

Cooperative Learning and Working – Norway

Does your school treat its teachers in the same way it treats its children? Does it expect the same behaviors among the adults as it does among young people? Is there consistency between how you support the people you serve and how you work with the people who serve them?

Aronskolaa primary school, 45 kilometers southwest of Oslo, bases its principles for cooperative interaction and learning among teachers on the principles of learning and interaction among students. The cooperative learning that takes place in classrooms is also an organizing principle for teacher meetings.

In one of the classes, children talked about the goal of the Norwegian language lesson. They stood, “mixed up” by snaking around the room as in a game of musical chairs, and then found partners for a brief, reciprocal discussion. They started by talking about how they would cooperate, how they would discuss together, right down to the pitch of their voice. They stood and “mixed up” once more with different partners to discuss three difficult Norwegian words that have a *kj* sound.

Five of the most popular cooperative learning strategies developed by US theorist Spencer Kagan were listed on the classroom board. In “round robin” for example, children take turns to respond orally in their group. In “rally coach,” one partner coaches the other in solving a problem, then they exchange roles. In doing so, they explain aloud what they are thinking. These strategies are good for “listening, showing respect, and helping,” says the principal. The children are very familiar with the strategies. They clearly know what to do.

Groups are mixed ability with the highest and lowest in a group of four being “face partners” and those in between being “shoulder partners” “so they can help each other if one gets stuck.” This “stops the mind wandering” so that “more [of them] finish on time when they do [the work] together.”

The school staff meeting, at the end of the morning, exhibits many of the same principles and processes that are evident in the cooperative learning classroom. The meeting engages staff in determining the goals for the school and connecting this to the annual Quality Plan that the school compiles to share with the municipality.



There is ice cream and relaxed social conversation at the start of the meeting. Teachers also snake around each other, form pairs and then, for 30 seconds each, using the Kagan cooperative learning methods, they discuss what inspiration and motivation are. Now the task is to

return to their corners in groups the principal has carefully composed and discuss how to get students from being inspired to being motivated. The reason for this is to think about how a data-informed focus can result in teachers thinking about many students who are merely in the middle rather than high up the range of achievement results. In one of the groups, teachers talk about needing to pair up with someone to learn more about the cooperative learning structures. Another shares her wish to extend her repertoire of methods. After some intervention by the principal about their data compared with the district overall, teachers work quietly in groups on reviewing and revising statements they had drafted in relation to their school goals the previous week. Teachers raise examples that challenge their thinking, such as how to reconcile the mother who was concerned that her child was introverted and didn't want to be in groups all the time against the importance of helping children to become more social and ensuring that "it is not so easy for kids to hide any more."

The principal and vice principal "want teachers also to be leaders and big picture thinkers." The teachers work together on a range of things in teams. Some teams focus on specific topics where teachers share strategies in relation to reading, social skills, math, and cooperative learning, itself. Everyone has the opportunity to be in one of these groups, the principal explains. But in addition, teachers are also involved in "how they run the school; on developing the school and its directions." "They plan the next meetings as they know what the next step is." This includes deciding what the priorities will be and what kind of culture they will have. "There is no way you fall asleep in our staff meetings," the principal says.

In many schools around the world, teacher collaboration or professional communities translate into working on specific aspects of pedagogy or the curriculum that have immediate or short-term impact on teachers' own classrooms classroom. The big picture is left to the principal and the senior management. But at Aronskolaa, all teachers can see what they are part of, how they contribute, and where their responsibilities lie. The big picture belongs to everybody.

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