

## Destructive Staffroom Discourse

By Jonathan Pitt and Kristian Kirkwood

### Abstract:

Holt's first book "How Children Fail" set in motion the education reform of the 1960s. Holt illuminated the plethora of problems in 'cookie-cutter' mainstream schools, such as the culture of the fear of failure. This qualitative study examines the concept of the "Destructive Staffroom Discourse" in mainstream elementary schools as an impairment to the atmosphere necessary for learning to occur.

### Introduction:

This qualitative study examines the concept of the "Destructive Staffroom Discourse" in mainstream elementary schools. Conventional research in education seldom challenges the existing state of affairs. The standpoint of North American culture identifies children as a panorama of future workers, and our education system presently reflects this notion. The current state of world events is driven by political affairs and fiscal matters. Our mainstream education system from pre-school to university is built on the desire to create a future generation of consumers, instead of finding ways to correct global warming, disease and famine (Priesnitz, 2004, p. 6). In a number of faculties, we teach bachelor of education students how to live in a technologically based world, yet we do not deviate from conventional educational practices. We

encourage bachelor of education students to embrace the technological innovations of today, yet we surround them with the educational conventions of the past. The established format of educating future teachers perpetuates the current problems facing mainstream schools today.

Society and education are both hierarchal in organization, which devalues open learning and prevents challenges to previously held ideals. We teach students in both mainstream schools and universities, that if they earn good grades then everything will work-out in the end. Pre-service teachers must realize that elementary school students are not interested in how outstanding their lesson plan is or how eloquent the teacher's chalk board skills are. As Ricci indicates:

At the faculty, candidates are asked to create endless detailed lesson plans and to stick to their plans as closely as possible. Instead, it would be best to have candidates practice reacting to spontaneity and the unexpected. By having them do things and then revealing to them that most teachers do not teach in this way, but yet, it is essential for beginning teachers to do it, we are preparing them for the task of doing what you are told even if it does not contribute to making them a more successful teacher. (Ricci, 2005, p.8)

Often idealist teacher candidates did what they were told by paternalistic society and, once hired as classroom teachers had to come to terms with the disillusionment that the naive concept of dispensing knowledge to students is not what our children need. As Gatto suggests:

The new dumbness is particularly deadly to middle- and upper-middle-class kids already made shallow by multiple pressures to conform imposed by the outside world on their usually lightly rooted parents. When they come of age, they are certain they must know

something because their degrees and licenses say they do. They remain so convinced until an unexpectedly brutal divorce, a corporate downsizing in midlife, or panic attacks of meaninglessness upset the precarious balance of their incomplete humanity, their stillborn adult lives. (Gatto, 2000, p. 6).

At any rate, our educational beliefs must continuously be tested (Brookfield, 1995). This will create discomfort for many and disagreement from mainstream schools and universities alike. The popular literature of reform read by teachers (e.g., Fullan) frequently only examines minor changes to our defective education system. We still assume that being educated is a process in which our minds are filled with facts and concepts. Institutions such as schools and universities have become laden with the profits generated by the masses of people who aspire to this belief. Mainstream schools and universities force people into stratified groupings (e.g., age, level of course credit) and into separate rooms so that education can occur. We believe that the popular notion that only university professors possess specialized knowledge compels many auditory-visual learners to attend university to earn a B.Ed. degree and to repeat the cycle of “talk-heavy” teaching to our young children. Similarly, university professors are pushed to lecture almost exclusively to students because of antediluvian promotion and tenure procedures which rely heavily on elevated student evaluations of faculty. When B.Ed. students receive the conformist sermon-style approach from faculty, they assume they are receiving the type of instruction required to be a good teacher. B.Ed. students crave lectures from their professors, in the same manner as most adults are more than willing to pay for goods and services we can do ourselves (Priesnitz, 2004, p. 36).

When top-down lecture methods dominate pre-service teachers' experiences they perceive this as the epitome of teaching (Brightman, 2007). Ware (1974) developed the preliminary concept concerning students who prefer the lecture as "The Doctor Fox Effect" in a study of the effectiveness of lectures and the validity of student ratings. As an obedient society we obsess with jobs and careers as defining our identity by the occupation we have. This unhealthy practice leads people to perceive that one becomes more of an authority with age. In the case of the "tweed-jacket" university professor stereotype, those who appear older often are thought of as being of a higher standard than those who seem youthful. This is a form of societal discrimination based on age, no different than assuming that someone is more intelligent based on gender or race. A study by Das and Das (2001) in Atlantic Canada indicated that a university student's own gender and gender role are correlated to his/her perception of their "best" professor. This finding is of significance for universities with a disproportionate student gender ratio. The paradigm that age equates to excellence is designed to preserve the primitive hierarchal class system and the accumulation of wealth at the expense of others. As Illich (1970) advises:

The university graduate has been schooled for selective service among the rich of the world. Whatever his or her claims of solidarity with the Third World, each American college graduate has had an education costing an amount five times greater than the median life income of half of humanity (Illich, 1970, p. 34).

Once entered into the profession, teachers still adhere to the credence that we must believe what educational experts tell us. We have been inculcated through an education system that maintains that "others know best." An example, would be the continual bombardment of our

senses from media who repeatedly use so-called experts to market their worldview. We believe that it is this misconception that causes parents to have faith in the education system as the best place for children. Based on our own direct observation, we have observed that many teachers also accept the concept that professional growth must mirror or parallel their experiences in the B.Ed. program at university. Nothing could be further from the truth.

#### Literature Review:

There is a paucity of information dealing with staffroom discourse in the popular literature. The mainstream school staffroom is inundated by dialogue that impacts and influences the standards and attitudes of educators and administration. Novice or beginning teachers frequently seek advice and guidance from veteran teachers within the staffroom; however, this counsel is frequently damaging and destructive. This tradition can have a negative influence on teachers. Some teachers may often lose rank among their peers if they cannot maintain their stature within the staffroom (Nias, 1989). Yet, in avoiding the staffroom in preference of seclusion, teachers may become the object of gossip (Rosenholtz, 1989).

Nias notes that not all staffrooms provide friendship or comradery; many are filled with “rivalry, jealousy, and suspicion” (Nias, p. 152). Rosenholtz (1989), like Nias, studied the school as a workplace. Rosenholtz employed a qualitative design, such as teacher questionnaires and open-ended interviews, as well as quantitative research on organizational behaviour and performance. The quantitative data gathered were in the form of summaries of the effective schools research by the U. S. Department of Education. Rosenholtz claims that these summaries are proper methodologically, but not conceptually. Rosenholtz argues that as a sociologist we need a conceptual framework before we can begin to analyze the original studies of the

summaries. In terms of methodology, Rosenholtz reviewed the literature and quantified what were largely case study findings. Rosenholtz found two recurring themes: teacher uncertainty and threatened self-esteem.

Rosenholtz's 1989 sample included 8 Tennessee school districts; all elementary schools were supported by their superintendents to participate in this study. Rosenholtz's questionnaire had 164 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale. These questions alternated between negatively and positively worded questions to avoid patterns in the responses. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete and had a 70% response rate of 1,213 teachers. Rosenholtz also examined school demographic data on reading and math scores in grades 2 and 4. Using the teacher interview data, Rosenholtz computed z-scores on every social organizational variable for all school districts. Less than 20% of the teachers contacted declined the invitation to be interviewed. The interview consisted of two types of open-ended questions conducted via telephone and tape recorded, then transcribed. Trained members of an interview panel conducted the interviews of 74 teachers in 23 schools.

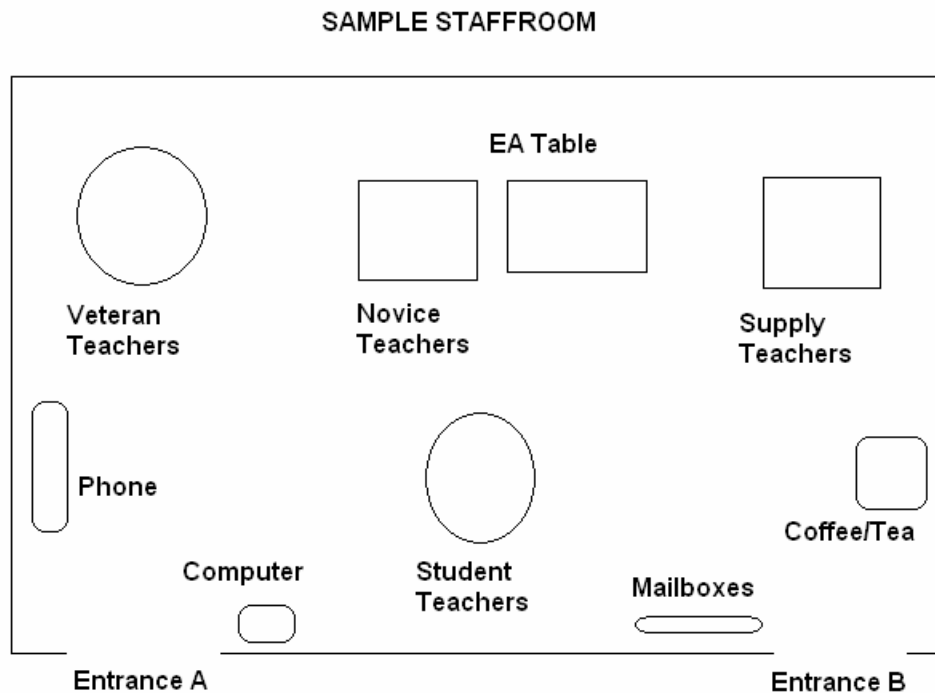
The results of Rosenholtz's study can be classified relating to teacher discussions thematically as gossip. Staff gossip about other teachers Rosenholtz describes as "talk about troubled teachers" (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 94). Teachers who do not feel supported by administrators or colleagues become isolated from the social framework of the mainstream school. For example, one teacher interviewed by Rosenholtz said, "Everyone talks about them. We gossip about them all the time; we tell each other things we hear about those teachers. We don't dare offer them help though" (Rosenholtz, p. 95). The irony is that these teachers could one day find themselves in a similar position of the social outcast. Similarly, this is why many

teachers fail to discuss their shortcomings or problems in the classroom, because they too could become a victim of gossip.

Kaiman (1994) classified the physical characteristics of the staffroom into five descriptors: first, simplicity; second, monotonous; third, colourless; fourth, flexibility; and finally, the staffroom has no clear functionality. Yet, despite having no clear boundaries, the staffroom still isolates and divides between separate groups among staff (See Figure 1).

For example, principals are more businesslike than teachers when interacting in the staffroom. This is why some principals engage in small talk to be perceived as colleagues rather than managers. In this aspect, this study also refers to Goffman's (1959) theory of teachers using the staffroom as a stage like actors in a play. Kainan asserts that here "teachers compete for prestige" (Kainan, 1994, p. 30). In this desire for status, teachers and principals seek to enhance their image. Principals engage in small talk as a tactic to appear more collegial. Teachers in the same way may work with students at recess or on breaks in an attempt to gain prestige by appearing to attend to student needs as the "dedicated teacher." Similarly, teachers who avoid the staffroom lose prestige by not asserting their status within the school hierarchy (Kainan).

This study found that teachers function like actors competing for prestige within the staffroom. Kainan claims that to the untrained eye the staffroom would appear to be a cohesive unit; however, within this beehive of activity the staff is divided into subgroups (See Figure 1). Sub-groupings can exist based on seniority, subject/division taught, age, and sex. This division is never clear-cut or consistent.



*Figure 1.* Sample staffroom. An adaptation of Kainan, 1994, p. 36.

Ben-Peretz and Schonmann (2000) classify staffroom discussions into four categories: gossiping, obtuseness, small talk, and ventilation. A metaphor presented through monologues included by Ben-Peretz and Schonmann compares the staffroom to a “house setting”, and within this type of family there exist different modes of communication, such as fights, intimate talks, advice, support, screams, insults, compromises, celebrations, sadness, and consultations.

Hammersley (1984) noted that staffroom discussions unveil aspects of teaching culture. Hammersley’s study sample included secondary school teachers. Hammersley claims that secondary school teachers’ discussions about students and the community are condemnatory. He



argues that a great amount of ethnographic research has been done on classrooms; however, the social relationships of teachers are often overlooked. Essentially, staff relationships have a direct impact on what occurs in the classroom. Hammersley's study sample was a small, inner-city school in the United States of America. The focus of the research dealt with teacher discussions of students in the staffroom and their implications.

He found that the staffroom discussions were mainly "shop talk" related to students (e.g., negative comments about students). Hammersley categorized topics within the staffroom shop talk: For instance, knowledge that a teacher acquired about a student was passed on to other teachers even if the other teachers did not currently teach that pupil; for example, "All the clowns in that form are away at the moment" (Hammersley, 1984, p. 205).

Hammersley refers to this as the "trading of summary typifications of pupils" (1984, p. 206). Essentially, this is how teachers "compare notes" about a student. These typifications can result in the categorization or labeling of student types. Within the staffroom, teachers network to exchange information regarding students. Teachers talk about students differently in the staffroom than they would in a classroom, parent meeting, or in-school team meeting.

#### Methodology & Findings:

The qualitative data gathered for this study was done during the spring of 2006 in April and May. The 12 participating teachers involved in the gathering of data were given pseudonyms as part of the interview process. Many males interviewed said that at some point in their jobs they had been the only male in a staffroom full of women. All of the teachers interviewed were from the same mainstream Ontario school board. Of the topics that teachers

discuss more often than others, Kristen (pseudonym) a participant in the study asserts, “we probably talk about children more often than we do other things.” She also noted that conversations reflect the school environment or the school culture. She stated, “If you have a negative staffroom, then I think that there is a good chance that you will find that the school culture is a very negative one.”

Eleanor believes that in staffroom conversations teachers come together as adults to “vent” and she feels that the topic that is most often discussed is student success and student learning. Jackie notes that the communication that occurs is centered on children and issues of concern. She mentioned that since her staff is predominately female, other discussion is centered on “woman talk.” Jackie sympathizes with the few males on staff because she believes the imbalance impacts the conversation in the staffroom.

Candy opines that the most frequently discussed topic in her staffroom was students. Candy also indicated that gossip was a frequent topic in her staffroom. Pam clearly stated her feelings in staffroom conversations: She found: “If as far as teaching we talk about what we can do with kids, especially X who is really good at math; I taught that child, and when I taught that child this is what worked for me. A lot of time it will spill over.” When asked what the most frequent topic of conversation was in her staffroom, Pam concluded that it was the students. For example, she replied, “kids, yep kids, you live, breathe, eat, sleep these kids.”

Paul believes that staffroom conversations are important because they allow teachers to socialize with other adults and that “they give teachers a sense of belonging . . . allows [teachers] to have some sort of social life.” When queried as to which topic was the most frequent in his staffroom, Paul noted that it was students; however, he stated that it was “not in the same way I

would in an IPRC (special education) meeting. Most often it's more like gossip or venting about, and it's usually the bad ones." When asked what impact the topics of staffroom conversation had on his teaching practice, Paul replied, "I often want to know if a student is a pain or behavioural problem." A specific example of external forces impacting the school culture and staffroom would be "power parents" who would put pressure on principals to ensure their children were straight A students, and "I've seen principals tell teachers to change report card marks because they know that parents would cause problems." Paul noted additional topics of staffroom conversation, such as sexual references or innuendos.

Lauren had very strong emotions about her staffroom because "if I need to vent and blow off steam about a kid or a parent, or a principal, then it's nice to be able to unload and escape." Lauren observed that the most common topic of conversation in her staffroom was students, "mostly the ones who cause problems though, I'm afraid. The bad ones get all the action in our room." Furthermore, she asserts that staffroom discussion impacts the school environment "because everyone is sharing information and ideas . . . it's the only time we get to do that. I mean, you get an honest opinion about the kids, and everyone appreciates that."

Conclusion:

In 1964 Holt first published "How Children Fail" which campaigned that mainstream schooling sabotaged a child's ability to learn. Forty years later, the "trading of summary typifications of pupils" continues to rob children of the joy of learning through the labeling of learners. Not all teachers are unscrupulous; however, as Holt suggests, children are scared into right and wrong thinking away from inquiry because they are afraid of making mistakes and being labeled and humiliated. The "Destructive Staffroom Discourse" does not invite children to

become themselves, rather it advocates that we (learners) must always be right and not make any mistakes because in our economy-driven society we value producers and not thinkers. As Holt stated “Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners” (p.1).

It is important to note that not all staffrooms are exactly the same. Teachers may never stop “kid-bashing” within the mainstream school staffroom (like age segregation), mainstream schools lack contact with the community. Ironically, the notion of the professional learning community or PLC once thought of as the salvation of mainstream schooling has become widely disfigured within the conventional context of schooling in North America. Learners benefit from contact with various ages, cultures, and belief systems, perhaps once students are included in conversations that impact them so significantly will the opportunity for authentic mainstream school improvement become a reality.

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### Biographies:

Jonathan Pitt is Assistant Professor of Education at Nipissing University. His research interests include aboriginal issues in education, the role of the staffroom in mainstream schools, and teacher development.

Kristian Kirkwood is the past-chair of Graduate Studies in Education at Nipissing University. His research interests include research methodologies and students at-risk in the mainstream education system.