

Chapter 4-4

You Are Not Alone

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I stood alone in my very first classroom, unsure where to begin. The ninth-grade students were coming the following day, and I had no idea what I would teach. I had spent the past week preparing my classroom. The previous teacher had retired and left everything behind for me. Instead of walking into an empty room, I had inherited another teacher's left-behind career, and it was overwhelming. I chose a corner to begin clearing and threw away more things than I kept. Little by little, I progressed and began uncovering the contents of my moving boxes. Now I stood in my newly decorated classroom, excited to be here finally, and I had no idea where to begin teaching. It seems funny now. I had done so much work to prepare for this day but had given so little thought to the contents of the lessons I would be teaching. I picked up the geography textbook assigned to this course. Opening chapter 1, I thought, "I guess I will start here."

I made my next decision very haphazardly, yet it set me on a path that would ultimately shape my professional career. I walked next door to the other new teacher and asked, "What will you teach this week?" Although I do not recall what she said, what we did in that moment profoundly affected me. We began to co-labor.

It was August 1998, and neither of us knew of the work of Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker or the book they had just released outlining the Professional Learning Communities at Work model. We did not think we needed to focus on learning rather than teaching. We had no idea how to focus on data rather than on good intentions. What Michelle and I knew was that we needed one another. That day, we began building a collaborative culture that would dominate my career. This one element has propelled me to any success I have had in this career.

ALONE IN A CROWD

Throughout my teacher preparation courses, I do not recall hearing about the loneliness that can occur for teachers in the classroom. Having been employed since I was 15, I have a very strong work ethic. But this was my first professional job. At age 23, I was unprepared for the overwhelming pressure of responsibility for other people's success. I was surrounded by people every day, just as I had been in my fast-food job, but as the teacher, I was the only authority in the classroom. When the door closed, I was alone in a crowd. I could not have remained in that state had I not consciously decided to work with others. Although I enjoyed my time with the students, those moments of collaboration with my peers fueled me to carry on when I struggled.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY BEGAN

When Michelle and I began co-laboring, we walked across the hallway to invite the veteran teacher to work with us. It did not take long for us to recognize that he had no interest in collaborating with us. He had made lesson plans for the year. I was too green to become offended by his words. We walked back across the hallway and got to work. Although that school year was stressful and exhausting, it was manageable because I decided to work interdependently with my colleague. We created common goals for our work and held one another mutually accountable for those goals.

I vividly recall the afternoon Michelle called me to say, "You are not holding up your end of the deal." I do not recall what specifically she spoke of, but I remember my next actions. I hung up the phone, put on my shoes, and walked immediately to the car. I arrived back at the school within minutes and completed the task for which she expressed her concerns. We never had cross words about that event. Instead, we trusted one another enough to speak candidly with one another. I grew exponentially in my content knowledge that year. Not only did we benefit from this arrangement, but our students also learned more as a result.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY FORMALIZED

Job changes separated Michelle and me a few short years later, and I found myself in a brand-new school in a different district. I hurriedly found the other seventh-grade Geography teacher and introduced myself to him. I was a bit more reserved as I approached Rick. I wondered if he would respond to me as Michelle had done or "What's His Name" across the hall. I found him to be a kind and willing partner. Neither of us needed a collaborative partner at this point in our careers. We knew how to fill the space of time provided for each class. Occasionally, we would offer one another a needed resource or idea, but that was the extent of our collaborative efforts.

Then came the day the school introduced us to a 3-letter acronym, letters carefully cut out by the die-cut machine hanging above the library door. Our principal explained we have one day each week to collaborate in a

PLC (Professional Learning Community). But what did the letters mean, and why were we asked to visit this room to do it?

We dutifully met there each Thursday, answering the questions on the minutes page as expected. I enjoyed this time because Rick was one of the funniest teachers I knew. Collectively making our quizzes and tests was helpful to both of us. However, I still had no depth of understanding of the PLC process. Nor did I realize that one of the two men who developed this process lived only minutes away from us.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY EXPANDED

Growth in our school brought a brand-new teacher to our team. The school asked Rick to teach seventh and eighth-grade classes, and Rachael moved into his old room. I instantly liked Rachael's fun and bubbly spirit. Rick's planning period did not align with ours that year. It was a rarity for all three of us to work collaboratively during Rachael's first year. As the first few weeks passed, I noticed a decline in Rachael's spirit; she seemed stressed, and I wanted to help her. Sitting together, I began giving her everything I had planned for each week. Although the school only required us to meet one day per week, we started meeting every day during our second-period planning time. As the students left for their elective period, we would gravitate toward either of our classrooms and discuss how the previous period had played out. Each of us taught five sections of World Geography. Therefore, the first period was a "practice" period to try the plans we had developed the previous day and refine the process in the second period.

During Rachael's first year, her struggles began to lessen as her confidence grew. She returned in year two, ready to be an equal partner in our co-laboring efforts. We could reflectively look at our plans from the previous year as we considered our plans each week. Little by little, our trust in one another grew. I recognized her strengths as a teacher and often complimented my weaknesses. We joined our students during class time for a joint lesson on several occasions. Even though the classroom was not technically large enough to accommodate that many students, they did not complain. They seemed to enjoy the atmosphere we created as we co-taught in those times.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY ORGANIZED

By this point in my career, I had worked in a school that identified itself as a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for several years. Other than the three letters on the wall, I had not been formally trained in the *PLC at Work* process (for details on this approach, see DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Having benefitted from the process, I wanted to understand it better and began to steer my doctoral studies toward that goal. As I read more about this approach, I could see elements of the "Three Big Ideas" of a PLC at Work in what Rachael, Rick, and I were doing. Although it would be years before I understood how much deeper we could have gone, we would stress the importance of the Focus on Learning, Big Idea number one, to the best of our ability. We were experts at Big

Idea number two, Collaborative Culture, and strived to grow our understanding of the third Big Idea, which is to be Data Driven.

We collectively decided upon our weekly learning targets and gave a quiz at the end of each week. When we gave a common formative assessment, we collectively analyzed the data and never grew competitive with one another. Rather, we used the data to drive our future decisions for learning. The school had one period per day for teachers to meet with students. One day per week, each core teacher was given priority to pull their students for remediation and enrichment (R & E). After looking at the data, we would divide the students into three lists: students who needed extensive remediation, those who only had a few misconceptions on a specific topic, and those who needed enrichment. It made no difference if the student was officially enrolled in my class, Rachael's class, or Rick's class; we drew from all three roll sheets when we made these lists. During the R&E period, students went to one of our three rooms to receive what they needed. This system worked beautifully for teachers and students alike.

THE COLLABORATIVE JOURNEY DIVERTS AND EXPANDS

As I completed my doctoral work, I recognized that one of the *PLC at Work* founders, Dr. Robert Eaker, lived in my hometown. After an initial meeting to gain clarity for my dissertation, I began to meet with Dr. Eaker periodically for more insights. He agreed to serve on my dissertation committee and was instrumental in preparing me to transition from the K-12 classroom into higher education. I joined the Womack Educational Leadership Department faculty at Middle Tennessee State University in the fall of 2013. I began teaching the Schools as Professional Learning Communities course the next fall.

Now, I am blessed with opportunities to work with pre-service teachers, new teachers, veteran teachers, and school-level and district-level administrators. Regardless of their years of service or position, the need to work collaboratively in this profession remains. When groups of professionals learn in a community, the students directly benefit from it. Twenty-seven years have passed since that first day with Michelle, and “What’s His Name” and I wonder where his path led him. I am thankful I chose not to walk his path alone but to co-labor in a community with several amazing educators. That pivotal moment in time thoroughly enriched my life and career.

REFERENCE

DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.