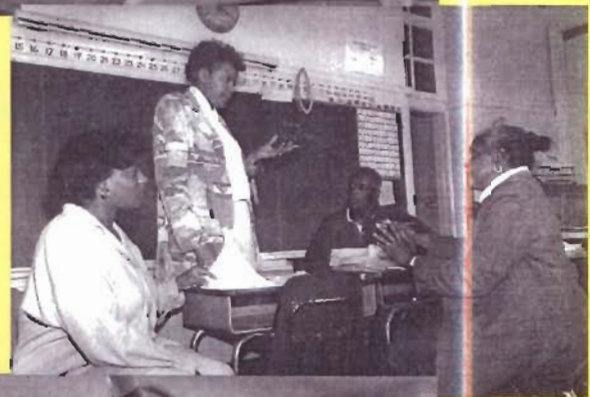
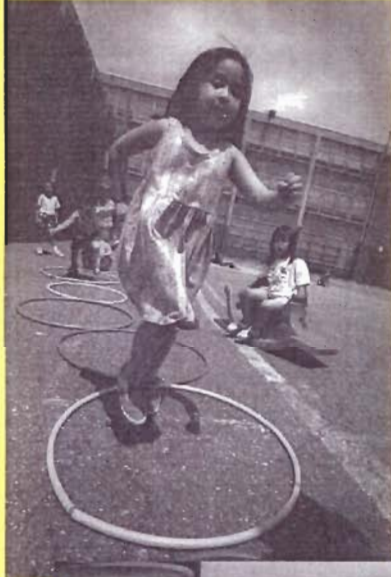


Communication is Key
at the
Guion Bluford Elementary School



TAKING STOCK / MAKING CHANGE

A Collaborative Action Research Project of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education
and the School District of Philadelphia. Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.



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by Nancy Barnhardt, Gretchen Brosius, Jolley Christman,
William Gaberina, Denise Godwin, Carol Shiffrin,
Everline Smith, and Linda Staple

We are grateful to the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for its generous support of Taking Stock/Making Change. Its commitment to funding school change projects over several years recognizes that there is no quick fix in educational reform. We also thank the Philadelphia Education Fund for underwriting a second printing of the TS/MC publication series.

Many thanks to Christina Hill Cantrill for her splendid design work and to Harvey Finkle for his beautiful photographs. Thanks also to Rita Silver who edited the series.

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Copies of this report are available from the Center for Urban Ethnography,
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INTRODUCTION

In the pages that follow, members of the Bluford Elementary Science Magnet School community in West Philadelphia tell the story of their efforts to improve their school through a three year project called Taking Stock/Making Change (TS/MC). Bluford was one of five schools in the School District to work with “friendly outsiders” from the Graduate School of Education’s Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) at the University of Pennsylvania. In this public school/university partnership each school staff studied their school and used what they learned as a basis for reforms—a means of school change known as action research. Also participating in TS/MC were the Brown and Webster elementary schools, both in Kensington; the Levering School in Roxborough; and AMY Northwest school in Mount Airy.

These schools were chosen to participate in TS/MC through an application process open to all schools involved in School Based Management/Shared Decision-Making, an initiative of the School District of Philadelphia that allows participating schools to make decisions at the local level, rather than having decisions made for them at the level of the central office. TS/MC called for a team of teachers, parents, and administrators from each of the five schools to perform school self-study, with the belief that continual stock-taking is an essential component of school-based change; schools must have the capacity to assess their decision-making and improvement efforts so that they can revise them.

In week-long summer institutes and Saturday retreats from 1993 to 1996, the five school teams worked with staff from CUE at Penn to learn ethnographic research methods such as one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation, surveys, and analysis of school documents. In addition, CUE staff consulted with the teams throughout the year as they carried out their research, analyzed their data, planned reforms, and gathered further data about what was happening in their schools.

Taking stock means looking more carefully than usual to see what you have at the moment. Ethnography documents the daily life of people and their points of view on

what they are doing. Ethnographers have realized that most of the time people are so accustomed to their daily routines and so busy doing them that they don't pay much attention to what is going on. Everyday life becomes invisible in its living. There is an ethnographic proverb, "The fish would be the last to discover the existence of water." That is why taking stock is necessary.

People in schools need access to what often remains invisible to them, so that they can solve the significant, everyday problems that block school improvement. Ethnographic research methods are important tools for problem solving. While Philadelphia schools had, for some time, examined a variety of kinds of data about school outcomes like attendance rates, standardized test scores, and report card marks, they were unaccustomed to considering information gathered through reviewing documents, interviewing, and observation—the traditional research methods of ethnography. Answers to questions like "How do we teach reading in this school?" "What do staff understand about how decisions are made?" and "When do students feel successful?" remained part of what was invisible.

Taking Stock/Making Change began with the assumption that the problems schools face, especially urban schools, are so severe that the pressure to do *something* can lead to a "ready-fire-aim" approach to school reform—with deliberation and reflection after the reforms have been implemented, if at all. When this happens, reforms that have been conceived and mandated from above are often not fully "owned" by local school staff, and educators become increasingly cynical about the possibility of real change. The TS/MC process is an attempt to break this cycle of cynicism by making educational improvement more collective, deliberate, and data-based; less a matter of lip service, more a matter of actual commitment.

Taking Stock/Making Change Staff:

Fred Erickson, Center for Urban Ethnography

Jolley Bruce Christman, Research for Action

Judy Buchanan, Philadelphia Education Fund

Jody Cohen, Research for Action

Paul Skilton Sylvester, Center for Urban Ethnography



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It's funny, but sitting in that faculty meeting amidst all the turmoil and confusion, I felt "This is normal. This is the way things operate at Bluford." Sure, I was aware that we had difficulty reaching conclusions. I just figured it was all due to our large staff and the array of personalities that come into play. I never thought that the bad communication at this meeting could be something fixable.

Gretchen Brosius, Teacher

Staff at the Guion Bluford Elementary School were proud to be among the first Philadelphia public schools to take up the District's School-Based Management/Shared Decision-Making (SBM/SDM) initiative. A large elementary school with more than fifty teachers and 1,100 students, Bluford is located in an African-American community about one mile from the city's western boundary. Prior to joining Taking Stock/Making Change (TS/MC), two experiences had galvanized the school community: the creation of a Governance Council to lead school change efforts under school based management, and, the decision to change its name to the Guion Bluford Elementary School in honor of one of its graduates who was also the first African-American astronaut. Changing a school's name in a large urban bureaucracy is not a minor accomplishment: the process had required the active involvement of community leaders, parents, and the entire staff and had provided the school with a sense of efficacy and momentum. The new name was also an outward symbol of the school's focus on science and technology.

Although Bluford's early entry into SBM/SDM exhilarated an active, reform-minded school community, staff quickly discovered the complexities of making difficult decisions together such as how to allocate their *reduced* Chapter I budget and whether to participate in the District's newly-launched program to privatize building mainte-

nance. Both decisions set the school reeling at the end of the 1993 school year as staff worried that trying to build school-wide consensus about difficult questions might cause irreparable rifts. At the same time Everline Smith, the school's Philadelphia Federation of Teachers representative and math specialist, and Carol Shiffrin, the reading specialist, urged the school's participation in TS/MC. They saw TS/MC as "one of the only resources available to help schools undertaking SBM/SDM." Bill Garberina, Bluford's principal, was also supportive of building a partnership with the Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE).

Bluford's early entry into SBM/SDM exhilarated an active, reform-minded school community.

In the following, we tell the story of how the Bluford TS/MC team unwittingly became part of the communication problems that it had set out to understand and prevent. And this was not the only surprise in our self-study process. Although we initially identified surveys and focus group interviews as our primary research methods, it was fieldnotes from our team meetings and those with the larger faculty that provided the richest opportunities to understand and improve communication at Bluford. Over the course of two years, the TS/MC team continued to collect a variety of kinds of data about school communication. We also re-visited data collected early in the project and each time we returned to look, we saw more. Distance provided a "cooler," less politicized environment in which we could analyze conflicts, power relationships, communication patterns, and decision-making at Bluford.

Over time, Bluford made changes that broadened staff and parent participation in decision-making. It built stronger and clearer connections among various school constituencies (committees, grade groups, PFT Building Committee, Home and School Association, Governance Council) so that the whole school owned efforts that individuals or small groups initiated. The school became more deliberate and thoughtful in its decision-making as it learned how to explore and consider options as a group. But looking at data, reflecting on what they meant, and making changes were not a neat cycle of research and action. And although TS/MC was a catalyst for some of these changes, more often innovations were not the direct results of TS/MC team efforts. Instead, TS/MC itself became a context for living and learning about the strengths and weaknesses of communication at Bluford.



Focusing Self-Study

Four teachers and one parent attended the first TS/MC summer institute. The teachers were Gretchen Brosius, Naomi McCrae, Carol Shiffrin, and Everline Smith; Pat Davis was our parent participant. Involvement in institute activities and deliberations about important changes underway at Bluford pointed to the science program as a fruitful area for examination and reflection. Due to the Chapter I funding cuts, the school would begin the coming year with only one science specialist teacher. This meant that children would be receiving more of their science instruction from classroom teachers.

Staff quickly discovered the complexities of making difficult decisions together.

As team members talked about the future of the science program and hypothesized about the problems that could arise, we found ourselves coming back to worries about communication in a school as large as Bluford. We recognized the potential for mis-



communication and lack of coordination despite the best of intentions. And so we identified two inter-related questions for self-study:

- How is Bluford becoming a science and technology focused school?
- What kinds of communication processes support this change?

The Bluford TS/MC team began the 1993-94 school year by holding a series of conversations with key players in the school's science program. We interviewed the principal and talked to the science specialist teacher; we met with the Science Committee and attended Governance Council meetings. The purpose of these discussions was to learn more about these school leaders' visions for science and to involve them in thinking about how TS/MC could be useful. Bluford had already taken several steps to strengthen its science program. Parents and students had been polled about science topics of interest to them. At certain points during the school year, every classroom focused on the most popular themes: dinosaurs, space, and living things. In addition, each grade was developing a framework to cohere curriculum and guide classroom

teachers as they assumed more responsibility for science instruction. The team invited the science specialist to join TS/MC, and she attended meetings when possible.

We decided that a survey of all teachers' perceptions of science would provide a foundation for considering subsequent steps and make everyone in the school aware of TS/MC's work in the school. All classroom teachers completed the survey, and the TS/MC team analyzed the data and made a summary by grade level. We also presented the data to the Science Committee and held a meeting with each grade group to discuss findings from their grade. Major themes from this survey were

- Many teachers were not confident about their own knowledge of science and therefore also felt uncertain about what and how to teach.
- Teachers wanted greater clarity about what they ought to use as a framework for their science curriculum.

The Bluford TS/MC team unwittingly became part of the communication problems that it had set out to understand and prevent.

- Teachers wanted more coordination between their classroom science instruction and students' work with the science specialist.
- Teachers were concerned about coordination of the science curriculum across the grades.
- Teachers needed additional science materials for their classrooms.

After sharing these findings with the science committee and at meetings of grade groups, it was unclear what our next steps ought to be. Some TS/MC team members felt that we could be helpful in facilitating school-wide planning sessions for more work on the thematic curriculum; but instead of going to the faculty at large for their ideas about how TS/MC might be helpful, we began brainstorming ideas about how to support the development of the thematic curriculum. At one of our meetings in

April, the science specialist announced that many teachers wanted the school to buy a science textbook series that would also provide other materials, especially worksheets, and that the staff was being polled about this. The other members of the team were surprised at this turn of events and worried that the decision about textbooks would be made without considering other issues and concerns raised by teachers in the survey.

The team decided that Jolley Christman, the team's "friendly outsider" from CUE should present the survey findings to the staff again at the upcoming faculty meeting in order to situate the textbook decision in that larger picture. There was little time to plan the meeting or to coordinate its purpose with others in the school, including the principal (Dr. Bill Garberina) and the Governance Council.

Fieldnotes from meetings provided the richest opportunities to understand and improve communication.

The following fieldnotes written by CUE staff member, Paul Sylvester, provide a glimpse into communication problems that can arise in schools when decisions are pressing, but there remains confusion about purposes, roles, and decision-making processes.

**Fieldnotes from Bluford Elementary School
Faculty Meeting, 5/11/94**

The meeting begins with Marianne (the Science Coordinator) reporting that the results of the textbook poll are in and Bluford teachers overwhelmingly voted for textbooks. She explains that "Paul will report on this later in the meeting."

Carol Shiffrin introduces Jolley, who reminds staff of results from the survey conducted in October by the TS/MC team about science curriculum and instruction conducted in the fall. Jolley says that teachers' major concerns about science at Bluford were

- 1) Lack of agreed upon curriculum
- 2) Lack of materials

- 3) Lack of coordination of science program across grades and among the science specialist, the technology teacher and classroom teachers.

Jolley: Now that you're at the decision about textbooks, maybe we need to go back and consider all the things Bluford needs to do to support classroom teachers as they teach science.

Then the issue of the vote about textbooks comes up again.

Paul: Was that poll to gather information or was it an actual vote?

Coordinator: To gather information.

Paul: So we still need to decide whether or not we buy the textbooks?

Coordinator: Yes. But what was the vote?

Paul: I don't have the data with me. But we should be clear whether it's a vote or to gather information.

Kindergarten Teacher: In kindergarten we can never get money for materials. Whenever we ask, they say, "You have your \$50.00 [teacher allotments for materials]." So when they say, "We have money to buy textbooks, do you want them?" of course we say "Yes." But what we really want is money for materials.

She then tells a story about a teacher doing "wonderful things" with spiders in her classroom and that what she wants is to be able to get materials that she can then use like those spiders.

Principal: Well, each grade can decide if they want textbooks or materials. We can poll people.

He then calls out the different grades and asks people what they want.

Much conversation in the room. People express confusion and frustration about the "vote" and about whether it's an open question about materials. Principal continues polling and writing down what people want. He calls for attention and says "life science, earth science, and physical science. Teachers choose what they want within those...We already have a curriculum; the one made by the science committee."

Teacher: But I thought we were doing themes and that themes mean dinosaurs, space, etc. [in contrast to life, earth and physical science].

Jolley: Are people using the curriculum that the science committee developed? Is there agreement that it is what people are using?

A teacher on the science committee expresses anger and frustration that “it is being suggested that the curriculum be overlooked.”

Principal: Do folks have the science committee’s curriculum?

Science Coordinator: No because you wouldn’t let me copy it.

Principal: The machine must have been down. I’ll take care of getting it copied.

With this the discussion ends and the meeting then turns to a report from the Discipline Committee. Discipline Committee Chair tells about idea for everyone to take turns manning an after-school detention room one week per year.

Someone yells, “What about signing up for days?” Chair says, “Wouldn’t you rather have one week?” Most say yes. Some yell no. She proceeds: “Is everyone willing [to take a turn]?”

“No.” (Many voices.)

Teacher: Let’s take a vote. All in favor of the detention room. [A few vote for it.] All opposed. [A few vote against. But many are not voting.]

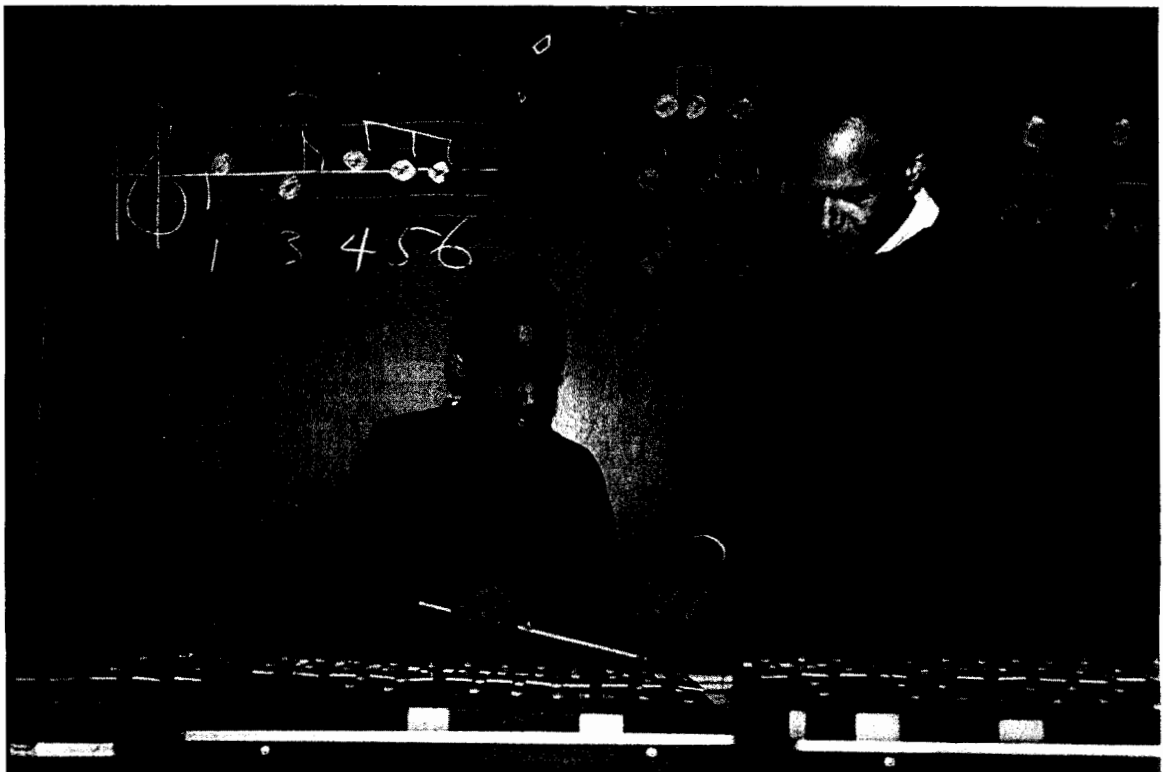
The principal turns to the A.A. “It’s going to die.” The next item is called; apparently defeat of the detention room is assumed.

Reflecting on the Data and Re-focusing Self-Study

As part of our reflection on events at Bluford during the previous school year, the team revisited the fieldnotes from this faculty meeting—a painful experience for all. We read them aloud; we asked another school team to look at the notes and to offer their perspectives on what was happening; we enacted the meeting and then wrote and performed a skit of what we wanted future faculty meetings to look like. All of these activities helped us to get a fuller picture of what had happened at the faculty meeting.

In her reflections on the faculty meeting, Gretchen Brosius examined group dynamics and began to describe the culture of communication at Bluford.

It's funny, but sitting in that faculty meeting amidst all the turmoil and confusion, I felt "This is normal. This is the way things operate at Bluford." Sure, I was aware that we had difficulty reaching conclusions. I just figured it was all due to our large staff and the array of personalities that come into play. I never thought that the bad communication at this meeting could be something fixable.



When given the opportunity to revisit that afternoon, I saw things from a much different perspective. By reading the notes days later, I was better able to remove myself from the emotions that I felt during the meeting. This gave me the chance to analyze what was actually happening. The problem became very clear to me when I saw it occurring time and time again throughout the faculty meeting: Nothing was ever resolved; everything was left hanging. Many people, including those on the committees mentioned, were unclear as to what was happening. Our main problem was definitely communication. Not only were the lines faulty among the entire staff, but within smaller groups, too.

I never thought that the bad communication at this meeting could be something fixable.

Gretchen points out that when things go wrong in schools, it is often “personalities” that are defined as the problem. The result is that staff give up on finding solutions because the old adage “You can’t change people” is a powerful one. Returning later to look carefully at fieldnotes from the meeting allowed us to look beyond the trees of personalities in order to see the larger forest—bad communication habits such as moving into debate or calling for a vote without the time to brainstorm solutions and deliberate the strengths and weaknesses of our options.

Carol Shiffrin’s reflections illustrate how much clearer issues and questions can be when urgent problems aren’t pressing for immediate attention and resolution and when emotions aren’t as high.

Reading Paul’s notes from the meeting was a real revelation to me. I shouldn’t have been so surprised! The kind of communication problems that surfaced are characteristic not only of our school, but of many situations and settings. Often, a large staff meets monthly at best, after a long hard day, in a rushed atmosphere, where there is too much to do and not enough time to do it. Still, seeing our conversation in black and white made the problem of communication so real to me.

In a meeting of less than one hour, there were at least five instances of communication problems around the science issue which resulted in confusion, uncertainty, anger, and frustration. Here are some of the unanswered questions the meeting triggered but never resolved:



1. What was the purpose of the science survey on textbooks? Was it information gathering or an actual vote?
2. Were we deciding between textbooks and materials?
3. Who was supposed to report the results of the survey: Mary Ann Hepner (Science Specialist at Bluford) or Paul Sylvester (CUE staff)?
4. Would the textbook decision be made at this meeting? Would Dr. Garberina's poll be the vote mechanism? Would people have to decide on the spot with no thought or discussion?

It is often "personalities" that are defined as the problem.

5. What was our science curriculum? Had it been agreed upon? Who knew about it?
6. What would happen next? What had been resolved?

The science “discussion” ended with Dr. Garberina requesting a copy of the Science Curriculum from the Science Specialist so that it could be copied for the staff. There was no resolution of the textbook issue or any of the unanswered questions above. Instead, the meeting moved on to the next issue, the detention room, which suffered a similar, unsatisfying fate! After re-reading those notes, I understand why Bluford staff might be reluctant to meet more frequently!

The kind of communication problems that surfaced are characteristic not only of our school, but of many situations and settings.

Reflecting on fieldnotes enabled Carol later to raise questions that seemed difficult, but not impossible, to address. Posing those questions also pointed to a path of change, offering us the opportunity to generate next steps.

But fieldnotes were not our only source of data. At the second TS/MC summer institute, other activities like constructing charts, diagrams, models provided more information to work with and raised still more questions about communication and decision-making at Bluford. These activities again provided distance and perspective on what was happening, what knowledge people shared, and what remained ambiguous. They helped us come up with some early actions to address the problems we were seeing in the data. Linda Staple joined TS/MC the second year and reflected on what happened at the second summer institute.

Nancy Bernhardt and I elected to be part of an existing group who had begun working with the CUE team the previous summer. When we actually arrived at the second Summer Institute we found that we were the two who would be primarily representing Bluford because of prior commitments of the remaining TS/MC team members.

Not knowing much of what had transpired the previous summer, we were beholden to Jolley, Fred, and Paul to fill us in and keep us on track. We soon realized that our mission was to explore ways of facilitating better communication among our staff. At the summer institute we explored how information was generated and spread through the building. One of the Institute’s activities was to reflect on the fieldnotes from the May faculty meeting; another was to draw an organizational diagram of how communication works and how deci-

sions are made at Bluford. In doing this, we realized that even we were confused about certain areas. How did decisions get made? Was the Governance Council a decision-making body? Or was it a facilitator and coordinator of information among different groups like the Building Committee, grade groups, committees, etc.?

Seeing our conversation in black and white made the problem of communication so real to me.

One key thing that came out of these activities was the importance of a clear-cut method to make all staff aware of what happened at specific small group meetings (e.g. Building Committee, Governance Council, Discipline Committee, Budget Committee, Science Committee, etc.), and, more generally, what was going on at school on a daily basis. It also became clear that we needed to hear from the whole staff about their concerns about communication. We planned focus group interviews of the entire staff so that they could share concerns and ideas about communication early in the school year.

Following these interviews we made changes to improve communication based on what people said. For example, Dr. Garberina had a





daily message on the counter each morning for staff to read and sign. In addition, after each committee meeting, minutes were typed up and printed on yellow paper and disseminated to each staff member.

How did decisions get made?

Although we did not solve all our communication problems, to me this was a step in the right direction. *No one could say that they didn't know what was happening in different committees.* Previously at faculty meetings there were always a few staff members who would vocalize they “were not aware of this or that.” This lack of communication fueled their perception that only a select few people actually knew what was going on and made the decisions around Bluford.

These focus group interviews generated lots of ideas for improving communication, but perhaps more importantly they provided the opportunity for the whole staff to have input on a topic of concern to them. Notes from the interviews were typed up and shared with the whole staff. This format of small group discussions about specific questions became one that we used at other kinds of meetings.

Learning from Our Mistakes

Our team learned much about communication by examining our own process. This often meant going over and over our mistakes—failed communications—to understand what went awry. For example, Dr. Garberina, Bluford’s principal, reviewed all of the notes from TS/MC team planning meetings in order to trace the roots of the communications “disaster” at the 5/11/94 faculty meeting described above. His investigation moved us into considering how communication patterns and habits of mind *within* the Taking Stock/Making Change team complicated and undermined our communication with the rest of the school. Below is his analysis of the TS/MC’s planning process

The goal of this TS/MC planning meeting was to structure the faculty meeting detailed above. Several issues concerning the future science curriculum needed resolution. The TS/MC team agreed that unresolved issues should not be discussed in isolation at the faculty meeting. Unfortunately, the issues were discussed in isolation at the planning meeting:

“Textbook...? Resource room...? Coordinator? Where are we going with the themes?”

Focus group interviews...provided the opportunity for the whole staff to have input on a topic.

“Label it ‘science decision for 94/95’ to clarify what our goal is.”

“Maybe the step for next year is a sequence of topics for each grade...”

“We want hands on...kids to think like scientists.”

“When I was looking at the Addison Wesley book, those themes looked good.”

“In terms of themes, what’s needed is a definition of what’s a meaningful, doable topic.”

“I look at the textbook as a means of getting other materials.”

“Teachers want black line masters. The Addison Wesley salesperson said if you try textbooks you get all that free. That’s where the decision to get the textbooks came from.”

“I’m confused because we spent at least two budget committee meetings on this. I thought they [the faculty] had already decided that they wanted it.”

“Some have decided. But not everybody.”

“...Shouldn’t the question we take to the faculty be whether the science curriculum is going to be led by themes generated among the faculty or the themes in Addison Wesley textbooks?”

This meeting resulted in a blueprint for disaster because the deadline for a decision regarding the purchase of textbooks created a sense of urgency and crisis that undermined thoughtful planning; themes were mentioned as important to the science program, but the discussion framed the issue as themes *versus* textbooks, rather than as textbooks complementing the continued development of the themes; and, black line masters were the only materials discussed other than textbooks. The TS/MC team mapped out an outline for the faculty meeting dis-



cussion of science curriculum without a discussion of the coordinator's role or of the kinds of materials that might be helpful to teachers other than black line masters. The team only cursorily discussed the relationship of themes to the curriculum developed by the Science Committee.

Dr. Gaberina's reflections showed us how seeing the whole picture is vital to creating a context for productive deliberation. When issues remain isolated and are not connected to the big picture, questions become posed as either/or and yes/no decisions. Learning to connect ideas, questions, and concepts is important for capturing the complexity of dilemmas that confront schools.

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Several weeks after the disastrous May, 1994 faculty meeting, the TS/MC team gathered to debrief and think about next steps. Several teachers had come to the principal after the faculty meeting and expressed concerns about TS/MC's focus on science and what they perceived as its inappropriate involvement in school decision-making. The following fieldnotes became important to our thinking about the role of TS/MC at Bluford and the kind of communication that was necessary within the team and between the team and the whole school.

**Fieldnotes from Bluford TS/MC
Debriefing Meeting: 6/6/94**

Bill Garberina, Principal: Mrs. Kelly will be the Science Coordinator next year. She was the only person to apply. She teaches fifth grade. Some members of the faculty felt that TS/MC is trying to take over. Mrs. Kelly will join TS/MC team and will co-chair the science committee.

Everline: I was involved in the conversation with the staff who complained about TS/MC. That came out of you guys taking the lead, people saw that our science leader was being led.

Carol: What is a role for TS/MC? Maybe for next year the focus should be the communication part and not on guiding the curriculum. Even if they did understand your (Jolley and Paul) role.

Everline: I think that you could be more involved in communication issues.

Jolley: It concerns me that when you say “You,” you’re referring to Paul and me and not to the whole TS/MC team. The purpose of TS/MC is not to bring in outside experts to tell you what to do, but to develop the capacity within the school to look at what it’s doing in a careful and systematic way.

Everline: We didn’t make your role clear.

Carol: As I think back on this, I thought of you as the experts on whatever it is that we’re doing. Maybe what you’re best for is to be expert in ethnography, at helping us understand our process.

Everline: I don’t see how they would perceive you as leading us. You just ask questions, facilitate.

Jolley: At faculty meeting, there was a lack of clarity about how the textbook decision was being made and what TS/MC’s role was at the meeting. Without these two things, we couldn’t have a discussion.

Bill: What we need is an ethnography of a decision.

Jolley: We have a great deal of data from this year that would shed light on how Bluford communicates about decisions. We also learned from our survey, but a question becomes, “How does that data and what we’re learning connect to decisions in the school?”

Carol: Maybe we should have gone to the whole staff to ask what TS/MC should focus on. This is a three-year program. There is no reason that we can’t take that approach now.

Paul: But didn’t we do that at the beginning of the year?

Bill: I think you’d be better off staying outside the school politics.

Carol: What if we reported on what happened here. In a tactful way

say that due to the communication process, we didn't get as far as we want and that now we see the TS/MC role will be to help people communicate better. To help people know how curriculum decisions are made. I know I felt uncomfortable as the reading teacher being seen as taking a leadership role in science.

Jolley: When we were looking at science and communication, we worked with the Science Committee and Marianne. Who would we work with and talk to about decision-making?

Bill: Anyone can raise a question, but the question is, "Who is the legitimate processor of those decisions?" TS/MC might have been considered the wrong processing mechanism for the science issue. The survey was appropriate for TS/MC as was presenting the three points about the science program, but not when staff felt that TS/MC was making a recommendation about the curriculum.

Carol: My feeling for next year is that the issue that we thought of as secondary really was primary: communication. But I still think that we should ask the faculty.

Bill: At Governance Council it was brought up that staff is sick of making all these decisions. I think it will have to be decided what decisions will be made in committee and what will be made by the whole faculty. I think that's coming down the road.

Carol: Another problem with school culture is that everyone asks, "So what do you have to show for the work you're doing?"

Everline: It might be better to focus on communication.

Carol: It's late. I suggest that we go to the faculty and tell them about all of this. And lay out two to three options and have them choose what they would like us to look at next year.

Decided that Carol will present at least two options to faculty: science and communication.

Jolley's journal entry immediately following this meeting offered a look at her perspective on what was going on and continued to raise questions about the role of TS/MC in the school and the connection of research to action.

Woke up Tuesday night with my head spinning. Bluford team meeting was playing in my head. So much happened—how to think about it all. Started the year with what I thought were some straight forward, innocent questions about science and communication. Now I'm understanding why Carol and Everline refer to science as Bluford's "gray area." And as for communication, Dr. Garberina's words resonate, "You started out doing ethnography, research. Now you've gotten embroiled in school politics. Some people saw you as taking a stand about the textbook question, which they think belongs inside the school. You need to move back—maybe do something like an ethnography of a decision."

Many staff members perceived [the problem] as "outsiders" coming into our school to control and fix things that were broken.

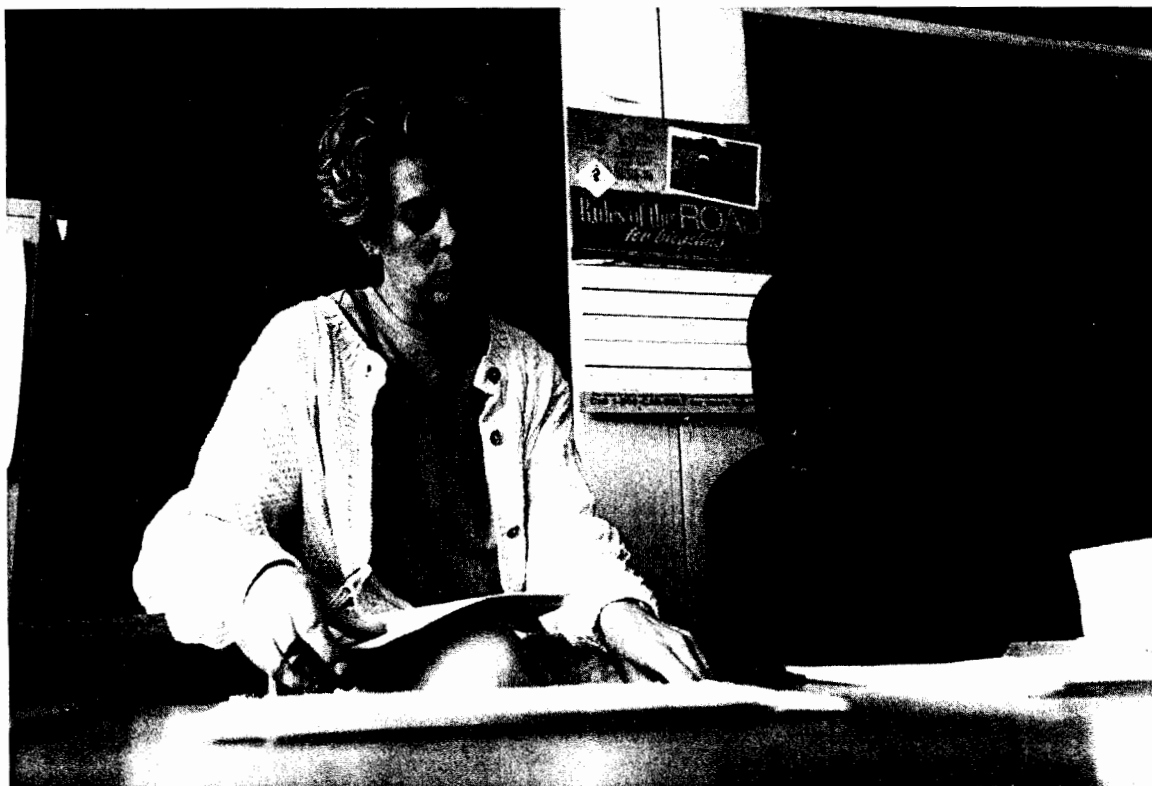
I am beginning to understand that at the faculty meeting TS/MC, and particularly me since I was presenting the findings, was seen as trying to influence the decision and even to determine the curriculum. We seem to be at a crossroads. Do we continue with a science and communications focus? Or is the science focus not appropriate given that there is little overlap between membership on the TS/MC team and the science committee? Will the leadership of the science committee resent the connections with TS/MC? If we choose a different focus, will we just end up offending some other people next spring? What could we do differently to ensure that we are not trying to usurp anyone's decision-making authority, but only trying to position what we are learning in the research to inform the decision-making process?

We seem to be at another crossroads in terms of thinking about who we are as a team. To what degree is it appropriate for Paul and I to speak up inside the school? I think one reason the TS/MC team may have chosen science was to provide support to the science leadership and committee, because as Carol and Everline both said they were "uncomfortable" about the times when they had raised questions and their colleagues had wondered why they were concerned about science, when math and reading were their areas. How do we keep the issues up front so that people try to address them?

Later, Gretchen revisited the fieldnotes from that team meeting and also reflected on the process of self-study at Bluford, especially the evolution of the research question, the role of the TS/MC team in the school and the roles of individual members within the team.

I feel many problems our TS/MC team encountered with the faculty were the result of poor communication on our team. When I reflect upon TS/MC within our school, we had communication problems *within* our TS/MC team. Our problems ranged from minor to more significant in nature. First off we had difficulty defining who *we* are. “We” meaning TS/MC as well as CUE staff. Who belonged in each group? It wasn’t made clear enough in my opinion who or what TS/MC was in our building. Many staff members perceived it as “outsiders” coming into our school to control and fix things that were broken. Paul and Jolley were viewed as TS/MC at Bluford among the rest of the faculty. Initially, some saw them as another pair of eyes sent here to see what was happening at our school. Some faculty saw

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them as the “doctor” who was sent to prescribe something for his ailing patient. If we had more successfully involved the faculty in our work, perhaps there wouldn’t have been the same reaction. Later, after a few encounters, people looked to them for feedback on events and interactions at our school.

Reflecting on what [our research] meant, and making changes were not the neat cycle of research and action that we imagined

Looking back once again, I know we made a wise decision to change our focus from science to communication. If we hadn’t, we would have continued working on our science goal; in the end, it wouldn’t have mattered how much time and energy were spent. All of it would have been overshadowed by our lack of communicating our work to the rest of the staff.

What's Different at Bluford

As we discussed earlier, looking at data, reflecting on what it meant, and making changes were not the neat cycle of research and action that we imagined at Bluford. In a few instances we could make fairly direct connections between something we learned in the research and school changes. For example, after the teacher survey about science instruction, staff made the decision to allocate each classroom teacher funds for science materials. But there were other changes at Bluford that occurred over time and could not be connected to one “Aha moment” of the TS/MC team. Instead these shifts emanated from a more amorphous, but also deeper understanding of what good communication entails. Below, Everline looks back over the last several years to consider changes in communication and decision-making processes.

Bluford recognized the importance of good communication and increasing meaningful staff involvement. We have made a number of changes as a result of “taking stock”.

- The Governance Council now includes representatives from all units in the school (e.g. teaching staff, custodial staff, cafeteria staff, etc.).
- Parents are an important part of the Governance Council. Five members of the Home and School Association serve as members on the Governance Council and are actively involved in school planning and shared decision-making. The Parental Involvement Committee of our Governance Council, led by our parent representative, now also works closely with the Home and School Association to have regular attendance at our staff site-based meetings so that parents will have a voice at what were once all faculty meetings.
- Representatives of the Governance Council now meet with their constituents on a regular basis to further inform staff and serve as their liaison at Council meetings.
- Yellow copies of minutes of Governance Council and committee meetings are distributed to the entire staff and additional copies of minutes are posted on the bulletin board and Philadelphia Federation News Board and kept in a binder so there is record of all meetings. This has decreased many concerns about not being informed.

- Committees and the Governance Council now present several options to staff whenever there is a decision to be made, so that there can be deliberation about different courses of action.
- Each staff member serves on at least one school committee. Communication lines between the committees and the Governance Council were clarified, with committee members giving regular reports to Council. This has proved to be an excellent vehicle for getting input from everyone.

People became more aware of obstacles to communication and began to predict where breakdowns might occur.

Another effective change is the re-design of the old traditional School District faculty meetings to site-based meetings. This allows us another forum for communicating concerns and ideas, debating issues, and reaching consensus. How have site-based meetings differed from the old, traditional faculty meetings? Site-based meetings are facilitated by the Governance Council Chair instead of the principal. This change has opened up wider participation among colleagues who feel they can speak freely and that they will be heard. The agenda is put on the daily gram prior to the meeting and distributed at meetings.

People also became more aware of obstacles to communication and began to predict where breakdowns might occur and what was needed to prevent, or at least alleviate, problems.

There have been many budgetary cutbacks in the School District and as a result, there are more demands placed upon faculty in our schools. In addition, reforms such as small learning communities, special education inclusion, and the development of standards for student performance add responsibilities to the heavy workload of teachers.

At Bluford, we can't find the time to address the important issues within our school because of the outside demands placed upon us by the District. The entire faculty and staff only meets twice a month. That is the only time we can communicate, discuss important issues and solve problems. But there is no space on our faculty meeting agendas for issues that directly affect our school because we continually have to address topics which the District deems necessary. We have to make a concerted effort to make the time to discuss important issues that affect Bluford and its staff. Until we are able to do that, Bluford's students and staff will suffer.

Now that Bluford has moved into small learning communities, communication across the whole school is even more complicated. We will now be making many decisions in our small learning communities rather than in grade groups. Our current communication and decision-making issues include: (1) How will we share what is going on across small learning communities? (2) What are the roles of grade groups, small learning communities and the whole faculty in developing goals and standards? To what degree do we need to agree on goals and standards? Currently, Bluford is seeking answers to these questions. We are trying to create harmony through good communication among small learning communities. Small learning community chairs report information at site-based meetings. We also are continuing to disseminate information by grades as well as small learning communities.

Nancy Bernhardt and Denise Godwin, Teachers

One legacy of TS/MC is the desire to keep the doors of communication open among administration, staff, parents, and students.

Being in a large school, communication or lack of it, will always be an issue. One legacy of TS/MC is the desire to keep the doors of communication open among administration, staff, parents, and students. We need to continue to find avenues to foster this both in school and possibly out of school. We need to take the time to listen to each other often, not just for brief periods at site based faculty meetings when we're getting ready to vote on an issue.

It appears that our site based meetings are communications about what is needed to be done or completed. We do not have enough opportunities to actually take stock of what's happening in the school, especially now that we are isolated in our small learning communities. We need the time to reflect on what's been done, what we're doing, and where we're headed.

Another key item that came out of the Summer '94 Institute for me was meeting and participating with the other schools involved in TS/MC. Through our sharing, I came to realize Bluford was not lacking in the area of communication as much as other schools. Hearing their stories, their problems, made me feel we had a lot of positive things going on. We were a concerned staff, our principal was willing to listen, and we had the ability through school-based management to change certain things if we chose to do so.

I was so impressed with the communication at two of the schools involved in the summer institute. One appeared to me to be a very cohesive group—the teachers and principal seemed to genuinely like each other. They seemed to know what their issues were and were facing them together. Another impressed me because of the parental involvement in the project, especially during the summer of '94. Parents whose children were no longer attending AMY were involved. They even had a former student as part of their team.

Linda Staple, Counselor

Some Conclusions

In summarizing the lessons from Bluford's experience, we think it's important to emphasize a number of points:

- In an action research project, it's important to be flexible. Be willing to change your focus when the data points to your need to do so or when other "stakeholders" in the research process ask you to consider other questions.
- Communicate early and often with the whole school about what you're doing and how you're doing it.
- Don't rely on outsiders to lead the process inside the school. Clarify and re-negotiate roles for insiders and outsiders throughout the project.
- Try to keep the big picture in mind. Don't get hung up in thinking that individual personalities are the problem. Look for relationships and connections between issues and questions so that you don't over-simplify problems and create solutions that are inadequate.
- Also look for relationships among people and try to build continuity and overlap to support communication. Teams/committees need continuity of membership so that they can build trust and shared knowledge. Making lists of team, committee, and council

memberships can help to reveal instances when either the same people are on everything or conversely, where there is not enough overlap to ensure coordination of efforts.

- Use whole school meeting time to generate ideas and to air feelings and concerns. Structure meetings so that everyone has a chance to contribute and be heard. Take notes so that what is said can become data for future reflection and planning.

In an action research project, it's important to be flexible.

- Use a number of research methods and be open to all kinds of data that can increase understanding of an issue.
- Don't think that because you have looked at a set of data once, you have learned everything you can from it. Keep going back to see it in light of new events and new understandings of what is happening.
- Working with other schools—seeing their problems and strengths—provides another lens for analyzing and understanding what's happening at your own school. Seeking other schools' perspectives on what's happening at your school can be enormously helpful.