
Colleague Support

Summary notes

Dr Bill Rogers (2020)

Colleague Support : Making a Difference

Teaching can sometimes be a 'lonely' profession. We teach in a smallish room, with 25 – 30 'minors' six periods a day, day after day, week after week ...

When the 'breaks' come we rush off for a tea or coffee, or 'yard duty'* or – perhaps – another meeting. For the better part of the day we are – effectively – cut off from our adult peers; the very people whose support can make a difference to our professional and personal coping. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) have described teaching as the 'lonely profession'. Rudduck (1991) has noted "...education is among the last vocations where it is still legitimate to work by yourself in a space that is secure against invaders." (p 31) Overstated? There is still some truth in these words. There are some teachers who view the in-class support of another teacher (even a T.A. coming in to give support!) as a kind of 'invasion' of their professional place/space ... (See Rogers, 2002).

We do work 'alone', though (hopefully) not as one who is 'lonely'. We come together – as teachers – through a professional connection. We arrive at a school largely by Education Department 'selection'; it is not always our 'chosen school'. We obviously can't always choose who we will work alongside and with; yet we will spend a third of our waking/working day with our colleagues. We have to make it work for our individual, and shared responsibilities. We have to make collegiality work for why we chose our profession in the first place and also for our wellbeing and morale in the *normal* stresses, strains and challenges of our profession.

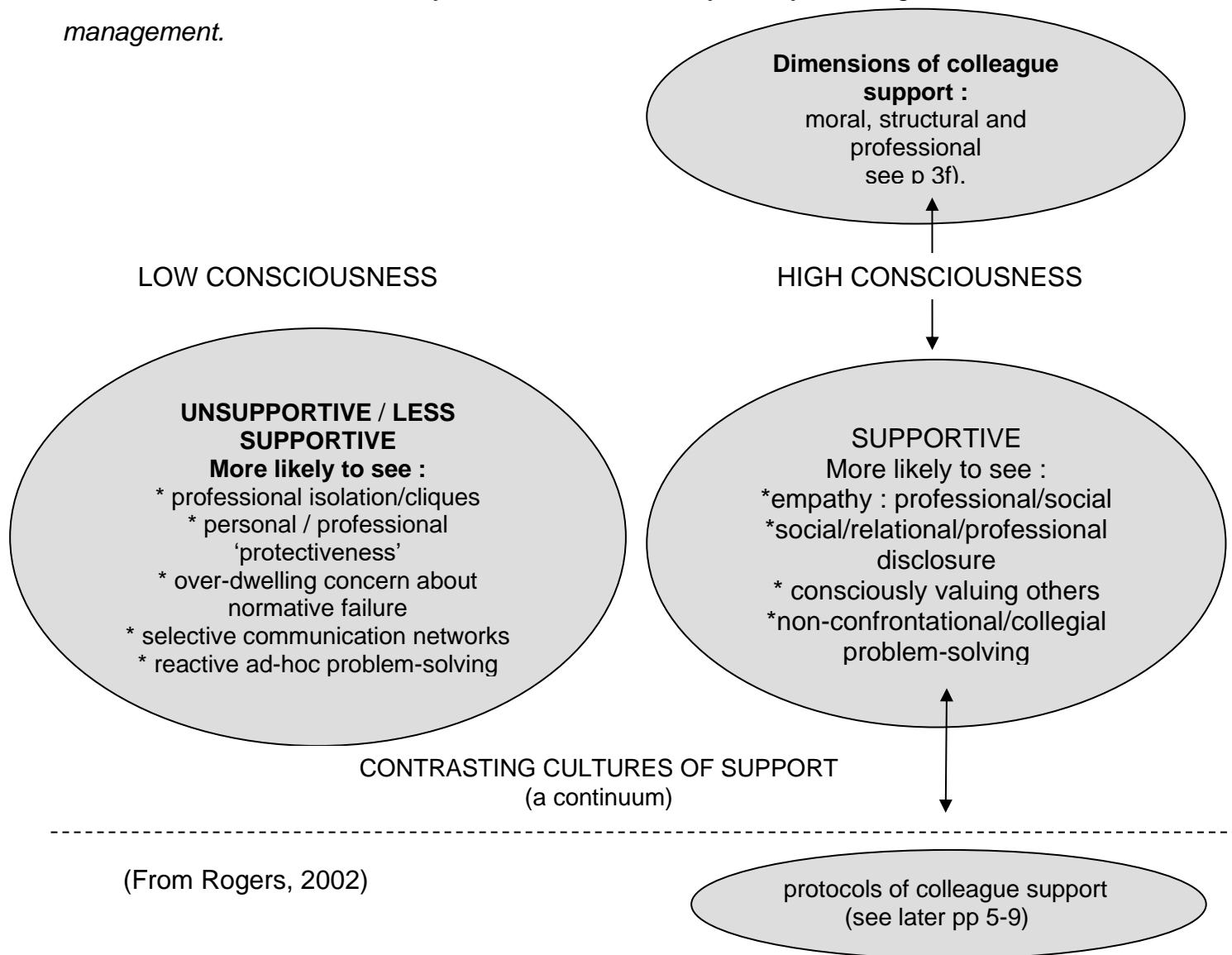
There is significant and substantial research to demonstrate that the kind of (and degree of) colleague support available in a school is a critical factor in personal and social coping; in managing normative stress; giving assurance to our professional role; giving support in behaviour and discipline concerns and enabling our wellbeing to do our work as teachers. (Rogers, 2002 and 2012).

In research conducted on colleague support I have noticed that schools have varying *degrees of 'consciousness'* about colleague support. (Rogers, 2002). In some schools colleague support is incidental, *ad hoc*; dependent on particular dyadic opportunity from those one or two

Playground supervision to my UK colleagues. In Australian schools all teachers do playground supervision, lunch and wet-day supervision, before and after school supervision ... We do not have 'mid-day supervisors'.

colleagues you trust In schools with a 'low consciousness' of colleague support senior staff may be unaware of the need to *consciously* occasion and 'factor-in' 'opportunities' that specifically address the *espoused* needs of staff for support.

By 'espoused' needs I mean that the senior staff will genuinely discuss with colleagues *their concerns and issues that directly affect them in their day-to-day teaching and behaviour management.*



Form follows function in colleague support; the function of colleague support is the meeting of staff needs – as much as humanly and reasonably possible their needs as a person, as a professional and a member of a collegial community. We all have fundamental human needs to feel valued, affirmed and to belong; we also have a need to be treated as a professional and supported as a professional. When schools create – *and enable* – 'forms', 'processes', 'plans and 'policies', such 'forms' can provide some 'structure' to both the moral and professional support we all value in our workplace.

If staff are genuinely consulted and involved in the development of these 'forms', staff feel both valued and supported; they believe their needs are being acknowledged and affirmed. As such they are more likely to cope more effectively in their day to day work. Just to give one example here, when a school has a well-developed *whole-school approach to behaviour leadership, management and discipline* teachers note they believe and feel :-

- ✦ A shared sense of collegial focus in what respectful behaviour leadership and discipline can actually – and realistically – mean, in our day-to-day practice (Rogers, 2002/2006b/2012).
- ✦ They have clear – and shared – aims and practices for day-to-day behaviour leadership. This gives assurance in focus and direction of day-to-day behaviour management and discipline.
- ✦ That they have clear plans *that focus behaviour management at the classroom level, at the duty-of-care level beyond the classroom (eg playground), and for students at risk.*
- ✦ That they have assurance they will be backed-up in difficult management and discipline situations, and that such back-up is given without blame or censure (Rogers, 2006/2012).

Dimensions of colleague support

Whenever I've discussed colleague support with teachers across a wide range of schools they commonly focus on the following 'dimensions' or aspects of colleague support :-

1. Colleague sharing, such as the sharing of ideas, resources, professional advice as well as the sharing of concerns/problems/challenges. Such sharing is often transitional, even *ad hoc*, but none the less regarded and valued for that. Teachers are busy people; the assuring word and confirmation we are 'on the right track' is highly valued in a busy day. Of course such collegial sharing also operates in more formal teamings when we discuss, problem-solve, review ... and plan together.
2. Colleague support often enables staff when under normative stress of the day-to-day ... The sharing of common concerns, needs, problems can help reframe, give assurance, and reduce the stress of coping 'alone'. There are countless studies that illustrate how colleague support buffers the normative stress of teaching; reduces emotional exhaustion, increases and strengthens shared professional and collegial identity and enables productive problem-solving. Rogers (2002 and 2012). Of particular note in the research literature is that measures of physical and mental health – as they relate to

stress management and coping – are positively correlated with how staff are supported by senior colleagues. Supportive leadership provides the professional assurance that underpins all other areas of staff management; it is the ‘anchor variable’ that can increase or decrease staff morale. Studies also show that in colleague cultures in less supportive schools – where any support is largely fragmented or affected by ‘cliques’ – genuinely sharing of concerns (particularly about behaviour and discipline issues) is tempered by how their concerns, challenges, problems will be interpreted by some senior staff. Staff in such schools are often concerned that such sharing implies that one can’t cope, or is an inadequate (or worse) an incompetent teacher (in Rogers, 2012). As one colleague noted to me, “There’s this ludicrous idea that when someone is really struggling we have this ‘hands-off mentality’ – just in case we do, or say, the wrong thing. It’s stupid really especially when we *know* they need help.” (Quoted in Rogers, 2002).

3. Professional support in supportive colleague cultures enables an individual teacher’s on-going professional reflection and development; again based (hopefully) on espoused needs. In such cultures professional support includes on-going discussion (including ‘formal’ group contexts), collegial planning and development within one’s professional role and responsibilities and the possibilities of mentoring support. Professional support also needs to include feedback, both the incidental encouragement feedback on one’s teaching and management as well as more focused professional appraisal – *always based in elective, professional, trust*. Our collegial peers are a significant source of experience, knowledge and skill that can be shared through informal and team-based peer discussion through to elective peer mentoring and peer coaching (see Rogers, 2012).

These ‘dimensions’ of collegial support are obviously inter-related and the degree to which they are *consciously* encouraged- and modelled – (particularly by senior staff) determines how useful, dependable and effective such support can be.

In the countless informal and formal discussions I have had with teachers and schools on this topic – and the research I have undertaken – I have also noted a clear underlying aspect that teachers affirm in a supportive school culture, that of ‘no-blame’ and ‘non-preferential’, selective, support. In a supportive collegial ecology staff felt, and believed, that they could share a range of concerns at both incidental and more ‘formal’

levels without being perceived as inadequate or (worse) incompetent. In such schools the term 'struggling teacher' is not a simple pejorative; teachers did not believe that they had to cope alone in a kind of degrading survivalism. (Rogers, 2002 and 2012).

Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) describe how teacher exhaustion is affected by school culture :-

One (kind of exhaustion) arises from lonely battles and unappreciated efforts, losing ground and growing and gnawing feeling of hopelessness that you cannot make a difference. The other type of exhaustion is the kind that accompanies hard work as part of a team, a growing recognition you are engaged in a struggle that is worth the effort and a recognition that what you are doing makes a critical difference for a recalcitrant child or a discouraged colleague. The former type of exhaustion ineluctably takes its toll on the motivation of the most enthusiastic teacher. The latter has its own inner reserve that allows us to bounce back after a good night's sleep. Indeed the first type of exhaustion causes anxiety and sleeplessness, while the second induces rest and regeneration of energy. School cultures make a difference in what kind of tiredness we experience.

(p 107)

'Protocols' of colleague support

I have also noted that 'consciously supportive' schools are characterised by notable 'protocols' that both describe and, in a sense, delineate the ecology, and culture, of support present within a given collegial culture (Rogers, 2002).

- **Mutual respect and mutual regard ... the axiomatic, and deceptively basic 'variable'**, the treatment variable ... We always remember how we *characteristically* treat others and, hopefully, vice versa ... Mutual trust, equality of treatment, 'no favourites', affirmation and assurance we're on the right track ... faith in others' abilities and an interest in their point of

view. At the very least it is professional civility. After all we don't have to like every colleague we work with, I do believe – however – we need to show civility, courtesy and basic respect to all.

- **Tolerance of – but not merely acquiescence to – fallibility in ourselves and others :** especially in areas where colleagues cope with uncertainty, normative failure and change. We won't always get it right; we forget, we 'fail', the worksheets weren't photocopied, the report wasn't in on time ... our humanity at work ... From the bad-day-syndrome of tiredness and mistakes to Murphy's Law (or even O'Toole's Law :- 'Murphy was an optimist).’ Humour often plays a part here. I have noted that supportive colleague cultures exhibit normative, shared, expressions of humour from staff banter, in-house jokes, the *bon mots*, the 'court jesters', even the wry smiles that give a 'coping edge'; a feeling of temporary uplift; a defusing of tension; a reframing of frustrating reality(!) Victor Frankl (a psychiatrist) interned in the Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz, wrote of his experiences. He chronicles in *Man's Search For Meaning* 1963 how he and some of his fellow prisoners were able to find some meaning even in their suffering.

One of the more remarkable sections of the book is where he addresses 'humour' ...

'To discover there was any semblance of art in a concentration camp must be surprise enough for an outsider, but he may be even more astonished to hear that one could find a sense of humour there as well; of course, only a faint trace of one, and then only for a few seconds or minutes. Humour was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humour, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds' (p 54).

Humour can give a shared identity in a stressful profession; we're in the same boat, going (roughly) in the same direction. [I add, here, that such humour does not include sarcasm, cheap shots, put downs ... even in so-called 'fun'].

Where a colleague's fallibility is *characteristic* then we do not simply, or merely, acquiesce. We need to address insensitive and unreasonable colleague behaviour in relationships and in their teaching and behaviour management. *Repeated* laziness, failure, blaming and unfair treatment of others is different from *normative fallibility* and will need to be challenged privately, professionally, respectfully within whole-school expectations about one's professionalism and our professional obligations in role.

Failure is normal in our day-to-day life and work, but failure is only meaningful if we learn from it. When we know where and how we fail, (particularly where such failure is 'characteristic') with adequate and respectful support we can learn from such failure.

- **Watchfulness of, and mindfulness of, and for, one another** : 'perspective taking', 'looking out for one another', 'thinking of' - and 'acting for' - the 'common good' of our colleagues. As one colleague notes it "*it is bearing one another's burdens ...*"; the reciprocity of good-will'. A colleague covers a class for us when we're running late (it happens ...); photocopies a worksheet when we're in a hurry and pigeon-holes it for us or emails it to us ...; notices our bad-day and makes a coffee; supportively notices when things are difficult and offers a 'collegial ear' and a 'collegial hand'.
- **Affirming, and maintaining, a non-competitive collegial ethos.**
- **Trust in *both* our colleagues and the supportive processes we develop** :- such as teaming, collegial planning, whole-school behaviour management policy and practice; trust in those 'forms' or '*structures*' of support that we have identified –collegially – that meet our common professional needs. Without basic trust (in our common professional role and for our common needs) it is difficult for a school to work collegially. Such trust implies reciprocal interdependency and – again – it is based in the same fundamental needs we all have as individuals and colleagues in our shared work.
- **Balancing the positive and negative features of school life and professional demands** : 'keeping the bigger picture in mind', 'living with uncertainty in the long haul ...' (See later p 13).
- **Acceptance of difference in others** (within shared values, aims, practices ...). We are clearly not all the same, in teaching style or leadership of our children. We can and should, however, – within natural differences – share *common values, aims in our practices, and commitment to whole-school policies and plans*. The days are long gone when a teacher could close their classroom door and simply 'do their own thing'. However (as noted earlier), when a teacher's *characteristic* teaching and management practices works against shared values/aims and practices, those teachers will need to be *professionally* (and

supportively) addressed and challenged to work collegially *within a whole-school approach*. (Rogers, 2002 and 2012).

- **Shared professional assurance** : at the dyadic and transitional (ad-hoc) level; as well as the more involved team level. The need for assurance that one is meeting one's professional obligations and supporting shared values, aims and practices is important in our professional growth. This is where *elective* mentoring can be very valuable in one's professional self-reflection and growth. I have seen countless colleagues value and benefit from the direct, non-judgemental, supportive mentoring (Rogers, 2012). We can go for a long time in our teaching journey without that *direct* shared engagement, observation and feedback that *classroom mentoring* can provide.

Team planning, collegial problem-solving and analysis, whole-team (and whole-school) behaviour planning and policies are crucial to our collegial welfare and our shared professionalism. What mentoring can do, as noted earlier, is add that *direct awareness; grounded in where the teacher and students are in the classroom*. It is a form of shared professional awareness that is occasioned by mentor and 'mentee' working together in the natural setting of where (the) behaviour concerns actually exist (in the classroom) and to where support and concerted action has to be addressed.

- **Being purpose-driven rather than merely task-driven**. This feature of colleague support is the strongest when aspects of teaming are *functional, purposeful and on-going*. A notable feature of supportive collegiality occurs when the team's existence has meaning not just for meeting their professional obligations, and even the needs of the individuals in the team, but also for the school's purpose and mission.
- **The certainty of uncertainty** : we have a profession where the vagaries and vicissitudes of challenging students and (sometimes) challenging parents crop up alongside the reasonable smooth running of a 'typical teaching day'. We obviously cannot control all the variables and factors that make up a complex community like a local school. The 'certainty of uncertainty'; this seemingly paradoxical statement reminds us that things do not always go to plan – certainly in day-to-day teaching. This does not delimit the obvious and essential need to plan, structure, develop policy and seek to manage our 'part' of the world as teachers with some reasonable consistency. It does, however, reduce the unrealistic, and stressful, striving for simplistic perfection. As Henry Louis Mencken (the

noted American philologist, social philosopher and satirist) has said, “There is always an easy solution to every problem – neat, plausible and wrong.” (in his essay, *Divine Afflatus*). While we live with normative uncertainty, the bigger picture of the whole-school approach (say in areas like our behaviour leadership – the way we lead, relate and manage classroom life and learning ...) will better enable us to cope with that uncertainty without self-recrimination or easy blame.

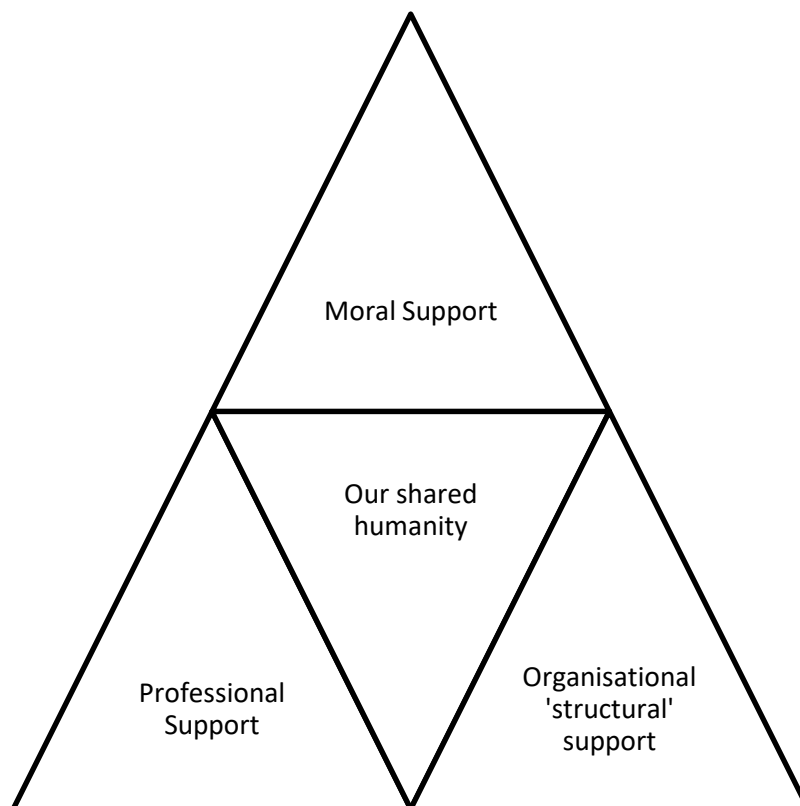
- **Commitment to face-to-face communication.** This seemingly pedestrian feature of collegiality is evidenced in dyadic, and team, contexts. What staff value, and rate highly, is the moral support that face-to-face communication gives whether in the transitional whinge* (coping support and moral support) through to the effective practice of collaborative communication in teams. (Rogers, 2002, 2012).

Colleague support, of course cannot simply be mandated ... ‘... we cannot mandate what matters to effective practice’. (McLaughlin (1990) p 15). The same applies with any significant change in one’s behaviour, one’s practice ... ‘... the more complex the change the less you can force it’. Fullan (1993) p 21.

The anomaly regarding colleague support is that while it is a fundamental – and necessary – feature of our professional life and personal coping it cannot simply be ‘forced’ on to others. It is more likely to characteristically occur – and find its positive response – when the school culture values, endorses, encourages and models collegiality and support within an ecology of mutual regard (rather than merely ‘mandating’ such support).

Form *follows* function; the function of colleague support is to meet colleague needs the best way we (reasonably) can.

*A preferred term my colleagues and I use is ‘moan-bonding’. This phrase was passed on to me by a colleague some years back ... The etymology of ‘whinge’ could be construed as *whineing* and *cringing* (not very dignified). *Moan-bonding* can be cathartic without being destructive or self-defeating.

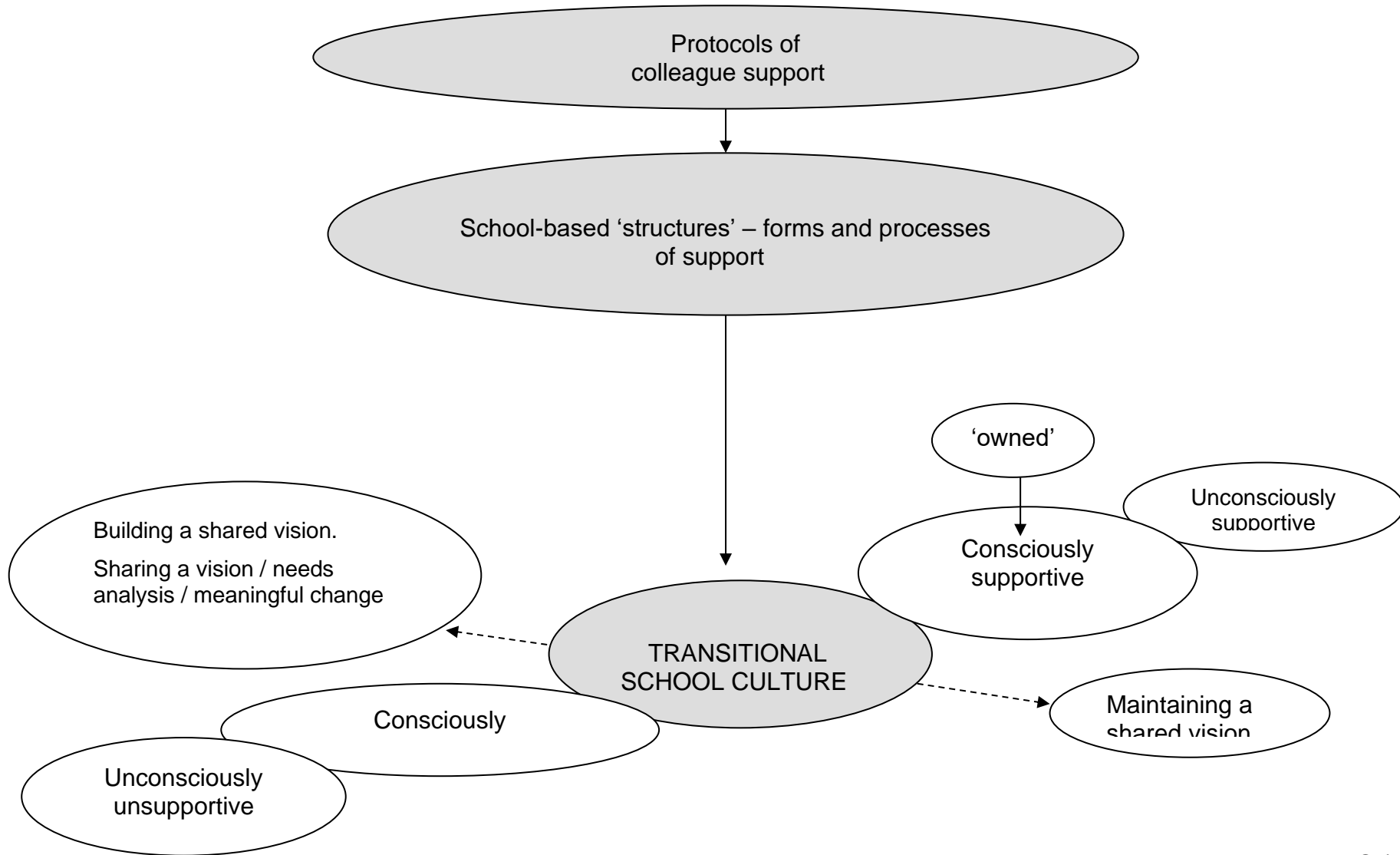


At the heart of colleague support is that shared humanity, without which any meaningful common activity – and our daily work – is more difficult. The days are long gone when teachers had to work in professional isolation, anxious perhaps that others might negatively assess and rate them. Collaboration and collegiality are not simplistic notions or some easy formula for ‘successful support’ in our profession; however when colleagues believe and feel they are valued, both their basic human needs as well as their professional needs are more likely to be met.

A consciously supportive colleague culture

In researching collegially supportive cultures, the degree of collegial *consciousness* about the needs of colleagues (present in a school), is a critical factor in determining how colleagues feel, and believe, their needs are known and how meaningfully such needs are addressed within their school.

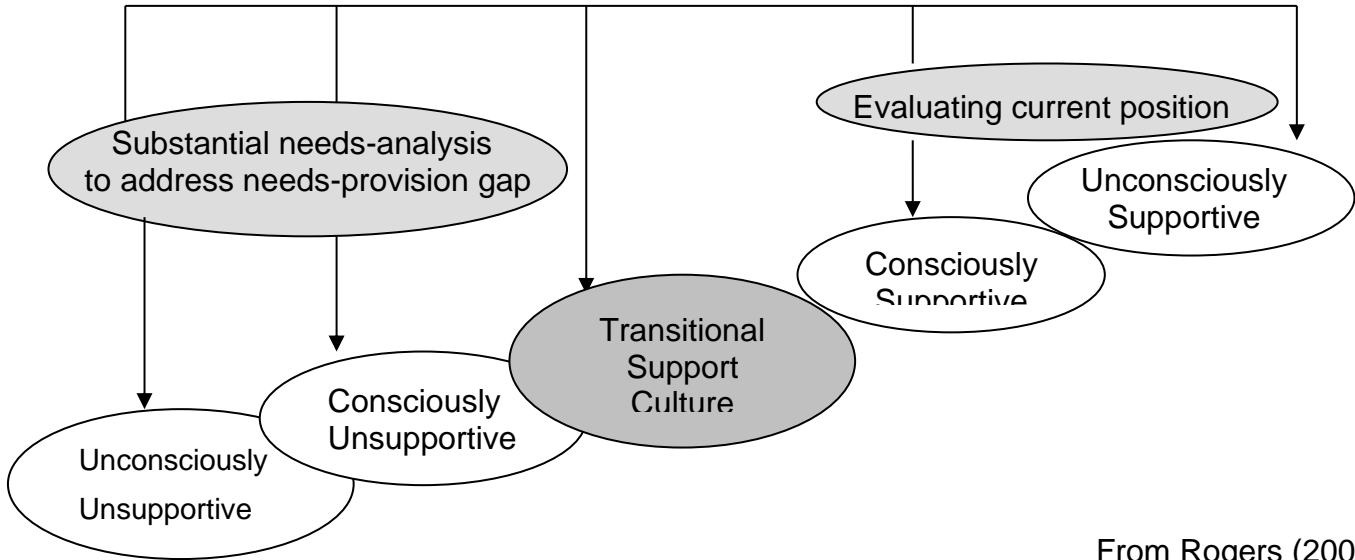
Schools can be broadly represented on a continuum of consciousness from *unconsciously unsupportive*, to *consciously unsupportive*, through to those schools who embrace awareness of colleagues' needs and pursue meaningful needs analysis and change becoming *consciously supportive*.



From : Rogers © (2002)

Needs analysis 'continuum' and consciousness of support

Needs analysis and evaluating current position



From Rogers (2002)

How have the needs of colleagues – in terms of colleague support – been assessed?

How *acknowledged* are the individual and collective needs of colleagues?

What current 'forms', 'structures', processes' or 'policies' seek to address those needs?

Where would you regard our school now in terms of its 'consciousness' of colleague support?

What changes to current 'forms', 'structures', 'processes' or 'plans' will we need to make?

From Rogers © (2002)

For a more comprehensive colleague support survey, see Rogers (2002, also 2012)).

In a recent major workplace survey (UK) on 'employee trust' and 'staff culture' [www.greatplacetowork.co.uk]. The audit remit (over 60m items) noted and rated :-

- How collaborative their workplace environment was and how consultative.
Are staff meaningfully involved in decisions about policy and practice that directly (and obviously) affect their day-to-day role and responsibilities.
- The issue of trust was a recurring focus in feedback :
In what way am I valued (here) TRUSTED?
- What direct and indirect support do I (really) receive from my managers?
- How approachable is (my) supervisor/manager? How demonstrably supportive/caring are they (beyond words to action ...).

The lowest scoring related to *how* managers treated their employees and how they were treated in their workplace : 'integrity' compared to 'favouritism' / *selective* fairness / gender equality / ethnicity issues / selective treatment depending on age ...

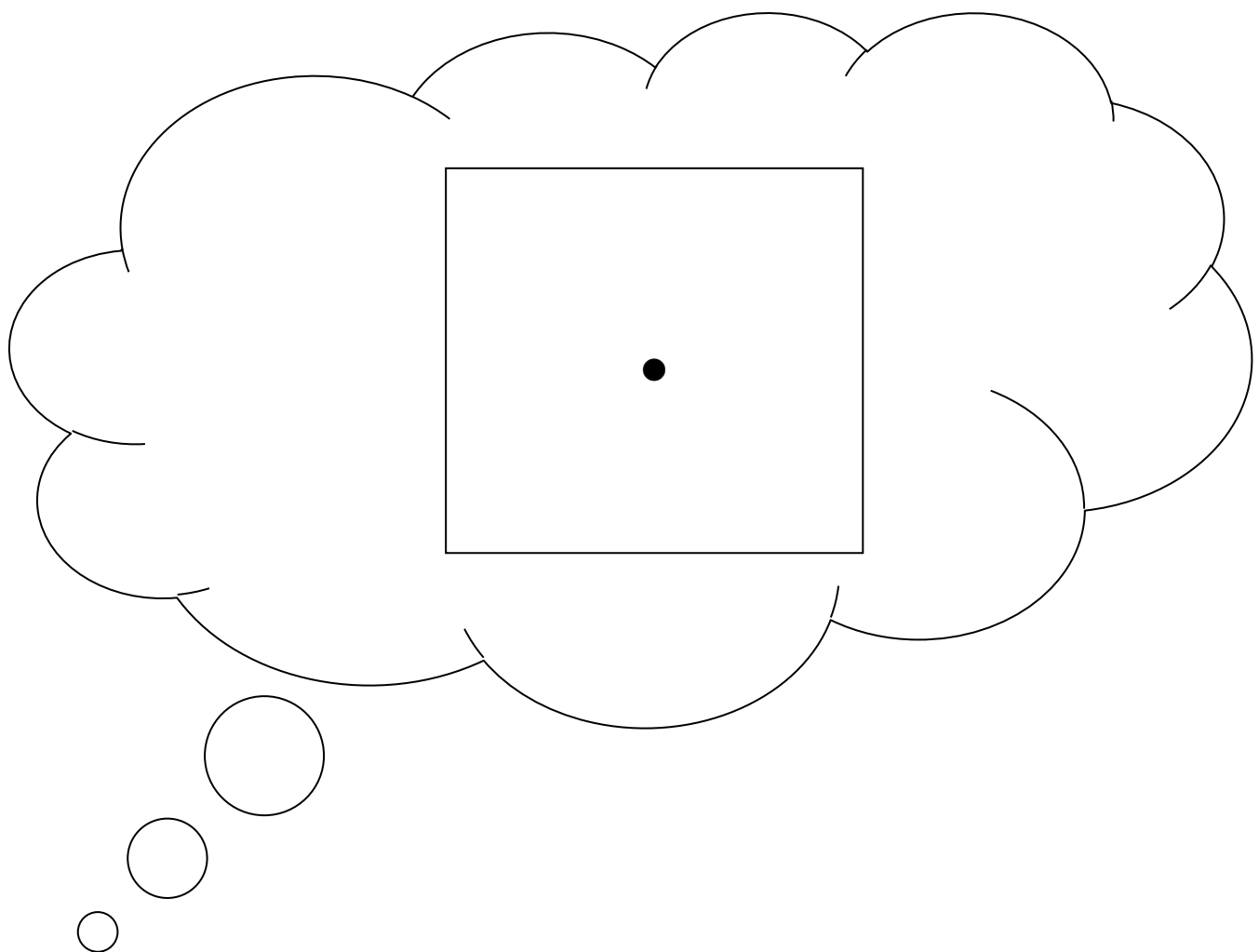
Dot and square : a metaphor for relativity in stress coping; the day-after-day-after-day ...

In her book *Middlemarch*, George Eliot has her lead character musing ...

“...will not a tiny speck, very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self ...”

(p443, in the Vintage Edition).

There is a visual exercise I've shared with many of my students over the years. I draw a large square (on the whiteboard) and a clearly visible dot in the middle. When I ask them what they can see most students say they see a dot. Even if I ask in different ways; (keep looking) they invariably say, “a dot ...” Well, most ... It takes a few minutes for the more 'lateral' thinking to see that there is also 'white space' ... there is 'white space' as well as 'the black dot' in the square.



This is in part a visual metaphor about 'relativity' – most of what they can *also* see (if they look) is a lot of 'white space'. It's as if the dot's strident visuality 'blocks' out what clearly *is there*; even as 'space'.

Taking my cue from 'George Eliot' (Mary Anne Evans)* – the quote at the beginning of these notes, I want to use this as a metaphor for the 'day-after-day-after-dayness of our life and work as teachers, as colleagues. I want to use the *visual cue* (dot and square) to represent *perspective, relativity* and *focus* in our life and work.

When it comes to the natural stresses and strains of life and work, it's easy – at times - to *over focus* only on those – *at the expense of what we do well and right*, and (probably) most of the time. To *over focus* on our failures (or others'); on the worst in self, in others (sometimes even those close to us), on 'all that's going wrong' ... is to only see the dot at the expense of the 'white space' as it were. This is particularly acute when we catch ourselves saying things like, "It will *never* get better ...", "It *shouldn't* be like this(!)" (but of course it is, *at times*), "No-one cares!" (no-one?). "It will *never* get better ...", (never?) "I just *can't* go on ...". (It's difficult to go on, *sometimes very difficult* but there are others – colleagues, friends, who can and will help ...).

To merely deny the 'dot-ness' of it all (the clearly present stress in whatever form) is foolish, unhealthy. The stress (and its reasons for why we feel the way we do) *is there*; we feel, we see its impact; how can we not? At times such stress seems to overtake us – even in the midst of known, available, support from loved ones, friends, colleagues; '*the white space*' – if you like.

However in terms of stressful focus, when we *only focus* on the 'dot-ness' of it all, then that's all *we see*; we can't see the 'white space', yet it is still there, but the 'dot(ness)' and we (in our perception and focus and attention) take too much of our attention and focus. That kind of *focus* on the 'dot(ness)' – at the expense of the 'white space' – limits *focus*, coping and limits perspective on possibilities for problem-solving support. At times it can psychologically stifle and immobilise us.

The 'white space' (as it were) also *represents* that support we do have in our lives : our loved ones, friends and our colleagues who – also – live with the vagaries of day-to-day stress in our work with children and parents (and each other). They, too, know something of our shared, and normative, struggle (and needs); colleague support is there.

When I've discussed this metaphor with colleagues some say, "... but 'the dot' is too big."
"Well then, we'll have to make the white space(ness) bigger ..." (the available support).
It is what the white space *represents* (in this metaphor) that gives some balance, gives some perspective, *some wider focus and relativity to the natural presence of stress in our lives*. That moral, professional, organisational, and structural support that can enable us in our day-to-day teaching and even beyond.

One of my favourite quotes of George Eliot's (also from the novel *Middlemarch*) is :-

"What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult for each other."

We can – at least – do that; that's our 'white space'.

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