

The Importance of Collegial Relationships

Teacher preparation programs teach pre-service teachers the importance of creating relationships with students and families for good reason—strong relationships between educators and families result in greater student success. However, pre-service and early-career teachers are not given the same support in creating effective, collaborative working relationships with other educators in support of student success. I wondered about this discrepancy throughout my career as a classroom teacher and intentionally included the importance of collegial relationships when mentoring and coaching pre-service and early-career teachers. I have continued this work in my first year at the Knowles Teacher Initiative, designing professional learning and supporting Teaching Fellows around how to develop and strengthen collaborative relationships with colleagues in support of equitable math and science instruction for all students.

But first, some background. Education is my second career and when I entered education I was shocked by the differences between work-related communication in the engineering and education fields. As an engineering tech and then entry-level engineer, I was expected to adhere to certain norms when communicating with clients, colleagues, and peers and I learned these norms by observing peers' communications and by direct instruction from supervisors and peers. When newer engineers or interns joined the organization, I was expected to mentor them the same way I was mentored. While I was responsible for individual work as an engineer, I was also expected to collaborate with colleagues and clients in order to move the work forward in a way that aligned with the project's budget and timeline and professional best practices.

When I entered teaching, I was unprepared to cultivate the collegial relationships I needed, as a teacher and teacher leader, to support adolescents' academic, social, and emotional development. As a result, I floundered for several years in my relationships with colleagues and administrators and I became frustrated with my and our abilities to support students—the equivalent of moving the work forward as an engineer.

As my education career progressed and I began to understand the complexities of teaching, I began to work more closely with the person who would later become my principal and highly trusted mentor and colleague. Several years after we began working together, me as a math teacher and her as the special education

teacher, she became our school's principal. In her new role, she became my major support system as I rewrote curriculum and instructional methods to support increased student success in math. When I made the difficult decision to leave the classroom, and thus our working relationship, I was keenly aware of exactly how she supported me, mentored me, and learned with me as I became the educator I am today. I know that the opportunities I had and the results I achieved were made possible in large part through her support of me and her conviction around the power of trusting human relationships.

What I often forget is that our relationship did not start the way it ended. We both spent considerable time in our school's early years frustrated with each other, believing the other person did not care about student success as much as we did. When I consider the work we did together to create a math department and school culture where student needs were individually considered and met, and each person (i.e., adult or adolescent, student, staff, or family) in the community was treated and valued as a human, I see how we each incorporated the other's perspective into our daily work and learned to use both of our strengths to move our shared work forward.

My work at Knowles with early-career teachers who are beginning to understand the impact of collegial relationships on their ability to support students led me to reflect on my relationship with my principal, and my previous experiences working as an engineer and a teacher at other schools. I discovered how intentional decisions on her part to cultivate relationships and my willingness to try anything to eliminate inequities and reduce barriers in our math program led us to create our collaborative, working relationship in support of student success. Some of these choices and their implications are described here in an attempt to describe how productive working relationships are developed and nurtured.

As principal, she used her positional power to make space for me (and often us) to figure out what more equitable math instruction looked like at our school. She provided me release time from classes so I could plan and learn, publicly supported me in front of staff as I made changes (or did not make changes) to the math program in order to better support students' success in the university math classes, and mentored me in approaching families and caregivers, especially those whose students' held marginalized identities, as partners. Her actions and willingness to allocate resources towards this work showed me that she valued my contributions to our school community (something I struggled with). As a result, I was more willing to trust her and

approach our relationship with honesty and curiosity when we disagreed or questioned each other.

As she took over the principal role at our school, she intentionally cultivated relationships with staff members. She met individually with staff members to discuss our visions as educators and what supports we needed to be the educators we wanted to be. She embodied the principal as instructional leader model by supporting teachers in developing their practice, knowing that instruction would not be perfect every day. She was also vulnerable with us around her own journey to becoming the principal she envisioned herself as. These actions gave me the encouragement I needed to lean into our relationship and trust that she also was approaching our thinking conversations with best intentions and an honest desire to improve our practices, not as an administrator looking for negative evidence for my review. This allowed me to engage in deeper and more vulnerable conversations with her around my practice and our school, and motivated me to create a similar space for her in which I was her thought partner.

She designated staff meeting and retreat time for learning about each other as people, how we each approached our work with students, colleagues, and families, and how we each developed the content-specific criteria for students to transition out of our high school classes and into university classes. She encouraged (and at times told) us to connect with other teachers around specific practices in their classrooms as a way of bridging the gap between colleagues who did not agree on instructional methods. This approach to collegial relationships increased my ability and willingness to work with teachers I previously avoided because I could focus our interactions around a practice that helped individual students in specific contexts. And while at the time, I was often annoyed and frustrated that we spent time learning about each other as people when I had so much to do with students and the math curriculum, I now know that I would not have been able to effectively or collaboratively approach those teachers I did not align with without having that insight into them as people.

She was transparent about decision making, school goals and objectives, and her interactions with families when they had a concern or complaint. She opened her days to staff by sharing what she did all day, the content of the district, university, and countywide meetings she engaged in, and conversations she had with families around students. She also clearly delineated what decisions were collective staff decisions, what decisions were solely hers, and what decisions were hers to make after she gathered information from staff. Her transparency allowed me to trust her and our working relationship because I knew that I wouldn't get surprised by a school initiative or parent complaint and that gave me the capacity to focus

on curriculum and student support. I became comfortable helping her plan how to share school information with the staff, considering things from both the administrator and teacher perspectives. I also realized it was unfair to surprise her in regards to student support as well (she was also a student advisor along with the teachers) and started proactively sharing student information with her so that she could better support students.

The timing of my growth with her positionality at school allowed her to provide opportunities for me to pursue and achieve National Board Certification, engage in state and national Teacher Leadership fellowships, co-create a hybrid instructional-teacher leadership position that allowed us to continue building the culture and structures necessary for collaborative relationships among staff to support student success, and to eventually earn my administrative certificate and complete my doctorate in education leadership. Her willingness to support me in these endeavors provided me with additional evidence that I could trust our relationship and view her as a true colleague and thought partner, not just as my administrator, and my willingness to believe in our relationship resulted in increased student support and success. The experiences I had in our relationship also formed the foundation of my own mentoring and coaching of in-service and pre-service teachers, and I continue to draw on those experiences and the learning we did together around coaching in my work today.

I am a better educator because of her steadfast belief in relationships, and especially the relationships between colleagues. While many of these factors and conditions were made easier by her position as principal, I now see how relationships were, and still are, the core of her work and are what allowed her and I to become truly collaborative colleagues, what reduced friction between teachers at our school, and what ultimately led to better student outcomes as our school grew.

My engineering background led me to believe that relationships were not necessary for success at work, and my prior experiences as a student and teacher led me to believe that supporting these types of relationships in my school would reduce the rigor of my content instruction. I now unequivocally believe this to be false. My content instruction and ability to make change at school became more effective as I developed stronger, more collaborative relationships with my colleagues. And when I incorporated these types of relationships into my practice at the same intensity level I brought to my math content instruction, my students demonstrated stronger content understanding and greater belief in their ability to reach their goals.