

**To Stand Alone or to Stand Together? -
The Concept of Team in Second-Level Schools: Some Issues and
Challenges.**

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How do we define the concept of team in an educational context?
 How should team members relate to each other?
 What is the relationship between team membership and professional identity?
 How is conflict played out in teams?
 What kind of knowledge do we have of teams?

These are the main questions addressed in this paper.

Introduction

I have always been attracted to the idea of team, and the collegiality it implies. My ideal of team is of a professional space, where the participants feel safe; where respect is reciprocated; where communication is open and questioning; where work-related emotions are not experienced as destructive; and where each individual has an opportunity to flourish and to inspire. This ideal is one which, I believe, can influence, in a powerful way, the reality of team-formation in the everyday circumstances of school life.

I am particularly interested in teams from an ethical perspective — the values that teams serve, and the values that teams express in the manner in which the members relate to each other.

I have views on what ought to be - team relations should have an ethical basis. I like Foster's gloss on the term 'ethics'

Ethics here refers to a more comprehensive construct than just individual behaviour; rather it implicates us and how we as a moral community live our communal lives. (Foster 1989:55).

I believe that the living of our communal lives should be guided by professional friendship - friendship in the Aristotelian sense that each

member of a team shows a concern for the other members and has their interests at heart.

However, teams do not always create safe spaces for members. Communication is not always open. And relations are not always marked by professional respect and concern. I hope to explore some of the factors which militate against the creation of an ideal team situation in schools - the role played by negative emotions and the unconscious, for example, especially around the often contentious and divisive area of appointments to posts of responsibility.

Team: Models, Metaphors & Primary Words.

Of course, the definition of team is not without its problems. The Collins English Dictionary lists the following meanings:

- 1 *A group of people organised to work together*
- 2 *A group of players forming one of the teams in a sporting contest*
- 3 *Two or more animals working together to pull a vehicle or agricultural implement.*

Dictionary definitions provide a useful index of our thinking and values. And it is clear that sport and economics influence our current thinking on **Team**

So the question arises - do these meanings speak to education? Or can the discipline of education propose a different understanding of team? It seems to me that there is something secondary about the first two of the dictionary definitions. Something valueless. *A group of people organised to work together.* Organised by whom? Organised to do what? In whose interests? For what purpose? As an educator, I want to propose a more fundamental or primary meaning for team, a meaning that is linked to values and to my view of the world and how it might be organised in a humane way. In saying this I am concerned that the concept of team in education is increasingly being defined and explored within the discourse of educational management, a discourse not noted for its pursuit of ethical or philosophical questions.

So, it is hardly surprising that I turn to a philosopher as a starting point in seeking to construct an educational, definition of team. Martin Buber,

writing on primary words and the primary meanings they convey, suggests that:

The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.

The one primary word is the combination I-You

Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations.

(Buber 1958: 15)

Relation as Primary

Relation for Buber is primary and necessary. This is hardly surprising. When we look at the settlement patterns of our ancestors, for example, we see that they lived in groups of ten or twelve people. They knew the value of relation. They collaborated. And that collaboration was on work that was worth doing — the work of survival, both for themselves and for their children. This was work that had a social purpose and value. And we know, from the numerous gravesites around the country, that our ancestors cared for each other — they honoured their dead. And their monuments are works of art. They represent what Melanie Klein refers to as reparation — the motivation we humans feel to create something that is not only worthwhile but complete, whole and beautiful, something that repairs the sense of fracture and discontinuity, which we all seem to carry. (James 2001:12) In the example of our ancestors, we see the notion of team linked to both an ethical and an aesthetic imagination.

Educational Definition of Team

When we put all these things together, we are, I think, getting closer to a primary definition of team that speaks to our values as educators. Teams form around:

Work that is worth doing;

Work that has a social value;

Work that is done collaboratively;

Work that creates something that is complete and satisfying;

Work where the members of the team share a relation of care.

There are clear connections between this understanding of team and teaching. Teaching is a social activity, founded on a relation of care. Teaching is work that has a social value. It is work that is worth doing, that is undertaken in the service of the young. Teaching is artistic — teachers are artisans, conceptualising and theorising what they do and translating their theories into everyday practice.

It matters to us, as teachers, that our students do well. The number of new programmes, introduced into second-level schools in the last ten years (Leaving Certificate Applied, the Transition Year, The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, the Junior Certificate School Programme, The Stay-in-School Initiative), is testimony to our desire that all students persist in the pursuit of knowledge, that all children be cherished equally.

Stand-Alone Teacher.

The paradox, however, is that while teaching is informed by a strong set of social values, and the ethical notion of a relation of care, most teachers operate a Stand-Alone model of teaching. And the culture of school is not, by-and-large, a team culture. Our educational values tend towards community, while our professional practice tends towards individualism.

The Stand-Alone model of teaching developed in the context of an authoritarian, even autocratic, model of headship in schools. Teachers, as much as students, fell under the supervisory gaze of the principal's eye. Rather like the monks in the medieval monastery, teachers were, and continue to be, isolated in their individual classrooms. Not surprisingly, the model of teacher professionalism that emerged, in this context, is one which placed great emphasis on the autonomy of the teacher within his or her classroom. In general, the iron rule of autocracy did not extend beyond the classroom door.

Any project which seeks to transform the Stand-Alone model and end the isolation of teachers, has to recognise that it is dealing with a long-established tradition, which, while it has contributed to isolation and an excessive privacy in relation to classroom practice, has safeguarded the professional autonomy of the individual practitioner.

Yet, since the introduction of the programmes I have mentioned above, in second-level schools, there is an assumption that a team culture underpins these curricular innovations.

A team approach is crucial to developing a good programme. Schools with distinctive programmes generally have in place a small team of key personnel who hold regular team meetings.

The team's role is to assist the co-ordinator in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programme.

(LCVP Programme Statement, 2001)

Interestingly, the formation of a team of teachers is premised on the notion of a co-ordinator, and the co-ordination of programmes is increasingly tied to posts of responsibility. The linking of team co-ordination with posts of responsibility risks introducing a model of corporate managerialism or oligarchy into schooling, which many teachers will regard as a threat to their autonomy. The potential of teams to provide teachers with opportunities for participative decision-making will be diminished if the formation of teams leads to new forms of hierarchy and new relations of power within schools.

Team Culture & Professional Identity.

An Ideal Team Situation is one in which all members have access to information; have spaces and opportunities to reflect on, and contribute to, the formation of policy and practice and are freed from the communication impediments of hierarchy, formality and status consciousness (Grace 1997:64). The essential characteristics of an Ideal Team Situation, judged from an ethical perspective, are freedom, equality and respect, set within the context of reciprocated empathy, and developed over time through a shared history. In this situation, all individuals have the right and the opportunity to: express their feelings; put forward ideas; question the ideas of others; and say what ought to be. (Habermas 1985)

In a situation in which a group of colleagues comes together to form a team with substantial decision-making responsibility, in relation to the design, implementation and evaluation of a curriculum initiative, then the

potential for enhanced professional well-being and peer validation is great.

The educational model of team, which I am proposing, is built on the ethical principles of respect and equality. This model accommodates professional friendship, which finds its best expression in what Roland Barthes refers to as 'peaceable speech' that is speech that is 'divested of all sense of aggression.' (Barthes 1977: 213)

Peaceable speech can cope with disagreement, because the commitment to explore a question is combined with a commitment to foster intersubjective relations. Thus, discussion does not become a dispute or a debate, in which the intention is to secure a victory over the other, who is regarded as an opponent, as someone to be defeated. Discussion, in the context of peaceable speech, is an exercise in what Foucault refers to as, 'the work of reciprocal elucidation.' (Rabinow 1991:381-382)

Teams & Negative Emotions

Often, however, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, there is a non-coincidence between the ethical self and the active self; between the imagined world and the world we create, between the words we would like to use and the words we speak. (Klemm & Schweiker 1993: 8) And so it is in school, where communication in teams can be characterised by antipathy as much as friendship, and can be driven by the chaos of our strongest feelings, by volcanic emotions which are not in the control of our conscious mind. In these moments, we are strangers to ourselves.

Antipathies and volcanic emotions can originate in the competition for promotion in schools. The system of posts of responsibility, in the words of Stephen Ball, 'encourages a sense of career development and personal status' based upon success in acquiring a post of responsibility. (Ball 1987:148) Paradoxically, the attempt to create a team culture, through the appointment of team co-ordinators, may result in some members of a team feeling disaffected and rejected. Their negative feelings of resentment, frustration and disappointment can be disruptive and result in an oppositional attitude in relation to team issues.

Negative feelings may also be ideological in character. The appointment of one person over another may be read as the promotion of one definition of school over another, or it may be read as evidence of a gender-bias, in those making the appointment. And the adoption of

middle management structures in schools risks alienating those teachers who do not achieve middle-management posts. The creation of co-ordination posts has the potential to redistribute power and influence in schools, and create impediments to the realisation of a team culture based upon respect, autonomy and equality.

Conflict & Memory

*The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things*
T.S. Eliot

There is a clear link between memory and conflict in schools. Memory is privileged in Ireland. This is hardly surprising, given the history of the development of the state and the strength of the Christian tradition in the country. Christianity is, after all, founded on the injunction -Do this is remembrance of MeÓ(Kellner 1993:62) Paul Ricoeur argues that a true community is a community of memory. However, too much memory, tied, as memory is, to the emotions and the unconscious, is harmful. For this reason, the mind is far more disposed to suppress and forget than it is to allow and remember. Yet, suppressed emotions are merely kept in check and can continue to exert an influence. Thus, team relations can be damaged by the surprising and unpredictable rising of emotions, whose origins lie in the past.

Teams, with too much memory, whose members get caught up in recreating the history of division and conflict in a school, will not provide opportunities for personal and professional development. And teams, where conflict prevails, encourage the activation of those aspects of the self, which are beyond our day-to-day consciousness and control. And this can led to serious conflict and emotional upheaval.

Tackling poor team relations demands courage, tact and honesty. The willingness to subject unhappy relations to reflexive interrogation is, however, worth pursuing in the interests of understanding how we become complicit in constructing destructive relations. This understanding can then become the means by which negative relations can be transformed or their negative effect minimised. As Freire notes, ÓFrom the perspective of the present, we review the past, in order to make a better future.Ó(Freire 1972:36)

However, the movement towards understanding is more vexed, contradictory and roundabout than the symmetry of Freire's presentation. In Freire, there is an implication of forward movement, of progress. His is a classic enlightenment belief in the power of reasoned reflection. However, in the social and personal worlds, our action and behaviour is not guided by reason alone. My ambition as a teacher is to forward myself and to invite others - students, parents and colleagues - to collaborate with me in the process. But I forget, or I lose sight of the insights I have gained or I am distracted by other concerns; or I am thrown off course by false certainties or misapprehensions or poor judgement. In other words, our actions are as likely to be guided by misunderstanding as much as understanding, and by forgetting as much as by wisdom.

A team which succeeds in overcoming conflict will be strengthened. When a team establishes and sustains a collaborative culture, membership of the team becomes an important source of professional identity and validation. People who work closely on work that is worth doing, and who share a vision, develop a strong sense of collegiate loyalty.

Sometimes, however, the success of a team can lead to tensions within the larger group of which the team is a part. Teams, by virtue of their existence, can lead to the creation of an insider/outsider culture.

A close-knit team can be regarded as a clique, by other members of staff. And, sometimes, individuals can find that their identification with one programme team means they are not considered for membership of other teams. And this can become burdensome.

Tacit Knowledge and the Difficulties of Changing

The knowledge imposes a pattern and falsifies
T.S. Eliot

To a great extent the backstage realities of organisational life have been neglected by theorists and researchers. They have been mesmerised by the obvious and deterred by the messiness involved in the analysis of the personal and emotional aspects of organisational functioning. (Ball 1987:216)

Teams are complex. The literature on teams, written from the perspective of organisational management, approaches the subject from a hierarchical and instrumental point of view. The historical and the particular, are, by-and-large, written out of their accounts. Difficulties can be overcome by the application of logic:

Colleagues will contribute to the team only that which they feel, as individuals, they wish to contribute. This may include their knowledge and skills, but it may also include their dislikes and jealousies, their uncertainties and perceived or real lack of ability or experience. None of these factors needs to present the team leader with insurmountable difficulties provided she is aware of their existence and has strategies with which to manage them.
(Bell 1998: 122)

This kind of propositional logic supports analysis. However, without a narrative within which to situate analysis, the exercise will be an empty one, and offer little by way of practical wisdom and insight into our lived reality, into the messiness of communal lives in organisations. This is hardly surprising. When we break down something complex into simple parts, we achieve a clarity, but at the cost of distorting what it is that we are analysing. This is true for something like a game of chess — the complexity of the game is greater than the sum of the moves that constitute it. A written set of rules cannot catch the movement and the moment of the game. And a good player will know far more than he/she will be able to articulate.

And it is truer for the complex game of human interaction.

There is assumption, in much of the literature on teams, that we will have little difficulty in translating the propositional logic of its analysis into existential, practical knowledge, which we will express in the process of living. Yet, for much of the time, as we go about our daily business, our everyday interactions, we rely on hunches, intuitions and unstated assumptions to guide us. We rely on tacit knowledge.

And analysing situations of conflict, and devising strategies for overcoming them, is no guarantee that the next time will be different. How often have you found yourself in a situation of conflict, which you recognise as being similar to previous situations? However, you can attend to the interaction, the lived experience and, at the same time, step outside it and review it in an analytic way. You get caught up in the flow of events, and your reactions are not simply logical reactions - you

respond to the conflict in your body, in your feelings and in your mind. You recognise that the interaction is proceeding along lines that you had promised yourself that you would avoid, but you cannot alter it. Afterwards, you analyse it and say "Next time, it will be different." In this regard, insight is nearly always retrospective, always a matter of catching up on ourselves.

Changing the way we relate with others and the way we react in situations of conflict is a difficult business. In psychotherapy, an analysand is encouraged to address a difficult aspect of his/her personality through a process of recognition, acceptance and integration. But this process is an iterative one. Real change in ourselves, and in our interaction, is difficult to achieve and sustain.

This is not intended to be discouraging — it is intended to be real. At the end of the day, I believe that a team culture can be of enormous personal and professional benefit to teachers. As Anne Lieberman says:

When teachers work together to transform themselves and their schools, they rediscover why they came into teaching in the first place and why they have persisted.
(Lieberman & Miller 1999: 90)

But the achievement of a team culture is a complex process, which, in itself, demands persistence.

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