Fear, Mistrust, and Misunderstanding in the Teachers' Lounge:
An Ethnography
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Many of us understand the power of collaboration and reflective practice within Critical Friends Groups. However, we need to ask ourselves the question, do teachers informally create networks to support their teaching?

Teaching is a characteristically lonely vocation, offering the practitioner only limited opportunities for adult-to-adult interaction in the course of the average workday. Once the classroom door is closed at the start of the day, each teacher becomes separated from the rest of the school, a characteristic which has created an isolationist and alienating culture (Little, 1990; Rogers & Babinski, 2002) endemic to the teaching profession (Court, 1999). The individualistic nature of our educational system (Hargreaves, 1980) and the rigidity of the academic structure and schedule (Court, 1999) hinder teacher interaction during the workday. Moreover, current educational reforms and new curricula have added to the teacher workload, leaving even less time for professional interaction on a daily basis.

I decided to explore this idea of informal support networks in an ethnography that I conducted for the last two years in an inner city K-8 school. I wanted to explore if, where, and how teachers informally support each others' teaching. The teachers at John E. Farmer School[1] were interviewed about their social relationships, observed during their lunch periods, and completed a survey. Although the objective of this project was to look at social interactions, an interesting picture of how teachers design safe congregational spaces started to emerge.

At Farmer School, the lunch hour is the only consistent time in the day when the teachers can connect with other adults. Many teachers discussed during their interview how lunch-time was important because it helped to alleviate the isolation of the teaching profession. What became an important basis for informal interactions between teachers was the space where the interactions took place.

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required to provide a formal space for teachers to interact (i.e. the teachers' lounge). At many schools in the district, lack of space is a constant issue. Farmer School is no exception, as it is a school built for a capacity of 500 students, but actually holds 900. Due to this overcrowding, Farmer School combined its teachers' lounge and Home and School Office at the start of the 2005-2006 school year. The Home and School Office is run by volunteer parents. As a result, many of the teachers indicated that they no longer view this space as a place for teachers to informally interact and to have open and honest conversations about their practice. For example, Cindy, a thirty-year veteran teacher, has been working at Farmer for twenty years. In an interview, she indicated her feelings about a teachers' lounge filled with volunteer parents.

"To speak for myself, it's not that I don't want to socialize with the extra staff members who are not professional teachers, it's not a snobby issue, but I don't want to chill out, I don't want parents looking at me like, oh look, she's never working . . . I like those people and everything and I do schmooze with them when I see them in the hallway, but to do it all the time, you know, to kick back and relax all the time in one specific space, I never really want it to look like I'm never working."

Cindy's feelings reflected that of other teachers as well, that the new designated teachers' lounge is actually a space for parents. Thus, it is not a space conducive to relaxing. Two new teachers did not even know that there was a teachers' lounge. Consequently, teachers rarely used the space for informal interaction. Throughout the observations, I never once witnessed teachers using the space to socialize. If teachers entered the space, it was to make photocopies on the available machine.

This view of teachers and parents together brings up interesting questions. What does it mean that teachers feel they cannot relax around parents? The teachers and the parents are at the school with the same objective of supporting the students, but the teachers seem to fear being misunderstood around the parents. What would happen if the teachers were misunderstood? Would their abilities as a teacher be questioned? Laura, a twenty-two-year teacher veteran who has been at the

[1] *The name of the school and any people are all pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.*

school for the last twelve years, explains her fears as to why she chooses not to use the new lounge.

"Personally, I don't use the teachers' lounge, but my opinion is negative because I find that at lunch I just want to talk about children. If I had a really bad day with the child I'd feel better if I could just say, you know, so-and-so drove me crazy today or didn't do any work, and I don't feel comfortable saying that because there are parents in there because it's the Home and School Room. You don't know who's going to carry that, that's confidential. If I say that in front of other teachers, that's not going back to that child, I would hope. But if you say that, you're never sure who's there and it may not be their parent but they could be friends with . . . it's an uncomfortable situation so I would not use it, even, and I love the Home and School folks, nothing against them, but it's just not, I don't feel comfortable because we [teachers] do talk about kids."

Again, Laura discusses how teachers venting frustrations or getting other ideas with fellow teachers can be misunderstood by the parents. The fear of generating gossip is a risk she is not willing to take. Yet, she explains her trust that other teachers will not share the information exchanged. Why are the teachers more trusted than the parents? Is it because they can sympathize and understand the practice? Laura is not the only teacher in the school with these concerns about conversation. One group of kindergarten-to-second-grade teachers had eaten in the previous teachers' lounge. After the combined lounge was set up, they tried for a couple of weeks to eat in there. Sandy, one of the kindergarten teachers, explained at length in an interview that because there were so many parents and students coming in to buy pretzels or candy, that it was just not a space for their lunch-time conversations.

Since the change of space for the teachers' lounge occurred, the teachers have created alternative congregational spaces for interactions and discussions about practice. Empty classrooms, offices, or the library are now used during lunch hours. Teachers have purchased small refrigerators and microwaves for several of the classrooms, in order to use those spaces for social lunch-time. Each of the three floors in the school now has a "teacher-made" congregational space. Some teachers even refer to their classroom lunchtime space as the teachers' lounge. Teachers separated into the different congregational spaces based on teaching level, teaching experience, and the actual age of the teacher.

Reflecting back on my ethnography and my own teaching experience, I find myself sympathizing with the teachers. I, too, do not think that I would find myself comfortable talking about my practice or students around parents. I remember that when a parent or student would walk into our lunch-time, the conversation would shut down. My observations and experience make me ask: what is really at the root of our fear and mistrust?   ∎

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