In recent research on teachers’ professional communities, WCER researcher Bruce King and teacher-researcher John Gunn found that the work of high school teaching teams is complex and often contradictory. Even in the best teams, hierarchies can emerge, tendencies toward individualism can persist, and genuine agreement can be elusive. The concern for pedagogy and student achievement can easily be thwarted by issues of control and micro-political struggles for status and authority. Consistent with other research, they found that relations of power and influence at the school level have dramatic effects on the nature of teacher collaboration, professional inquiry, and curricular and pedagogical innovation.

Gunn and King explored critical dilemmas in the development of a high school inter-disciplinary humanities teaching team in an urban high school over a 10-year period. Gunn was a teacher and member of the team during this period. He joined the team in 1989, the third year of its existence, when it was composed of four teachers and a team leader. Initially, Gunn began this project as action research that was supported by a study of school reform in which the school participated. Gunn had written reflections on his experiences with the team from 1989 and, as part of the action research, he received feedback on his observations from team members. Discussions between King and Gunn evolved into an analysis of Gunn’s reflections and documentation and, ultimately, a paper based on them. To guide their analysis they used a framework that focused on the micro-politics of teachers’ relationships as well as the research base related to professional community. As they defined it, a strong, school wide professional community consists of:

1. a clear shared purpose for student learning;
2. collective understanding of, and responsibility for, instructional practice to achieve learning goals;
3. professional inquiry by staff members to address the challenges they face; and
4. opportunities for staff members to influence the school’s activities and policies.

Growth in phases

During this time period, the team experienced three phases in its development. The first phase was one of consolidated power in which curriculum, pedagogy, and the discourse within team meetings were fairly well controlled. Team leaders and senior members of the team placed a priority on keeping pace with the scheduled curriculum and directed discussion away from...
This issue of WCER Research Highlights approaches the subject of high school reform from a number of perspectives. The nation’s 15,000 high schools occupy an increasingly critical and central position in the changing economic and cultural landscape. Despite increasing graduation rates and student achievement over the past decade, high school diplomas have been described as “pathways or tickets to nowhere.” High schools have been characterized differentially as factories, shopping malls, or learning organizations featuring academies or small learning communities capable of maximizing and personalizing student learning. Following the establishment of several high school reform networks over the past decade, several state education agencies and foundations have invested heavily in creating new approaches to high school reform and restructuring. At the beginning of the 21st century, the role of high schools in transforming and/or sustaining American values, aims, and futures has never been contested more intensely.

This issue of Research Highlights focuses on instructional elements, organizational structures, and interpersonal dynamics, all of which contribute to improving instruction and student achievement in high schools. We read about findings from UW-Madison education professors Bradford Brown and Adam Gamoran, and researcher Bruce King. Their recent research addresses the topics of making English classrooms more engaging and effective, developing more effective teaching teams, and developing students’ interpersonal skills. For nearly 40 years WCER has been an influential force in the production and dissemination of knowledge about effective learning, teaching, assessment, and organizational practices in grades pre-K through college. This year I am pleased to serve as interim director as the School of Education conducts a national search for WCER’s next director.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Approaches to Reform

L. Allen Phelps
Interim Director
Professor of Educational Administration

issues emerging in teachers’ classes. In the context of this pressure to keep pace, teachers became reluctant to raise issues for fear of being seen as struggling. The top-down structure of authority also conveyed the message that staff members were not expected to initiate inquiry regarding their classes or pedagogical issues. In failing to redefine the authority structure of the school, teachers acquiesced in a culture that limited their voice in the school, creating cynicism about their work and about leadership.

In phase two, the exercise of power became much more decentralized but teachers reverted to a form of individualism. They differed on how they structured reading assignments, the degree to which they allowed students freedom to interpret literature, their requirements for student exhibitions, the way they taught student writing, the way they provided feedback to students on their writing, and the standards they used to evaluate student work. These individual choices were influenced by different pedagogical orientations that, for the most part, continued to go unaddressed by the team.

In phase three, the team was much more successful in generating consensus on important issues through shared power. Importantly, new staff had joined the team. Because they had not been involved with earlier patterns and conflicts on the team, or, perhaps, because of their own dispositions, the new members encouraged a shift in the ways teachers related to each other and facilitated significant gains in the team’s collaborative work. Common assessments, a framework for student essays and evaluations of them, and critical feedback among members on implementing the curriculum were some of the accomplishments of the team during this period.

Lessons learned

From the experience of the teaching team during this 10-year period, Gunn and King derived the following five lessons.

One, it is immensely difficult, if not impossible, to separate issues of interpersonal relations from substantive issues. In particular, power, recognition, and leadership could not be separated from staff discourse about teaching and learning.

Two, the creation of teaching teams implies the recognition of teachers’ potential to engender effective school improvement.

— L. Allen Phelps
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This empowerment is important. If society wants to help students grow into independent and knowledgeable thinkers who are capable of democratic deliberation, society must expect teachers to be similarly capable—and seen as such by students. To create an effective culture of democratic professionalism, school leaders must expect and model professional discourse, including the establishment of norms of critical feedback and collegiality.

Three, teachers must clarify their models of and expectations for teaching and learning. For some time, teacher teaming in this study was bedeviled by the team's inability to address certain pedagogical issues, such as the degree of disciplinary knowledge students should be taught and the ways in which writing should be used in the development of students' thinking.

Four, the evolution of effective teacher teams takes time. Teams need time to work through their differences and establish trust. To the extent possible, membership in teaching teams should be considered a long-term commitment. Teams that are able to develop collective authority and accountability seem to further teacher professionalism and morale.

Five, teacher teams offer an alternative model for school governance to the one currently in ascendancy, which emphasizes centralized control through national or state curriculum standards, testing, and accountability requirements. Professional cultures and learning communities that exhibit collaboration, democratic deliberation, inquiry, trust, and risk taking among teachers may be key to a school's capacity for instructional changes that lead to high and equitable student learning.

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Material in this article was originally published in different form in Urban Education, vol. 38, no. 2 (March 2003), pp. 173-195.

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More Coherence Would Benefit High School English

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For more information, contact Gamoran at Gamoran@ssc.wisc.edu

*Four criteria suggested by UW-Madison professor of English Martin Nystrand and SUNY's Arthur Applebee in their research for the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA). Material in this article was published in different form in The High School Journal, vol. 86, no. 2 (Dec. 2002/Jan. 2003), pp. 1-13. Funding for this research was provided by CELA and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
Preparing Adolescents For Adult Relationships

The emerging information age appears to put a premium on cognitive skills. But adolescents’ development of social skills is, in fact, more important than ever before, according to UW-Madison education professor Bradford Brown and colleagues.

In studies recently published by Cambridge University Press, Brown and colleagues* recently reviewed a range of trends in the relationships and institutions that structure the daily social life of adolescents and adults, including families, friendships, high schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. They found globalization and other worldwide changes might be adding to the repertoire of social resources and competencies that adolescents will need to function effectively as adults. Increasingly important are skills for social versatility: abilities to operate effectively in multiple types of relationships—hierarchical, horizontal, and intimate. More than ever, adults need to feel comfortable in multiple social worlds, including

- the increasingly diverse and fluid worlds of family,
- heterogeneous occupational worlds,
- male and female worlds, and
- worlds defined by ethnicity, language, and religion.

The study aimed to determine the extent to which adolescence is a discernible stage of life in various regions of the world and to examine how this period is experienced in each region. The study analyzed how the experiences of adolescents are changing and how their life trajectories are being altered as the societies around them change. Brown and colleagues asked an international team of scholars with extensive background studying young people to comment on the nature of adolescence in 8 specific regions of the world. The scholars were asked to summarize and evaluate the character and conditions of adolescence within their regions of the world.

A couple of centuries ago, the world consisted of many isolated, insular social worlds. Now these worlds are interconnected. Boundaries still exist between the spheres of male and female, Muslim and Christian, and gay and straight, but they are more permeable, and competence in daily life often requires the ability to move across these barriers. The general trends in social life require adults not only to understand more of these worlds but also to adapt their language and behavior to function effectively and exercise personal agency within them. As the world becomes more crowded and the number of regional ethnic conflicts increases, young people need to be equipped with skills for bridging group differences.

Adolescence is a particularly important period for acquiring a versatile social repertoire. For one thing, adolescents have available time that they will not have later for learning new languages, social rules, and vernaculars, and for experiencing cycles of trial and error in relationships. Adolescence may also be a foundational period for developing attitudes and habits related to versatility. Other research has found that, across nearly all cultures, adolescence is when people adopt their “social persona.” If adolescents adopt social personae that are rigid and closed, it is much harder to change them and expand their social repertoire later.

Although the demands on adolescents are increasing, Brown notes that opportunities to develop a fuller social repertoire are also expanding. Brown’s optimism is tempered, however, by concern that these opportunities are not as complete as they need to be, creating new categories of adolescent “haves” and “have-nots.”

Opportunities and obstacles

School offers adolescents a significant opportunity to enlarge their social repertoire. Schooling creates opportunities for peer interaction—between classes, at lunch, and while going to and from school. Schooling expands the amount of time and the personal importance

Fostering adolescents’ social development and versatility requires environments of mutual understanding and trust.
that adolescents give to peer relationships. Many schools also increase adolescents’ contact with peers who differ in ethnicity, religion, social class, and gender. On the other hand, opportunities for diverse contact vary widely. Residential segregation by ethnicity and socioeconomic status often limits the diversity of local schools. The persistence of same-sex schools in some parts of the world, the current growth of elite private and religious schools in many localities, and the growth of home schooling in the U.S. prevent many youth from obtaining a diverse social experience.

The most important opportunities for developing the social repertoire adolescents need for a successful transition to adulthood derive from relationships themselves. Many psychologists believe that the foundation for interpersonal competence lies in young children’s experience of secure attachment relationships in early childhood; and it has been argued that the experience of family disruption leads to the development of insecure or avoidant attachment patterns that handicap formation of secure relationships later in life.

Future trends will leave many youth with few or no relationships to help them with the transition into adulthood. These include youth with no families or small families, youth for whom frequent moves have repeatedly disrupted relationships, youth who are dispositionally introverted, and middle-class youth in societies in which pressure to perform academically squeezes out time for cultivation of relationships.

Deficits can also be expected among youth who do have networks of kin and community but live in communities that lack the kind of social capital needed for modern life. This includes youth raised in isolated rural communities and those living in hypersegregated urban ghettos that are low on social capital.

To enter adulthood, adolescents need a network of people they can draw on to help secure instrumental needs. Life in a heterogeneous global society calls for more social capital of a kind that provides bridges to diverse social, cultural, and institutional worlds. Those who are entering adulthood need to be connected to those who can help them navigate systems of education, employment, housing, and health care. Having a social network is also important to existential and emotional needs, especially as young adults attempt to make their way in a large impersonal society.

**Future trends and policies**

Social policies need to be directed at helping all youth form lasting relationships that provide social capital and support, and special attention needs to be given to promoting these relationships for youth identified as potential have-nots. As we move further into the 21st century, Brown says, adults who have only one form of relating and mastery of only one social world are likely to be increasingly handicapped. To earn one’s keep, to care for one’s relatives, and to maintain a stable existence as an adult in the new global society, it will be increasingly important to be able to move between heterogeneous types of relationships and social systems and be able to operate effectively within each.

Fostering adolescents’ social development and versatility requires environments of mutual understanding and trust. The good news is that such environments can be created. These environments are most likely to occur in schools and other settings when the following conditions are met:

- Students come together in positions of equal status;
- Students engage in the cooperative (rather than competitive) pursuit of a shared goal;
- Interaction occurs between individual members of groups;
- Adults in the setting vocally support the goal of intergroup understanding, while also acknowledging group differences; and
- Adults function as role models, pathfinders, peace-makers, and mentors.

**For more information, contact Brown at bbrown@facstaff.wisc.edu**

*Coauthors with Brown were Reed Larson, Suzanne Wilson, Frank Furstenberg, and Suman Verma.

*Material in this article was published in different form in the Journal of Research on Adolescence, vol. 12, no. 1 (2002), pp. 31-68.*

Brown’s prior research for WCER was funded by the Spencer Foundation.

**SEE ALSO:**


More Coherence Would Benefit High School English

Perhaps more than any other subject, English can offer high school students opportunities to engage in creative thinking, develop argumentative reasoning, defend a point of view, and contribute ideas that illuminate the thinking of peers and teachers. And the higher the track or ability group, the more likely are students to encounter content that is most consistent with high-quality English instruction.

High-quality instruction should be available to all students. But some argue that, in principle, tracking is an appropriate way to meet the needs of different students. Others question that strategy, including UW-Madison professor of education and sociology Adam Gamoran. Gamoran argues that lower track students cannot possibly benefit from spending less class time on writing, being asked less often to demonstrate understanding, or being less frequently challenged to use their minds.

In a recent national study, Gamoran and colleague William Carbonaro (now at the University of Notre Dame) documented instructional quality and sources of inequality in the types of English instruction found in different types of classes. They offered their findings as a baseline for understanding how much is yet to be accomplished in the reform of high school English.

Gamoran and Carbonaro found that most students in high school English classrooms do not receive high-quality instruction in which:

- the relationship between teachers and students is recognized as central to the quality of instruction;
- teachers provide opportunities for students to have a voice in choosing the content of their own instruction; and
- interactive discourse raises expectations for students as thinkers and learners and encourages students to become engaged in their studies.

More Coherence Would Benefit High School English

Gamoran and Carbonaro’s study addressed four constructs of quality in English instruction: (a) quantity of content, (b) coherence, (c) student voice, and (d) content emphasis.*

Quantity of content: Gamoran and Carbonaro found students in high school English classes usually involved in reading novels, plays, or essays (averaging just under 10 times a month on these activities). Yet students prepared only about eight assignments of any serious length (one page or more) over the course of a term. On average, students reported spending less than 2 hours per week on homework for English class; less than 10% of students reported spending 4 hours or more on homework.

Instructional coherence: Examples of coherence included discussing completed assignments, discussing readings, and writing reports about readings. Gamoran and Carbonaro found some aspects of coherence in English classrooms; for example, 87% of teachers reported discussing completed assignments most or all of the time, and 86% of teachers reported discussing assigned reading at least twice each week. But students prepared written reports on their readings less than once a week.

Student voice: Neither teachers nor students offered much evidence of a strong voice for students in English instruction. Student-led discussion occurred barely twice a month, and oral reports hardly more than once a month. Moreover, students generally did not choose their own reading selections. Students indicated they were asked to show understanding and that they felt challenged about twice weekly, rather than every day, which is the ideal.

Content emphasis: Among the content areas, literature study received the heaviest emphasis, with 92% of students encountering moderate or heavy emphasis. Within the writing domain, teachers emphasized formal writing (80%) more than more-demanding analytical writing (55%). There was still a relatively strong emphasis on grammar and vocabulary even as late as 10th grade. “Heavy” or “moderate” emphasis on grammar and vocabulary was experienced by roughly 75% and 80% of students, respectively.
Access to Quality: private vs. public schools

Gamoran and Carbonaro found important differences between students’ experiences with quantity of content, instructional coherence, student voice, and content emphasis, depending on the schools they attended, their track within the school, and the characteristics of their teachers. One important difference was in homework time. Whereas students in public schools reported being assigned about 1.75 hours of English homework a week, students in private schools averaged close to 2.5 hours a week. Thus, private school students averaged 24 more hours of English homework than public school students over the course of a 32-week school year.

Students in public schools said they were asked to show they really understood the material an average of 7.7 times a month, compared with averages of 8.7, 8.9, and 9.9 in Catholic, other religious private, and nonreligious private schools, respectively.

The frequency of oral reports was greatest in Catholic schools (close to twice a month, compared with about once a month in other types of schools), but Catholic school students choose their own readings about one third as often as other students.

Public schools were less likely than private schools to emphasize literature, formal writing, and vocabulary, but more likely to emphasize grammar.

The most notable difference in content was in analytical writing, with public schools less likely to emphasize this form of writing than private schools.

These results suggest that private schools assign tasks that are more conducive to high-quality instruction (analytical writing, formal writing, and literature study) at slightly higher rates than public schools.

Access to Quality: honors vs. general tracks

Gamoran and Carbonaro found that students in honors classes did the most reading, writing, and homework, whereas students in general classes did the least. With regard to coherence, discussion of completed assignments and written reports of reading were roughly similar across tracks, but marked differences existed for discussion of readings—again favoring the honors classes.

The two areas that were least conducive to high-quality instruction were (a) emphasis on vocabulary (equal across tracks) and (b) emphasis on grammar (more prevalent in the lower tracks). Again, the lower the track, the less likely students were to encounter content that was most consistent with high-quality instruction.

Gamoran and Carbonaro found that inequality in access to high-quality English instruction related primarily to tracking within schools, rather than individual differences among students.

Conclusions

Two main findings emerged from Gamoran and Carbonaro’s study. First, most of the high school English instruction they studied did not meet high standards for either quantity or quality:

1. On average, students spent little time on homework, and they carried out few sustained writing assignments.
2. Reading, writing, and discussion were coherent in some ways but not others; in particular, few written reports on readings were required, and little class time was spent on writing development.
3. Students had little voice in the course of class sessions: they rarely led discussions, gave oral reports, or chose their own readings.
4. Despite some evidence that students felt challenged and were asked to show understanding, this was far from universal.
5. Most students engaged with content that was conducive to high-quality instruction, such as literature study, analytical writing, and formal writing. However, there were also surprisingly high levels of emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, tasks unlikely to promote the kinds of classroom conversations that engage students.

In their second major finding, Gamoran and Carbonaro reported that a student’s track position was the best predictor of the type of English instruction he or she received. In contrast, there were few consistent differences in instruction based on students’ personal characteristics, their schools, or their teachers. It was hardly surprising to find a sustained pattern of differences across tracks, since track differences in high school English have been reported in many smaller scale studies.

Generally, the entire sample of classes turned out to be pretty noninvolving places. As Gamoran and Carbonaro expected, passive activities dominated at all track levels. Moreover, students in any ability group had limited opportunities to answer open-ended questions, to work in cooperative learning groups, to direct the classroom activity, or to make decisions about what happened in class.

The most important reforms for high school English pertain to all classes, not just those designated as lower tracks. All classes would benefit from greater coherence across activities and subjects and from greater incorporation of students’ ideas and experiences into the ongoing flow of lessons.

(continued on page 3 . . )
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