

CHANGING SPACES

Redesigning Small Schools



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2004

As architects are fond of saying-- space defines us. Whether it's one's own room, or place of work- space determines how we behave and how we feel about what we do. Consider the growing realization that concrete towers of public housing can destroy a sense of community and result in alienation and soaring crime rates, or the imagery provoked when contemporary school reformers compare large inner city high schools to factories -or even worse - prisons. Undeniably, such comparisons offer insight into the way people relate to one another, to the regimentation and mindlessness so characteristic of such institutions.

Space can change relationships. This was the lesson the Japanese taught the sagging US car industry when they moved factory honchos onto the shop floor. It's how architects express their understanding of behavior: plazas create interaction; columns, gates and monumental doors suggest awe and power.

Since we know such things, it seems surprising that current thinking regarding school reform has paid so little attention to how schools use space to support or undermine desired reforms. It has been argued that small schools offer unique opportunities to improve the learning environment, that they allow for closer contact with students, more flexible scheduling, better use of local resources and greater commitment from staff. Yet, with all the volumes of school research, amazingly little has been written about the use of space, about how classrooms or corridors, offices or shared work areas hinder or encourage school change.

Aside from making sure that sufficient floor footage exists to house new autonomous units, advocates for small schools seem to have mimicked the architecture of larger institutions in several significant ways: small schools still have offices (and bathrooms) for the principal and secretary, a general office and a staff room. Teachers still covet their own classrooms, staff rooms tend to be a refuge not a meeting place and most teacher spaces are off-limits to students.

Perhaps reformers have assumed that at least on this point, small schools *should* replicate the larger institutions, that there is nothing lacking about the professional dynamic or the assumptions that govern what teaching and learning is about that can't be corrected by smaller numbers of students. Or perhaps the problem is that most of us now teaching in small schools come from traditional settings and remain blinkered by the mindset of large institutions. That is, we do want something different to happen, but lack the vision or imagination to change course - a problem not too dissimilar from the reformers in the former eastern bloc countries who, as we have seen, remained trapped by past experiences despite good intentions. Or perhaps school reformers, in their efforts to

restructure quickly have been too preoccupied with organization--with time tables, curriculum planning or graduation requirements.

Whatever the explanation, the design of NYC's new, small schools, their staff rooms, principals offices (and bathrooms) present no surprises. While casual visitors might note the friendly atmosphere, a more astute guest would immediately observe that professional conversation and student-teacher interaction still follow familiar patterns. Perhaps this is ok; small new schools do seem friendlier, the curriculum does sound more appealing and 40 minute periods have given way to larger time blocs. Still, it is puzzling that reformers have reinvented conventional spatial design, especially since isolation is one of most frequently voiced complaints heard from teachers. Staff members still claim that despite their desire to be collegial, institutional constraints make that impossible and so they simply 'shut the door and get on with it.' Teachers in small schools still have little opportunity to engage in professional conversations and what chat there is, usually takes place in formally scheduled staff meetings. Students and teachers still believe schools are hierarchical places with learning occurring primarily in formal settings.

Perhaps teachers actually prefer their solitude-- unlike lawyers who seem to grab any opportunity to gather around the office watercooler to discuss a case, or doctors who even on TV soaps can be seen huddled over a puzzling x-ray or gossiping about some bit of human drama. I can't think of another profession where there are so few opportunities to meet informally with colleagues, where conversations about student work, about individual kids, about what happened in today's or yesterday's class or about whether a lesson bombed or scored ---the very stuff of teaching and learning --has to be formally planned for or saved up for one's lunch hour.

While it may require more imagination to figure out how large schools could overcome these constraints, small schools would seem to face no such dilemma. Small schools *could* use space to end isolation and promote collegiality; they could create common areas where administrators and teachers might gather together to be both immediately accessible to students and in constant proximity with one another.

Such an open plan space creates its own dynamic. As one small New York school discovered, when it eliminated classroom ownership, gave up a 'staff only' room, a principal's office (and bathroom) and combined the staff and general office into one large space, the negatives of 'going public, of creating a hub which limits privacy was more balanced by accessibility to one's colleagues and to students. In this school, staff members share classrooms and have, as their base, a space where each member of staff has a desk and access to telephones, a fax, a copier and computers. A student lounge is located adjacent to the office and students move freely from one room to the next. Frequently, staff use the student lounge for lunch breaks, to read the newspapers, talk with students or play a game of chess. In this environment, classroom discussions and -

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debates continue naturally; conversations between staff members occur continuously and conferences with students are frequent and often unplanned. A snapshot in this school

would typically capture a social studies teacher chatting with a math teacher, a science teacher chatting with a student, the teacher in charge of community service speaking with a student, one of the school's co-directors speaking on the phone, another with a student, two students joking with an English teacher, the college advisor sharing a student essay with an art teacher.

Situating a school staff together in one intentionally accessible room through which students must pass to speak to a member of staff, get notices, report cards, transcripts, or see the principal instantly demystifies the very notion of 'school .' Gone are the long counters which allow school decision makers to distance themselves from students; gone are the barriers to access. Teachers, secretaries, directors -- all are available when they are not teaching, conferring with a student, speaking with another teacher or guest, or on the phone. At the same time, each teacher's desk becomes one's private territory, with one's own books, file system and shared phone extension. This seemingly contradictory public/private arrangement allows this school to play out its assumptions about education which are based on a definition of learning which extends beyond the classroom and emphasizes the importance of shared knowledge and the creation of community. Such assumptions have a profound impact on both teachers and students.

One central benefit concerns the way students begin to see the adults in school. No longer are teachers accessible only during classtime or within specifically scheduled periods. No longer are overheard conversations between teachers the result of eavesdropping or an accidental occurrence. Instead, here in many subtle, sometimes invisible, but always natural ways, students observe adults engaged in their work, in professional as well as personal banter, at once animated, serious, humorous, insistent, sympathetic, questioning, yet always respectful.

This most natural of arrangements changes fundamentally the way students see school and fundamentally recasts student-teacher relationships. For many this provides the first opportunity ever to observe adults in an atmosphere of purposeful exchange and trust. It also serves to unpack the institutional mystique of school and makes public the intentions and practices of those in charge. With constant evidence before them that adults are working on their behalf: observing the frequent conversations with other students, noting the time it takes to prepare one's lessons and respond to student work, hearing teachers arrange for speakers, trips and community service placements, it somehow seems illogical to adopt the 'us against them mentality' so characteristic of adult-teen relationships and instead allows teens multiple opportunities to seek the adult support they need.

For teachers the dynamic is equally powerful; this shared space creates a totally new way of participating in professional development. Instead of slotting teachers into individual classrooms which isolate them from each other and from students, the communal

arrangement encourages conversation and collaboration. Instead of waiting to discuss important issues in formally scheduled staff meetings, teacher talk, that easy going

mixture of professional and personal chat, is ongoing. It is captured in snippets of conversation: in a comment about a class just taught, a question about a source for an assignment, an opinion about some current event, a request to join a colleague's class to argue a dissenting position, a response to a piece of student work.

Such continuous interaction creates an atmosphere of honesty, of shared triumphs and collaborative excitement. Practitioners become researchers, challenging one another, exploring the day to day response to one's lessons, puzzling about a student and talking over how to challenge students to consider new ideas. If professional growth is a product of reflection and thoughtful analysis then this environment which maximizes collaboration and collegial interaction supports it powerfully. It strips away institutional formalities and promotes the idea of collaboration and shared struggle.

Seen from the perspective of hierarchy and position -such a scenario might not be desirable. After all, who wants kids around nonstop? Who wants to see a colleague's well organized tidy desk as a constant reminder of one's own bad habits? Who wants to hear the director argue about resource allocations? Perhaps only the very few. Clearly a staff would have to be convinced that the advantages of such communal living outweighed the negatives. Teachers and principals would need to decide that rather than taking on all the physical attributes of a big school -- a small school could truly break the mold.