11). Although the perception of collaboration as a shared value may or may not be supported by the school environment, the power of change that one teacher holds in the classroom is immense.

However, if the value of cooperation faces resistance by individual teachers or entire schools and is stereotypically un-American, then what may be necessary is a shift in teaching pedagogies and cultural structures. Supporting data in a study by Sharan (cited in Kohn, 1998) suggested that it is not the method of cooperative learning that does not work; rather, it is the system surrounding schools. If teachers' methods are not supported by the system, the method will often fail (p. 49). While one teacher has the ability to create a classroom community and instill in students a sense of collaboration, a support system for these methods is necessary to encourage these practices in the entire school.

The overarching issue surrounding schools is that of the school culture. In "The Power of School Culture," Leslie Goldring (2002) defined a culture as a "visible and useful tool in schools, where relationships tend to hold more power than official roles and titles" (p. 32). Goldring outlines six traits of culture, two of which are having a "shared vision" and "collaboration." She argued that teachers and principals who effectively work together and who value collaboration were most likely to be open and flexible to ideas of change (p. 34). Where there is a support system in place, the school culture can effectively work to create an environment of trust and commitment, which is then shared with students in individual classrooms.

This shift in classroom instruction must come from the teaching community and school culture. In *Ethical Leadership in Schools: Creating Community in an Environment of Accountability* (2007), Kenneth Strike offered a definition of community through four general characteristics that "good" communities share: goals that can be achieved only through cooperation, collective success or failure, the members benefit from each others' growth and commitment, and members are "bound together by ties of loyalty, solidarity, and trust" (p. 83-4). Strike believed that while the community does not take away competition, the spirit of

competition was not the most important value. He extends the view of a school community to beyond the classroom walls and suggested that in order for teachers to thrive, the professional community needs to also be developed, with teachers thinking of themselves as "people engaged in a collective task of educating children. They regularly cooperate with and learn from one another in accomplishing this task" (p. 101). In "Creating cultures for collaborative inquiry: new challenges for school leaders," Emihovich and Battaglia (2000) expanded on this idea of a collaborative community using the practice of teachers as active inquirers. When teachers become "authentic learners," they see firsthand the effects of a learning community and participate in a process of growth and development. The authors argued that previous attempts at restructuring the school community have been "fragmented and inadequate," indicating a lack of motivation or means to achieve the community that continues to be proven as an effective structure for learning in schools (p. 226).

As I researched, I found a variety of information concerning the values of competition and collaboration, particularly as illuminated through the American public school system. There seems to be a trend towards encouraging collaborative learning and a disillusionment with the current system of competition in schools; however, in my experiences, there is a disconnect between theory and practice in schools. While most would agree that a competitive environment does not stimulate cooperative thought, calling for a paradigm shift in American values is a difficult task.

In the course of this paper, I examine my own interactions with the school culture in Japan, as found in the teaching community, to further develop ideas for how to bring the value of collaboration into cultural settings that do not have the same group-oriented structure.

Research Findings

As I lived and taught in Japan, I gained an inside perspective on Japanese culture, and I adapted easily to the customs and philosophies within the group structure. Because of my close interactions and Japanese lifestyle, my perspectives are also colored by that light.

Even though teachers at Katoh come from around the world, there is an inherent understanding and participation in the collaborative ideals. This focus on collaboration was found throughout all levels of the immersion staff, from individual interactions to school-wide functions. As well, there is an emphasis on the idea of being a learner in order to be an effective teacher.

When I first came to Katoh, I was unsure of how I would fit in with the team of professionals, and I still held on to my individualistic practices. For example, Gerard, one of my mentor teachers, asked me to create a writing lesson that would connect with our recent field trip to Fuji Safari Park. I chose to introduce students to animal fables and created an opportunity for them to write their own original animal fables, using the animals we had seen at Safari Park.

To aid in my students' understanding, I read aloud an animal fable. Excited about my idea, my first task was to find a big book that was suitable for our time and the children's comprehension level. I looked through the big books and found two that were in the fable genre, but when I realized that I only had 20 minutes for a combined read aloud and modeling lesson, I had to adapt and find a shorter book. As I continued to search by myself, I grew frustrated with the lack of appropriate read alouds. I came to the realization that I should utilize the resources available to me in the other teachers. I went to Pat, the first grade English teacher, and asked her for ideas. We spent time scouring the big books and her classroom library; eventually, she remembered a story in an old New Zealand children's magazine, "How the Turtle got his Shell," which was exactly what I needed for length and vocabulary. Since the magazine was small, Pat

showed me how to enlarge the pages using the color copier, then I mounted each page while Lindsay helped me to laminate them to create my own big book for class. I also created my own story map for the students to use in our project, and Gerard helped me to make four big posters to use in the modeling session.

This experience, which illustrates my learning as part of the community, may also hold meaning as one of the ways that a shift in thinking from competition to collaboration can occur. When I began looking for stories, I had the attitude that I could do everything myself and did not need the other teachers telling me what to do. However, I found that it was more time effective and helpful to me to use the knowledge and resources of the other teachers. While this experience didn't mean that I gave up my "can-do" attitude, it helped me to see that working as a team creates richer learning experiences for me and my students.

My experience relates to Graves' (1991) research in the differing value systems of America and Japan. When I first came into the collaborative culture, I was still an individualist. However, as Strike (2007) illustrated, the process of becoming a community does not entail giving up all of one's ideals. Rather, it is a process of keeping an open mind and allowing new ideas to become a part of one's philosophies, thus causing a shift in thinking.

Outside of individual teaching partnerships, the entire foreign staff developed a close bond with each other. One of the best examples of this cooperative spirit was displayed through our weekly staff meetings. During one meeting we had a roundtable about big books. There were at least 30 big books in the school, and Pat encouraged the others to use the big books and involve the students in shared reading. Then, we went around the circle by grade level, with each teacher sharing an idea for using big books in the classroom. At another staff meeting, all of the teachers worked through some math problems that were on a typical high school entrance exam in order to better understand the challenge that sixth grade students and teachers face and

how we can best support them. In other meetings, classroom management issues were brought to the table and discussed, and at one meeting, we all danced the "Chicken Dance" before beginning the meeting.

These interactions during meetings created an environment that focused on the challenges of education and reaching high standards and objectives, but that did so while emphasizing the shared responsibility of the staff in achieving the goals. Although the foreign staff members were all different than one another, not only in where we came from and our cultures but also our beliefs about teaching and our own learning, there was a rich environment of collaboration at Katoh. With so many different people coming together in a foreign country, it helped to build a close-knit support system between all the foreign teachers unmatched in the American schools in which I completed practicum. Along with the community, there was a pervasive attitude of excitement and celebration. While we tackled the tough issues together, we did not forget that there should also be time to come together in laughter.

The sense of community at Katoh went beyond the foreign teaching staff, as well. Even with language and cultural barriers, the entire school came together in collaboration, whether it was for weekly staff meetings with translation or preparing for annual events.

On a Sunday in late October, Katoh Elementary holds its annual Bazaar, a fundraising event for the school. The elementary staff was in charge of setting up and taking down the tents, tables and gas burners for the event. Since our setup was rained out on Saturday, it took an amazing cooperative effort to pull everything together before the official opening of Bazaar. Throughout the setup and takedown, I helped wherever I could. Although I had no idea how to set up the tents, I found I could tie the ropes, and I joined the chain to carry out desks. I was eager to be involved and a part of the team, even though I was not always sure of what I was doing. Seichi-sensei, our principal, would give direction in Japanese, and when there was not a

translator available, he would help the rest of us out by pointing, moving and guiding us to where we needed to go.

To me, this situation illustrated the communication that occurs between the Japanese staff and the foreign staff at Katoh. While words are important and language could easily be a barrier to working together, the staff showed a willingness to work together and carried out the tasks effectively. This shared experience between all staff illustrates Goldring's (2002) perspective of teachers and principals working together in an open and flexible environment. Even though I felt as though I was not able to carry out all of the tasks as easily as those teachers who had set up for Bazaar before, the staff continually found a place for me, and I adopted a spirit of cooperation, too. It would have been easy to fade into the background and allow others to do the work, but that would be neither culturally appropriate nor team-oriented. Working alongside the Japanese teachers reinforced the cultural values, as we did everything as a group. For example, when we formed a chain to carry desks out of the shed, a few of the foreign teachers immediately thought to carry desks out on their own. However, the Japanese staff began to line up and encouraged the foreign staff to do the same, until we had a human chain of about 30 people, handing desks and tables down the sidewalk. This situation might suggest that while some of the foreign teachers still hold on to the individualistic ideal, there is a stronger force at work at Katoh that allows everyone to embrace the Japanese culture and act accordingly, which turned out to be more beneficial for our setup and takedown.

The collaborative environment permeated every aspect of being a teacher at Katoh, even though the Japanese curriculum is competitive. Obviously, one of the reasons for this is cultural; however, it is also possibly due to the teaching staff taking on the position of a learner, rather than a director.

For example, during one of our prep periods, Gerard and I went to Travis' classroom to help him figure out a math problem on a transformation that was part of his sixth graders' homework for the next day. With the curriculum at such an advanced level, the concepts can elude teachers as well. When we went into the room, we all sat down at a table and looked at the problem. Gerard went up to the chalkboard and drew the block rotations to scale, and we worked through it together. What seemed impossible to do at first became clear to us as a fairly simple problem. Also, during my final week in Japan, the foreign immersion staff had a professional development day in which Mike, the director of the immersion program, led us in a cooperative learning activity to generate discussion. He printed out 10 big posters, each with one question on it. Each teacher took a marker and cycled through the posters, brainstorming ideas, questions and sharing tips and tricks for bilingual education, teaching practices and language functions. After the writing was finished, we gathered all of the posters together and discussed the ideas found on them. Often, this sharing generated new questions to ask and more ideas to be shared between teachers.

These situations are also important, as they point to the role of the teacher as an active learner, relating directly to the research conducted by Emihovich and Battaglia (2000). In order to understand how to work in a collaborative group and convey that environment to students, teachers should actively model that process. When teachers are able to see things through the eyes of a learner, it reduces the emphasis on being an instructional leader – a mindset that often leads to a view of teachers as the controller of what students learn in the classroom. Working in a group structure allows the staff to realize that we all learn and accomplish more when we are working together, instead of by ourselves.

With my unique experiences in Japan, in a group-oriented culture working with a variety of foreign staff members, I learned more about being a part of a collaborative environment and

working as a team with teachers, instead of an individual While I realize that this team aspect may or may not be a part of another school I teach in, I don't want to lose sight of the rich environment it provided.

<p style="text-align:center">Conclusion</p>

Living and teaching in Japan afforded me a genuine understanding of what it means to be a teacher-learner in a collaborative environment. As I begin teaching in a new school, I can incorporate collaborative learning strategies in my individual classroom, working with my students to create a community of support, even if the overarching school culture does not always support my values. As a teacher and an individual, it will be most important to keep an open mind about the school culture without sacrificing my own ideals. I can encourage collaboration and make it a part of my daily professional interactions simply by asking good questions or seeking out advice. Now that I have seen the value of working together, I can identify areas where collaboration can occur and how effective it is. Promoting focus on the social goals of learning, along with high expectations of academic development, should be a topic of discussion and teaching practice.

One of the questions that I have continued to ponder through my research is how a paradigm shift to focus on collaboration can occur in America. An answer to this question lies in finding a middle ground between cultural ideals of the individual and the group. Competition is not always necessarily bad, and there is value in independence and individuality. The goal for teachers and administrators, then, may be to develop a culture of open communication and honesty. Perhaps one solution is creating dialogues, addressing the issues of how students and teachers learn on a more regular basis. While cooperative learning is often supported in literature and theory, questions should be raised about its effectiveness in practice, especially when it is not supported by everyone in a school.

While my research has led me to develop a better understanding of how to put these values into practice and participate in a rich, collaborative environment, it has also created more questions that I have not fully addressed in the course of this paper. One question is how I can influence veteran teachers in my school. Entering an environment where teaching practices may already be established and working with teachers who have years of experience compared to me brings me uncertainty as a novice. However, I believe that as I begin to find my place in the school culture and gain the trust of my students, colleagues and parents, I will find more opportunity to become a role model and a leader. It will be integral to my growth that I engage in respectful and meaningful conversation, take hold of opportunities to learn from experience and practice my philosophies in the classroom, continually reflecting on my students' needs as well as my performance. Also, I have learned to keep an open mind about differences, and it is important that I continue to explore teaching pedagogies and philosophies to gain a greater understanding of the interactions between individuals and groups in a school culture.

Other questions that have come to mind relate to broader cultural norms. In my two cultural experiences, I found two levels of focus – one on the individual, the other on the group. While schools can provide "new" cultures within the dominant culture, can they also shift the dominant culture? How might that occur? In the American culture, for example, a shift from individualistic thinking to cooperation may be possible in time. Perhaps if schools worked to engage students as collaborative learners throughout all levels of education, generations of citizens who understand the value of collaboration and practice it throughout their lives could be created. The process of learning through modeling and experiencing can be transformative, if allowed to take place.

Thinking about cultural norms and differences between cultures led me to wonder if there are certain universal truths that extend throughout cultures and teaching practices, and if so, is

collaboration one of these truths? After my experience teaching at home and abroad, I believe that the value of cooperation is universally shared. To create in ourselves and our students a global perspective, and to work together in a rapidly interconnecting world, collaboration is vital. Technology, among other things, offers the opportunity to expand our knowledge of other countries, cultures and ways of life, and while there are differences that should not be ignored, there are also similar values that should be acknowledged and cultivated. While standards and curricular goals for learning may change between schools and cultures, there is an overarching value system of humanity that should not be ignored.

While my experiences in America and Japan do not provide definitive answers to my questions, nor should they do so, I was offered an opportunity to look at education through a different lens, providing me a rich learning experience and a set of teaching values which I believe are integral to my, and my future students', learning.

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