

Collaboration During School

Introduction

Throughout the course we have discussed the many benefits of collaborative work on student achievement, instructional improvement, and job satisfaction. In this module, we will examine more specifically the different manifestations of collaborative work in an educational organization.

How Much and How Often

Regardless of the type or style of collaborative work chosen, one major consideration is the configuration and allocation of resources. The Alcatel-Lucent Foundation studied the effectiveness of different formats or structures of collaborative sessions (Smith, Wilson, & Corbett, 2009). They included:

1. Frequent short sessions – Collaborative work that took place in frequent, but short sessions, such as before- or after-school meetings, was found to be less effective than other configurations. While the frequent nature of the meetings was beneficial, the short time frame prevented deep discussions, encouraging more superficial treatment of important issues. Intrusions and distractions were more numerous during the blocks of time immediately before or following the school day. Participants in after-school meetings also reported simply being too tired after a long day of instruction to work through the difficult collaborative tasks in a sustained fashion (Smith et al, 2009). Regardless of the time scheduled, short sessions were beneficial in establishing camaraderie between members of the group, but were ineffective in making substantial professional growth.
2. 2. Less frequent, longer sessions – Collaboration that encompassed longer periods of time tended to be more effective, but if the time between the extended sessions is too long, the infrequency hinders the continuity of discussion (Hord, 2009). Similar to the concerns about students losing ground over summer vacation, long breaks between collaborative sessions resulted in more time spent reviewing, recapping, and backtracking before new ground was covered.
3. 3. Extended blocks of time during the school day – Not surprisingly, the most effective and productive configuration for collaborative work was extended blocks of time scheduled within the school day (Smith et al, 2009). In this "best of both worlds" scenario, teachers were able to meet frequently (if not daily) during time that was dedicated solely to collaborative activities, not time that was donated (such as after school), or time that was typically allocated to other tasks. Teachers do not like to be away from their classrooms or to short-change their other responsibilities, so scheduled time that is designated for collaboration (and nothing else) is understandably a more effective use of time and financial resources.

Approaches to Collaboration

Now that we have determined the need for frequent extended times for collaborative work, we must examine some of the possible ways to carve out this time for professional development. Perhaps the first hurdle is to change the mindset of those in our profession. Historically it has always been believed that the most productive use of a teacher's time is in the classroom with their students. Obviously this is true. The sticking point comes, however, in the notion of a teacher in front of a class of students as being the only productive use of their time. Everything we have learned about collaboration thus far would indicate that an equally productive use of a teacher's time is being engaged in effective and successful collaboration (Raywid, 1993).

Creating and sustaining time for collaborative work can be done in three ways:

1. Freeing up existing time – This approach works within the constraints of the existing schedule, calendar, negotiated agreement, staffing levels, etc. to carve out time for collaboration (Raywid, 1993).
2. Restructuring or rescheduling – In this approach, the status quo is altered to create different conditions that allow for collaborative configurations (Raywid, 1993).
3. Purchasing collaborative time – This approach requires the allocation of financial resources in purchasing additional time for collaboration, or by purchasing a means (such as substitutes or additional teachers) to dedicate time for collaboration (Raywid, 1993).

In reality, schools often opt to combine the approaches described above to create a configuration that allows for effective collaborative work through the dedication of time, personnel, and financial resources.

Collaborative Frameworks

The relative effectiveness of frequent, extended collaborative sessions, and the need to somehow reallocate resources to

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to note that the unique needs and resources of each team, building, and district must be considered in the design of a professional learning community. Below are some more common configurations that can be adapted to the needs of the particular organization. As you review them, consider the pros and cons of each approach for your particular teaching situation.

- Extra days in the school year - The addition of extra days to the school calendar that are designated as collaborative work days provides extended time but not frequency (Raywid, 1993). Extra days in the calendar can also be distributed through the school year in hourly or half-day increments to provide greater consistency and frequency. This requires both the allocation of financial resources to "purchase" additional teacher time, and the possible restructuring of the existing school schedule or calendar.
- Additional teachers - Designating additional teachers for a set number of students frees up teachers at a common time. For example, having six teachers for four elementary classrooms allows for a set number of teachers to be available for collaboration at designated times throughout the day. Obviously, this is another allocation of financial and personnel resources in assigning these additional teachers.
- Common planning time - Common planning time for teachers on a team or house allows for both sustained and frequent collaborative work. Typically this time is scheduled during specials or other time when students are assigned elsewhere. This requires modifications in both the schedule itself and in the number and/or type of teachers on staff.
- Increase class size - Some districts decide to increase class size and designate the funds saved from reduced teachers to hire a cadre of substitute teachers who provide coverage on a regular basis, allowing teachers time to work collaboratively. Depending on the size of the district, an increase of one or two students in each class may generate enough of a cost savings for this approach to be implemented (Raywid, 1993).
- Year round school - When a year round calendar is implemented, collaborative work can be scheduled in the times between sessions. There are numerous financial and scheduling obstacles to be overcome, but professional development could occur periodically and for extended periods of time year round.
- Conversion of in-service and/or instructional days - Effective collaboration time can be created by converting designated professional development days from periodic, isolated full day events to a series of frequent blocks of one or two hours. Late start or early release days throughout the school year provide opportunities for sustained, frequent collaborative work. In some states, waivers can be granted to convert actual instructional days or hours from student contact time to professional learning community time (Raywid, 1993).
- Matching time - When frequent, but short collaborative sessions are one of a limited number of options, teachers can match the time allotted during the day with additional time after school (either donated or compensated).
- Contract negotiations - Collaborative time before or after the instructional day can be achieved through changes in the negotiated agreement that allow for extensions of the teacher workday. This may or may not require the allocation of a significant amount of financial resources depending on what is negotiated.
- Grants - Collaborative work may be funded through the awarding of grants that allow for compensation of substitutes, teacher stipends, hiring of additional staff, or other alterations in the status quo. Consideration should be given, however, to the sustainability of the initiatives once grant funding has ended.

Collaborative Alternatives

When collaboration and professional learning communities are discussed, they typically refer to a configuration of teachers such as a department or grade-level team, a house or pod of teachers within a larger school, or the staff of the school itself. There are a number of other alternatives, however, that also provide the benefits of collaborative work within a different type of structure.

Coaching

A mentor/mentee or peer coaching relationship can be established during the preservice preparation of teachers, with new teachers, or in providing support to teachers in need of assistance (McGatha, 2008). A peer coaching collaboration provides a support system for the new or struggling teacher that is focused on improvement rather than rating, that is oriented not toward evaluation, but toward growth (Slater & Simmons, 2001). In a peer coaching situation, the teacher builds new skills, shares ideas, and solves problems, all while working on current practices. The coaching relationship can be specific, concentrating on predetermined needs or issues, or nonspecific, allowing for a broad examination of the teacher's experiences (Slater & Simmons, 2001).

Reciprocal Peer Observation

Peer observations can be established through the pairing of virtually any two willing teachers. Several elements, however, are critical to the relationship. First, the observations must be reciprocal so that both teachers are equally invested in the process. The observations must also be both collegial and critical to affirm strengths, examine areas of improvement, challenge perceptions, or assumptions, and stimulate self-reflection. The strength of peer observations is the opportunity for both teachers to apply what is observed in others to their own individual practices (Pressick-Kilborn & Te Riele, 2008).

Coteaching

The professional "marriage" of two individual teachers into one classroom through coteaching is often erroneously considered solely as a means of delivering special education services. A coteaching collaboration can exist between special education and general education or within complimentary subject areas. In coteaching the relationship itself is as important as the process. The individuals involved need to clearly establish common philosophies, goals, and practices that guide daily interactions and activities. Roles and responsibilities need to be delineated and discussed. Norms for partner behavior, classroom management, protocols, and procedures must be articulated and agreed upon (Conderman et al, 2009).

Conclusion

The work of collaboration can, and should, take many forms. A rich collaborative culture should encompass shared work both between individuals and among the group at large. For this collaboration to be effective, priorities must be established and choices made in providing a configuration that works within the constraints of the organization. Allocations of time, money, and personnel must be made to support and sustain collaborative work as a vital component of a teacher's professional life.

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