

**Henry Jackman Award 2012 Essay:**

**Capacity Building & Collaboration In and Beyond the Classroom**

An effective and dynamic teacher models lifelong learning for students and empowers youth to reach their full potential in their education and lives. Reaching one's full potential is in large part the result of effective collaboration with others. Drawing on Gandhian philosophy, the pursuit of individual perfection in a Gandhian sense can only be achieved "in the cooperative mutuality of human community" (Gutek, 2011, p. 281). Accordingly, to teach effectively, teachers must facilitate collaborative learning opportunities in the classroom. Furthermore, they themselves must collaborate with other professionals and community members as they work toward the common goal of providing the highest possible quality of instruction and care to their students.

Collaboration in the classroom may take the form of cooperative learning. John Myers defines cooperative learning as "an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual helpfulness (i.e. positive interdependence)" (personal communication, October 5, 2011). Cooperative learning plays to students' natural strengths, and satisfies students' social, developmental, and learning needs (Gibbs & Ushijima, 2008). During my practicum placement at Sir John A. Macdonald Collegiate Institute I implemented these ideas by facilitating a cooperative learning assignment in a Grade 9 Academic Geography class. The lesson required students to collaborate in small groups, and then as a whole class to explore, interpret, and apply immigration and population concepts. As a result of the cooperative learning structure of the lesson, all students were actively and happily engaged in their learning.

Effective teachers collaborate with other professionals. At Sir John A. Macdonald C.I., I had the opportunity to participate in the school's "Student Success Dialogues." Teachers, educational assistants, social workers, and administration collaborated to share their knowledge, best practices, and experiences with a focus on supporting grade 9 students that had been identified as "at-risk" of not earning school credits. I observed and participated in a rich exchange between caring professionals that resulted in diverse concrete student support strategies. In designing a quiz for a Grade 9 Applied Geography class, I collaborated with the Academic Resource Centre staff as well as my mentor teacher. By drawing on the knowledge and expertise of my colleagues, I was able to create a quiz that effectively served students with exceptionalities. I also sought out the opportunity, and enjoyed the privilege, of observing and participating in Visual Art and ESL classes. As a result, I learned ideas that can be applied across disciplines, and the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. These varied collaborations at Sir John A. Macdonald have reinforced for me the value of collaboration within my professional learning community. The ideas I learned expanded my capacity as a teacher, and inform my teaching practices and philosophy.

Teachers must go beyond collaborating with professionals within their school to include the broader community. For example, building connections with parents, and encouraging community agencies and organizations to engage with the school and its resources is critical to integrating newcomers, and to "fostering community ownership of the school" (*Many Roots, One Voice*, 2005, p.46). In the United Kingdom and Australia, schools are part of an integrated system of housing and social supports that combat youth homelessness (S. Gaetz, personal communication, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Equally,

collaboration between teachers, the school, and the various supports available in the local community can help teachers to more effectively support LGBTQ youth (G. Metcalfe, personal communication, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012). In so doing, teachers expand their capacity to effectively support students and the broader school community.

When teachers collaborate with community members and professionals, they access a breadth and depth of social capital that enables them to better support their students. Integrating cooperative learning into the classroom facilitates opportunities for students to engage in collaboration with their peers, thereby improving the quality of the learning experience. By effectively integrating these three levels of collaboration into their professional practice, teachers expand their capacity to support and facilitate students' learning, development, and happiness.

## **References**

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