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# NURTURE HIDDEN TALENTS

**TRANSFORM  
SCHOOL CULTURE  
INTO ONE  
THAT VALUES  
TEACHER EXPERTISE**

By Diane P. Zimmerman

**O**ne sunny spring day, I held a heavy three-ring binder full of student writing. The evidence of a career as an exemplary teacher of writing was in front of me. This teacher had saved copies, and sometimes originals, of kid-perfect writing. The binder was an amazing compendium of models of writing collected over a 34-year teaching career — like an encyclopedia yearbook.

The number of original copies surprised me. It seemed that students knew about this collection and found honor in donating original work. I opened the binder and started to read, “How to Make Blueberry Muffins Grandma Sam’s Way.” Not only did I learn how to make muffins, I fell in love with Grandma Sam, who knew just how lumpy to make the muffin batter.

As I flipped through the binder reading one kid-friendly essay after another, I asked, “Why haven’t we ever seen this?” The teacher shrugged and said, “Oh, I don’t know. It never seemed like the right time to share it.” Together we had been working on his retirement tribute. I thought, “At least we can celebrate this collection as he goes out the door.”

#### UNDERRATED AND IGNORED

The backstory tells more than I’d want to admit about the school culture and how teacher expertise often stays

hidden and underused. This teacher was known for producing excellent 6th-grade writing. Teachers often assigned to this class students who were ready to take off as writers. Sad to say, no one ever figured out his magic — not I, as the principal, nor his colleagues at this intermediate school.

Because he kept to himself and often chose not to join in schoolwide social events, it was easy to ignore him. Each fall, he had this irritating habit of writing what he called “lesson plans” for an entire year. His peers wondered, “How does he do this?” We would now call what he was writing a pacing guide, which ensured he did not miss even one writing assignment. His expertise as an exemplary teacher of writing was never valued in this school, and that is a shame.

While our media-rich culture places a high value on talent, the irony is that talent is underrated in most schools, and educators often remain silent about their hidden talents. Many school cultures are not conducive to dialogue that supports displays of teacher talent. One teacher summed it up this way: “While I think I have something to say, no one listens, and so, as a consequence, I have learned to remain silent.” Others report criticisms from peers for being know-it-alls.

Veteran high school principal and colleague Bill Sommers says his purpose as a leader is to get the “talent to come out from behind closed doors.” He says, “Often when I go into a school, teachers will beg me not to showcase their work because of the response they anticipate

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Educators can use these reflection questions to create opportunities to identify talents and then to foster and nurture them.

### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- One large (4 inch by 24 inch) sentence strip for every participant and a few extras for mistakes.
- A large wall to organize the sentence strips.

### Reflection 1

#### Mine existing group talent

1. Each person takes about five minutes to reflect on his or her teaching career and to answer these questions:
  - What part of your teaching gives you the most energy?
  - When are you most proud of your students' accomplishments?
  - What talents contributed to this success, and how would you describe them to a colleague?
2. Working with a partner, describe how you define your talents and the one for which you are most proud. Partner listens and captures your most-proud-of talent on a sentence strip large enough for others to read. Change roles and repeat. (To keep balanced participation, all participants can choose only one talent while recognizing that there are many.)
3. Each participant takes a moment to stand and announce his or her talent and then post it on the wall at the front of the room. Ask participants to post similar talents in close proximity to other talents already posted.
4. The group looks at the wall and reflects collectively:
  - What are we learning about our talent pool?
  - What else are we learning? (Continue this question until group comes to a stop.)
5. Ask the group to summarize what participants learned. Designate a scribe to capture these thoughts.
6. Type up the talent pool list and the summary and distribute.

### Reflection 2

#### Deepen understanding about talents in a school

1. Looking at the talent wall, participants ask colleagues to expand on their thinking: "Tell me more about how you ... ." Continue as long as time allows and the group is engaged.
2. Working in teams of three, develop questions that can help participants better understand another teacher's personal stance for excellence.
3. Each team selects a question to ask the whole group. The expert answers first, and then others are asked to contribute, allowing others with a similar talent to be recognized. Continue as long as time allows and the group remains engaged.

### Reflection 3:

#### Honor talents

(Note: In schools with strong taboos about "showing off" or being "singled out," this may need to be the first reflection.)

1. As an entire staff, discuss the following questions:
  - How do we celebrate and learn from excellence? Note: Only tangible evidence is acceptable, such as: "Last year, a board meeting showcased student writing from one of our teachers."
  - What are the barriers that keep us from celebrating excellence? Probe deeply: List the behaviors and keep asking for more. Often, the presenting problem is not the real problem, so be slow to come to conclusions.
  - Distribute copies of this article to all participants and discuss: How can we fulfill the promise of this article? How will we continue to celebrate and learn from our talent pool? How will we make our talent pool known to others? What are our next steps?

from colleagues.”

He attributes what he calls the “silence of talent” to school cultural norms, which are observable. Pay attention to what teachers and administrators talk about, and you know how talent is valued in that school.

### NURTURE TALENT

Striving for excellence by developing and capitalizing on talent ought to be an inherent goal for all schools. We need to pay attention to our most valuable asset: the cognitive capital of teachers (Costa, Garmston, & Zimmerman, 2014).

The quality of school leadership is one of the most powerful contributors to the development of teacher quality. Too often, educators give lip service with visions, missions, and serial reform initiatives but do not stop to think about what it means to foster, nurture, grow, and optimize talent.

Costa, Garmston, and Zimmerman (2014) asked colleagues, “How do you optimize teacher talent in your school?” Most gave lengthy but vague explanations of excellence. In the end, their answers could be summed up in three words: “We do not.”

Despite the emphasis on effective adult learning practices and professional learning communities, the thoughtful work in schools is too often driven by external demands such as standards, textbooks, technology, assessments, or other reform initiatives. There is little time devoted to finding out about and

optimizing talent that already exists in a school.

Teachers will quietly admit to “going underground” in their bid to preserve the wisdom gleaned from a career in teaching. One teacher said, “When the external review team came to see my math lesson — I had gotten the highest

3rd-grade scores in the district — I knew they’d be looking for the textbook. Instead of trying to explain why the way I taught fractions was better than the book, I simply adapted my lesson that day to include the textbook.”

**We owe it to our schools to optimize the talent of our teachers.**

### DEVELOP EXPERTISE

Schools need to expect teachers to be expert and work to develop this expertise both pedagogically — how we work with students — and for the content and standards of instruction.

Each teacher should be expected to become an expert in multiple areas, including but not limited to curriculum content and strategy, pedagogy, technology, behavior management, relationship management, and brain development. These specializations ought to and need to come from the teacher’s interests, passions, and unanswered questions about learning.

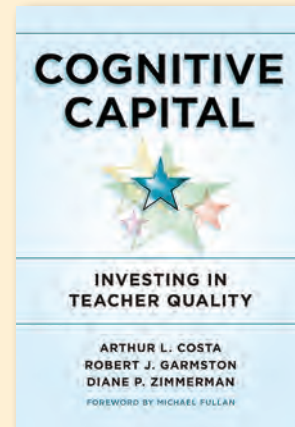
Areas of expertise and talent should be identified, fostered, nurtured, and made public. Teachers should find themselves

### COGNITIVE CAPITAL:

Investing in Teacher Quality

By **Arthur L. Costa,**  
**Robert J. Garmston,**  
**and Diane P. Zimmerman**

Teachers College Press,  
2014



**B**uilding on the authors’ work in cognitive coaching, this book provides teachers, schools, and policy leaders with the rationale

and new direction for enhancing the development of the intellectual capacity of educators, their performance, and their ultimate effects on student learning. The authors focus on assisting teachers in developing awareness in their own ability to make effective judgments based on all their capabilities and experiences.

regularly consulting with peers in areas of expertise. This is observable and measurable and rarely happens in schools.

Imagine as a new teacher being given a directory of staff that tells not only the obvious — those with content specialties — but also the less obvious — those who have specializations in the nuances of teaching and learning. Envision a school where teachers collect evidence of student learning, share it, and use it to gain collective wisdom.

Dream of schools that see teaching and learning as a continuous evolution of knowledge that capitalizes on learned wisdom. And, finally, believe in the miracle of schools that have the capacity to pass on teacher wisdom to the next generation of teachers. We owe it to our students to optimize the talent of our teachers.

The almost-happy ending to my story is: At this teacher’s retirement, the binder was celebrated publicly and passed on to his daughter, a first-year teacher. His legacy lives, just 34 years too late and in a different school.

### REFERENCE

**Costa, A., Garmston, R., & Zimmerman, D. (2014).** *Cognitive capital: Investing in teacher quality.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

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