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# Children and Place: Reggio Emilia's Environment As Third Teacher

*Education is often understood as the sole responsibility of parents and teachers. Reggio Emilia identifies a 3rd teacher between child, teacher, and parent: the environment. In its attention to how space can be thoughtfully arranged, Reggio Emilia has reconceptualized space as a key source of educational provocation and insight. In what ways does this idea support and challenge existing understandings within early childhood education? The article draws on educational literature on space(s) and early childhood education, including but not confined to Reggio Emilia, as well as classroom-based practice, to pursue the implications of the notion of environment as 3rd teacher to classrooms and teacher education and how both preservice and experienced teachers can use this knowledge to inform their practice.*

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THE REGGIO EMILIA approach to education talks about three educators as being in the classroom at any one time: the teacher, the child, and the environment. We do not usually think of the environment as alive, in the way that a person is; instead, we see it as coming about as a result of human imagination and work (Arendt, 1958; Frye, 1963), that is, if we truly see it at all. Maxine Greene, drawing on Virginia Woolf, reminded us of how we become immersed in the "cotton wool of habit" (Woolf, cited in Greene, 1995, p. 115). By seeing the environment as an educator, as the Reggio Emilia approach does, we can begin to notice how our surroundings can take on a life of their own that contributes to children's learning.

Childhood is often the first place where we begin to see and use the environment imaginatively. Kytta (2002) described the affordances that enhance children's environments as what it is possible to do, or imagine to do, due to aspects of a

place that children perceive as valuable. Take swinging, for instance. Swinging is possible where a child can find nonrigid, attached objects, such as a strong rope attached to a tree or pole, or a swing in a park. When one of the authors was teaching elementary school in a First Nations community on the Central Coast of British Columbia, she liked the corner classroom at the end of the hallway. Because it was located where the undergrowth was thickest, the classroom was often enveloped in a greenish light. Topics rich in local anecdote and story, like the sasquatch, could come alive. The filtered greenish light also reminded her of her "deep down" image of the child (Fraser, 2006, p. 20) and those "secret spaces of childhood" (Goodenough, 2004, p. 1) where she used to play hide-and-seek with other children in the neighborhood.

Fraser (2006), in her work with preservice teachers, has identified eight Reggio principles as key to the environment as third teacher: aesthetics, transparency, active learning, flexibility, collaboration, reciprocity, bringing the outdoors in, and relationships. If we interpret these principles in light of research on children and place, we find that a Reggio Emilia approach to the role of the environment in teaching and learning draws deeply on how young children perceive and use space to create meaning. In this article, we explore Reggio Emilia's idea of the environment as a third teacher and consider how teachers (preservice and inservice) can look again at the messages and invitations contained in their classroom surroundings so as to draw more deeply on children's perspectives.

## Environment As Third Teacher: What Does That Really Mean?

When we think of the environment, we tend to think of what we can see around us. However, the environment is much more than visual. Tarr (2001, 2004) studied the environments of kindergarten and primary classrooms, imagining not only how they looked but how they felt from a child's perspective:

> From a small chair in a corner, I counted 19 different, decorated, scalloped borders segmenting portions of the bulletin boards lining the walls. The boards were filled with words: a word wall, class rules, a calendar, alphabets, numbers, shapes and colors, and a plethora of cartoon people and animals, each with a message and at least 50 of them with horseshoe-shaped smiles rather like a capital U ... St. Patrick's Day mobiles created from brightly painted rainbows and black-line masters hung from the ceiling just above the children's heads. Rainbows, leprechauns, and pots of gold jiggled before my eyes. (Tarr, 2004, p. 88)

Tarr (2004) wondered how this "visual busyness" influences children's concentration (p. 88). She also questioned the implicit messages behind the choice of materials and whether "the mass of commercial stereotyped images silence the actual lived experiences of those individuals learning together" (Tarr, 2004, p. 90).

An important and desirable human activity for young children is interaction with others. Bearne, Dombey, and Grainger (2003) further comment that "interaction should have the dynamic to move thinking and learning" (p. 2). How the configuration and conceptualization of spaces work to invite, hinder, or facilitate interaction has been the subject of study for scholars in early childhood (e.g., Ellis, 2004) as well as scholars in several fields (Jacobs, 1961/1992, 2004; Project for Public Spaces, 2005; Seamon, 1979). Jacobs (2004) explained that "For communities to exist, people must encounter one another in person" (pp. 36–37; cited in Robertson, 2006). Seamon (1979) has drawn on Jacobs's (1961) work to describe *place ballet,* or the bodily regularity of people coming together in time and space. A Reggio Emilia approach involves maintaining a "delicate balance" between providing structure and encouraging children's free exploration (Tarini & White, 1998, p. 379). Seeing the "environment as third teacher" is one way of playing this place ballet, but how?

A Reggio Emilia approach advocates that teachers pay close attention to the myriad of ways that space can be made to "speak" and invite interaction (Cadwell, 2003; Fraser, 2006), such as positioning small mirrors around the classroom or

placing easels close to natural sunlight. Educators can introduce "provocations" meant to surprise children and spark discussion, like a pizza box in the kitchen corner, paper and pencil in the blocks center, or aromatic scents to tantalize the children's noses when they first enter the classroom. Other strategies include bringing in realistic objects for children to use in their play, such as different colors and shapes of pasta in the house corner. By storing colorful objects in transparent containers (markers, buttons, fabrics, wrapping paper), which children can help sort by color or texture, children's curiosity and imagination are piqued. Cadwell (2003) explained how, before seeing the environment as central to learning, children used to dump their blocks on the floor or empty containers of sequins on the light table. Now, the materials are carefully selected and arranged to invite exploration. On low shelves, the child can find "transparent jars of shells, buttons, beads, wires, tiny pine cones, dried rose metals, sequins in the shape of flowers, and spiral shavings from colored pencils," all of which "reflect the light and reveal their enticing contents" (Cadwell, 2003, p. 117). From a child's perspective, such small changes animate the environment, making it feel "electric and alive" (Cadwell, 2003, p. 118). "Life attracts life," Jacobs (1992, cited in Robertson, 2006, p. 26) explained. Children come to care for their surroundings as well as see them in unexpected ways, which becomes part of a planned approach to curriculum and evaluation that is organized around "expecting the unexpected," a favorite Reggio Emilia saying. This approach to curriculum planning is called the *negotiated curriculum.*

Through negotiated curriculum, also called *emergent curriculum* (Jones & Nimmo, 1995), teachers engage in a recursive cycle of design, documentation, and discourse (Forman & Fyfe, 1998; Fraser, 2006). They introduce a provocation. They listen closely to children's conversations as they engage with their surroundings. They document the children's learning using such devices as note-taking, sketches, tape recording, video recording, and photographs, so as to create a visible trace of the learning process. Teachers also reflect and talk with other teachers or with the children. They use what they hear, see, and think about to plan a next activity, one that will build on as well as deepen the children's interest and investigation. A group of teachers described how teachers' views of glue changed when they stopped seeing it as instrumental to creating a collage and instead first created opportunities for children to explore the properties of glue: What did it feel like when wet and dry? How could it be "dripped" and into what shapes? What could be done with glue and a paintbrush, stick, or cotton swab? The teachers observed the children during this exploratory phase and recorded their observations. At one point, the teachers wondered whether they should continue with exploration or challenge the children in a new direction. By reviewing their observation records, they decided that the younger children were still exploring whereas the older ones were ready to move on. Rather than separate the children into two groups, they set out, on different days, bowls of glitter, sequins, and beads. The older children began to construct objects, whereas the younger ones discovered that a paper containing all glitter but no glue needed glue as a necessary adhesive. When the children then moved on to create collages, the teachers observed that they were much more thoughtful and deliberate, rather than "impulsively and randomly" gluing the materials on the paper (Kantor & Whaley, 1998, p. 330).

Huyssen (2003) reminded us that "lived memory is active, alive, embodied in the social" (p. 28). Documentation is a living testimony to interactions that happen within a social space. Their story can be told through children's portfolios, drawings, three-dimensional structures, words, photographs, videos, and documentation panels. Cadwell (2003) described how classroom shelves became a living archive of the interactions that had happened in that space: a matching game made of clay shapes, stones from a visit to a beach, a carved wooden puzzle donated by a family, and a paper sculpture of "Girl Land" with movable parts (pp. 109–110). Behind each is a story. Further, the objects invite other children to take them out and play with them. If prefabricated commercial images serve to silence children's voices (Tarr, 2004, p. 115), documentation gives voice to the "in-

dividual and group histories" (Gandini, 1998, p. 168) of those who inhabit the space, creating a community memory. By making the walls "speak" with the children's learning, parents and other adults are also invited into a dialogue so that messages do not "bounce away" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 176) into empty or overly cluttered space. The practice of making the walls "speak" draws on the idea of creating "places for children."

## Children's Places Versus Places for Children

From a child's point of view, an environment is what the child can make of it. Children will often find uses for objects and spaces that adults do not anticipate or intend. For instance, Armitage (2001) has documented that one of the most popular spots where he observed children playing marbles on school grounds was on metal drains. During "marbles season," "the whole feature [of the drain] disappears under a crowd of people [namely, children] playing marbles along the metal slots that run across its length" (p. 46). Another popular spot was the drain cover. Children considered some drain covers as more challenging than others, depending on how the ridges were dispersed in the maze of lines surrounding the center. Rasmussen (2004) invited children to use disposable cameras to take pictures of the places where they most often played and that had meaning for them. One enclosed courtyard flanked by apartment buildings shows play apparatus that adults had installed for children: swings, a slide, a sandbox, a basketball post, and net. While mentioning all of these places, Line (one young girl with a camera) focused on the tree, which was actually off limits to the children, as was a green box covering electricity cables. Nevertheless, the children climbed in and around both of these places when "the caretaker" was "not looking" (p. 161). Rasmussen wryly commented as follows: "The last two spaces are places that children take to be very important, at the same time as using them gives rise to conflict between children and adults" (p. 161). She distinguished between the structured places that adults create for children and the places where children invest imaginative energy; she called the latter, "children's spaces."

## Children, Place, and the Classroom

Children love to create their own worlds at their own scale in any environment they can manipulate or modify. Young children also like novel objects to explore and interesting events to witness. What children also value most in favorite places are opportunities for social affiliation and creative exploration or self-development. As Ellis (2002, 2003, 2004) has reviewed, place is a source of meaning, belonging, and identity largely due to the relationships facilitated by bonds to place. In his research with children, Moore (1986) concluded that exploration of the natural environment intensifies friendships just as friendships prompt exploration of the environment. Langhout (2003) has reported consistent findings that autonomy, social support, and positive feelings are associated with children's place attachment or sense of place. Reviewing research related to the greening of schoolyards—a movement to replace some of the barren grass, asphalt, or wood chips areas with naturalized environments for children's exploration and play—White (2004) pointed out that natural environments stimulate social interaction between children, are important to children's development of independence and autonomy, buffer the impact of life stress on children and help them deal with adversity, and improve children's cognitive development by heightening their awareness, reasoning, and observational skills.

Because children's experiences are limited by the places they inhabit, it is vitally important that we pay attention to those places (Chawla, 1992, 2002; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Ellis (2005) argued that thinking about planning for teaching as "planning for place-making" can productively support children's development of community, positive identities, and successful learning. By using a Reggio-inspired assignment called the "Marketplace," preservice teachers became excited about perceiving the world through the eyes of a child.

### The Marketplace of Learning

> You'll know where you are because of the people with bulging white plastic bags heading in the opposite direction, bags that if opened would spill out with color, life, and the week's groceries: apples, strawberries, lettuce, red peppers, figs, a brown loaf of bread studded with seeds. We are within the vicinity of the Jean Talon market. The sounds grow louder as we approach a large square crisscrossed by rows of stalls and throngs of people. Each stall features fruit, vegetables, pies, maple sugar, or flowers, laid out in a feast of multi-colors, rich and layered, a sight bewildering at first until you learn to discriminate by color, texture, and of course, price. Meanwhile, there are also sounds to take in (people jostling, laughing, speaking in a number of languages; merchants hovering, poised to discourse on the value of their produce) as well as the smells, with the expectation of taste, whetting the palate.

This is a short account that Strong-Wilson wrote based on her impressions of a popular fruit and vegetable market in Montreal. For 3 years, the author has been working on recreating such a marketplace in an undergraduate course. "The Kindergarten Classroom" is one of the required methods courses that elementary preservice teachers take in the 2nd year of their 4-year program and just prior to their first extended field experience in schools. Her use of the marketplace was first inspired by Fraser (2000, 2006), who described an assignment in which student teachers bring in objects to elucidate principles central to a Reggio Emilia educational philosophy: aesthetics, transparency, collaboration, relationships, bringing the outdoors in, reciprocity, flexibility, and active learning. Fraser's idea originated with Malaguzzi (1998), who has provided intellectual direction for Reggio Emilia, and first used the marketplace as a metaphor to describe the kind of stimulating learning environments that teachers can create in classrooms: "Customers look for the wares that interest them, make selections, and engage in lively interactions" (Malaguzzi, cited in Gandini, 1998, p. 173).

The author combines Reggio Emilia's notion of "environment as third teacher" with her own interest in touchstones, that is, memories of places (real or imagined) to which adults continually circle back and that are often formed in childhood through play and stories (Strong-Wilson, 2006). Her purpose is twofold: (a) to encourage preservice teachers to see the world as if from a child's perspective, and (b) to perceive classroom surroundings in a new way, as a "third teacher." The course is divided into four themes: image of the child, teacher role, environment as third teacher, and curriculum. Linking across the four themes is a teacher portfolio. The format of the portfolio invites student teachers to draw connections among themes. The process begins with the image of the child theme, in which they compose two autobiographies about their childhood; one on stories, the other on toys and games. In small groups, they share and discuss their autobiographies. Outside of class, they also complete one of the following: a short narrative or sketch of a secret childhood place (Goodenough, 2004), a neighborhood map showing their favorite haunts from childhood, or an interview with a relative about stories or games that they remember from childhood. The author has found that through this initial writing and sharing about their early experiences, student teachers recall with often uncanny precision the spaces that they inhabited as well as the details of the interactions that they experienced there. Student teachers often comment that through the remembering, they relive the childhood experience. The author has also conducted this activity with inservice teachers, with the same results. The most poignantly remembered experiences are often those in which teachers, as children, had used their imagination to transform their environment in ways that the adults around them had not planned for or did not anticipate, thus creating "children's spaces." Tree branches became houses; cramped spaces became secret hide-outs; discarded building materials (wire, netting, pieces of wood) imaginative fodder for art, drama, and science; and a hammer transformed into a doll.

If we look closely at the eight Reggio principles in light of research on children and place, we find that they also coincide with how young children use and perceive space in unplanned ways, that is, with Rasmussen's (2004) notion of "children's places." For instance, aesthetics and trans-

parency draw our attention to how children are attracted by and curious about anything that engages their senses. The principle of flexibility articulates how children will often use objects in their play in ways not explicitly intended by the teacher or curriculum. Active learning recognizes how children learn through experimenting with and manipulating objects, whereas bringing the outdoors in acknowledges children's curiosity about the natural and social worlds surrounding them.

The marketplace creates a context in which preservice teachers become more thoughtful about how they can provoke children's interactions using everyday objects; the objects, placed in relationship with one another within the classroom, can carry messages that invite children to engage with the world. Because the assignment follows on memory work into early childhood experiences, the teachers' choices of objects bear traces of their remembered experiences of how stimulating and full of unexpected surprises the world often was as children; those remembered experiences are mostly of unplanned rather than planned opportunities for learning. The challenge that Reggio Emilia has taken up, through the notion of environment as third teacher, is to create rich contexts (a "marketplace") that allow children to find their own "affordances" through their interaction with objects and other people (Kyatta, 2002), and in which teachers, through documentation and negotiated curriculum, learn from children, thus creating a community memory.

## Translating Theory Into Practice

How might the notion of "environment as third teacher" invite teachers to imagine new ways to use classroom space? One powerful strategy, as just discussed, is for teachers to have opportunities to recall as well as collectively discuss images of the child as formed within their childhood experiences. A particularly effective way of eliciting such childhood memories is through drawing a map of the neighborhood where one grew up (Frank, 2003) and identifying secret places where they played alone or with other children (Goodenough, 2004). Teachers can then examine classroom and school environments for what they allow and what they prevent children from exploring and investigating. Another idea is for teachers to involve the children in the process, as in Rasmussen's (2004) study when she gave children disposable cameras and asked them to identify which places were most significant to them and why. Following on Tarr's (2004) suggestion, teachers can also conduct an informal inventory of what they see on their walls, in particular, looking for the presence of commercial images, and ask questions (like the following, based on Tarr, 2004, p. 90) about whether, how, or to what degree (going back to Bearne et al.'s [2003] definition of "interaction") their present uses of space "move thinking and learning," including their own as teachers as well as those of parents and caregivers: Why am I displaying these materials and for whom? What image of the child does the display communicate? Does the display honor children's voices and work? How can the walls invite active participation and learning on the part of the children as well as of their parents and caregivers? The classroom is more likely to become a child's favorite place if it supports autonomy, social affiliation, and creative exploration and expression. Attention to the "environment as third teacher," because it is so close to children's ways of interacting with the world, is one way to accomplish these goals.

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# Looking at Student Work For Teacher Learning, Teacher Community, and School Reform

Teachers are usually alone when they examine student work and think about student performance. The authors describe several projects that have enabled teachers to leave the isolation of their own classrooms and think together about student work in the broader contexts of school improvement and professional development.

BY JUDITH WARREN LITTLE, MARYL GEARHART, MARNIE CURRY, AND JUDITH KAFKA

IN 1995, WHEN the California Center for School Restructuring convened teams from nearly 150 elementary and secondary schools to examine the progress of local school reform and its impact on student achievement, it employed the slogan "Examining student work for what matters most."[1] The precise meaning of the slogan was left open for school teams to define. For some, it meant assembling and examining school-level achievement data. For others, it meant using rubrics to assess student essays, projects, or portfolios. For still others, it meant considering samples of student work for their instructional implications or inviting a panel of students to speak about their opportunities to learn.

The years that have passed since that conference testify to a growing conviction that there is something important to be learned by giving close attention to students' experience and students' actual work. Reform advocates, professional developers, school accreditation agencies, teacher networks, and researchers have increasingly engaged teachers in looking together at samples of student work or analyzing classroom performance.[2] Indeed, "looking at student work" has become the organizing theme of one website (www.lasw.org) and a prominent component of several others.[3] It forms a major activity of professional conferences, professional development programs, and reform projects.

One might reasonably ask, "What's new about teachers looking at student work?" Teachers examine artifacts produced by students all the time. They read, review, grade, and celebrate student work every day. However, they do so most often on their own, possibly in conference with a student or parent, but almost always in isolation from colleagues.

In recent years, organizations engaged in professional development and school reform have begun bringing teachers together to do *collectively* what they generally do alone: that is, look at student work and think about students' performance in the classroom. In addition to evaluating a teacher's instructional relationships with individual students, the purpose of these collaborative efforts is to foster teacher learning, support for professional community, and the pursuit of school reform.

These organizations have also focused on introducing these practices into the *ongoing work of schools*. In this

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regard, they have ventured into difficult terrain. It was one thing for California's restructuring schools to gather once a year at a conference to examine student work. It is quite another to transform long-standing workplace traditions of privacy and non-interference by asking teachers to put the work of their own students on the table for others to consider and discuss.

We have recently completed a two-year study that responds directly to this growing interest in looking at student work. In reviewing published descriptions and studies, we discovered a wide range of purposes and practices subsumed under the broad descriptive term "looking at student work." The good news for advocates of these practices is that there is emerging evidence that some versions of looking at student work yield benefits for teaching and learning.[1] However, the available research gives little sense of how any demonstrated benefits might in fact be achieved.[2] While there are promising precedents, the literature offers few specifics regarding the actual practices that teachers employ in looking at student work. Our project attempted to make some headway on that problem.

There is emerging evidence that some versions of looking at student work yield benefits for teaching and learning.

Through case studies of teacher groups working with three nationally recognized organizations — Harvard Project Zero, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the Academy for Educational Development — we sought to identify specific practices employed by teachers who come together to examine student work in the context of broader programs of school improvement and school-based professional development.[3] Each of the three organizations has accumulated a track record of school-based or district-based professional development or school improvement activity. Each has developed a distinctive approach to looking at student work that reflects the organization's history and particular interests.

The "Evidence Project," developed by Harvard Project Zero, was premised on the idea that student work offers a window into children's thinking and learning, and so teachers' collaborative reviews of that work constitute a "significant model of school improvement from within."[4] With its commitment to fostering student learning and creativity, Project Zero viewed the Evidence Project as an opportunity to organize time and space so that teachers could interweave individual inquiry with collegial conversations about teaching and learning — always keeping the student at the center of the conversation. Toward that end, project staff members developed structured discussion guides ("protocols") and a project manual to help teachers organize discussion of student work in relation to a question of interest defined by the presenting teacher. Teacher groups varied in the way they organized their activity and in how they made use of the project protocols.

In its project, Building School Capacity to Improve Student Learning, the Academy for Educational Development (AED) sought to "build the capacity of school faculties to improve the quality of instruction in middle-grades schools, through a continuous, comprehensive, and critical review of student work."[5] Teachers in minischool grade-level teams constructed interdisciplinary "learning goals" to guide the ways they considered student work. As teams reviewed student work in relation to their learning goals, they considered the assignment, the lesson plan, and often the school's performance standards as well. Along with promoting team reviews of student work, AED also helped schools and districts embed reviews of student work in school-level self-assessments. In cross-school or cross-district meetings, teachers examined portfolios of student work from other schools, looking for evidence that students were meeting those schools' learning goals.

Instructional Improvement Through Inquiry and Collaboration is a project of the Coalition of Essential Schools that builds on existing elements of its whole-school reform model — the 10 principles of whole-school reform, critical friends groups, and the cycle of inquiry — to focus teacher communities on inquiry into teaching and learning. Coalition staff members envisioned that inquiry and collaboration would entail systematic attention to student work and to such artifacts of teacher work as lesson plans, assignments, classroom videotapes, and peer observations. In some contexts, teacher inquiry was integrated into the work of existing critical friends groups or teacher teams; in other contexts, new groups were created. At most sites, teachers were introduced to a range of protocols to help structure their discussion of student or teacher work.[6] Consistent with the Coalition's commitment to local interpretation of its principles and mission, there were regional and school differences in the design and implementation of the project.

We focused our study on teachers' practices of looking at student work, while also taking note of how those practices fit with each project's broader aims and with other activities at each school site. Overall, we visited seven schools, but eventually we focused on four sites: an elementary

school affiliated with Harvard Project Zero; a middle school working with the Academy for Educational Development; and two high schools, one in each of the two participating regions of the Coalition of Essential Schools. We made multiple visits to each site, talking with participants and observing them at work together. Video recordings, copies of student work, protocol guidelines, and agendas provided evidence of local practice. Interviews with teachers, administrators, and project staff members helped us determine the meaning and value of those practices in the eyes of various participants and stakeholders. Our charge was to see what we could learn from these projects about "looking at student work" as a resource for instructional improvement, while recognizing that the projects also encompassed a wider range of purposes and strategies."

## COMMON ELEMENTS OF PRACTICE

In our investigation, we attempted to capture how "looking at student work" took place in each school and how the various approaches created opportunities for teacher learning. Despite differences in philosophy, practice, and local contexts, the projects and sites shared three common elements.

*Bringing teachers together to focus on student learning and teaching practice.* Teachers get together for many reasons over the course of a school year, but rarely are they invited to look closely together at evidence of student learning. Thus a significant contribution of these projects was to organize occasions when talk about student learning and teaching practice formed the primary agenda. Gradually, these learning-focused conversations would become embedded in the schools' structures, schedules, relationships, and habits.

Teachers at each site reserved time and space in their regular work schedule for the meetings we observed. However, as one teacher emphasized, "There aren't too many schools that will set aside that time." The efforts of the projects to create and sustain groups with schedules and routines led to conversations about teaching and learning that took place in the course of ongoing school work. Between meetings, teachers reported reflecting on prior meetings "through a different eye" and thinking about "how I am going to present this" at the next meeting. It may seem a truism, but what these projects demonstrated is that, if teachers are to engage together in the tough work of instructional improvement, the school must organize for it.

*Getting student work on the table and into the conversation.* Numerous published testimonials attest to the value of having teachers come together to talk about their

work. In most of these accounts, the materials on the table, if any, represent teachers' work in the form of instructional materials, lesson plans, or, occasionally, videotapes of classroom activity. There are few precedents for placing student work on the table in any systematic and serious way or for engaging in a conversation about student learning and thinking. These projects instituted structured events that helped create the expectation that there would be student work to look at and that time would be set aside to discuss it. As one teacher explained, looking at student work "made me more aware of the work I was looking at. Before, if I looked at something, I would say, 'Oh, that's good,' or 'Yeah, that meets the standard.' But now, I can go into more detail with it, and I learned that through this."

Facilitators reminded participants to refrain from making judgments and to concentrate on describing what they saw in the student work and on posing questions.

*Structuring the conversation.* A distinctive feature of these projects was the extent to which they promoted the use of "protocols" — procedural steps and guidelines — to organize discussions and structure participation. Designated facilitators helped participants make productive use of the protocol formats.[13] Although the projects and the individual teacher groups varied in which protocols they used and how they used them, the protocols shared some central design features.[14]

First, the protocols used by these organizations were designed to interrupt or slow down teachers' usual responses to student work (to evaluate and grade it), and to stimulate an open-minded but focused examination of what that work can tell teachers about student understanding and teaching practice. To this end, some protocol guidelines constrained presenters from supplying background information about an assignment, the students, or the presenter's own intentions. Facilitators using such protocols often reminded participants to refrain from making judgments and to concentrate on describing what they saw in the student work and on posing questions.[15]

In addition, the protocols structured participation in ways that deliberately departed from the flow of ordinary conversation. They determined when presenters had the floor, when presenters listened while others conversed, and when the entire group could engage in open discussion. They structured the discussion through a series of timed phases or segments, and they focused the conversation in each phase by inviting talk of a particular sort — for example, phases devoted to "describing the work" (without judging it) and then to "interpreting the work" in one protocol or to "clarifying questions" in another.

Finally, protocols explicitly organized opportunities for participants to raise questions, issues, and dilemmas triggered by examples of student work. They also provided teachers an opportunity to give and receive feedback. According to one published summary, "A protocol creates a structure that makes it safe to ask challenging questions of each other."[16] For example, the Tuning Protocol used by some teachers at Coalition schools provided for both "warm" and "cool" feedback, and the Modified Collaborative Assessment Conference used by teachers in Project Zero groups required that the presenter remain silent in one phase as colleagues posed questions about the student work.

Together, these elements of design — bringing teachers together, introducing student work, and structuring conversation — were meant to afford certain opportunities for teacher learning, the creation of a professional community, and the pursuit of school reform. Yet we know that design and intent do not fully account for actual practice. Educators have long been familiar with the term "mutual adaptation," coined in the 1970s to account for the ways in which both innovative programs (ideas, purposes, strategies) and their users change in the actual process of implementation.[17] We expected to develop useful insights from looking closely at how the ideas and tools developed by the three national organizations were actually taken up by participating schools and teachers.

## BEYOND A SLOGAN: UNPACKING PRACTICE

To deepen our understanding of what looking at student work entailed at each site, we paid close attention to what the participants said and did with one another in their meetings and to what they shared with us in interviews. We unpacked practice by looking for the ways in which participants' talk and their use of structured protocols worked to "open up" or "close off" opportunities to delve deeply into questions of student learning or teaching practice. We developed an understanding of how specific practices and resources helped to direct teachers' close attention to student work and to open up discussions of teaching and learning. However, we also gained an appreciation for some of the challenges that teachers, administrators, and partner organizations confront in making "looking at student work" an integral and productive component

of collaborative professional development or reform activity in a school.

To take one example, Shelby, a high school health/science teacher, provided two samples of a persuasive essay she had assigned as the culminating project for a mental health unit on violence and violence prevention. Shelby was not satisfied that the essays had captured what she had hoped her students would learn from the unit. Her colleagues in the meeting, representing a wide range of subject fields, had all participated in professional development aimed at strengthening "writing across the curriculum." In examining the student essays, they began to realize that they had an incomplete grasp of what it meant for students to produce a persuasive essay — and for teachers to assign and assess one. A math teacher mused, "What comes to mind is how well do the students understand what is meant by a 'persuasive essay'?" Seconds later, she added, "because I'm not clear what is meant by a persuasive essay." Those dual themes — what students understand and what the teachers understand as a "persuasive essay" — were picked up throughout the discussion, culminating in this exchange:

> *English teacher:* Do you think maybe the kids didn't get it?
>
> *Shelby:* Do you think maybe the *teacher* didn't get it?! (Laughter)

In their 40-minute discussion of the two essays, both Shelby and her colleagues gained new insight into the students' writing and their own instructional practice while also reinforcing a spirit of mutual support and community.

In this example and in others we observed, certain practices and conditions helped to focus attention on the student work and to deepen the discussion of teaching and learning.

1. *Flexible, creative use of tools for local purposes.* Each of the organizations in our study introduced processes, tools, and roles to help teachers build community and focus their conversations on student learning and teaching practice. The resources they created or selected were designed with certain key features and certain built-in constraints to enable particular things to happen. In many groups, teachers were attentive to the intended steps and phases of the protocols they used, remarking on those moments when they departed from the guidelines in some way ("I don't want to be judgmental, but I see . . ."). However, the more sustained and lively conversations about student work occurred when groups took a flexible, creative approach to the tools and crafted them to their own purposes. Teachers made choices to employ one protocol rather than another in accordance with their interests; they adjusted the suggested time limitations to accommodate an unfolding conversation; they sometimes ignored the prohibition against "judging" the student work in order to pursue a compelling question or dilemma.

2. *Ability to exploit subject expertise and examine subject issues.* Any piece of student work is student work in a subject area — literature, mathematics, art, science, history, photography, and so on. What teachers made of a given piece of work — the accomplishments or creativity they recognized, the struggles they detected — reflected their own conceptions of the subject area and of what it means to learn and teach it. Subject-related resources worked in some unexpected ways in these groups. Sometimes, a teacher's lack of familiarity with a subject area forced others to explain basic concepts and rationales in a way they otherwise would not have done — recall that it was the *math* teacher in Shelby's group who first focused the group's attention on what it meant to write a persuasive essay. On the other hand, the participants were able to pursue this issue because they shared some common subject-related interests and because at least some members had relevant expertise and experience. Thus it was the English teacher in Shelby's group who particularly helped the group to capitalize on the math teacher's question. The teachers in our case groups were well aware of the benefits of common interests and participant resources. As a teacher remarked at another site, "The nice part about the group is we're all focused on writing, so when I see a problem in a piece of student work, they may give me concrete examples of what they did to help *me* in my teaching."

None of these groups came together with the explicit aim of pursuing professional development in a particular subject area. Their purposes were broader: a general concern for enhancing professional community and supporting instructional improvement; and they typically considered student work from several subject areas. Yet we are persuaded that explicit attention to the subject content of any given piece of student work and to related questions of student learning and teaching practice was an important contributor to what a group was able to accomplish by "looking at student work."[3]

3. *A balance between comfort and challenge.* Recent literature describes "teacher learning communities" as those in which teachers develop the capacities to pose tough questions, challenge assumptions, and even disagree openly over matters of practice while cultivating trust and mutual support.[4] Such capacities, it appears, develop only gradually. Shared inquiry into student learning and teaching prac-

tice runs against the grain of typical professional talk and counter to the prevailing norms of non-interference, privacy, and harmony.

In these projects, protocols and process guidelines worked to get a conversation started and to focus it on evidence of student learning. Such procedural tools gave participants permission to make observations about student work, to raise issues and questions, or to suggest implications for teaching practice. Yet more important than the tools was the human element at work — a facilitator who sought to open up a question or persist with a difficult point, a presenter who invited feedback by being self-critical or disclosing problems openly, a participant who took the risk to broach a controversial topic. We found the most generative conversations in the places where teachers actively invited challenge — for example, by being self-critical as in "This lesson didn't fly" or by introducing a provocative question such as "Do you think the kids didn't get it?"

4. *Facilitation to build a group and deepen a conversation.* A balance between comfort and challenge, when we found it, was the product of strategic and skilled leadership. Protocols and guidelines — tools for structuring conversation — have some power to help groups get past cultural norms of privacy and non-interference, but by themselves they won't bear the burden of cultural change in schools and in teachers' professional relationships. When we saw evidence of group norms built on open discussion, constructive questioning, and critique, we saw individuals taking the initiative to establish a different kind of conversation — one in which people could push on ideas and practices while still being respectful toward one another.

Shelby's group provides a case in point. One teacher recalled that "the first few months, we were not dealing with tough issues. Everyone was very polite." However, the group's leader persistently and explicitly linked their conversations about teacher practice to the "bottom line" of improving student achievement. During meetings, she routinely called attention to the goal of looking at student work "to improve student achievement — to use that cycle of inquiry to try strategies and change student achievement levels." Participants who volunteered to guide a protocol used the guidelines to clarify how the protocol supported the group's broader aims:

> So let's go to interpreting the student work. [Reading] "In this period, we want to make sense of what the student is doing and why. Try to find as many different interpretations as possible and evaluate them against the kind and quality of evidence." So we want to "try to infer what was the student thinking, what does the student understand and not understand, and what was the student most interested in. How does the student interpret the assignment?"

At the same time, the group's leader worked to build a climate of consistent support. She met with participants between meetings to help them think about what student work they would bring to the next meeting and what protocol would best help them achieve their own purposes. And she emphasized the role of humor in the group, remarking:

> We do a lot of laughing in my group. It makes it easier for people to bring hard things to the table because we're not blaming the person who is bringing the hard thing. In some groups, teachers would hold back because "they'll think I'm a horrible teacher" — but not in my group.

Over time, participants grew more comfortable in dealing with the "tough issues." Shelby sums up:

> I look forward to getting a chance to present. And it doesn't intimidate me anymore to question whether I even know what a persuasive essay is and whether I have enough knowledge to try and communicate it to the students, because I don't know. I think that's what makes a person a good teacher, when you don't think you know everything and you're willing to open up and trying to understand it better.

## THREE DILEMMAS IN MAKING THE MOST OF LOOKING AT STUDENT WORK

Putting student work on the table did not ensure whether or how it would be taken up in conversation. In Shelby's case, teachers devoted close attention to the two student essays as they worked to define precisely how the writings had fallen short of Shelby's expectations. When they eventually turned to a discussion of instruction, they were able to frame their suggestions in ways that linked directly to the problems of student learning reflected in the student work. Their efforts to link issues of teaching and learning were aided by a group leader who combined expertise in facilitation with many years of experience as an English teacher and by participants who treated looking at student work as a central part of their activities each time they met.

Even with the aid of facilitation and protocol guidelines, these practices take time and effort to introduce. We observed occasions when teachers took only limited advantage of student work that had been introduced, elevating

relatively little time and attention to the evidence of student understanding that it could offer. There were many variations to this pattern. At one site, teachers talked regularly about instruction and students' responses to classroom activities, but without actually bringing student work for others to examine. At other sites, teachers routinely made student work available, but they moved away from examining the content in *detail* as they turned to more general issues regarding class performance ("You would be amazed at how even the lowest students are trying to compare and contrast and analyze") or to questions about instruction ("What did you ask the students to write?"). How do we explain these often brief and often tentative approaches to looking at student work? We suggest three explanations, each with implications for practice.

1. *Concern for personal comfort and collegial relationships.* In crucial ways, any student work on the table is also the teacher's work: it results from an assignment the teacher has given and reflects the fruits of the teacher's instruction. It was no surprise then that teachers at our sites treated looking at student work as delicate business that risked "overstepping boundaries." Teachers were conscious of the need to affirm one another's intentions and competence and of the risk of offending or hurting feelings. On occasion, teachers responded to their colleagues' questions about student work by justifying their own teaching practice. Although the tone was often joking ("My turn to defend myself!"), the substance was serious.

2. *Scarce time, many interests.* Teachers seek to make the most of the scarce time they have together. Their talk in meetings reflected the strong impulse to turn the talk to wide-ranging issues of teaching practice, using the student work as a point of departure for discussion of curriculum, instruction, or assessment. Some teachers pointed out that the student work alone was not sufficient as a resource for the broad questions or issues they wished to raise. For example, one teacher brought a single example of a student essay for the group to examine but also wanted the opportunity to talk more generally about the progress of her entire class. ("I really wanted to show you more pieces. There's a big chunk of students in my class that had difficulty with that.") Yet we wondered whether the impulse to talk about *teaching* might have been better served by sustaining closer and longer attention to the available evidence of student *learning*.

Project organizers emphasized that looking at student work serves as just one strategy in a broader agenda of teacher development, support for teacher community, and the pursuit of school reform. Their point is certainly an important one, but it also underscores the multiple demands on teachers' time and attention and the problem of tradeoffs that teachers must make when they sit down together to look at student work.

3. *Uncertainty about what to highlight in "looking at" student work.* The collaborative practice of looking at student work is different in important respects from the familiar experience of reviewing student work independently in the classroom. The protocols supply one way of dealing with the unfamiliarity, helping teachers get a fresh look at student work and at the same time refrain from making premature judgments. Still, in many ways, the teachers in our study were uncertain as to how to make their conversations a productive enterprise. Two aspects of this uncertainty stood out in particular.

First, teachers had the unfamiliar task of deciding what work to bring for others to look at. Unlike formal programs of professional development in which student work may take the form of edited and polished "cases," the student work in these projects traveled directly from the classroom of participating teachers to the meeting in which it was discussed. The teachers had to decide — often quickly, given the exigencies of their daily workloads — which student work would best serve their own purposes and those of the group: One piece or many? Work showing student mastery or work displaying student struggles? Work linked to curriculum in other classrooms or just their own? Each selection represented a tradeoff, and no selection could serve all purposes fully.

Second, the participants then had the additional task of figuring out what to say about the student work in the time allotted, given their own multiple interests and diverse backgrounds. Many of the protocols we followed required that the presenter refrain from supplying introductory background or context regarding the students who produced the work, the assignment the students had been given, or the instructional strategies the teacher had employed. Participants were asked to begin by describing what they saw in the work while refraining from judgments about its quality. However, the task of "just describing" the work, and doing so in a way that would stimulate productive discussion, turned out to be complicated. Furthermore, the teachers almost invariably displayed what we termed a "quest for context." For example, when given the opportunity to pose questions, they focused on precisely those points of context that the presenter had been asked to withhold: "Is this the first draft?" "Is this related to a story that the children read in class?" "Were they instructed to underline the first sentence?" "Why did you choose this piece, this student's work?"

In some respects, these dilemmas may be resolved with the simple passage of time, as groups gain familiarity and

facility with particular procedures. Persistence matters, and some tradeoffs remain inevitable. However, we argue that groups would also benefit from tackling the dilemmas head on, reserving time to reflect on the assumptions underlying a given protocol or process and the degree to which it provides a fit with the participants' own purposes and resources.

## CONCLUSION

The slogan "Examining student work for what matters most," coined nearly a decade ago, implied a promise that systematic, collective attention to student work would help to advance school-based teacher development and school reform. "Looking at student work" has emerged as a practice with growing appeal and potential importance but with few strong roots or traditions in schools.

The value of looking at student work resides in its potential for bringing *students* more consistently and explicitly into deliberations among teachers. Looking at student work has the potential to expand teachers' opportunity to learn, to cultivate a professional community that is both willing and able to inquire into practice, and to focus school-based teacher conversations directly on the improvement of teaching and learning. These are benefits worth pursuing. To secure these benefits will entail organization, leadership, and persistence. The projects we studied illuminate some strategic possibilities available to schools and thus expand our supply of promising supports for teacher learning and school reform. They also suggest that a slogan is but a starting point.

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1. For a summary report on the California School Restructuring Program, see Judith Warren Little and Rena Dorph, *Lessons About Comprehensive School Reform: California's School Restructuring Demonstration Program* (Berkeley: Graduate School of Education, University of California, 1998).

2. Joseph P. McDonald, "Students' Work and Teachers' Learning," in Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller, eds., *Teachers Caught in the Action: Professional Development That Matters* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), pp. 209–35; Steve Seidel, "Wondering to Be Done: The Collaborative Assessment Conference," in David Allen, ed., *Assessing Student Learning: From Grading to Understanding* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), pp. 21–39; and Judith Warren Little, "Organizing Schools for Teacher Learning," in Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes, eds., *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Teaching and Policy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pp. 233–62.

3. See, for example, www.essentialschools.org; www.annenberginstitute.org; http://scs.ucd.org/fsw; www.pz.harvard.edu/research.htm; and www.edtrust.org.

4. For a review of five programmatic approaches and corresponding bodies of research, see Judith Warren Little, Mary I. Gearhart, Marnie Curry, and Judith Kafka, "Looking at Student Work for Teacher Learning and School Reform," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 2002.

5. For examples, see Cynthia L. Greenleaf and Ruth Schoenbach, *Close Readings: A Study of Key Issues in the Use of Literacy Learning Cases for the Professional Development of Secondary Teachers: Final Report to the Spencer and MacArthur Foundations* (Oakland, Calif.: Strategic Literacy Initiative, WestEd, 2001); Elham Kazemi and Megan Loef Franke, "Using Student Work to Support Professional Development in Elementary Mathematics," Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, Seattle, April 2003.

6. We have identified the three organizations and projects by name, but we have employed pseudonyms for all participating individuals and school sites.

7. Harvard Project Zero, "The Evidence Project: Proposal Narrative: Proposal to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund," 1998, p. 1. See also Steve Seidel et al., *The Evidence Process: A Collaborative Approach to Understanding and Improving Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Project Zero, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, 2001).

8. Academy for Educational Development, "Reviewing Student Work, Improving Student Achievement: Proposal to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund," 1998, p. 1.

9. Coalition of Essential Schools, "Instructional Improvement Through Inquiry and Collaboration: Proposal to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund," 1998. See also Lindsey Claire Matsumura and Joan Rector Steinberg, *Collaborative, School-Based Professional Development Settings for Teachers: Implementation and Links to Improving the Quality of Classroom Practice and Student Learning* (Los Angeles: National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, UCLA, 2001); and Bill Nave, *Critical Friends Groups: Their Impact on Students, Teachers, and Schools: Results of a Two-Year Qualitative Study of the National School Reform Faculty Program: Procedures* (R.I.: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2000).

10. For a more extended analysis of how local approaches to looking at student work affect teachers' opportunities to learn, see Mary I. Gearhart, Judith Warren Little, Judith Kafka, and Marnie Curry, "Looking at Student Work: Locating Opportunities for Teacher Learning in the Context of Practice," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 2002.

11. One site relied exclusively on members of the group to facilitate protocol-based discussions; other sites also used teachers to facilitate, sometimes supplemented by external facilitators or coaches. Summary descriptions of specific protocols may be found at www.lasw.org.

12. These protocols evolved during the project. Current versions may or may not have the identical features.

13. Not all protocols are designed to help participants withhold judgment. In approaches oriented explicitly toward standards implementation, protocols may be designed to structure an assessment of student work in relationship to specific tasks and standards. For example, see the approach advocated by the Education Trust (www.edtrust.org).

14. www.lasw.org.

15. The term "mutual adaptation" was coined by Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change: Volume VIII: Implementing and Sustaining Innovations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1978). Research on fields ranging from cognitive science to anthropology similarly shows how individuals and groups "appropriate" innovative designs to suit particular purposes and contexts.

16. Most of the available research focuses on subject-specific professional development activity. In one recent study, researchers found that teachers were able to derive more insights from student work as they began to devote very close attention to its details and to link the student work to their own classroom observations and conversations with students (Kazemi and Franke, op. cit.). For an example of a subject-specific protocol for looking at student work, see the "Protocol for Looking at Student Work in Reading Apprenticeship Classrooms," developed by the Strategic Literacy Initiative, WestEd. You can contact the Strategic Literacy Initiative at 510/302-4245.

17. See, for example, Christopher M. Clark, ed., *Talking Shop: Authentic Conversation and Teacher Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001); Pam Grossman, Sam Wineburg, and Stephen Woolworth, "Toward a Theory of Teacher Community," *Teachers College Record*, vol. 103, 2001, pp. 942–1012; and Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert, *Professional Communities and the Work of High School Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

18. See, for example, Carne Barnett, "Mathematics Teaching Cases as a Catalyst for Informed Strategic Inquiry," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 14, 1998, pp. 81–93. K

*Human Relations, Volume 40, Number 10, 1987, pp. 633-658*

# A Paradoxical Conception of Group Dynamics

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*Most of the research literature on group dynamics has either ignored the subject of within-group conflict or sought ways to "resolve" it as a consequence of its seemingly dysfunctional effects. We argue that there are many processes experienced as conflictual because of the models members use for understanding and managing actions, feelings, and thoughts that are in "apparent opposition." We contend that by understanding the paradoxical nature of these group processes many of the conflicts associated with these "apparent contradictions" are "released" and, hence, not in need of "resolving" because they are experienced as essential to group life, rather than extraneous. Underlying theory about the paradoxical nature of group experiences is expounded, and seven group dynamics are examined using a paradoxical epistemology. These are the paradoxes of identity, disclosure, trust, individuality, authority, regression, and creativity.*

## INTRODUCTION

A great deal of organizational energy is expended on trying to get groups "unstuck"; individuals remain behaviorally invested in preserving the very conditions they crave to change, relationships in decline continue to decay as each party stubbornly waits for the other to make the first move, and groups enmesh themselves in the "we-they" dynamic, packaged as management vs. labor, powerful vs. powerless, black vs. white, men vs. women,

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etc., in spite of their desire to avoid such dynamics. Such paralysis is invariably accompanied by conflicts which split the group into opposing sides.

As social scientists, we often get pulled in to assist groups trapped in conflict. We are asked to help *resolve* the situation. Yet, our experience teaches us that attempts to *resolve* group conflicts rarely produce more than temporary relief. The conflict simply reappears at another time, or shifts to another domain such that the group's encounters with others become excessively combative, or some key interpersonal relationship within the group becomes impaired.

How we think about "stuckness" in groups is the centerpiece of this paper. We argue that instead of seeking to *resolve* the conflicts that create paralysis, we need ways to *release* these conflicts. Our central thesis is that group life is inherently paradoxical, and when group members are unable to see this they adopt approaches to group experiences that "create" conflicts out of processes that are "conflictual" only because of the way they are understood. When group dynamics are experienced as oppositional, members act as if the conflicts must be "resolved" before the group can move on, thereby making "unresolvable" that which needed no resolution until it was *defined* as needing resolution.

By stating that group life is inherently paradoxical, we do not mean that group life is not inherently other things as well. Just as when we say someone is inherently intelligent, it does not preclude being inherently attractive or inherently athletic. Were it not for the distorting aspects of language, we may have stated the proposition as an exploration of the inherently paradoxical facets of group life. But this implies that the paradoxical is something to be compared with other facets. In saying a group is inherently paradoxical, we mean that paradox is contained within the very core, within the very existence and meaning of group, and that a group's paradoxical nature needs to be understood alongside the other aspects of group life.

## CONFLICT IN GROUPS

Conflict is a familiar experience to anyone who has spent time working in groups. Experientially, it can be defined as the clash of oppositional forces including ideas, resources, interests, wishes, or drives. These oppositional forces are usually expressed in antagonistic or incompatible forms, and much of group life is concerned with how to discard the attendant tensions. Yet, more often than not, the methods used to dispose of the conflict simply stimulate a new set of group tensions, triggering the taking of sides over whether the discord itself should be confronted, or ignored and left to fade. As group members describe their efforts to conquer conflict, they seem to tell a story of being conquered by it.

A group, by virtue of its nature as a collective phenomenon *creates* certain tensions. It is not merely a number of people occupying the same physical or psychological space; it includes the mutual dependencies of members on each other to achieve collective aims (Alderfer, 1977; Jantsch, 1980; Simmel, 1955). When a group comes into being, it is expected to satisfy both the interdependent needs of its individual members and the needs of the collectivity that result from these interdependencies. Thus, while the individual members are coming to rely on the interdependencies that are created within the group, the group as a whole is also becoming dependent on this same network of interdependencies. These interdependencies mean that members come to depend on the group and the group comes to depend on its members, triggering a wide range of emotional reactions, both conscious and unconscious, that often are experienced as conflicting and divergent (Slater, 1966). The links between individual elements and the collectivity evoke contradictory feelings which then have to be managed within the life of the group. These seemingly contradictory feelings may be handled in a variety of ways. They may be retained, ignored, embraced, adopted, driven underground, or expelled.

When tensions emerge in a group, members invariably take sides and assume that the opposite points of view have emerged from different sources. We hear statements such as "The problem is that we just have people who hold different values. Some like it this way and others like it that way. What are you going to do? Throw out those with values that don't fit the dominant group?" In these moments, it is virtually impossible for members to entertain the idea that their disagreements might have emanated from a common source.

## THE LEGACY OF RESEARCH ON GROUPS

Since conflict is a very familiar experience for anyone who has spent time working with or in groups, one would expect to find substantial attention paid to this topic in the research literature on small groups. Interestingly, this is not the case. In McGrath and Altman's (1966) review and classification on group research, conflict is not one of the 31 "substantive classes" the authors use to organize their sample of 250 studies on groups. More recently, Hare's (1976) *Handbook of Small Group Research,* an excellent summary of work in a variety of areas, does not even have conflict in the index, and Zander's (1977, 1982) books on groups mention within-group conflict on a total of three pages and then only in passing. Even in the psychoanalytically-oriented collection of writings edited by Gibbard, Hartman, and Mann (1974), only two of the 16 articles address conflict as a substantive topic. There are notable exceptions to this general trend (see

Deutsch, 1973; Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964; Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964; Yalom, 1985), but the relative inattention is very striking.

There are many processes connected to group conflict that have been researched, under headings such as cohesiveness (Seashore, 1954), effectiveness (Hackman & Morris, 1975), and groupthink (Janis, 1972), building on the recognition that *different* skills, abilities, attitudes, or perspectives are often needed for a group to achieve its stated purposes. These differences, which are the source of a group's potential, also give rise to the various forms of conflict (interpersonal, subgroup, and intergroup) that imperil group efficacy. What is left glaringly unaddressed, however, is the role these conflicts play in group life.

Our concern in this paper is not to displace any of the concepts well established in the literature of group research, but rather to augment those writings by asking how some of these group dynamics might look if conflict were also brought to the same center stage of theory that it seems to occupy in people's experiences in groups. Research on groups can be characterized by how conflict is understood. So that this paper can be placed in an appropriate context of theory, we begin with a brief overview of three ways conflict has been dealt with in the group dynamics literature.

One perspective views conflict as a *problem,* such as a "process loss" which needs to be and can be minimized or controlled (see Hackman & Morris, 1975; Schwartzman, 1986 for reviews of this perspective). Options are (1) to seek a reduction in the incidence of destructive conflict through cooperation and conflict "resolution" (Deutsch, 1973), (2) to pre-empt potential conflicts by designing the task of the group so that conflicts don't arise, or (3) to "decompose" the group as in the Nominal Group Technique and Delphi Models (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975) in order to minimize and control group level interaction (Schwartzman, 1986). From this perspective, conflict is seen as one of the sources of "stuckness" in groups, and group movement is seen as facilitated by the creation of conditions which minimize conflict.

A second perspective views conflict as an inevitable *phase* during which hostile emotions must be expressed or a set of differences must be resolved. There are two types of phase models, the linear-progressive where the group is seen as passing through stages that lead to maturity, and life-cycle where the phases are similar to the growth and decline of any living system from birth to death (Gibbard et al., 1974). The inability to resolve the central conflicts in the group or to learn conflict resolution skills is seen as forestalling movement toward the establishment of "mature" norms for interaction and work (Tuckman, 1965; Bennis & Shepard, 1956). In this view, conflict is a necessary phase of group life and the associated paralysis is treated as a form of developmental impairment.

The third perspective views conflict as a *concomitant,* attendant process of collective life. It is an inevitable and recurring feature of all groups, rooted in both the "differences" represented by bringing people together and the unconscious ambivalences stirred by individuals becoming a part of a collective (Bion, 1961; Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964). The struggles around these emerging differences and unconscious themes are what create the fabric of group experiences. In this perspective, paralysis is seen to result from a group's collective resistance to acknowledging, accepting, and repeatedly confronting these inevitable conflicts.

The paradoxical approach described in this paper has similarities with this third tradition. Our point of departure is that we think the research on group dynamics, including the writings in the third perspective, has inadequately addressed the question: What is it that gets groups *stuck* and *unstuck?* Theorists suggest that movement is the result of the resolution of conflicts, either among group members (over issues such as control, influence, and leadership) or within individuals (such as feelings of vulnerability). But most who address this issue punctuate their theories with statements about "working through" the difficult inter-member or group level issues fueling the conflict (see Gibbard et al., 1974). Most ignore entirely what "working through" means (for an example of a theory which does, see Whitaker and Lieberman, 1964). Until recently (Wells, 1980), the literature has been relatively silent on the topic of what the psychological process of "dealing with conflict" in groups actually involves.

## WHAT IS PARADOX?

In general, paradox can be understood as a process that involves a vicious cycle, based on disconfirmation, that creates self-renunciation, for example, the statements "I am lying," or "this statement is false" (Hughes & Brecht, 1975). The essence of paradox may be seen by examining the following two sentences when they are juxtaposed:

The below statement is true.
The above statement is false.

Each of these statements taken separately is quite simple. However, when they are put together, paradox is created, a self-referential, self-contradictory vicious cycle that has the quality of looking into an endless hall of mirrors. While the content of each statement remains the same, its meaning is changed by the fact that it has become framed by the other statement (Hofstadter, 1980). To find the location of the paradox we must look

into the empty space between the two statements, not simply at the text, for the paradox is implicitly written between the lines, in the con-text or the sub-text.

In the above example, if we remain inside the implied frames, we are caught in a spiral of seemingly contradictory forces, trapped between which of the suggested "truths" is "true." A paradoxical view suggests looking from an outside frame (a metaframe) to see how these seemingly contradictory statements make sense while the apparent contradiction is maintained.

For group members, there are many experiences that surface in contradictory forms and generate tensions that are threatening both to individuals and to the group as a whole. How these are managed provides the foundation for the individual's sense of belonging to the group and the group's identity in the context within which it is located. In this paper, we are interested in exploring what group experiences might look like, both to members and outside observers, if these contradictory forces were treated as paradoxical, as being a natural and central part of the very concept of groupness, as opposed to those perspectives which suggest that contradiction presents a problem that must be "solved."

## GROUP PARADOXES

When we take experiences in groups and examine them through a paradoxical frame, what do we see? To address this, we will explore the contradictory and self-referential dynamics associated with a number of familiar themes in group life. Understanding a paradox requires an appreciation of the contradictions it contains, the roots of these contradictions in both the individual and the group as a whole, the ways these oppositional forces are linked to make them into contradictions, and the essential elements of groups that are expressed in the relationship between the opposing elements of these contradictions. We illustrate our paradoxical thinking with a discussion of seven paradoxes: identity, disclosure, trust, individuality, authority, regression, and creativity. These are illustrative of paradoxes typically found in all groups.

### *The Paradox of Identity*

To be an individual, a person must integrate a variety of group memberships since one is, to a large extent, a composite of the groups to which he or she belongs (Alderfer, 1977). To be a group, a collection of individuals must integrate the large array of individual differences which the members represent (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). The paradox of identity is

expressed in the struggle of individuals and the group to establish a unique and meaningful identity by attempting to indicate how each is separate from the other, while all the time turning out to actually be affirming the ways each is an integral part of the other.

Membership in a group involves the development of symbiosis which draws the individual into a struggle over what to give up in order to belong, and draws the group into a struggle over what to invest of itself in its individual members (Maruyama, 1976). Such connecting involves both individual and group processes which are mutual and co-occur, creating the following dilemma: for the individual, it is how to preserve an identity that remains differentiated from the group (McCall & Simmons, 1978); for the group, the dilemma is how to maintain a coherent identity in the face of the inevitable turnover in membership (Mills, 1967). In sorting out what groups to join, individuals want connection without loss of self (Mahler, 1968). Likewise, the group is concerned with how to rely on its members and get them to embody its life without investing so much of itself in any one individual that if he or she leaves or burns out the group will be irreparably diminished.

The group as a whole must constantly evaluate whether its stipulated purposes can be achieved given its membership, just as members repetitively reassess whether the rewards of belonging match the investments required (Lawler, 1981). These twin processes mean that individuals are looking for "good" groups, defined in terms of minimal compromise of individuality, and groups are looking for "good" members, defined in terms of individuals willing to subordinate self-interests to those of the collectivity (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). When group and individual identities are formulated in either/or terms and seen as separate processes, there is a tendency for groups to turn away from individuals who boldly assert their individuality and for individuals to be reticent about joining groups that affirm the primacy of the collective.

A paradoxical approach to identity conceptualizes the processes through which both individual and group identity are formed as being one and the same. In this frame, individuals are seen as both creating and being created by the groups to which they belong. Even entertaining this possibility feels paradoxical because the simultaneity of the two complementary processes creates a loop that is hard to tolerate, both intellectually and emotionally. The paradox of identity conceives of the individual as deriving meaning from membership in a group to which he or she belongs, while *at the same time,* the group derives meaning from the identities of its individual members. The individual is *of* the group and the group's existence is integrally enfolded into the shared life of its members. The struggle, so often observed *between* the individual and the group, is predominantly a struggle occurring simultaneously *within* the individual and *within* the group over how to live with the

tensions created by the mutual adjustment processes of the individuals to the group and the group to its individual members.

### *The Paradox of Disclosure*

For group members to determine who they are going to be in a particular group, they need to discover what functions the group expects them to fulfill. For the group to work out what it is going to be like and how to allocate the roles essential for its functioning, individuals must be willing to disclose who they are, their abilities, and what they are willing to invest in the group (Luft, 1970). The paradox of disclosure is that for meaningful group formation to occur, members must self-disclose, but it is only as the group sorts out what it is going to be like can members determine what is meaningful to self-disclose.

The cycle associated with this paradox is particularly prevalent in groups that are forming, when everyone is new to each other. But it also occurs when an established group goes through the process of bringing in new members. Both old and new members get caught in a disclosure dilemma, in that the group might be quite reticent to show anything other than its appealing side to new members until it is established that they are committed and will not leave. And the new members may be reluctant to disclose much about themselves until they have worked out the lay of the land and the "true" identity of their new group.

The paradox of disclosure is caught up in the dynamics of social comparison. To know oneself in a social context, one needs to know how he or she is experienced by others (Cooley, 1922; Festinger, 1954; Smith, 1983). This external knowledge can be obtained through the feedback of others, but it must be characteristics of self that are considered important and this means the recipient of the feedback must be willing to self-disclose (Luft, 1970). If one remains at a level of trivial exchange, the quality of what is reflected back will be of minimal value (Rogers, 1980). If one is in a group where members will not disclose their inner responses and reactions to what others do, think, and feel, then it is virtually impossible for members to develop a sense of what they mean to the group or for the group to formulate what it means to its individual members (Argyris, 1962). Both individual and collective discovery depends on a cyclical process of self-disclosure and feedback, where the feedback becomes an act of self-disclosure and *vice versa*.

Every group needs to know both the strengths and the weaknesses of its members so that it can match its aspirations with its capacities. And the members need to know the group's limitations so they can gauge how much to depend on the group for what they require as individuals (Thibaut &

Kelley, 1959). However, fear of being rejected by others, usually blunts members' willingness to either offer authentic information about themselves or their genuine reactions to others. However, acceptance gained when the important concerns are kept hidden feels shallow and of limited value. Acceptance feels real only after the "rejectable sides" have been disclosed and acceptance is actually *experienced* in place of the anticipated rejection (Rogers, 1980).

The key point in the paradox of disclosure in groups is that only when one gets reactions from others can self-knowledge develop. But the fear of rejection makes individuals seek only those reactions that will make them feel safe. This sense of safety, however, only emerges when members risk rejection by revealing the parts of themselves they expect are unacceptable (Glidewell, 1970). Defending against possible rejection, by closing down or refusing to risk being experienced as rejectable, *creates* the climate of rejection that is so feared (Rogers, 1980). Paradoxically, only as individual members risk self-disclosure in the group, with all the uncertainty about how the group and other members will deal with it, and the group risks rejection by its members by revealing its collective limitations, does the condition develop where it is safe to engage in the type of disclosure by both members and the group that is necessary for them to work out who they are going to be to each other.

### *The Paradox of Trust*

Before individuals are willing to trust others in a group, they want to know the group will accept them, their weaknesses as well as their strengths, their fears as well as their hopes, their ugliness as well as their beauty (Harris, 1967). For a group to develop the critical internal relationships so that it can become an entity worthy of being trusted, it needs to have the trust of its members and the assurance they will stand by the group through the bad times and the good (Schutz, 1967). The paradox of trust can be represented by the conundrum of a cycle that depends on itself to get started: for trust to develop in a group, members must trust the group and the group must trust its members, for it is only through trusting that trust is built.

As a start to exploring this issue consider the rather familiar interpersonal dilemma of one individual saying to another "I do not trust you," which may be a statement of judgment about "your untrustworthiness" or a reflection of "incapacity to trust." If I do not know how to trust, it makes no sense for you to try to become a trustworthy person for me, for the problem is not *in* you in the first place. Your changing will not alter my inability to trust. It may, in fact, reinforce it. Breaking out of such binds of mistrust requires both parties moving to a meta level and exploring together the ways

their relationship blocks the building of trust, for then together they would be affirming that which is experienced as negative, and the process of mutual affirmation is the basis upon which trust is created (Tillich, 1952).

Many of the key dynamics of members' trust in the group and the group's sense of its own trustworthiness can be understood by exploring the operations and implications of positive and negative feedback systems. Positive feedback generates a sense of acceptance that is necessary for any system to absorb the self-corrective negative feedback (Rogers, 1980). It is only through negative feedback that knowledge develops, for it tells the system that what it is doing is not working and that it must stop, reflect, contemplate other alternatives, adopt an experimental approach, and discover anew what works (Maruyama, 1963). A system receiving only positive signals has no way of discovering when it is doing poorly or why. If it is successful, it may know its actions are correct, but it will not know what it is about its actions that is leading to success (Hayek, 1967).

Negative feedback provides a contrast. It is out of the in-formation created from the distinctions between the positive and negative, that the capacity of a system to reflect is created (Bateson, 1979; Wilden, 1980). The special dilemma in the positive and negative feedback process is that the very thing that is necessary for any organism to thrive, negative feedback, is also what assaults it, thereby making it very hard to trust that which needs to be trusted.

In group settings, the intertwining of individual and collective feedback processes is complex. A group may need to be able to receive negative feedback about its processes in order to learn and grow; however, the message may feel like an assault on the group's norms. The group literature suggests that the carrier of such messages is often dealt with as a deviant which, in turn, helps to strengthen those norms (Dentler & Erikson, 1959), or as a scapegoat which provides some internal catharsis enabling the group to remain unchanged (Slater, 1966; Wells, 1980). The bind is that the group may elect not to listen to the very things it needs to hear. Instead, it may chose to reject the carrier of the message so that it does not have to deal with the message, treating the concerns as "belonging" to the person expressing them rather than seeing this as an integral part of the group itself. In so doing, the group may come to feel that it has reaffirmed and strengthened itself, but it may well have diminished itself instead by rejecting the very voice expressing the need to be different in order to continue thriving.

A paradoxical approach calls for a change in the frame used for thinking about the issue of trust. It suggests that looking at experience through the lens of trust-mistrust blurs the capacity to comprehend what is going on. Groups and individual members must learn to confirm (to trust and to value) that which is disconfirming (what seems inherently untrustworthy).

This can become very confusing the more one attempts to sort it out. The issue, however, is learning how to trust that which logically makes little sense until the kind of assurance and growth associated with trusting has been created. When that point is reached, not understanding the logic ceases to be a reason for not trusting. The issue of trust has become reframed, transformed into the paradoxical dynamic of trusting what seems untrustable, and discovering that it is the *process of trusting* rather than the content of the trust, that strengthens the relationships within the group so that they feel trustable.

### *The Paradox of Individuality*

To build a group out of a collection of individuals, members must express their individuality (Benne, 1968). For people to become fully individuated, they have to accept the groupness upon which individuality is predicated (Freud, 1922). The paradox of individuality is that a group relies upon the energies brought to it by its members as individuals, yet it is threatened by that very individuality, an individuality which ironically develops only when members invest themselves fully in the groups to which they belong, an investment which itself appears to undermine individuality.

Freud (1922) elaborated on the individual side of this in his explication of how individuality develops as one works on one's "groupness". It is the impairment of one's connections to the primary group, the family, that stirs the intense desire to be individuated in the first place. By learning how to deal with one's groupness, the importance of individuation fades, and through its fading, individuation is realized. Benne (1968) pointed out the group side of this paradox in his observation of the way members divide into camps over whether the group exists for its members or members exist for the group. He indicated that development depends on moving beyond this polarized perspective to the stage where members accept their groupness and the group accepts the importance of its members' individuality. The paradox is that the group gains its solidarity as individuality is legitimated, and individuality is fostered when the primacy of the group is affirmed.

The paradox of individuality runs counter to the instincts we all have on approaching a group for the first time. To imagine throwing oneself into a group before developing a clear sense of what it is like sounds insane. Yet, it is members' reluctance to engage that makes the group feel like a hollow cocoon, an unsafe place to take risks.

One special irony of this paradox is that members usually join a group to deal with some part of life that feels a sense of inadequacy. The inadequacy can grow out of aloneness (Kierkegaard, 1844) leading to the search

for friendship groups, out of the desire to develop new competencies that cannot be acquired in isolation (Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975) triggering the joining of educational groups, out of the requirement to earn income for survival (Dunnette, 1966) stimulating the connecting with employment groups, and out of the need for intimacy and social support (Fromm-Reichman, 1956) forming the basis for creating family and emotional support groups. Hence, individuals come to a group looking for what they can get. However, when everyone is approaching the group this way the question becomes who is going to do the giving? This puts the group in the position of looking at its potential members in terms of what they offer the group, not what they need to be given, communicating the message to new members "if you want anything from this group, you are going to have to first do some giving!" So potential members look to see what others are getting and giving. What emerges is ambiguous. If it turns out that others are in this group because they have similar inadequacies, the individual will fear that the group will demand more than it will give, making joining seem pointless (Storr, 1960).

The paradoxical perspective emphasizes that the group exists, grows, becomes strong and resourceful only as the individuality of its members is expressed. At the same time that a group requires connections, conformity, and similarity for its existence, it also requires discontinuities and differences. Both the differences that come as expressions of individuality and the similarities, expressed as connectedness, simultaneously jeopardize and strengthen the group (Bateson, 1979). In like manner, the similarities and the differences both support and threaten the individuality of group members (Benne, 1968). The expression of differences risks individual disconnection and collective disintegration while providing the possibility of connection based on personally meaningful commonalties. Similarly, the connections risk the stagnancy of conformity. The paradoxical struggle is again within the individual *and* within the group, to live with the tensions that emanate from the group's dependency on the individuality of its members and the individual's dependency on the commonalty of the group.

### *The Paradox of Authority*

Individuals benefit from belonging to a group when they authorize others to take certain actions on their behalf (Slater, 1966), and the group develops a capacity to act in a unified manner when members subordinate parts of themselves to the group (Maruyama, 1976). This poses the danger, however, of members' diminishing themselves in the hope of augmenting the group only to discover this ends up weakening the group (Kets de Vries, 1980).

The paradox of authority is that members must subordinate their autonomy to the group for it to become strong enough to represent members' collective interests; yet, in authorizing the group, members may diminish themselves and lessen the capacities of the group which derives its potency from the strength of its members.

One of the most critical developmental processes in a group is the creation of an authority system (Bennis & Shepard, 1956). Authority is usually thought of as something that flows from above (Etzioni, 1959). If, however, we look at the dynamics of authorizing rather than at the authority itself, it is evident that authority gets built or created out of the actions of members who authorize their authority figure to enact certain things on their behalf (Mechanic, 1962).

Authorizing is closely linked to the dynamics of empowerment (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980). One develops power through empowering both self and others (Freire, 1972). However, taking and using the available power feels risky and is often avoided because of the fear that others will experience it as depriving them of a scarce commodity. Power taking is accordingly resisted making both group members and the group as a whole feel powerless, creating the simultaneous wish for even more power and a greater reluctance to use the power available, because the fear of producing feelings of deprivation in others is correspondingly larger. On the other hand, if one takes the available power, empowers self, and then uses this to empower others, the total amount of group and individual power increases. Taking power when it is dangerous to do so, and then acting to empower others defuses the terror and breaks the cycle. Of course, as Freire (1972) reminds us, the empowering of others is a very tricky business, for ultimately no one can empower anyone else. One can only empower self. So the work of those who have or create power is to generate the conditions in which others can move toward their own empowerment.

Authority may be defined as sanctioned power (Weber, 1947). While the sanctioning needs to come from numerous places, it is particularly important to come from those most influenced by it (Swingle, 1976). The special bind, however, is that in sanctioning other's authority it often feels as if one is de-authorizing self. This fear makes group members reluctant to authorize, creating the conditions where authorizing would seem additionally dangerous. The converse also presents a dilemma. As group members learn to authorize themselves so that they can be effective authorizers, are they in fact de-authorizing others? This fear too makes group members reluctant to authorize both themselves and others.

One of the essential developmental tasks of a group is to learn how to do both facets of this authorizing simultaneously (Bennis & Shepard, 1956). One without the other is not sufficient. A paradoxical perspective on authority

in groups affirms that authorizing others to act on behalf of parts of self passed over to others, is in fact authorizing of oneself, and authorizing self to take actions for others. is likewise authorizing the group.

### *The Paradox of Regression*

Individuals seeking to become more often join a group (Slater, 1966), only to discover the group asks them to be less so that the group can become more, replacing the desire to progress with a sense of personal regression (Bion, 1961). The paradox of regression is that for a group to progress members must be willing to regress, which makes it seem that the group is regressing; however, for the group to develop to the level where it does not remain regressed, it has to make it safe for members to regress.

The process of individuals joining a group can be thought of as the bringing together of whole and separate entities that then have to discover how to be parts of something larger than, and different in kind from themselves. To prepare for their "partness," which is necessary for a whole (the group) to come together as an integrated entity constructed out of its parts, the individuals have to permit themselves to let go of the ways they have integrated themselves as individuals, to allow for the group to sort out how it is going to integrate the individuals into a unity at a new level of functioning (Bion, 1961). This individual fragmentation, of course, represents a temporary loss of wholeness of the individuals which is experienced as regressive. Since this is individually threatening, members are likely to resist it. But the resisting, while perhaps making it easier for the members, makes it harder for the group as a whole to do what is necessary for it to come together as an integrated entity made up of "wholesome parts."

When individual members do allow the necessary regression to occur, they are thrown back to places in their own individual histories when fragmentation was most problematic (Kernberg, 1980). This is often to those experiences in the family of origin when one's sense of self as an individual unit and as a part of a group was established (Freud, 1922). While such individual regression is taking place, the group as a whole, in order to function with these members constituting its parts, has to work out a collective way to contain the anxieties stirred in its members as they regress in the service of the group's development. When members are willing to regress, they give the group the opportunity to develop ways to contain their anxieties, making the group into a potentially safe place to be present as a part (Konig, 1985). This also gives the group the chance to build into its foundation a method for drawing together the elements (the individuals) that have grown beyond demanding that their original versions of "wholeness" must be maintained. If and when such a foundation can be created, the members

are then able to experience their partness, as elements of the whole group, and their wholeness, as a part of that group.

In our above discussion we have been exploring the most primitive form of regression, namely to infancy and to the early experiences in the family of origin. There is no logical reason why the regression should be so severe, especially if individuals have learned in the past how to become effective parts of groups that have sustained them in their partness and enabled them to feel whole as elements of a group. In fact, one of the fundamental tenants of group psychotherapy is that individuals who have so much difficulty containing their anxiety in collective settings and in interaction with others, get a chance to have their anxiety contained by the group so that they can do the necessary individual regression to enable early group experiences to be "re-worked" (Schemer, 1985). Groups that learn how to deal with the regression of their members can create the conditions where those individuals will not require such extensive regression in the future. Hence, paradoxically, the group and the individuals who become skilled at regressing can learn about how to interact so that they do not end up remaining regressed.

### *The Paradox of Creativity*

Every group has to be adaptable and to change so that it is not destroyed in a survival struggle (Wilden, 1980). However, every change means something is destroyed, at the very least, those investments carried by members committed to preserving the status quo (Glidewell, 1970). The paradox of creativity is that the creative process, the making of the new, involves destruction, the very antithesis of what creativity symbolizes, yet the refusal to destroy blunts creativity's possibilities.

From the beginning of a group's life there are activities focused on establishing patterns that have some order to them, (Bateson, 1979) and that provide a basis for the interactions among members. The creation of these patterns does two things. It precludes the establishment of other possible patterns that might have been formed if these had not been put in place (Wilden, 1980), and it sets the developmental paths for the future (Jantsch, 1980). Change requires the modification or destruction of these patterns so that other constructions can be created. While these two implications may make the formation of the initial patterns seem undesirable, to avoid this would, in effect, block the creation of the group. To become *something* means giving up options to become something *different*.

Of particular importance is the issue of growth. Were it not for the development of patterns (traditions, rules, and conventions) that give coherence and wholeness, there would be no form to set the stage for the trans*form*ation that is the heart of growth. The very change that restricts is the

shaping that makes changing possible. Before change can occur the patterns to be changed must be established.

To survive, a group needs to both innovate and remain stable (Smith, 1984). However, it is very easy for the forces of change and novelty to be placed in opposition with those for stability and order. There is a tendency in groups for stability to be put into the system as a whole and for novelty to be placed in the members, often one or two individuals (Lawrence, 1985). Those individuals then are experienced both as the source of the group's creativity and as the repository of the chaotic emotions of novelty that the group's orderliness is designed to overcome. While the group loves those individuals for their creative contributions they also loathe them, for that very creativity threatens to destroy the order. The intense feelings of both love and hate for the same object are difficult to reconcile and the tendency is to split them (Klein, 1959; Laing, 1969) so that some order-disturbers are seen as creative and others are experienced as destructive. Then the negatively labeled ones can be scapegoated and the positively labeled ones elevated to heroic proportions, even though what they offered to the group was identical (Slater, 1966).

As with all paradoxes in group life the link between creativity and destructiveness is difficult to acknowledge and difficult to live with as it occurs. The paradox of creativity involves the embracing of both the twin forces for stability and for novelty which are usually split and managed as though they are oppositional. This paradox involves the acceptance of conflict that is often disowned and displaced into the complex mixture of emotions evoked by the processes of creativity, one prong of the novelty axis. Since creativity contains both generative and destructive facets, an easy way out is to split these into "good" and "bad," enabling a subset of the group (often one individual) to be viewed as the carrier of the destructiveness and thereby worthy of the group's disdain, while the other "creatives" are embraced. This leaves the group free to turn a blind eye to the destructive elements of creativity it accepts, but it also sets the stage for the group to diminish its self-insight and to repetitively reject the very things it needs. The paradoxical approach focuses on maintaining the coexistence of those tensions the group would prefer to split and to develop ways of understanding the conflict as an index of vitality.

## THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SOCIAL PARADOX

Throughout our discussion of each of the above illustrative paradoxes, we have implied that the very treatment of many group dynamics, in nonparadoxical ways, serves to reinforce the conflicts they are designed to

"resolve," increasing "stuckness" rather than releasing it. What is it then, about people in groups that contributes to such apparently self-defeating cycles? And what might it take to create an epistemology based on "release" rather than "resolution?"

The dilemma is linked to the fact that groups are social entities that not only act but also reflect on their actions. The nature of those reflective processes is then used to inform subsequent actions. If we examine these collective reflection processes in groups, some patterns emerge. For example, when subgroups form, it is most common for each side to describe its actions as being caused by the other side and to argue that the only way for the situation to alter is if the other were to change its behavior. When each side takes this position, a cycle is created that develops a life of its own and drives the behavior of the subgroups without their apparent comprehension. Stepping back from these exchanges one realizes that even though each side explains its behavior as being caused by the other, neither faction actually controls the other's behavior in the manner implied. It is in the rules of the interaction that the system of control resides. Each side abdicates responsibility for its own actions and makes the others the "cause," thereby creating the experience of being controlled from outside. Then each party struggles to overcome or avoid the very conditions their actions have created.

How a group thinks about its experiences of conflict both gives that conflict its meaning and sets the parameters for the group's possible actions. If a group committed to a particular direction, for example, sees opposition as an attempt to thwart its progress, members of this subgroup may treat those taking a different perspective as an opponent to be overcome. This posture produces an adversarial relationship. If the opposition is seen as a natural part of the very concept of group commitment, the subgroup may embrace those who embody differences as being a part of itself, enriching the understanding of commitment and direction as a result.

In the human arena, something that is not conflictual in its essence can be made conflictual simply by how those involved elect to think about it. That is, the actual domain of conflict may be in the system of thinking about an event rather than in the actual event. This means that when experiences of conflict are an expression of our thinking patterns, the process of transforming conflict demands therefore a shift in our modes of thinking.

What then are the essential elements of a group's methods for reflecting on its own experience and for understanding reality? What is it that creates the shared belief that the differences are opposites which must be reconciled and conflicts are processes that must be resolved before movement can take place? We will explore this in the next two sections dealing with the problems of logical typing and the attendant issues of the double bind and the processes of self-reference that are enfolded into the reflective processes of any group.

## *Logical Typing and the Double Bind*

The central concern of the Theory of Logical Types may be stated as follows: "To describe a class of objects or events we require a concept (or set of concepts) that operate(s) at a different level of abstraction than the concepts appropriate for describing one or more of the objects or events of which the class is constituted" (Russell, 1960). Thus, to describe the behavior of a group we need concepts structured at a different level of operation than those relevant for describing the behavior of the individuals who make up the group. It is not that the group behaves, or exists, independent of its individual members, or *vice versa,* but that the group and its members are not the same thing. This is captured partially in the statement of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. However, the logical typing issue goes beyond what is implied in this cliche.

To illustrate what is meant by different levels of abstraction, consider an event that occurred in the USA in the late 1970's. A group of physicians came together to discuss how they, as medical practitioners, would deal with the role expected of them should a nuclear war occur. Observers of this group's initial meetings have provided a wide range of commentaries to capture what transpired, a sample of which follows: (1) the members shared their *personal* anxieties over the realization of their own mortality in the light of possible nuclear war, (2) the *group* gave expression to a widely held *national* feeling of total helplessness about the possibility of survival in a nuclear era, (3) the group took a hard look at the role *government* expected them to play as part of the *national civil* defense program, and (4) the *group* gave birth to an *organization* composed of many thousands of medical practitioners.

The list of descriptions was large. Each of these "explanations" was a commentary on the *same* behaviors. It was not as though the commentators had been observing different interactions. They had all been at the same meetings. Rather, each of these "explanations" was aimed at a different level of abstraction. The reports of the meeting were framed in different ways, and each statement may be viewed as an appropriate reality in light of the frame used to represent it. In this example, it is clear that this group event has a different meaning depending on how it is framed, and that each of the frames comes from a radically different "system of thought." This is what is meant by the concept of different logical types. The meaning systems created by the concepts at one level are different from those at another level.

One way to understand the logical typing issue is to try to make the link between the explanation of "sharing their personal anxieties over their own mortality" and "giving birth to a new organization." There is no self-evident way to do this. Such a movement requires a journey across conceptual terrain that is discontinuous. In fact, if there were not a descriptive event

to which each of these frames was attached, the statements about "sharing personal anxieties" and "building a new organization" would be so unrelated that it is unlikely one would even attempt to make the translation from one to the other. Whitehead and Russell (1910–1913) created the term "different logical types" to capture situations like this, where statements belong to and have meaning in totally different systems of thinking.

Let us imagine that a decade later this same group of physicians were to sit around and discuss what "really" happened during their inaugural meeting. There might be a wide range of interpretations among the members, similar in scope to the variations offered by the original commentators. Should someone say "but what really happened?" implying that there was one dominant truth, those who carried or expressed, on behalf of the group the various framings of the event, might become locked into a battle about whose view was more correct. Given that the multiple frames used created different logical conceptions there could be no adequate resolution to this debate. The argument would only subside when members could accept that the event had multiple meanings and that different members embodied the range of these interpretations on behalf of the group as a whole. That is, each member stored a part of the collective experience in his or her individual memory and when members reassembled, the collective memory of the group came together again with all its disparate and clashing parts.

All groups have experiences that can be framed in multiple ways. And when two or more parts of a group frame these experiences in different ways they are in the process of storing their experiences in more than one system of logical typing. Group members may well find themselves in conflict because their exchanges with each other have folded within them these multiple, discontinuous systems of logical typing.

Bateson (1972) took the concept of logical typing and showed that a social entity such as a group can find itself in an impossible situation (which he called double binding) as a consequence of the contradictory meanings and injunctions for simultaneous contradictory behaviors emanating from two or more contexts in which the entity's actions are embedded. By contexts, we mean frames of reference as in our example of the group of physicians for social responsibility. This is especially important because in human consciousness, be it individual or shared, meaning does not lie simply in the act or the symbol, but in the relationship between the act or symbol and the context by which it is framed (Jaynes, 1976).

When the framing provided by one logical system suggests actions contradictory to those implied by the framing of another system, we have the essential ingredients of the double bind. When the group acts according to the logic that comes from the first framing, it bangs into the "brick walls" provided by the logic of the second framing and *vice versa*. At the level of

interaction of individuals in human systems, this experience is sufficiently familiar to hardly need illustration. The clearest example is in the authority systems operative in the military when a junior officer receives a directive from his or her superior officer that at one level of framing makes no sense. To act according to the instruction she or he knows will produce a disaster, but to refuse to implement the order may mean being courtmartialed for disobeying the authority's directions, or in battle being accused of mutiny. The interaction, framed in this light and with the options the junior officer experiences open to him or her, is double binding.

When caught in a double bind, it sometimes occurs to group members that the whole situation needs to be redefined. But this brings with it another dilemma. That is, the need to *redefine* only occurs *after a clear definition* has been formed. Then the redefining takes place in terms of what has already been defined (Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978). This throws the entity (entities) into the even more complex problems of self-reference.

## *Self-Reference*

One major difficulty for any social entity that exists in a condition that has been defined, is the tendency to use this definition to reflect on what needs to be *redefined.* The concern is that any self-reflecting social entity engaged in a pattern of interactions will be prone to use these patterns and the underground rules which regulate them as the vehicle for understanding those patterns (Smith, 1984). This has been labeled the problem of self-reference.

In general, we find self-reference appearing in two forms, tautology and paradox. Both generate a system of circularity and symmetry. Tautology operates on the same plane and involves the process of confirmation which, when reduced to basics, produces statements of the form "if P is true, then P is true!" Paradox operates across planes, across logical types, and involves a vicious cycle of *disconfirmation* as we discussed earlier.

To understand the importance of this issue for group life, we must appreciate that some concepts come into being as a consequence of the definition of other concepts. This is a critical element in the self-referential problem. For example, the term hopeless arises and has its meaning only in reference to the concept of hope. In fact, by defining hope, we define hopeless. If we experience hopelessness and want to change, a typical solution would be to develop more hope. A paradoxical view would argue that the larger the category of hope, the greater the possibility of hopelessness. To diminish hopelessness, the paradoxical way is to give up hope. By having less or no hope, we diminish or eliminate the concept of hopeless and create the poten-

tial for a fresh start on those issues that became defined as hopeless. Consider the following analogy. If we notice that water is wet and decide its wetness is a problem, we may seek a solution by attempting to eliminate the wetness of water. No matter how hard we try, that approach is hopeless. By giving up the hope of changing the wetness of water we no longer become embroiled in the hopelessness of that task and see other alternatives to trying to change what is unchangeable.

The philosophical base of this idea is not simple and deserves some explication. A starting point is to recognize that the moment we say this is "A" we are drawing a boundary which clusters together "not A." However, "not A" is a part of "A," for without "A," there can be no "not A" (Wilden, 1980). Let us personalize this process. By saying "I am me," I am also saying something about what is "not me." Raising this issue to the level of the group, by affirming "this is what this group is," we are also formulating what "it's not." In other words, acts of definition involve both affirmation and negation; "this is group," and "that is nongroup." "Group" and "nongroup" however, are the consequence of the same act of affirmation. In other words the negation, "nongroup," is contained within the affirmation of "group."

If we keep in mind this idea of affirmation, there is a chance we will not get tangled up, but there is a common and critical error. We tend to view "this is our group" in clear affirmative terms, but we view the negation, "that is nongroup," as being "other." This is the dilemma, for the moment we treat our "nongroup" as "other," as "part of the environment," as "beyond us," as "context," as "them," we can fall into the trap of using it as a system of reference. For example, we affirm that our group is powerful, attribute the condition of powerlessness to "not us" (them), and then use *our* view of *their* powerlessness as a frame to understand our own power. In so doing we, as a group, have used a part of us, albeit what we called "other," as the frame for understanding us. Then we have unwittingly created for ourselves a self-referential system with all the possibilities of circular stuckness.

Take, for example, a group which is deeply committed to some course of action. This very commitment creates the experience of noncommitment. When the part of the group that falls into this negative side of the definition of commitment is experienced as resistant, the resistance is seen not as a part of the group, but as "other" that must be overcome if the committed side is to succeed. Then the resisting side of the group becomes viewed as "nongroup" and is placed in this position by the way in which the committed side elects to define itself. The committed side is doing what the resisting (noncommitted side) is not doing, etc. As this epistemological switch is thrown, we have the perfect condition for each side to enter into oppositional forms with each other. What may have started as a consequence of a paradoxical, self-referential phenomenon, is turned into an inner conflict shrouded in either/or, right/wrong, and strong/weak systems of thought and action.

## *Conclusion*

The relevance of the material we have discussed in this paper for all types of small groups is far reaching because it penetrates to the very core of the processes groups engage in when they attempt to learn about themselves from their experiences. The long-term viability of a group depends so much on its capacity to self-correct in the light of both internal and external data that suggests it needs to change course or to follow a different path. Such data always comes in the form of being in conflict with the status quo and with the prevailing mode of "being" and "doing business." If the group is unable to treat that conflict as a central and desirable part of its experience and instead relegates it to the "intolerable" or "to be obliterated" domains of the group, then the preconditions for development and growth are being eliminated. This argument may run counter to so many people's experiences in groups in that most feel that conflicts retard group development. And certainly anyone who has sat through long periods of group "stuckness" will concur. However, an alternate perspective is that this conflict can be healthful and even liberating if it is understood in paradoxical terms. If group members could learn to treat conflict as endemic to groupness, a natural consequence of "differences attempting to act in an integrated way" and that the contradictions only become conflictual because of the thinking patterns members and the group as a whole use, then that which is experienced as being so problematic may be reframed and understood as being just in the nature of things, like the wetness of water and the warmth of sunlight.

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