

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 12

Issue 1 *The Multicultural Classroom*

Article 13

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Ochoa, Jennifer (1996) "The Joys of Teaming," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1509>

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The Newest Member of The Family

Jennifer Ochoa

The Joys of Teaming

One rainy night in November, 1994, I sat gulping coffee to stay awake during a mandatory three-hour evening inservice which my school district deemed highly necessary and highly relevant. The topic of this particular meeting was “restructured time.” When the inservice started, I was not only grumpy and tired after a full day of teaching but I had little knowledge of the topic “restructured time” and little desire to learn more about it. Since I felt fairly negative on this particular evening, when we broke up into groups by schools to discuss the notion of team teaching, I joined the ranks of my colleagues who thought that teaming would never work at our school.

Many veteran teachers I work with remembered back to the 1970s when team teaching was widespread across our district. Those who had been involved in the “old days,” recalled teaming as a positive experience, but wondered why, twenty years later, our school district was paying this pricey speaker to bring teaming back when the school district had originally dumped the concept. We were then informed by our assistant principal that an edict had come down from above that all secondary schools in our district would be involved in a team situation, so we might as well get used to the idea and figure out how we would implement teams in our school.

I went home that night and forgot about the inservice until a few weeks later when my fellow teacher and friend asked me to be a part of a committee to develop a team plan at our high school. Initially I said “no” because I was involved in too many activities and I really couldn’t fit another meeting into my schedule. My friend was persistent though, and she told me we had been granted release time from teaching to write the proposal. Like a typical high schooler who will do anything to get out of class, I finally agreed to attend one meeting.

From the first moment of the meeting, I was sucked in by the energy of those present. Because of the enthusiasm and commitment I could sense in the others, I was soon drawn into the plan. I began to love the concept we were developing, and I wholeheartedly agreed with the reasoning behind the kind of team environment we wanted to create. We decided to start teaming in our building with ninth graders, since the statistics showed us that most students who got lost on the road to graduation fell away during their freshman year. Many students, upon entering a larger building with more people, more freedom, and some friends who could drive, started skipping school and hanging out with other students who didn’t view school as important. The statistics indicated that many students who successfully completed their freshman year without attendance problems went on to graduate. Thus we wanted to focus on ninth graders.

The plan, in its basic form, called for four core teachers (math, English, history and science) to share a common group of 100-125 freshman. Although we asked for much more, we were only given the essentials: one team of four teachers,

120 students, close proximity for three of the classrooms, and two common planning hours.

We felt the proximity of our classrooms and the sharing of the same students were necessary to give the students a sense of belonging. We thought the resulting family feeling would be important if we were to interest students in education. Our big desire was for the team to be a community in and of itself and for the students to feel a sense of continuity among their core classes. We felt that, instead of being four individual teachers with individual guidelines and expectations, we would instead become a big teaching machine that ran its various parts from the same motor. Therefore, we spent a lot of time discussing our individual teaching methods and philosophies. We decided what we could give up from our own practices and what we felt was absolutely necessary for our classrooms to run smoothly. In all, the process of compromise was not as difficult as I had envisioned, perhaps because my other team members and I are well-matched in personality types.

We reasoned that a common set of expectations and guidelines would help students because they would only have to get acclimated to one set of rules, rather than four. Common guidelines were also necessary to establish the community feeling we were striving for, so we presented the guidelines only one time to students (in their second hour classes), and we emphasized that these guidelines were for all of their team classes.

Those who had been involved in the "old days," recalled teaming as a positive experience . . .

Another goal we had was to improve our students' attendance. Since my school district does not have a rigid attendance policy, ninth graders figure out quickly that they can probably get away with skipping classes. We wanted them to get a different message—to get good grades they needed to be in class, and we would do all we could to see that they were there. Thus, from the first day of school we closely checked our students' attendance by keeping hourly lists of ab-

sences and comparing them at the end of the day. Beginning that first day, we started calling the parents of students who were suspiciously absent. The threat of discovery seemed to work because absences and random hourly skipping fell sharply.

We began to address our third goal—to make sure our students were having a successful educational experience—by working to make both students and parents feel at home at school. We established several practices to help parents have easy access to all of us and to information about their child's progress in all classes. We began by sending letters home to the parents telling them about our two hours of common team planning time and inviting them to contact us during these times. We made it known that we were willing, even anxious, to meet with any parent who had a concern or question about his or her child's classes.

Making monthly phone calls home to report on every student's progress in all classes also became part of our practice. We targeted students in our individual second hour classes because we use this class as a homeroom for the team. As we met daily, we monitored each student's performance in all four classes. Each team teacher became responsible for reporting progress in all four classes for all thirty students in his or her second hour by calling parents. We were amazed to find that parents looked forward to our calls. They told us they felt much more in touch with school and their child's place in school because of these calls.

Another practice we instituted was "The Homework Hot Line." Every day after school, we recorded a message on an outgoing-only machine (the kind they have at movie theaters) telling the happenings and homework in each class on the team. Through letters and phone calls home both parents and students have become very familiar with this number. The old refrain "but I don't have any homework tonight Dad!" no longer works for our students.

Lastly, we built the "we are one" theme into our Fall Open House and Fall Conferences. We were placed together as a team in one of our rooms for these events, rather than being placed in different sections of the building with our depart-

ments. To add to the atmosphere we purchased a party-size coffee maker and bought cheap cookies. Food and drink impressed our parents so much at Open House that we had 60 percent of our parents come to conferences, an almost unheard of figure at my school. These methods we have developed for parent/teacher interaction have worked well. I truly believe most of our parents feel comfortable with their child's educational environment this year, and they feel that the teachers really have their students' best interests at heart.

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Most results of our program have been positive so far. We have created a close-knit community for our students and ourselves. My teammates are all men, and each of us has very different personalities, but we are all in our second and third year of teaching and so we're still green and optimistic. Because as a foursome we have grown into good friends, we have unintentionally furthered the creation of the family setting. The students know we "hang out" together, we like each other, and we really are united.

Because of the comfort level we have established with the students, they seem to be always with us. They come early to our rooms before

school. They stay with us at lunch. They stay after school. In fact, this fall, the four of us went to the Homecoming game together, and our kids came and sat with us then, too.

As a teacher, being on the team has made for the most comfortable and best year of teaching I have had so far. Because I am responsible to three other teachers, I am much more organized and on top of everything I am doing in my classroom. I have to plan and explain everything I do in much greater detail because I need it to fit with what the others are doing. In terms of behavior management, it is much easier to follow through on the guidelines because three other people are using the same ones. But most of all, we have found that having the same students and having the time to work together as professionals is a completely different experience from being a lone teacher. Whenever I need to talk about some of the situations of the day, I have three other people who know what I'm talking about and whom I'm talking about. We can easily track behavior problems and compare behaviors in different class settings. When we confront any problem behaviors, we have not only our own experiences with the student to draw from, but three other peoples' experiences as well. It's even nice to share amusing and positive student anecdotes with each other.

Being on the team has made me a better teacher and I think it has made the kids better students. I don't know why our district dumped the concept 20 years ago, but I'm glad they considered bringing teaming back. I can't remember what teaching alone feels like anymore.