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# School-University Collaboration: Everyone's A Winner

Carole Schulte Johnson  
Mary Hughes  
Rena Mincks

## **How did our collaboration develop?**

Mary and Rena are first grade teachers in the same elementary school. About five years ago, Carole spent her sabbatical year working with Chapter I students in the local public school district. At that time she and Mary often discussed Mary's Chapter I students. These discussions included general issues related to the teaching of literacy and it became apparent both had similar questions and concerns about approaches to teaching emergent and beginning readers.

Since her sabbatical, Carole was often the professor working with the university practicum students assigned to teachers in the local district. Mary and Rena regularly participated in the program, so Carole would meet with them to discuss the preservice students in their classrooms. During these meetings, Mary and Carole continued their discussions regarding emergent and beginning literacy and Carole began to share related articles (Bracey, 1992; Cunningham, 1991; Cunningham, Hall and Defee, 1991; Eldredge, 1991; McIntyre, 1992; Taylor, Short, Frye, and Shearer, 1992). These informal discussions laid the basis for the collaboration.

During the discussions, Mary indicated she was interested in changing her program but had not decided how to revise it. Although her program included regular reading of self-selected books, process writing and invented spelling, she felt her time was too tied up with homogeneous basal groups, thus requiring many children to work on their own for much of the literacy period. Based on her readings and experiential knowledge, she wanted to give more individual help, yet also provide a structured approach to the teaching of literacy strategies.

During spring of 1992, Mary was enthusiastic about one of the articles from Carole (Cunningham, Hall and Defee, 1991), because it contained the elements she believed desirable in an emergent/beginning literacy program. The article described a first grade program which included four components, approximately equal in time: reading real books, writing, whole class basal, and a structured approach to word recognition. The whole class basal, which included comprehension and the structured approach to word recognition components incorporated teaching strategies, reviewing and reinforcing them while the reading real books and writing components provided time to practice those strategies and involved individual help from the teacher. Other adults, such as parents, Chapter 1 teachers, reading specialists, aides, and the university collaborator, also could provide attention during these times.

Mary shared her excitement about this approach with her principal, the other first grade teachers, and Carole. This led to a decision to develop an Action Research plan and to request district approval to pilot a similar program. Rena was interested and decided to participate in the research. Carole was asked to be the "critical friend" whose role was to continue to share her research and knowledge background as the

teachers would share their knowledge and experience. From the beginning, all three were involved in the development of the Action Research plan. Thus the research was a collaborative effort, not one basically defined or developed by the university collaborator and then implemented by the teachers.

The research plan presented a brief rationale, described the four components of the reading program, and listed some of the activities included within each component. The types of data to be collected at the beginning, middle, end, and throughout the year were specified. For instance, an attitude toward reading inventory was included for each time period. Measures to be given in the beginning of the year included the regular first grade reading inventory (developed by the local teachers) and sections from Clay's Diagnostic Survey (1986). Middle and end-of-year assessment was based on informal reading inventories as well as the usual assessments given by the first grade teachers. In addition, samples of children's writing were to be collected throughout the year and the teachers planned to keep anecdotal notes as well as weekly journals. The plan worked well, with minor changes made as the project developed. For example, in the fall we recognized it was necessary to specify which writings to include. We chose two elements: the children's writing journals (self selected topics written once or twice a week) and a set of writings related to their ongoing course work throughout the year. The latter were identified on a month to month basis. During the spring it was decided to obtain monthly timed samples of their writing vocabularies, related to Clay's writing vocabulary in the Diagnostic Survey.

### **What were the greatest benefits to you as a teacher?**

**Mary:** As a teacher I appreciated the opportunity not only to listen to, but to be heard by, an education professor whom I respect. She brought us access to new information

and research. Then through a mutual exchange of ideas and reactions, we began to look at old ideas in new ways. An example of this was Carole's bringing to my attention the Cunningham, et al. (1991) article which led to our collaboration. It seemed to be just the type of program I had been seeking.

**Rena:** I agree. Teaching is a complex task, not a bag of academic, management and curricular tricks that you reach into and apply to the classroom. I reflect upon how I can make the best use of both the students' and my own time, while accommodating various learning styles, in order to attain appropriate educational goals. All of these considerations are necessary in each subject area. Sharing helps me answer some of my own questions. For instance, one student who in March was an emerging reader consistently chose books he could not read. He did not accept my suggestions of appropriate books, even when I handed several to him. I tried Mary's and Carole's suggestions and he did begin to make more appropriate selections.

**Carole:** I appreciated that Mary and Rena were willing to take the risk and share their classrooms with me; after all, to some extent they regularly put themselves on display as teachers. Since my previous K-12 teaching was in the intermediate grades and also with special needs readers, I was limited to a cognitive understanding of emergent and beginning reading behaviors. Working with these first graders reinforced the distinction between talking about teaching and actually teaching, where decisions must be made. I worked with first graders who came to school reading picture books and chapter books, as well as first graders who had no sight words and could not name or write any letters of the alphabet if they were not in the child's first name. Unless children had limited English proficiency, they usually understood stories read

to them. However, this was not necessarily true for stories they read. Some concentrated so hard on figuring out the words that they did not remember much of the story. However, later in the year as these same children became fluent readers, they had no trouble with comprehension. Now in my teacher education courses I can refer to these examples.

**Rena:** It's easy for teachers to become very protective of students. This can result in cloudy vision regarding them. I may think I am doing the best for a student while someone without my attachment will see how I may not be enabling that student to develop the wings necessary to fly. Collaboration helps clear my vision, and sharing suggestions and experiences, whether successful or not, is an avenue for my growth as a teacher. Take the boy I referred to previously. I wanted to avoid continually enabling him to pretend to read; yet I wanted to maintain his self-esteem. When I presented my dilemma to Mary and Carole, their ideas helped me balance the two.

**Mary:** As we put theory into practice, the collaboration provided support to take risks and the flexibility for each of us to fit our own teaching style. As we implemented the program and shared ideas, we realized that as long as we kept within the basic framework, the two classrooms did not have to be exact replicas of each other; for instance, I was able to have parent helpers several days a week during self-selected reading while Rena was not.

I know I made quicker decisions regarding children's reading because of the perspectives, experiences, research and backgrounds we each brought to the problem solving situations. This was feasible because the university collaborator became a part of the classroom on a weekly basis. In the past I used the various basal levels as a guide to the individual

students' progress. In the new program I couldn't use the basal as a guide since the class read it together. Thus I needed to rely on their reading in the self-selected books. I was uncomfortable because I thought I did not know as much about each child's development in reading as previously. Rena and Carole helped me realize that many of the self-selected books could be identified as comparable to various levels of the basals and when in doubt, I could ask a child to read from a book at a level I recognized. They helped me realize I did know about individual students' growth in reading and could knowledgeably discuss it with their parents.

**Carole:** As a teacher educator, I'm aware of the changes in the schools. However, since participating in these classrooms I *experienced* how much more complicated reading is today. Not only are there more problems in terms of number, but teachers need to be aware of problems such as physical and sexual abuse which previously were not recognized. The wide disparity among children in terms of the background knowledge they bring with them must be accommodated. For instance, at the beginning of the year, some children only used context, while some relied heavily on memory and did not use print. Except for those children who entered first grade as readers, most of the children seemed to go through a stage of reliance on sound. With these experiences, I can bring realistic situations into my college classes; for example, *How do you work with parents who show up two or three times a week and demand to know how their child is progressing?; How can you encourage parents to read regularly to their child?; and How does your program meet the diverse needs of the students?*

### **What were the main problems in collaborating?**

**Rena:** The only problem I have seen is the time factor. All of our schedules are so full, but I truly believe that for me,

changing a schedule and doing whatever I can to meet with others is well worth it. The benefits far outweigh the scheduling difficulties.

**Carole:** I agree. Although I was able to spend one half day a week in the two rooms working with and observing students, time to discuss what happened and do further planning was limited. Only short, brief sharing could be done during recess. We did eat lunch together and tried to preserve at least 10 minutes for each of us to do journal writing. However, interruptions from other teachers, office staff, parents and students did interfere. One result was that the questions/concerns of highest importance to each of us were usually first on the agenda. When I look back now, it is amazing how much sharing we were able to do.

**Mary:** Besides time for collaborating, time was needed to establish appropriate records for the project and to go through the proper channels within the district structure to obtain permission for the project. In addition I believe collegial relationships are important in schools, so I felt consideration needed to be given to the attitudes of my colleagues. Also, since I was vitally aware of how much I was gaining from the collaboration, during the course of the project I hoped I was giving my share.

### **What were the greatest benefits to you personally?**

**Carole:** It's hard for me to separate personal benefits from those to me as a teacher; however, as I reflect back upon the year, I know the Friday mornings I spent in the classrooms were the highlight of each week. I re-experienced the joys of working with children, getting to know them as individuals and trying to nudge them to develop their full reading potential. I was enthusiastic about observing the changes in the children's reading behaviors. In the spring as we ate



together and compared notes, we would celebrate for those children who were finally moving into the beginning reader stage.

**Rena:** Good elementary teachers need to be mentally alert the whole time they are in the classroom. This can lead to stress, particularly on days when you wonder if anything will go right! Collaboration provides a mini-support group. When I was down, just knowing I could share my concerns with Mary and Carole helped me face the day or the next week.

**Mary:** An important benefit to me personally was the sense of security the collaboration brought to my willingness to risk trying a new teaching style. This led to my growth as a teacher and professional. Because of this experience and the support we provided each other, I now am comfortable in assessing children's reading without reliance on the levels of the basal and also using the basal with the whole class rather than pacing ability groups differently.

**Rena:** I believe when we feel positive about our teaching we tend to feel positive about ourselves. I am a better teacher because the collaboration provided time to bounce new ideas and solutions around, a time for creativity. Yes, one person alone can be creative, but even creative people can blossom when others encourage and add to the ideas and creations. Besides, I don't know what I would do without having people from outside adding a glow of sunshine to my classroom. They may confirm my procedures and observations or give suggestions which help me grow as a teacher. An example is that at one point I felt many in the class were not reading during self-selected reading. Because of our discussions I decided to start this component with silent sustained reading, before beginning the one-on-one reading.

This helped students become involved in their reading so most students made better use of their time.

**Mary:** Since I tend to be intuitive, the collaboration offered a more objective, data-based interpretation of my intuition concerning how the children in my classroom were learning to read. This was largely due to the researcher's being a skilled listener and her ability to link my insights with current research. Teachers often share ideas but this project included interpretation and assessment from several different perspectives. Carole shared the mid-year data results with us and we made our interpretations in terms of the behaviors we observed in the classrooms.

**Carole:** The sharing of problems, concerns and alternative strategies was valuable for me also. I learned from the good ideas and insights which came from Mary and Rena. My high regard for teachers was reinforced through their willingness to risk, to change, to share problems and successes not only with each other but with me. In addition, it contributed to my professional growth because it required me to test my knowledge in the real life situations of the classrooms. My experience reinforced the value of the one-on-one reading during self-selected reading because it provided private opportunities to encourage using alternative strategies. I tried to finish each one-on-one reading with a comment about what I specifically liked about their reading that day. Invariably I was rewarded with a big smile.

### **Advice to collaborators**

**Mary:** My first advice to anyone even remotely considering collaboration is to *do it!* Choose to collaborate with someone who wants to learn from you and the children as well as do research and share important data. Then get the support and permission of your school administrator and

other appropriate district groups. Inform and involve the parents so they feel part of the project, and follow up with data and information to all.

**Carole:** Mary has an important point. All team members should see it as an opportunity to learn from each other and from the students. At times during our discussions we had different hypotheses. Sometimes we decided more information was needed. At other times, since the teachers spent more time observing and assessing their students, greater weight went to the teacher's opinion.

**Mary:** I recommend keeping a journal of dreams, data, observations, frustrations, and resolutions to problems. This can provide reminders for later sharing since so much happens daily in classrooms. I highly recommend the active and regular involvement of the university collaborator in the classroom. When other teachers and parents see collaboration taking place naturally, they have more confidence in the project and its results.

**Carole:** In fact, if the project is going to be truly collaborative, it's necessary for the university personnel to spend time in the classroom. However, final decisions — whether they be strategies to use, lessons to present, or data to be collected — must rest with the teachers.

**Rena:** Collaboration is a great stress reliever, and to me a necessity. When classrooms have 20 plus students with different learning styles and various levels of learning in a variety of academic areas, it is not possible for a teacher to do the best job using only personal insights. Collaboration provides an opportunity to discuss current trends in the classroom, components of the curriculum that are or are not working

and sharing ideas for working with individuals who provide a variety of challenges to teachers.

Without collaboration we probably would not have been as systematic in collecting and interpreting data. The data certainly support our decision to continue the program. That's why I agree with Mary — *do it!*

## Conclusion

While our journals, anecdotal notes and the data which is analyzed indicate the program was not a panacea — that is, all students did not become proficient readers — we are happy with the results and plan to continue it and encourage the other first grade teachers to do so also. There were important benefits for each of us.

**Carole:** I am much more knowledgeable and thus comfortable in discussing emergent and beginning reading in my teacher education classes. In addition I cherish the friendship which has developed between the three of us.

**Mary:** I wanted to revise my literacy program and I am so pleased to have found one which is successful and fits my teaching style. The collaboration also provided the support I needed, since questions arose as we implemented the program.

**Rena:** I value my growth as a teacher. The collaboration helped me clarify my thoughts and then make decisions regarding the next teaching steps.

**For the Students:** At the beginning of the year we wondered if there would be a negative effect on the above grade level readers, since the pacing in the basal program might be slower than if they were in an ability group, nor would they

receive the recognition of being in the highest group. The mid- and end-of-year informal reading inventories indicates this was not the case, since results placed the students in third to above fifth grade reading levels.

In both classes there were students who would have been in a below grade level group and in all probability they would have stayed there the whole year. During the spring each of us independently observed that some of these "slow to take off" readers began to blossom. Their oral reading improved both in fluency and in the variety of strategies they used, and during self-selected reading they chose appropriate level books and made better use of the time. Near the end of first grade, the informal reading inventories indicated many of these children were reading on grade level. Checking with their second grade teachers indicates they continue to do so.

We believe the biggest benefit to the first graders was that the program allowed them to have positive attitudes about themselves as readers even though they knew who the best and least able readers were. We attribute this to two factors: the students were not put in ability groups (and by implication labeled by the teachers) and each of us regularly made conscious efforts to inform and praise individuals specifically for improvements, no matter how small.

The whole class instruction enabled us to teach literacy strategies but also freed our time (since we didn't have several more groups to fit in) so we could individually support and encourage students to apply appropriate strategies, no matter where they were on the literacy continuum.

From our multiple perspectives, reviewing our journals and the data we have analyzed, we are in agreement that the program itself, while allowing students to view themselves as

readers, did not have negative effects for any group of children or for any individual child.

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