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## Teacher collaboration : why isn't it working?

Jill Suzanne Schnathorst  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Teacher collaboration : why isn't it working?

### Abstract

Professional learning communities have started to develop in schools as an approach to look closely at student needs and implement changes in instructional practices. When teachers come together in professional learning communities they are ultimately collaborating. Through collaborative sessions teachers determine strengths and weaknesses of students and then work together to decide instructional strategies that will potentially lead to an increase in student achievement. The focus of this paper is to examine the benefits and barriers of successful teacher collaboration and also suggest an action plan to address barriers of collaboration for a team of 1st grade teachers.

Teacher Collaboration:

Why isn't it working?

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Jill Suzanne Schnathorst

University of Northern Iowa

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Advisor:

Dr. John Henning

This Research Paper by:

Jill Suzanne Schnathorst

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John Henning

---

Director of Research Paper

Victoria Robinson

---

Co-Reader of Research Paper

John Henning

---

Graduate Faculty Advisor

Radhi H. Al-Mabuk

---

Department Head  
Educational Psychology & Foundations

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Student achievement must always be central to every decision educators make. Students in many schools are failing state tests and are graduating high school without the necessary skills to obtain a job or be successful in college. Schools can add rigor to curriculum, buy new materials, and require students to take more classes. However, if instructional practices of educators do not change then rigor, materials, and more classes have little impact on student achievement.

In response to No Child Left Behind and low student achievement, many districts have made changes in teacher professional development. Professional learning communities have started to develop in schools as an approach to look closely at student needs and implement changes in instructional practices. When teachers come together in professional learning communities they are ultimately collaborating. Through collaborative sessions teachers determine strengths and weaknesses of students and then work together to decide instructional strategies that will potentially lead to an increase in student achievement. The focus of this paper is to examine the benefits and barriers of successful teacher collaboration and also suggest an action plan to address barriers of collaboration for a team of 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers.

### Statement of the Problem

State accountability standards and low student achievement has significantly changed the role of the teacher. Teachers are expected to work with colleagues to analyze student data from assessments and determine effective instructional strategies that will have an impact on student achievement. Districts and schools encourage

teachers to work collaboratively. Teacher collaboration is a new concept for many teachers and frequently teachers fail to collaborate successfully.

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) schools and districts have put in place accountability systems in an effort to raise student achievement. NCLB has required states to adopt test-based accountability systems (NCLB, 2001). Teachers are expected to do more so that all students meet high standards and also perform well on standardized tests.

In response to NCLB, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2001) suggests teachers of learning communities work collaboratively with other professionals to contribute to the effectiveness of schools (NBPTS, 2001, 5). The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) emphasizes the importance of schools to develop and sustain professional shared learning.

In response to NCLB law and accountability policies Data Driven Decision Making (DDDM) has found an important place in schools. DDDM, in education, refers to teachers and administrators collecting and analyzing data and using the data to guide instructional decisions. DDDM is a process that helps districts and schools improve student achievement. Improving student achievement is central to NCLB law and DDDM is a useful process to guide data collection and determine the next steps in instructional planning.

As an elementary teacher in a larger urban school district, specifically the Waterloo Community School district, this author is familiar with NCLB and DDDM. The Waterloo Community School district utilizes DDDM in an effort to improve student achievement and guide instructional decisions. In response to NCLB, grade level teams

have been meeting regularly for several years to assess student data, instructional practices, and achievement scores.

This district implemented the DDDM process as a tool to lead teachers through a collaborative process. To guide teachers through the DDDM process, the district developed a form that provides guidance through the DDDM process. The form is designed to help teachers organize proficiency standards, which includes categorizing students into three proficiency categories; meeting proficiency, close to proficiency, or not meeting proficiency. The form also assists teachers in determining proficiency goals and then guides them through the process of deciding effective instructional strategies that may increase student achievement. After teachers have worked through the form it is assumed that they have essentially collaborated to improve student achievement.

Based on current research, administrators implemented common planning time for grade level teams to collaborate. Each grade level team is required to meet for fifty minutes once a week to discuss student data acquired through common formative assessments and also explore instructional strategies. Frequently, grade level teams meet during early release days to continue assessing data and investigating instructional practices. During common planning times and early release days grade level teams utilize the district DDDM form to guide their data collection, analysis, and instructional decisions.

Time and materials are readily available to grade level teams with the idea that teams will utilize the time and materials to increase student performance on assessments. Administrators assume that grade level teams are engaging in collaborative sessions or what researchers and the education community call teacher collaboration.



This author can only specifically comment on what happens in her team meetings at Poyner Elementary in regard to teacher collaboration. However, it can be assumed that the same practices that happen in one grade level team may happen during grade level team meetings across the school and district. Staff moral is visibly low after early release days and common planning times. Teachers comment on how they feel mentally drained and frustrated. Many teachers express a negative attitude toward team meetings, stating that the only thing they did was analyze numbers and assessment questions.

The district directive for grade level teams is that all teams utilize the district DDDM form to guide all team meetings. Each member on the team is expected to come to each meeting with assessments already scored and students grouped into areas of proficiency, close to proficiency, and not meeting proficiency. Assessments may include chapter tests, diagnostic assessments, and rubrics. During the meetings each member is to share proficiency marks with the team. The team is then expected to look at the assessment to determine which questions align with district objectives. Once this process is completed the team is then directed to determine which objectives the students did not achieve proficiency and then decide to focus the lessons up to the post-assessment on these objectives. After looking closely at proficiency standards and district objectives the teams' next step in the teacher collaboration process is to determine effective instructional strategies to use during instruction.

Although this process seems simple and easy to follow, the process described above rarely happens. Typically it takes the teams' entire common planning time and early release days to sort through the data and match objectives to questions on assessments. Comments by team members frequently imply that their time could be

better spent working in their classrooms planning lessons. Some comments during team meetings imply a difference in educational practices and at moments teacher competition is evident when analyzing student data. The barriers just listed slow down the collaboration process and hinder the team from discussing important issues surrounding student data and effective instructional practices.

The most crucial step in teacher collaboration, which is exploring effective instructional strategies, rarely takes place during team meetings. Effective instructional strategies improve student achievement (Marazano, 2001). Simply discussing student scores and objectives does not change a teacher's classroom instruction. A change in instruction has an impact on student achievement. By the time the team meets again the students have already taken the post-assessment and the process begins again. However, it begins again without focusing on the crucial step in teacher collaboration that has potential to change student achievement, which is discussing instructional strategies.

There are many benefits of teacher collaboration and also barriers that challenge successful teacher collaboration. Districts and schools support teacher collaboration and provide time and materials to aid in the collaborative process. However, teachers continue to collaborate unsuccessfully.

### **Significance of the Problem**

As stated earlier, teacher collaboration is not always taking place even when administrators provide adequate time and materials to guide data collection and analysis. Many grade level teams fail to collaborate effectively. Effective collaboration by grade level teams not only includes collection and analysis of data but also discussions and application of effective instructional strategies.

A change in academic achievement by students is very unlikely if instructional practices do not change. Research supports teacher collaboration as an effective approach to raise student achievement. For many, however, teacher collaboration never occurs. Teachers may collaborate on some aspects of data collection but the key aspect of teacher collaboration, which is determining effective instructional strategies to use during instructions, rarely happens. Barriers of time, beliefs, and competition greatly hinder the process of collaboration.

Teacher collaboration that includes data analysis and implementation of effective strategies to increase student achievement is highly supported by this author's school and district. A significant amount of administrator time and teacher time is focused on the DDDM process. Several dollars are also spent on materials and assessments.

Teachers and administrators who do not utilize the time set aside each week and during early dismissal days to collaborate are wasting a precious resource. Teacher's value time but this precious resource is wasted when teachers do not use the time to collaborate effectively.

## **Organization**

Chapter one has presented the problem and its significance. This paper continues by defining the purpose of teacher collaboration and also defines teacher collaboration. Chapter two also describes vehicles to teacher collaboration and the benefits of teacher collaboration. Chapter three describes the keys to teacher collaboration and the barriers that prevent successful teacher collaboration. In chapter four, the author will address the barriers to successful teacher collaboration to improve teacher collaboration at Poyner Elementary in Waterloo, Iowa.

## Chapter 2

Research suggests that teacher collaboration is purposeful and can positively impact student achievement. Teachers define collaboration differently. Some consider discussing daily duties and schedules collaborating while others define collaboration as working together in groups to improve student achievement.

The purpose of collaboration is to provide opportunities for teachers to pose and answer questions, analyze data, and reflect on their teaching practices. During collaboration teachers develop content and pedagogical knowledge. When teachers come together in teams to collaborate they share what they are doing in their classroom. Collaboration allows teachers to share effective strategies and learn new strategies. When teachers collaborate and begin analyzing data based on student strengths and weaknesses they are making a change from analyzing numbers to analyzing content. During collaborative sessions teachers are supporting their professional development.

Teachers have opportunities to collaborate when they are engaged in action research or are a member of a professional learning community. Teachers involved in action research reflect on their instructional practice and make changes. Professional learning communities provide a setting and climate where teachers analyze data and make changes to instructional practices to improve student achievement.

### **Purpose of Collaboration**

Teachers are the day-to-day decision makers in a classroom and ultimately determine the instruction delivered to students. Although districts work toward developing curriculum that meets national and state standards, teachers are still the individuals who decide how the curriculum is delivered to the students. Schools and

districts are concerned about student achievement and teachers are one of the most important factors in bringing about change in student achievement.

Collaborative sessions provide opportunities for teachers to develop content knowledge as well as pedagogical content knowledge (Borko, 2004). Content knowledge can be described as a deep understanding of subject matter. Pedagogical content knowledge is described by Shulman (1987) as understanding the way students make meaning of subject matter and helping students construct ways to understand the content.

A list of common strategies used by teachers may include; lecture, explicit teaching, drill and practice, compare and contrast, role playing, brainstorming, discussion, and cooperative learning. Some of the strategies listed above are considered highly effective according to research collected by Robert J. Marzano and published in his book *Classroom Instruction That Works*. Marcia Tate, in her book *Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites: 20 Instructional Strategies that Engage*, also considers several of the strategies listed above as highly effective. However, some of the strategies listed, and used by many teachers, are not as effective and therefore do not have as great of an effect on student achievement.

No single strategy can be considered the most effective at every moment in teaching but utilizing a variety of strategies can have an impact on student achievement. When teachers are making critical decisions about teaching curriculum it is important that they are using the most effective strategies and meeting the needs of all students.

Teachers who improve their practice by using a variety of strategies can potentially have an impact on student achievement. Many opportunities are available to educators who want to improve their instructional practice. Workshops, often offered by

school districts, are one way teachers can learn about new strategies, along with enrolling in professional development courses. Reading educational literature is another way educators can learn about new strategies. Teacher collaboration is also a means for improving instructional practices and is commonly seen in professional learning communities, peer-coaching situations, and in action research teams.

Collaborating to construct common assessments, interpret data, and examine instructional strategies supports a teacher's professional development. During collaborative sessions among colleagues, teachers have the opportunity to grow professionally and apply changes to their instruction in a concerted effort to improve student achievement. When teachers are working in teams collaboratively they share what they do in their classroom. The teachers are sharing instructional strategies.

When teachers analyze student data and determine strengths and weaknesses they eventually shift from analyzing numbers to analyzing content. Once teachers have begun analyzing content they are looking at instructional delivery or strategies they used to teach the content. During this time of analysis teachers can determine strategies that were effective or not effective. When teachers determine areas of weakness in student scores teachers begin searching for new strategies to use in their classrooms.

It is common for one teacher to have the most students achieve proficiency in particular areas. If one teacher's scores are considerably higher than the other teacher's scores, then the teacher with the higher scores can share what she does in her classroom during the chapter or unit. Teachers can share their strategies when they are meeting regularly in collaborative groups

Collaborating with colleagues provides teachers with opportunities to discuss and analyze student data and then make changes to instructional practices. Collaboration provides teachers the opportunity to work together to enhance their instructional practice so students can be more successful. When teachers collaborate, all teachers are working toward a common goal, which is increased student achievement.

### **Definition of Collaboration**

The term “teacher collaboration” has many meanings for teachers. For some teachers collaboration may mean discussing lunch and recess supervision and developing a recess supervision schedule. Other teachers may call discussing the social climate of their school “teacher collaboration”. Some teachers may define teacher collaboration as working together to instruct a group of students.

Although all of these activities are purposeful to the structured organization of a school, they do not define teacher collaboration. The most important part of teacher collaboration is to improve student achievement.

Teacher collaboration, according to Leonard (2002), is defined as teachers, who meet regularly, share a common goal, value diversity, trust others and are trustworthy, and selfless. David (2008) defines teacher collaboration as a group of teachers who engage in collaboration work together to identify challenges, analyze data, and test out instructional practices.

Nelson (2008) describes teacher collaboration as a cycle of ongoing dialogue about classroom practices and student achievement. In this cycle, teachers decided a vision, compare their vision to their current practice, formulate an inquiry question, study strategies to adopt, develop a plan to monitor implementation, implement the plan, collect

and analyze data, and determine implementations for changing practice. During this cycle, research informs all of the stages of inquiry.

Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook, in their book *Interactions: collaboration skills for school professionals* (2000), describe collaboration as several elements. They call these elements the defining characteristics of collaboration.

According to Friend and Cook, collaboration is voluntary. People cannot be forced to collaborate but instead should want to collaborate with colleagues. Administrators may demand that teachers collaborate but only the individuals involved can decide if they will truly collaborate.

Collaboration requires interactions between colleagues that is equally valued as well has equal power in making decisions. When one member of a team is seen as having more valuable knowledge or greater decision-making power then collaboration cannot occur.

Leonard (2002) defined collaboration has having shared goals and Friend and Cook (2000) also agree that teams that collaborate must share at least one common goal. Educators on a collaborative team do not have to share all goals in order for effective collaboration. Instead, they must share at least one specific and important goal that they will commit to. Teams members can even disagree and have differing opinions but their differences can be set aside.

Friend and Cook (2000) include shared responsibility for participation and decision making as a characteristic of collaboration. Individuals engaged in collaboration take an active role in decision making and participating in collaborative sessions. Shared participation does not mean that each task is divided into equal parts but instead a



“convenient division of labor”. Each member of the collaborative group may have a different task but it is critical that each member be a part of the decision making process.

In a collaborative group, each member should be engaged in sharing resources according to Friend and Cook’s characteristics of collaboration. The shared resources should be a valuable contribution to the group and be purposeful in meeting a shared goal. Shared resources can include more than just tangible items. Other shared resources can also include knowledge of a technique or access to individuals that can assist in the collaborative process.

According to Friend and Cook (2000), individuals who collaborate share accountability for outcomes. If the outcome of collaboration is positive or negative each member of the group shares the accountability for the outcome.

Teacher collaboration can be defined as a team of educators clarifying essential outcomes, identifying strengths and weaknesses, identify challenges, developing common assessments, defining proficiency, analyzing results, studying and testing instructional practices, and developing improvement strategies (David, 2008; DuFour, 2003; Nelson, 2008).

### **Vehicles of Teacher Collaboration**

Research suggests teacher collaboration has an effect on how teachers plan and instruct students and improved instruction from teachers has an impact on student achievement. In order for teachers to work collaboratively they must have opportunities to meet with teams of teachers to discuss student data, student strengths and weaknesses and also effective instructional strategies. Professional learning communities (PLC) provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate. Teachers involved in Professional

learning communities gather in teams to analyze data, share strategies, answer questions, and share results. Action research also offers an opportunity for teachers to collaborate. When teachers are engaged in action research they are shifting their thinking from anecdotal to research based. Teachers examine and reflect on their teaching practices and solve problems. Professional learning communities and action research provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues in an effort to improve student achievement.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

Professional learning communities provide educators with the opportunity to work collaboratively in teams. As a professional learning community, teachers work in teams and engage in an ongoing cycle of questions that encourage deep learning for the staff members involved (DuFour, 2004). Teachers in a professional learning community agree on a shared vision of high quality academic work (DuFour, 1997).

A professional learning community includes team members that review the data to identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning. Next the team engages in a discussion of how they can build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. The members of the team discuss what is working and what is not, as well as new strategies they can implement in the classroom to improve student achievement (DuFour, 2004).

When educators work in professional learning communities teachers engage in collaborative conversations throughout the year. As a result of these valuable conversations teachers share goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results (DuFour, 2004).

According to Hord (2009) there are six researched-based dimensions of a professional learning community. These dimensions include shared beliefs, shared and supportive leadership, supportive conditions including time, place, and resources, respect and caring among the community, collective learning and increased effectiveness of the professionals, and peers sharing their practice to gain feedback.

Shirley M. Hord states that within professional learning communities staff members must assure that the areas students are not performing well in receive “meticulous attention”. “The staff members prioritize these student learning needs, and define one area to which they give immediate attention” (Hord, 2009, 40). Hord explains a community as one that assumes a focus on a shared purpose, mutual regard and caring, and an insistence on integrity and truthfulness.

According to Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan Talbert, in their book *Building School Based Teacher Learning Communities* (2006), professional learning communities of practice are places where teachers “work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (p.4).

Karen Louis and Helen Marks (1998) found in their study of eight elementary, eight middle and eight high schools that achievement levels were significantly higher when schools had established strong professional communities. Louis and Marks suggest the organization of professional communities has a positive relationship with the organization of the classroom and also the academic performance of students. Teachers

dialogue and discourse in professional communities transfers over to their classrooms and has a positive affect on student achievement.

Among many factors defining professional learning communities most importantly educators within a professional learning community must engage in a culture of collaboration. Teachers who work as a professional learning community recognize the value of collaboration.

### *Action Research*

Action research occurs when individuals examine their own practice as a way to solve problems in their day-to-day practice. Action research is another method educators can use to look closely at their instructional practice and then make changes to improve their instruction.

Through action research teachers examine their instructional practice and then reflect on their instructional practice. Action research provides teachers the opportunity to research the practical everyday problems that arise in their classrooms. When teachers are engaged in action research they are involved in researching the relationship between their instructional practice and their theories in education. (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009).

Action research, for educators, shifts their thinking from anecdotal to research based. Teachers are thinking critically about their instructional practice and using the practical research they've gathered from their classroom to make informed decisions on how to improve their instruction. Instead of making assumptions about what is affecting student achievement, teachers are using evidence from their classrooms and are making informed decisions about instructional practices.

## **Benefits of Teacher Collaboration**

The Center on Organization and Restructuring reported that teachers who collaborate to define school goals, develop curriculum and assessments, discussed student problems, observed each other work, and considered instructional strategies delivered higher quality instruction in comparison to teachers that worked in isolation. (DuFour, 1997)

Through the collaboration process teachers are confronted with the opportunity to reflect on current practices. Sharing crucial conversations about instructional practices is needed in order for teachers to make a real change in their teaching. Teachers can improve their teaching when they engage in conversations that explore ways of transforming their practice.

As a result of essential reflection, teachers begin making changes to their instruction and also begin developing new ideas. Teachers then begin to develop professionally. Collaboration gives teachers the confidence to make decisions about what they will do in their classroom to increase student achievement (Leonard, 2002). Through collaborative planning teachers have the opportunity to be involved in sessions with other teachers and improve their teaching practices (Strahan, 2003).

When teachers and staff members work as a community and begin using common authentic pedagogy student achievement begins to rise (Louis and Marks, 1998). Through the process of collaboration, professional dialogue begins between team members. Karen Louis and Helen Marks (1998) found a link between authentic pedagogy and authentic student achievement in their study of eight elementary, eight middle and eight high schools. They suggest that there is an increase in student

achievement when staff members work collaboratively and use authentic pedagogy.

When teacher work collaboratively they build a professional knowledge base that is then available to peers to review and also use in their own classrooms (Nelson, 2008).

Through collaboration teachers begin to use common language and more specifically communicate the same pedagogy.

The Center on Organization and Restructuring synthesized research data from more than 1,500 United States elementary, middle, and high schools and conducted field research in 55 schools in 16 states. The study revealed that schools that demonstrated increased student achievement functioned as a professional learning community (DuFour, 1997). Collaboration is a key component to professional learning communities.

The Center on Organization and Restructuring also found that teacher efficacy was enhanced because teachers could rely on colleagues to reinforce their objectives. Researchers who studies 6 teachers that were engaged in reflective cycles of inquiry suggest collaborating among colleagues supports professional development and most importantly a change in instructional practices (Schnellert, et al., 2008).

Schnellert, et al. (2008) suggest from their research findings that teachers can make instructional changes that foster student achievement when they: (1) engage in the (co)construction and implementation of situated assessment practices; (2) set, tailor, and monitor content-specific goals for students and themselves; (3) have opportunities to work collaboratively and recursively through instructional change cycles; and (4) are engaged as partners in accountability cycles that incorporate local assessment data (Schnellert, et al., 2008). Although only one of the researchers components to foster student achievement includes the word collaborate, all of the components listed above

require some form of collaboration among teachers. When all 4 of these components were evident student achievement was reached.

In a 2003 study, David B. Strahan reexamined previous data and conducted new interview questions and observations during the third year of the investigation of the three schools involved in the North Carolina Lighthouse Schools study. Three schools from the Lighthouse study were included in the research, Archer Elementary, Hunter Elementary, and North Elementary, all K-5 schools. Strahan found Archer Elementary participants share a common goal of student learning as a result of collaborative planning sessions that improved teaching practices. Grade-level team meetings resulted in focused development of data-driven dialogue. Planning sessions and staff development focused on student progress on several assessments.

Patricia J. Bonner (2006) suggests opportunities for collaboration, autonomy and choice in teachers' work, reflection, time, and a culture of inquiry are all conditions needed to promote professional growth and ongoing learning for teachers. Traditionally, professional development did address the immediate needs of teachers. Through collaboration teachers are involved in their own learning. Through collaborative practices teachers collect resources and have opportunities to practice new ideas over a period of time. During collaborative sessions teachers address crucial problems they are experiencing instead of addressing issues that are not true for them personally. Also, during collaborative sessions teachers can share resources or new ideas to help each other grow professionally.

## Chapter 3

### Keys to Collaboration

Collaborative teams are effective when they have a clear sense of purpose, specific goals and structured activities that give direction to their work. More importantly collaborative teams need effective leadership. Staff members need leadership that keeps the focus on engaging and purposeful dialogue that will have a positive impact on student learning (DuFour, 2003).

Collaborating provides teachers the opportunity to develop professionally. During collaborative sessions a resource person helps establish a supportive environment for teachers to grow professionally. A resource person is not an authority figure but rather a facilitator of collaborative sessions with his or her team (Bonner, 2006).

### Barriers of Collaboration

Although collaboration is suggested by research to have the potential to improve teacher practices and student achievement barriers continue to challenge the benefits of collaboration. Professional collaboration is considered by teachers to have the potential to change teacher practices and many teachers see collaboration as desirable. Yet, lists of constraints continue to be the barriers to teacher collaboration.

#### *Beliefs of Educational Practice*

Instructional practices vary among teachers and the perception of what is effective and what is not can also vary. Teacher beliefs about what constitutes effective educational practice can cause barriers between teachers (Leonard, 2002). A difference in the use of data to drive instructional practices differs among teachers. Some teachers use data gathered systematically to judge the effectiveness of their instruction while other



teachers use a personal metric to judge the effectiveness of their teaching (Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004).

Intuition and experience along with anecdotal information is often the basis for teacher instructional decisions. In a study conducted with 9 high schools across the United States, researchers found that 40% of teachers use data to inform their decisions while 15% rely on anecdotal information and intuition (Ingram, Louis & Schroeder, 2004). Ingram, Louis, and Schroeder also found more than half of the respondents from interviews mentioned they looked at non-achievement outcomes to determine teacher effectiveness.

Four barriers were recognized by Ingram, Louis and Schroeder in the form of cultural challenges. The first barrier was that many teachers had developed their own personal metric for judging the effectiveness of their teaching. The difference in the teachers' personal metric and external metrics differed. The second barrier was many administrators and teachers relied on intuition, experience, and anecdotal information to base their decisions rather than using information that was gathered systematically. A third barrier includes a lack of agreement among stakeholders about which student outcomes are of most importance and what kinds of data are most useful. The fourth barrier they discovered was the disassociation teacher's made between their own performance and student performance. This barrier can lead teachers to overlook the usefulness of data to improve teaching practices.

### *School culture*

School culture is important to the success of teacher collaboration. "Authentic teacher collaboration - that which is directed ultimately toward student learning - is

unlikely to occur within the realm of a negative school culture” (Leonard, 2003). Some schools may promote isolation and not on purpose. The school schedule can make it difficult to engage in collaborative sessions. Teachers may feel uncomfortable with collaboration and more comfortable with a traditional model of teaching. In research gathered by Leonard & Leonard, 2003, a lack of commitment and avoidance of additional work was evident according to teacher responses on a survey completed by teachers in 45 North Louisiana schools.

### *Shared goals*

Shared goals among a group or team of teachers can lead teachers to work together collaboratively. Often when teachers do not share the same goals it is unlikely that they will consistently work toward collaborative purposes (Leonard, 2002). It is very likely that teachers are asked by administrators to collaborate with their team.

Collaboration among teams of teachers is seen to improve student achievement and as a result administrators frequently ask teams of teachers to work together collaboratively to improve student achievement. Teachers that are committed to collaboration are more likely to realize its benefits than those who comply with administration requests (Leonard, 2002). Administrators’ requests to collaborate are considered top-down attempts to get teachers to collaborate. Top down requests can have an effect on collegiality.

In a study to determine cycles of reflective inquiry researchers gathered data on 6 teachers and found changes in teacher practice to be linked to engagement of inquiry cycles (Schnellert et al., 2008). Two of the participants who gained the least were reluctant to work toward common goals. The two teachers who made the greatest shift in

instructional practices shared common goals and were more likely to utilize other resources such as colleagues and literature in order to reach their goals.

### *Value of Time*

Teachers feel they need sufficient time to collaborate and feel teacher collaboration is an effective use of a teacher's time (Leonard, 2002). Lack of time is a constraint for teachers in many areas, especially when they are considering collaboration (Leonard, 2003). Adequate time is not always given to teachers to gather and interpret data that is going to be used in the data decision-making process (Ingram, Louis, Schroeder, 2004).

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) express time as a critical factor in teacher collaboration, and in order for teachers to collaborate they need “chunks of time in which to work and sufficient longevity as a group over time” (p.294).

### *Teacher Trust*

A certain level of trust must be present for teachers to explore their teaching practices with other teachers. An understanding of values and beliefs and respect for the difference in teachers professional opinions or practices can be a barrier to collaboration (Leonard, 2002).

The collaboration of teachers does not always happen naturally. Many teachers are willing to share ideas with other colleagues but collaborating to improve instructional practices is set apart from simply sharing ideas.

*Teachers generally welcome the opportunity to discuss ideas and materials related to their work, and conversations in professional development settings are easily*

*fostered. Yet, discussions that support critical examination of teaching are relatively rare (Borko, 2004).*

### ***Teacher Competition***

Teachers willingly engage in the opportunity to discuss ideas and materials related to their work, yet teachers are hesitant to engage in a discussion that examines their educational practices (Borko, 2004; Leonard, 2002). During collaborative conversations as mentioned in the definition of professional learning communities teachers must share goals, strategies, questions, concerns, and results. Until recently teachers did not openly share results to a team of colleagues and now student achievement data has become highly visible.

### ***Administrative Support***

School culture is important to the success of teacher collaboration and administrators can have an impact on school culture. Some schools may promote isolation and not on purpose. The school schedule can make it difficult to engage in collaborative sessions. Administrators who don't allow for common planning time among grade level teams prevent opportunities of collaboration from taking place. Teachers need time to discuss instructional plans and reflect on lessons. If administrators create schedules that don't allow for collaborative time then collaboration won't take place. A lack of materials, such as reference texts, is a barrier to collaboration. Administrators control the school budget and if they are unwilling to allocate a part of the budget to materials necessary during collaboration teachers are unlikely to engage in collaborative sessions.

## Chapter 4

### Summary

Research supports teacher collaboration as an effective approach to improve student achievement. Districts and schools have recognized the effectiveness of teacher collaboration and suggest teachers engage in collaborative practices. Administrators may suggest teachers work collaboratively, yet many barriers of teacher collaboration go unnoticed or ignored. When teachers and administrators fail to recognize the barriers of teacher collaboration the collaborative process fails to be effective or successful.

### Proposal for Poyner Elementary School

This author currently teaches first grade at Poyner Elementary in Evansdale, Iowa. Poyner Elementary is part of the Waterloo Community School district, a district dedicated to improving student achievement. Teachers at Poyner Elementary have been working in grade level teams toward improving student achievement by analyzing student data. This author's grade level team is exhausted from countless hours of engaging in the Data Driven Decision Making process. This team has spent very little time collaborating on how to change instructional practices. This team of first grade teacher's needs a change in how their grade level team collaborates.

This author will begin discussing the teacher collaboration process with her team by providing a brief article about teacher collaboration; such as *What Is a "Professional Learning Community?"* by Richard DuFour (2004). This article will define teacher collaboration for the teachers and address barriers to collaboration. After reading this article the team will discuss what they read. This will be a time to share the ideas they believe in or agree with and also concepts that they disagree with. As a facilitator, this

author will guide the team in constructing a common definition of teacher collaboration for this team.

After the team has a common definition of teacher collaboration it will be important that the team establish shared values. Shared values are a barrier to collaboration and must be addressed. The values of the team must be shared and not values that have been forced upon the team. These shared values would include views about children and their ability to learn, priorities for the use of time and space and role of parents, teachers, and administrators. Shared values could include but are not limited to integrity, respect, discipline and excellence.

The following suggestions for implementation will require this author to model effective collaborative practices. Through positive language and sharing information in a non-threatening manner this author can slowly over time implement change for this team of first grade teachers. It is impossible for this team to stop collecting data and fulfilling district requirements to solely concentrate on learning about effective teacher collaboration. As a team, we do not have time to study collaboration articles and books. Time is already limited. Instead, this team will change over time while slowly implementing changes in team meetings that will eventually yield successful collaborative sessions.

Instructional practices differ among teachers and the perception of what is effective can also differ. A difference in what teachers consider best teaching practices can cause barriers between teachers. As a team, this author will suggest the teachers on the team share their beliefs of what constitutes effective instructional practices during collaborative sessions. During collaborative sessions team members can engage in

discussions and can share their instructional beliefs. Also during collaborative sessions teachers can share effective instructional strategies.

Shared goals are also a barrier to teacher collaboration. This team has been directed by our administrator to collaborate during common planning times and on early release days. We have to meet during these times because it is a directive from the district and our administrator. The district has set many of our academic goals so over time, this author will prompt discussion regarding shared goals. This could include raising expectations of students beyond district standards.

Time is a barrier for teacher collaboration, but luckily this author's school district has established common planning times for teams to work collaboratively. This author will suggest creating a time frame for discussion during collaborative sessions. For example, how much time should the team spend discussing student data, strengths and weaknesses, and instructional strategies? By managing the teams time effectively we will utilize the time set aside for collaboration effectively and will not have to use time outside of preset collaboration time to work on student data.

Addressing the barriers of teacher collaboration with this author's team will result in a gradual change over time. The change that will occur will result in successful collaboration among colleagues. Successful collaboration can have an impact on student achievement, which is the whole purpose of teacher collaboration. By ignoring the barriers of collaboration, ineffective collaboration occurs. Ineffective collaboration is a poor use of precious teacher time and more importantly unfair to students.

## **Conclusion**

Administrators and teachers agree that student achievement is important and recognize collaboration is effective in improving student achievement. However, knowing how to collaborate effectively is unclear to many administrators as well as teachers. The barriers listed in chapter detail the difficulty teachers experience when collaborating, which results in unsuccessful collaboration. Until these barriers are addressed teachers will continue to collaborate unsuccessfully or not collaborate at all. Student achievement is important to administrators, teachers, parents and the community and teacher collaboration can have an impact on increased student achievement. By addressing the barriers to collaboration administrators and teachers can utilize their time effectively by collaborating with successful results. Ignoring the barriers of teacher collaboration is like ignoring the academic needs of students and this is just unacceptable.



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