

Changing Old Habits: Exploring New Models for Professional Development

*Thomas Patteson and
Laura Birdsall*

Late in 2007, River Valley Waldorf School (RVWS) in Upper Black Eddy, Pennsylvania (about 40 miles north of Philadelphia), commissioned the Triskeles Foundation, a non-profit organization based in nearby Exton, to oversee a new model for in-house professional development for teachers, or “peer coaching,” a process that would develop an alternative to the traditional mentoring process. Shortly after work began in January 2008, it became clear that the plan would necessitate a rededication of meeting time away from business issues and toward pedagogical concerns. This shift would require developing a more efficient governance model. Triskeles’s original charge to help the faculty make in-house teacher development a priority led to the reorganization of River Valley Waldorf School governance.

Understanding Professional Development

Traditionally, professional development in public education involves teachers attending presentations by professionals who are brought in from outside the school. Because the experts who give the lectures often do not spend much time in the classroom themselves or because they are not aware of local issues, their perspectives are not always relevant to teachers’ problems. In this model of professional development, teachers become passive recipients of knowledge instead of active contributors to pedagogical improvement.

A more common model of professional development in Waldorf schools is a visiting “expert” mentor who observes and helps a teacher but then leaves to return to her or his own school. Another typical Waldorf school practice involves individual teachers attending summer courses or workshops.

While both of these have obvious potential to deepen an individual’s pedagogical practices, course and workshop content often does not make its way into the full faculty, so opportunity for school-wide improvement is missed.

Over the past couple of decades, teachers and education professionals have been working to develop alternatives to traditional top-down models of professional development. One of the most promising methods is based on the simple idea that teachers themselves are the best resource for improving classroom teaching. Called “peer coaching” or “in-house professional development,” this approach draws on the wisdom and experience of colleagues to make the educational process more humane and effective.

After being commissioned by RVWS, Mark Birdsall of the Triskeles Foundation recruited Steven Strull, President of the National School Reform Faculty, to introduce the professional development project. Strull, a longtime advocate of peer coaching in education, compares the idea to doctors’ rounds, in which medical professionals work through group discussion to identify and address patients’ problems. According to Strull, traditional education is one of the only fields in

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which professionals are directed by managers and not the other way around. This has a direct and negative impact on the quality of teaching because management decisions are not necessarily informed by first-hand knowledge of what is happening in the classroom.

In Waldorf schools, teachers often highlight a different issue as the primary detriment to on-going professional development: The large amount of time in weekly meetings devoted to managing administrative details leaves little time for discussion of pedagog-

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ical practice. The development of a vibrant professional development community would necessitate the reform of a cumbersome governance model that required hours of meeting time focused on business issues.

Strull led three day-long sessions with the River Valley Waldorf School faculty in the winter and spring of 2008. In these meetings, Strull shared the fundamental ideas behind the National School Reform approach and led the faculty through a number of basic exercises. Laura Birdsall, an experienced teacher who had done consulting work for River Valley in the past, also attended these sessions and continued the project after Strull's workshops ended.

The Protocol

At the heart of the peer coaching model used at those River Valley Waldorf School workshops was the protocol, a written set of step-by-step guidelines that provides a framework for faculty discussion and ensures that it remains focused and effective; or, as Strull defined it at his first meeting with the faculty, "A protocol is a tool to teach yourself the habits you wish you had." The various protocols used by the National School Reform Faculty were designed to anticipate and address issues that all teachers encounter.

Leading the group through the protocol is the responsibility of the facilitator. Ideally someone is selected from among the members, but it can be someone from outside the group. Strull initially served as facilitator, but the teachers quickly grasped how the protocols worked and were soon able to facilitate them on their own.

The structure of the protocol depends on the particular problem or issue that the group has chosen to address. For example, in the "Consultancy" protocol, the presenter shares a dilemma that she has encountered in her work. This would be a complex problem touching on the foundations of teaching practices.

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1. The protocol begins with the presenter sharing relevant background information and then posing the dilemma in the form of a question.
2. The group asks clarifying questions of the presenter and then moves to more probing inquiries; these are meant to help the presenter reach a deeper understanding of the dilemma.
3. Now, with the presenter listening and taking notes, the members of the group talk with each other about the dilemma in light of the additional information that emerged through the questioning process.
4. Following the group discussion, the presenter responds briefly to the group's conversation, sharing how the process has altered her perception of the dilemma.
5. Finally, the facilitator leads a short discussion about what just took place and brings the process to a close.

Another protocol, entitled "Chalk Talk," uses nonverbal communication to get at issues from a different angle. It begins with the facilitator writing a question on the chalkboard. Everyone present is then able to write a response on the board. It could be a sentence or a single word, or even a symbol that indicates a certain relationship between other ideas on the board. All of this takes place in complete silence, and participants are encouraged to take time to contemplate their reactions to the original prompt. Such a "silent conversation" can be refreshing and enlightening, breaking long-established group patterns of communication.

These professional tools, when effectively used, allow teachers to share the immediate pedagogical issues with which they are wrestling. The protocols also have a democratizing effect within the group in that their structures ensure broad participation; the strong voices of the few do not

tend to dominate within the protocol structure. Because the content of the protocols is supplied by the teachers themselves, this model of professional development can be a meaningful improvement over the traditional mentor/mentee or the “sit and get” visiting lecturer formats. Discussion emerges organically from teachers’ classroom activities. “This work helps you improve on what you’re already doing,” Strull explains. “It creates more meaning in what you’re already involved in.”

Strull’s experience in public schools is that teachers frequently respond to the pressures of their profession by withdrawing into their classrooms and facing their challenges alone. Because of this, one of the foremost goals of peer coaching is to “de-privatize” teaching practice. This experience of isolation can also be true for Waldorf school teachers and may have an even more profound impact on Waldorf students’ experience, given that class teachers stay with their classes for up to eight years.

By working through their problems as a group, teachers are not only less isolated, they are able to bring their collective experience and wisdom to bear on the issues they all face. But, in the end, the use of protocols to guide faculty pedagogical discussions must be evaluated on whether or not they help teachers to continually improve the quality of their work. Ideally, in-house professional development will both increase teacher effectiveness and foster a culture of continual improvement within a school faculty.

The three workshops at RVWS between January and April of 2008 were a learning experience not only for the RV faculty, but also for Strull, who was largely unfamiliar with the philosophy behind Waldorf schools. Fortunately, he found that the Waldorf school emphasis on communication and discourse made the use of these protocols a natural fit, and the River Valley Waldorf School faculty was receptive to them. At the same time, Strull noted that many of the school faculty members were accustomed to a more unstructured, open-ended form of dialogue,

and consequently had to adjust to the more tightly controlled format of the protocol.

Implementation of a Professional Development Plan and Results

Laura Birdsall began working full-time at RVWS in July 2008 and has continued to lead the work introduced by Strull. Under Birdsall’s guidance, the school has dedicated roughly half of the year’s faculty meetings to addressing pedagogical issues using the protocol format. The full faculty chose “assessment” as the broad theme for the year. From September to December 2008, the faculty held seven pedagogical meetings. During this time virtually every teacher brought issues relating to assessment from her or his classroom as material for group work, and most also took turns facilitating the protocols.

An example of one “Tuning Protocol” session may be illustrative. In October 2008 the second grade teacher shared a description of the assignment of her students’ first independently-written stories of the fable “The Lion and The Mouse.” In response to some children stating that they didn’t want to copy a story from the board but wanted to write their own story, the teacher spontaneously divided the class into mixed-ability groups of three, and the retelling of the fable was written in these groups. The teacher’s focusing questions were: “Have I modeled the story retelling and writing process enough for my students to be successful?” and “What do my colleagues think of this assignment and the students’

results?” The protocol began with a fifteen-minute presentation by the class teacher of the step-by-step process the students were led through as they wrote their stories. This was followed by approximately five minutes of clarifying questions, such as: “What were your goals? Why did you put them in groups? While they were in groups, were they able to ask how to spell words? Did any group have the sequence of events wrong?” Next, for a full fifteen minutes and with the presenter silently observing from the sidelines, colleagues examined the student work in light of

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the initial focusing questions; while examining the student work, colleagues discussed what they saw and then silently reflected and wrote notes in preparation for the warm and cool feedback period. Warm feedback included the following:

- “What beautiful little books they created!”
- “They must be very proud of their work.”
- “It was courageous to try something new and let go of the normal structure.”
- “This process and the finished book were a great opportunity to assess language arts development.”
- “You now know what they are capable of, and this will affect future assignments.”

Cool feedback included:

- “Did the ones who struggled lose confidence?”
- “Without preplanning, did you miss some important assessment opportunities, such as observing pencil grip and letter formation?”
- “I am wondering/concerned that the more advanced students took over, leaving the less mature ones feeling left out.”
- “Are you clear about each child’s contribution?”

In the end, the class teacher reflected on the feedback that seemed particularly important and the group debriefed on the process.

Questionnaire Responses

In January 2008, fourteen RVWS teachers who were involved from the outset were asked to respond to a questionnaire designed to gauge the effectiveness of the project up to that point. As shown in the charts below, the results were overwhelmingly positive. The teachers were given four questions that required a graded response from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The majority of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the claims stated in each of the questions. In total, there were only three neutral and no negative responses.

Teachers’ written responses to the questions also demonstrate a widespread affirmation of the project’s effectiveness and a desire to see it continue. Asked to list the most positive aspect of the work, one teacher wrote, “Our faculty feels like a

stronger unit since we began this work. We allow ourselves to become vulnerable and support our colleagues when they open up about challenges they are experiencing.” Many teachers emphasized how the sessions made clear the commonality of their problems: According to one, working through the protocols “helped me not feel so isolated and bear my questions and doubts alone.” Another confirmed the potential for learning from one’s peers, stating, “Many teaching methods or situations encountered are universal to teaching in a classroom. I gained insight from the experiences of other teachers.”

One of the survey questions addressed the matter of devoting faculty meeting time to these in-house professional development protocols. The faculty felt that their meetings had become too exclusively focused on administrative and business matters, and that the school was departing from Rudolf Steiner’s vision of a “college of teachers.” Using protocol work to reorient faculty meetings around pedagogical issues was thus seen as a crucial step toward real reform of school operations.

As the chart shows, the prompt related to use of faculty time together elicited the most enthusiastically positive response from the faculty. One wrote, “We are able to accomplish so much more and get along much better when we are not hashing it out over administrative issues! Our time together is much more productive.” Another said, “It feels so healthy to talk about why we are truly here and share thoughts around teaching practices. The business meetings had taken us away from teaching and created tensions between us. [The new approach] has opened everyone up and made the faculty more united.” At the same time, a number of teachers expressed concern that the faculty not neglect administrative issues altogether. The ideal balance between administrative and pedagogical affairs in faculty meetings will have to be sought through continuous experimentation.

Changes in Governance

The freeing-up of faculty meeting time for pedagogical work was accomplished at River Valley Waldorf School by a major change to the governance of the school. The faculty and board of the school, working with the Triskeles Foundation, implemented a Leadership Team of four members: two teachers, the administrator, and a board member. This group was given the

authority to make all decisions for the faculty, through collaboration and consultation with their peers as appropriate. The exact composition and structure of the Leadership Team is being evaluated through the 2008–09 school year, and will be finalized for the 2009–10 year.

It is interesting that a similar reorientation of faculty meeting time is underway at the Lake Champlain Waldorf School in Vermont. As at River Valley, the teachers felt that administrative work had come to overshadow pedagogical concerns in the faculty's weekly meetings. In order to address this imbalance, the school instituted a clearer division of labor between pedagogical and administrative work. Michele Starr, a class teacher and chair of the College of Teachers at LCWS, explains: "We made a conscious decision to separate the administrative and pedagogical realms in order to bring the College of Teachers into line with Rudolf Steiner's vision of the research academy." Jon McAlice, a Waldorf educational consultant, facilitated this change (see McAlice, Identity and Governance, in this issue). Day-to-day decision-making is now the responsibility of the Governance Council, while the College of Teachers focuses on questions of pedagogy and curriculum. The purpose of the College is to distill the collective experience of the school's teachers into recommendations concerning pedagogical policy, which are then submitted to the Governance Council for review and implementation. Now in its second year, this format has allowed the school to pinpoint and address areas of concern for the faculty. For example, the College recently decided to devote special attention to seventh to tenth grade students in order to better understand these students' situation from the standpoint of human development.

Conclusion

At River Valley, the faculty is determined to see that this new focus on pedagogy takes root in the day-to-day life of the school. "What happens between meetings? Do teachers continue sharing? Or are the pedagogical meetings 'islands' in a busy month? With far less time spent on business, are we teachers still able to address those non-pedagogical issues that affect our classrooms?" These questions touch the very heart of the project. As important as the group sessions are, the ultimate test of the endeavor is whether or not a

culture of communication and mutual support continues to strengthen at River Valley, enabling the faculty to continually grow and improve the quality of their teaching. But, for the time being, RVWS teachers have found that the open communication fostered by the Waldorf school model has become more focused and productive as a result of using protocols. In short, the implementation of "in-house professional development" or "peer coaching" has helped them realize one of the core values of Waldorf education: on-going, structured collegial dialogue as a means of creating a more fruitful and humane environment for students and teachers alike.

Laura Birdsall, MEdPD, began Waldorf teaching as a middle school support teacher in 1979 at Pine Hill Waldorf School. She was later a class teacher at the Urban Waldorf School in Milwaukee, the first public Waldorf school, a middle school specialist at Kimberton Waldorf School, and is now serving as a master teacher at River Valley Waldorf School. She has been a school consultant and a teacher trainer, and she is now the Director of Side by Side, PA, a non-profit program of the Triskeles Foundation. She may be contacted at ljbirdsall@gmail.com.

Thomas Patteson is a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked as a freelance writer and contributor for various social and political causes. His interest in alternative approaches to education stems from his background as a home-schooler and his undergraduate experience at New College of Florida.

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For more information:

National School Reform Faculty:

www.nsrffharmony.org

River Valley Waldorf School:

www.rivervalley.waldorf.org

Triskeles Foundation:

www.triskeles.org