1. Parallel Play

Parallel play, a wonderful concept from the preschool literature, is thought to be a primitive stage of human development through which 2- and 3-year-olds soon pass on their way to more sophisticated forms of interaction. To illustrate, imagine two 3-year-olds busily engaged in opposite corners of a sandbox. One has a shovel and a bucket; the other has a rake and a hoe. At no time do they share their tools, let alone collaborate to build a sandcastle. They may inadvertently throw sand in each other's face from time to time, but they seldom interact intentionally. Although in close proximity for a long period of time, each is so self-absorbed, so totally engrossed in what he or she is doing, that the two of them will go on for hours working in isolation.

Parallel play offers, of course, a perfect description of how teachers interact at many elementary, middle, and high schools. The term also aptly describes the relationship between one school principal and another whose school is only blocks away. One teacher summed it up with discouraging accuracy: “Here, we all live in our separate caves.” A playful(?) notice on the wall of a faculty lounge captured it even better: “We're all in this—alone.”

The abiding signature of parallel play in education is the self-contained classroom, with the door shut and a piece of artwork covering that little pane of glass. The cost of concealing what we do is isolation from colleagues who might cause us to examine and improve our practices.

2. Adversarial Relationships

I once heard a Boston school principal offer this sage observation: “We educators have drawn our wagons into a circle and trained our guns—on each other.”

Adversarial relationships take many forms in schools. Sometimes they are blatant: The 7th grade algebra teacher on one side of the hall lobs a metaphorical hand grenade into the classroom of the 8th grade geometry teacher on the other side, saying to parents, “You don't want your child in that classroom. All they do is fool around with blocks.” Reciprocal unfriendly fire is returned: “You don't want your child in that classroom; it's a grim, joyless place with desks in rows and endless worksheets.”

One principal concluded his remarks to a large parent group with—I think—a slip: “Here at John Adams Elementary School, we all live on the bleeding edge.”

No wonder so many teachers engage in parallel play. Barricaded behind their classroom doors, they escape the depleting conflicts so rampant among the adults outside.

More often, we educators become one another's adversaries in a more subtle way—by withholding. School people carry around extraordinary insights about their practice—about discipline, parental involvement, staff development, child development, leadership, and curriculum. I call these insights craft knowledge. Acquired over the years in the school of hard knocks, these insights offer every bit as much value to improving schools as do elegant research studies and national reports. If one day we educators could only disclose our rich craft knowledge to one another, we could transform our schools overnight.

Adversarial Relationships

But I find educators reluctant to make these gold nuggets available to others. Sadly, when one educator persists in repeating the failures of the past while another next door has great success, everyone loses.

When a teacher does place value on what she knows and musters up the courage and generosity of spirit to share an important learning—“I've got this great idea about how to teach math without ability-grouping the kids”—a common response from fellow teachers is, “Big deal. What's she after, a promotion?” Regrettably, as a profession, we do not place much value on our craft knowledge or on those who share it.

Just think. This June, thousands of teachers and principals will retire. With them will go all they have learned over the years, forever lost to the profession. The following September, newcomers will arrive to spend their careers painfully learning what those who just left had already figured out.

We also become one another's adversaries through competition. In the cruel world of schools, we become competitors for scarce resources and recognition. One teacher put it this way: “I teach in a culture of competition in which teaching is seen as an arcane mystery and teachers guard their tricks like great magicians.”

The guiding principles of competition are, “The better you look, the worse I look,” and “The worse you look, the better I look.” No wonder so many educators root for the failure of their peers rather than assist with their success.

3. Congenial Relationships

Fortunately, schools also abound with adult relationships that are interactive—and positive. We all see evidence of congeniality in schools. A lot of it seems to center around food: One teacher makes the coffee and pours it for a colleague. Or around the activities of daily living: A principal gives a teacher a ride home so she can care for her sick child.

Congenial relationships are personal and friendly. We shouldn't take them lightly; when the alarm rings at 6:00 in the morning, the alacrity with which an educator jumps out of bed and prepares for school is directly related to the adults with whom he or she will interact that day. The promise of congenial relationships helps us shut off that alarm each day and arise.

4. Collegial Relationships

Congenial relationships represent a precondition for another kind of adult relationship highly prized by school reformers yet highly elusive: collegiality. Of the four categories of relationships, collegiality is the hardest to establish.

Famous baseball manager Casey Stengel once muttered, “Getting good players is easy. Getting 'em to play together is the hard part.” Schools are full of good players. Collegiality is about getting them to play together, about growing a professional learning community.[1]

When I visit a school and look for evidence of collegiality among teachers and administrators—signs that educators are “playing together”—the indicators I seek are

- Educators talking with one another about practice.
- Educators sharing their craft knowledge.
- Educators observing one another while they are engaged in practice.
- Educators rooting for one another's success.