

[excerpt from]

“The Coolest School in America”

How Small Learning Communities Are Changing Everything

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Chapter 9

MNCS Graduates: Telling Lived Stories

Vivian Johnson, Peg Lonquist, and Walter Enloe

Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) graduates tell stories offering both wild support and insightful critiques of their school. It is clear that MNCS graduates loved the opportunity to pursue their own interests, be challenged, and not feel that they were wasting their time. Selected quotes from a 2002 survey of graduates (who have been given different pseudonyms) document the difference between the MNCS experience and that of traditional schools:

When I was in [traditional] school and when I was home schooled it was more of a book learning. I think the thing I really learned from MNCS was that that is not the *only* way you can learn, there's tons of different ways. That's what I really liked (Jamie).

Minnesota New Country School changed my life. I learned so much more about life and about myself than I would have at a traditional high school . . . they encouraged me from eighth grade to study and research professions that interested me. So that's what I spent most of my time doing. It allowed me to completely realize my passion (John).

I liked that advisers are not there to spoon feed you. Their role is more of supporting you in taking initiative, how to do research. Most kids are spoon fed by teachers so they don't really grow intellectually (Marisa).

You are free to choose. And the freedom that you could say that you didn't like something and they were pretty much open to change (Jamie).

My adviser used to take me with him to state capitol meetings with politicians and committees. I just learned by being there. I know I can do almost anything (Marisa).

As a result of attending MNCS, I'm involved in local politics, I'm active as a citizen, I vote, and I get involved in campaigns. And I get other people involved. Someday I will run for office (Cecilia).

On the other hand, being enthusiastic about the MNCS experience did not inhibit supportive graduates such as Meredith and Sarah, from offering insightful critiques and suggestions for school improvement:

MNCS has a good idea and good plans for learning, but has problems with staff understanding and following through with these goals. I had the best adviser I could ever ask for, but unfortunately other students weren't so lucky. . . MNCS needs to really evaluate their staff and ways of implementing the learning goals they had set up eight years ago (Meredith).

If you're not [self-motivated] you are expected to be that way to leave there with a diploma. It is not like a regular school that you go there and classes are waiting for you all day. You must be able to think of your own work and complete it (Sarah).

THE STUDY BEGINS

Nine years after opening MNCS, advisers knew in their hearts that powerful, authentic learning had occurred repeatedly as a result of the schools project-based approach to learning. Their intuition was supported by surveys (Thomas et al. 2001) summarizing that MNCS students compared favorably with their peers on the Minnesota Basic Standards Tests (math, reading, and writing) and outscored them on language measures. In addition, Tom Vander Ark of the Gates Foundation wrote the following to the MNCS advisers: "We have scoured the country to find people like you, people who have taken this belief and successfully created a teaching and learning environment that

fosters high achievement by all. . . . The Minnesota New Country School is the coolest school in America."

However, these MNCS advisers were interested in systematically documenting the impact of the MNCS experience and enlisted our help in developing a research protocol.

As teachers in the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University, we saw our role as devising a process where the MNCS advisers could identify the primary areas needing exploration with their graduates and conducting the survey and semistructured interviews. (Survey protocol can be obtained by e-mailing the authors at vjohnson@hamline.edu.) During a series of meetings, MNCS advisers narrowed their questions to the following five areas:

- Project-based skills
- Individual responsibility
- Resilience/persistence skills
- Reflection skills
- Relationship skills

MNCS graduates' perceptions of their experiences in these five areas, as well as some additional benefits and recommendations that they highlighted, are reflected in this study. To provide context for their stories, we begin with a description of the learning environment in this unique school.

A DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT WHERE LEARNING IS RELEVANT

The initial observation when entering MNCS is a large open area filled with large tables, surrounded on three sides by small computer workstations and on the fourth side a small stage. Adjoining rooms include a media center, a craft room, a science lab area, a small stage, and an atrium. Teens and adults are found in pairs or alone engaged in myriad activities. One learner is working alone on a computer finishing a project on robotics. Three or four others are discussing what they

learned about carding wool at a local Angora goat farm. Several more are socializing or playing chess. Others are consulting with their adviser. Leaving the large open area and going into an adjacent room, the visitor observes another learner explaining his two-year study of the Minnesota River's pH levels to a younger student. While listening to the conversation, it becomes clear that the younger student is going to continue the study after the older one graduates. Other students are off campus taking advanced placement courses, consulting with experts in their field of study, or building a boat.

For the prospective student, perhaps the biggest surprise is the role of the MNCS teachers. The teachers (called "advisers" to more accurately reflect their role) guide students in locating resources and fine-tuning the goals of their projects. The occasional foray into the traditional teacher role might include teaching photography resulting in student photo essays, leading an environmental education bike trip, conducting an archaeological dig, directing a play, or assisting with fund-raising and supervising a study trip on geology and culture to Hawaii. All of this is possible because MNCS strives for "a different environment so that learning is relevant and interesting" (Marisa). As the description unfolds, it is clear that this "different environment" at MNCS is based on project-based learning.

MNCS founders chose project-based learning because they believe it is more aligned with the world students will encounter after graduation. Project-based learning requires that students choose, plan, research, and complete standards-based projects, many of which result in real-life products. Working on the projects requires creativity, problem-solving, teamwork, time management, communication, and assessment. With multiple opportunities to engage in project-based learning, students strengthen skills that advisers believe are essential for success. Graduates agree. As one former student wrote, "At MNCS, I was allowed and encouraged to use my own creativity in my work and my personal intellect was respected. In this way, MNCS prepared me well for college." While project-based learning fosters learner independence, it does not allow

free reign, as some people perceive.

At MNCS, students have a great deal of latitude to follow their own interests. However, the process of following one's specific interest must also support the development of competencies described in the Minnesota Graduation Standards. Furthermore, all projects must be presented before three adults (two advisers and another adult) for approval. The learner must be able to articulate a project's rationale and how its pursuit will make them a better person in five years.

Once approved, the advisers and parents provide encouragement, but the students themselves are responsible for reporting their use of time and for initiating, completing, and presenting their final projects. Sarah sums up project-based learning at MNCS: "It is not like a regular school that you go there and classes are waiting for you all day. You must be able to think of your own work and complete it." Throughout the study, Sarah and other graduates provided us with a rich sense of the impact the MNCS experience had on the developing of project-based skills, individual responsibility, resilience/persistence, reflection, and relationship skills, the five areas of most interest to MNCS advisers.

PROJECT-BASED SKILLS

No classrooms, no bells, no teachers standing in front of a class, yet many of MNCS graduates participating in this study describe deep learning from their remarkable projects. As Cecelia explains, she enjoyed balancing several projects at once. "[I am] most proud of the yearbook and my senior project which studied twenty-one schools and the effects of barometric pressure on student behavior. . . I started college [PSEO] after six months at MNCS. . . I had the top state project in the science fair and was first alternate to the International Science Fair." As a future scientist, Beth explained that project-based learning coupled with a supportive adviser allowed her to explore her passions. "My absolute favorite project was my senior project. I wish I were still

in high school to continue doing it. . . My senior project was on hypoxia in the Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico and I was tracing that all the way back to Sibley County because I wanted to relate this huge environmental problem to the people in the little-bitty county on the Mississippi River."

A number of projects each year must be completed individually and others with a team so that students develop both skills. One group of MNCS students created a computerized embroidery design business and "learned everything from beginning to end to start a business" (Cecelia). As she describes the process, the number of higher-order thinking skills required to complete a complex project become clear. In this case, the learners first developed the business concept. Then they wrote a business plan and revised it several times. The design business also required students to investigate machines and equipment needed, apply for a business license and business loans, attend IRS training seminars on taxes and accounting, and then market their product. Finally, these students developed invoices, kept sales and purchase journals, and filed tax returns. The profits either returned to the business or were given as postsecondary scholarships to the students involved. Several students have continued the business after the founders graduated. One member of this team started her own business while at MNCS and now operates it full time. "I had to learn how to create a business legally. So I had to correspond and do all the work with Minnesota's Secretary of State Office" (Marissa). Other graduates also describe noteworthy projects of their own or their peers.

For example, Kent researched and built a straw bale structure. Jennifer conducted an experiential analysis of teen behavior toward impoverished peers. Art researched tigers as an endangered species. Lynette created a historical time line of events that had a profound impact on the world. Susan wrote a paper on the history of quilting in the United States. A group project led to students monitoring the deformed frogs discovered in a pond located near the school.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

The MNCS grads in this study described long-term benefits as a result of having responsibility for their own learning. During an interview, Jamie describes how project-based learning contributed to her evolving understanding of a deadline, maturing as a learner, and the impact of the two on her college experience. According to Jamie:

When I got to MNCS I didn't have any clue [about deadlines], so then someone had to kind of teach me. Like okay, when about do you want to get this done? . . . then I would set up my own. . . . The advantages in college are that if they tell you to do a paper it doesn't take me long to figure out what I am going to do. I know the process of setting up what to do. Many people have too big of [*sic*] an idea and will never be able to fit it all into a paper. Just research I'm good at. I am also good at setting up my deadlines.

Another student expressed the benefits this way: "I've found the most important skills I've carried with me are not facts and dates, but the ability to draw connections, problem solve, hold myself accountable, and communicate effectively." Marisa concurs. "I think all the independence, and hanging it all on yourself makes, I just like the person I became from it all." Anthony noticed that the other students in his current college courses struggle with learning on their own without teacher direction. In contrast, MNCS "taught independence in learning. What I wanted to learn I could go out and learn, I don't need to find a teacher to go and teach me. I have the independence to know what I want to learn. . . and I took the initiative." On the other hand, several graduates in our study felt that new students should be given more guidance regarding deadlines: "The only drawback to my education at MNCS was the lack of set deadlines for projects. I think that the students need to be pushed harder to accomplish their goals. The first year of college was difficult for me in sticking to and managing deadlines set by professors, as I was not used to taking deadlines very seriously." "MNCS was a great school to teach a person responsibility;

however, if a person is not motivated by learning, there is a bit of room for procrastination." Most of the study participants told us that completing complex projects gave them more opportunity to develop these skills than in a traditional school. However, additional scaffolding by advisers would, allow more MNCS learners to obtain the benefits described in this section.

Anthony noticed that his sense of responsibility toward school and his peers was allowed to be expressed in a way that may not have occurred in a traditional school. On occasions when he felt that his friends were not getting the credits they deserved for their projects, he sought out their advisers and argued in their defense. "I felt very strongly about trying to help my friends to make the school a little bit better place for them. . . by the time I left there I was pretty good at getting stuff negotiated." An understanding of responsibility for their own learning could also be seen in the graduate's description of the role of the adviser. The advisers' responsibility is "supporting you in taking initiative, how to do research . . . [advisers] are not there to spoon feed you" (Marisa).

RESILIENCE/PERSISTENCE SKILLS

Our data indicated that these MNCS graduates were able to research independently and were persistent about finding other solutions when the first approach did not succeed. For example, when a group of students was starting a business, the loan application was denied. Marisa explains that you have to "try again when small business associations or banks refuse you. It's about self-initiative and not giving up."

All the graduates we interviewed indicated that they were already persistent when they came to MNCS but on reflection discovered that they had been granted more opportunity to practice this skill than they would have had at a traditional school. Jamie explained that the opportunity to use this skill is what had attracted her to the school. "To succeed in a place like this, you need to be persistent, you need to be

working all the time . . . that's probably the thing about [traditional] school I didn't like was that it was just so boring, you just had to do what the teacher said.

In fact, graduates concurred that students who were not already persistent or able to develop the quality of persistence would not be able to succeed in a project-based learning environment. "If you're not [self-motivated and persistent] you are expected to be that way to leave there with a diploma" (Sarah). However, there is room to develop persistence. Anthony describes struggling with completing projects "basically the whole time I was there. . . I never really wanted to just buck up and finish [a project], I always wanted to start something else before I finished something else" and yet several complex projects were completed by this student.

REFLECTION SKILLS

Students at MNCS were required to reflect on what they learned as part of their assessment as they completed each project. Written and/or verbal reflections were delivered to three adults as well as occasionally to the entire school, parents/guardians, and the community on quarterly "Presentation Nights." Our interviewees often did not expand much on reflection, and we were not clear whether that was because of the phrasing of the question or because it seemed so second nature to them to reflect continually.

In fact, a common response when we asked students about reflection was not about their work but their reflection on the pain of their school's stigma as being a place for slackers. Dealing with this stigma, they felt, caused them to be reflective regarding the need to believe in oneself and the need to turn difficulties into positive learning experiences. One graduate sums up the lesson: "You have to have a thick skin in business and I learned that at school because the town didn't support the school" (Cecelia). Another graduate recalls that the name-calling was hurtful but that "now when my professors ask where I went to school, they are absolutely enthralled with it. They just think

that it is so cool" (Marisa).

A unique perspective on reflection at MNCS was expressed by Anthony. "I'm sure it [reflection] helped, but I got really good at playing the system . . . if you can go in there, sit down and answer all their questions, and if you understand it inside and out, you get more credit. I 'got a lot better at it!" From our perspective, Anthony "got better at" reflection.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

MNCS advisers were also interested in the graduates' reflections concerning their ability to deepen relationships with adults and peers. Without a doubt, the first student-adult relationship the students considered, with the advisers, evoked strong feelings—primarily of gratitude and affinity. The view Jamie expressed was frequently stated during our interviews:

Relationships [with adults at MNCS] are totally different. You know you had to do what they say, but there is something else there, they really care about you and you can tell that. And they really want you to succeed, they really want you to learn . . . and they become more of a friend, friend-adviser [At the traditional school] I never ever got any feelings like they wanted to help you learn.

Marisa observed that the organizational structure at MNCS, including having the same adviser every year, facilitated the development of deeper relationships with advisers. "We had coffee every morning, students and advisers, talking, connecting. . . . My adviser expected me to lead the first day and I did. That was [another adviser's] attitude too." But just as some of the participants in this study described the positive impact of their relationship with their advisers, others were neutral or negative.

Graduates were distressed about their peers who had advisers who seemed controlling or laissez-faire and thus not as helpful. "One adviser type wants to direct you and directly teach you and

hold you in tight control. Others let you do whatever even messing around for months, even years until you decide to get going. The ideal is in the middle. She knows when to kick butt and when to back off. She knows when to push gently knowing the kid will do it eventually" (Cecilia).

After describing close relationships with advisers, graduates cited peer relations as an important aspect of the MNCS experience. Cecelia sums up the general consensus: "I love the camaraderie of the people. . . . I'm still in contact with 90 percent of the people back then, even the ones that dropped out." Beyond the typical social aspect of friendships, we heard about the importance of peers helping each other during the learning process. Jamie describes it this way: "We were friends but we helped each other with our learning too . . . we can have group projects, so that's one way we can help each other learn. Or like at math, towards the end we' would all sit at a table, so we can help the younger ones."

Questions regarding the effect on relationships with parents resulted in quite varied responses. Some graduates reported no effect because they already had a close relationship with their parents. A few noted that they probably talked to their parents more about school than they would have had they attended a traditional school and felt proud when their parents attended presentation night. One graduate felt attending MNCS resulted in a strained relationship with her parents because she was so involved in her projects. "My parents did not like the fact that I wanted to go to school all summer long and that I didn't want to be at home, and when I was at home I was reading or working on stuff all the time. . . . My dad was really worried whether I would fit into college or not. . . . My dad was worried that I wasn't taking extracurricular activities like band and stuff like that because it looks good on college applications" (Marisa). Now that she is in college and everything is going well, Marisa's relationship with her parents has improved.

Graduates also reported that their relationship skills were positively impacted by the requirement to work with community experts. "My community expert was wonderful. She helped me get on that river trip.

I could call on her. She would call and invite me to things . . . and this was her daily work, it is so thrilling" (Beth). Marisa describes how her experiences with the community experts enhanced her ability to successfully enter the public service area: "I am going to get into politics in the future . . . you know, connections are everything." Working with adults became a norm for MNCS students to a degree that is rare in a traditional school setting. As a result, we noticed that the MNCS grads seemed to lack the inhibition that many teens have when communicating with adults, both in their interactions with us and in their descriptions of past and current interactions.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS NOTED BY THE GRADUATES

The MNCS students interviewed were perceptive as they reflected on their experiences at the school. All of them responded positively to having attended MNCS and could articulate a depth of learning rarely seen in traditional public schools. During the surveys and interviews, while the MNCS graduates were expressing their ideas about the five areas the advisers had asked us to focus on (project learning, individual responsibility, resilience/ persistence, reflection, and relationship skills), the students identified additional benefits and offered insightful suggestions for improving the environment for future students. The most often identified additional benefits included the following (supporting quotes found earlier in the chapter):

- The freedom to choose their own topics of study (within the Minnesota Graduation Standards framework) and thus take increased interest in their schoolwork
- Encouragement to pursue areas of interest that directed them toward discovery or discard of a career path
- The experience of working in a community of teens and adults that contributed to reciprocal learning

RESEARCHER IDENTIFIED BENEFITS

Although the graduates were articulate about their learning outcomes, we noted their inability to identify the acquisition of some skills that were readily apparent to the researchers. The most striking was their leadership skills. MNCS holds monthly all-school meetings, and unlike traditional schools, students take part in many decisions that affect the entire school. Individually, students practice leadership by being required to articulate and justify their project ideas. In addition, several students explained how they prepared for and brought unsolicited school improvement ideas to the advisers. One student explained how he advocated for some of his peers when project ideas were not approved because of an adviser's more traditional perspectives on learning. In our experience, this type of student advocacy does not occur in a traditional school. In fact, a student advocating for a peer in this manner may be in trouble with a teacher or principal in a traditional school.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE GRADUATES

Graduates offered five main recommendations for improving their school; the first three relate to the adviser's role and the others to further skill development. The graduates recommended that MNCS do the following:

1. Develop a selection process for advisers and for ongoing professional development so that all advisers follow through with the original philosophy: Graduates described adviser philosophies that ran the spectrum from a completely hands-off approach to one whose approach was much like a traditional teacher's role. The graduates believe that it would increase the success rate of MNCS learners if the advisers define their role and actions more clearly and agree to a common approach that lands somewhere in the middle of these two extremes:

MNCS has a good idea and good plans for learning, but has problems with staff understanding and following through with these goals. I had

the best adviser I could ever ask for, but unfortunately other students weren't so lucky. . . MNCS needs to really evaluate their staff and ways of implementing the learning goals they had set up. (Meredith)

2. Increase training of advisers to assist new students with project completion skills: Graduates in this study concurred that for independent and focused students, this school approaches perfection. They were able to work at their own pace, explore new interests, and discover their strengths. However, for students who are less self-motivated, they observed that only a few of them truly succeeded in finding their passion and flourishing at MNCS. In their opinion, some students might have succeeded had they had more training on project completion skills.

3. Require advisers to participate in more community building, both as role models and for the benefits: Another interesting insight addressed community building. These graduates believed that being part of a "community of learners" was an integral part of the MNCS mission and was a reality they experienced and appreciated among their peers. However, former students observed that the staff no longer modeled a similar community of learners, to everyone's detriment. "Adults need to take time for themselves and to be a professional community—just like they expect of the students" (Marisa).

4. Counsel students to transfer to another school if project-based learning does not work with their learning style: Graduates concluded that advisers needed to be more proactive with learners who were not experiencing success. They felt it, did not help the school's reputation or atmosphere to have students who were not able to work on projects independently and showed no signs of learning that skill. "My brother went [to MNCS] . . . for two years but he failed miserably and got at least a year behind. He was not reaching his potential. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He didn't know how to apply himself. He left MNCS and went to [a local high school] and excelled-top of his class. He wasn't self-motivated. He needed help and direction" (Cecilia).

5. Offer more guidance on writing skills during their first few research projects and provide instruction on note- and test-taking skills

right before graduation: In regard to curriculum, the college students identified three academic skill areas where they would have liked additional preparation: writing, note taking, and test taking. While all the graduates completed several research papers, wrote poetry, and composed essays at MNCS, they expressed feeling "a bit shaky" regarding their writing skills. "To this day, I still struggle with writing. I never studied it at school" (Bill). Graduates also felt they needed instruction in note and test taking to ensure their success at the postsecondary institutions they were attending where lecture are still the predominant teaching method. "Just research I'm good at. I am also good at setting up my deadlines, but I don't know how to study for tests" (Jamie). Marissa explains that she "wasn't prepared for note-taking and tests and large classes. I couldn't keep up."

However, while the graduates did offer these concrete suggestions, they were worried that the need for improvement in these areas might be used as a rationale for making fundamental changes to MNCS' structure. They clearly felt it was more important for students to choose and develop their own projects. "For all its issues and problems, I wouldn't change it, it influenced me positively" (Bill).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study presented us with more questions than answers. First, how would learners in a traditional school environment compare to MNCS students on the pre survey assessment? We suspect that students who chose MNCS would rate themselves higher on the five skill areas (project-based skills, individual responsibility, resilience/persistence, reflection, and relationship skills) addressed in this survey than would a comparable sample of learners from a traditional school environment. This could have significance for MNCS if it is found that indeed MNCS does attract a unique portion of the overall student population. Conducting a comparative study of MNCS students and students in a traditional educational environment is also warranted. Several other subquestions resulted.

Another question arose as we were contacting students for interviews and we inadvertently talked with their parents. Parents' insights provided a different lens and would be a rich element in a future study. Also, we were intrigued by the students' reporting that their peers in the traditional school and some adults made disparaging and even hostile remarks about MNCS. Since school reform is more likely to thrive with community support, it would be interesting to explore this further. Finally, the graduates' perception that advisers perceived their roles quite differently led us to wonder how a nontraditional school might successfully orient and support teachers who experienced only more traditional school models.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION

This study of the graduates of MNCS, a 7-12 charter school that has no formal classes but rather supports student-directed projects, sought to understand the school's effects on their project-based skills, individual responsibility, resilience/persistence skills, reflection skills, and relationship skills. Through survey and interviews, we found the MNCS graduates were articulate in identifying their strengths in each of these areas, some of which they felt they already possessed before attending MNCS and others they agreed they learned or had developed further. Graduates and researchers identified additional areas of growth due to the unique structure of this school. Recommendations for improving the school also emerged from this study.

The graduate's reaction to MNCS ranged from wildly supportive to disappointment, yet all expressed positive feelings having attended this unique school. The MNCS graduates concur that the project-based approach, allowing for choice of projects and constructing their own knowledge, is a more effective model for learning than the model found in traditional schools:

All the annoying stuff is gone—bells seats, mind on and mind off every forty-five minutes. And even then, your mind is mindless

most of the time. Nine teachers a day, lockers, all of it gone. . . [and in its place is] a different environment so that learning is relevant and interesting (Marisa).

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