

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE: WHY TEACHER COLLABORATION?

1.1. Collaboration? What Do We Mean By That?

Collaboration is more than just sharing ideas, materials, and experiences. Collaboration is an intellectual endeavor—purposefully working towards a common goal and sustaining that work together until the goal is achieved, and/or until important understandings are gained about the goal and what it takes to achieve it. Teachers need and benefit from individual and collective time with colleagues to share in the day-to-day experience of teaching. They also need time to coordinate around shared responsibilities, such as field trips, assemblies, curricular resources, scheduling, and record keeping. This handbook, however, focuses on collaboration that seeks to intentionally (1) improve teaching and (2) develop professional knowledge about teaching effectively.

The term collaboration is overused these days, and it seems (at least to us) as if the intellectual nature of collaboration and the goal-driven nature of collaboration are often overlooked or unrecognized. Both Merriam-Webster and the American Heritage dictionaries define collaboration as: “to work jointly with others especially in an intellectual endeavor” (M-W); “to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort” (AH).

Our intent here is not to establish a definitive definition of collaboration, but rather to introduce a definition that corresponds to the kind of collaboration we have researched over the last twenty-five years. We have worked with numerous teachers and administrators, all of whom were characterized by a common desire—they wanted to improve their teaching and their students’ learning. In all cases the administrators and teachers established regular and sustainable weekly or bi-weekly time to meet within teams and work on their teaching—planning instruction, trying it in the classroom, analyzing student work and assessments, and refining their methods and practices in order to achieve stated goals. We summarize two of our major research and development projects briefly in Section 1.5 of this chapter, including how they shaped our notions of collaboration and the achievement results that emerged: Done well, collaboration can contribute to student learning and achievement. Before providing that background, however, we share our observations about three other major contributions that genuine and productive collaboration can make to teachers, teaching and schools.

1.2. Collaboration’s Contribution to Professional Development

Teachers learn about teaching and about teaching well through their ongoing experience. Most people reflect on their work, job performance, and how to do it better; teachers are no different. Yet, there is portion of *the job*—professional development—that concerns one’s ongoing and systematic learning, one’s development as a professional in the field. For the most part, conventional professional development occurs through conferences, seminars, trainings, and book studies teachers participate in of our own volition or as required and provided by their school district. Such professional development potentially provides access to a wide array of information, including theory, research, policies, curricular programs, instructional approaches, and assessment tools and methods. The access represented by such professional development can make a significant contribution to teachers’ development although it is

limited in one important way. Conventional professional development typically serves only to introduce teachers to information about teaching. It rarely supports teachers' classroom implementation of that information.

Teacher collaboration complements conventional professional development. Teacher collaboration can be another essential form of professional development, as is the case in other countries most notably Japan (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2014; Stigler & Hiebert, 1998). Done regularly and systematically across the school year and with the explicit purpose of improving teaching and student learning, teacher collaboration focuses on implementation—turning ideas and information into well-honed practices. Learning to effectively implement a specific instructional practice takes time and effort. That time and effort is usually more productive, satisfying, and sustained when it is undertaken collaboratively. We would argue that a strong professional development program coordinates both of these learning opportunities for teachers: (1) access to promising, credible, research-based information about teaching and (2) time to collaboratively study and transform that information into implemented practices. Collaboration enhances conventional professional development because it extends the study of the methods or practices over time and into the classroom—from the PD venue to the ongoing day-to-day of the classroom and school. In turn, conventional professional development advances teachers' collaborative work because it feeds it with worthwhile information. This external infusion of promising practices and methods contributes significantly to productive collaborations. At its best, carefully planned PD introduces relevant and promising information, and collaboration helps turn that information into implemented practices. Collaboration also simultaneously identifies additional problems of practice that potentially inform subsequent PD offerings. The distinct components of a dual professional development program support one another. Such coordinated approaches to professional development contribute to continuous improvement.

1.3. Collaboration's Contribution to Continuous Improvement

Legendary UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, wrote: "I hope I learned a little bit each and every year. As I like to say, if I'm through learning, I'm through" (Nater & Gallimore, 2006, p. 41). To remain effective, not to mention fresh and vibrant, teaching requires constant learning and continuous improvement. Schools are much the same. To stay effective, fresh and vibrant, school staffs require constant learning and continuous improvement. Like many other service and delivery occupations, teaching well involves continuous work on "problems of practice," that is, the specific challenges involved in the actual practice of teaching—delivering the lesson, responding to the contributions of the students, managing the classroom, and coordinating time. No curricular program, no matter how carefully delineated, teaches itself. In fact, no curricular program, no matter how well developed, is problem- or challenge-free, at least not when it gets to the point of delivery... *live* with 15, or 20, or 30 or 40 students. No matter how carefully developed and delineated, teachers always have to face the ongoing challenge of orchestrating the interaction among curriculum, standards, students and time. How best to use available time so as to maximize the learning of those to be taught is the ever-present challenge of teaching effectively—the very pursuit that drives continuous improvement.

Collaboration contributes to continuous improvement in this manner: Multiple teachers are better than one in thinking and planning how best one might teach something. Multiple classrooms are better than one in providing a fruitful context for testing and figuring out how best to teach something. Collective planning and multiple efforts to test the plan yield more insight and experience than a single teacher can typically produce on his/her own. Having said all that, our extensive work with teacher

collaboration suggests that realizing the promise of collaboration and sustaining continuous improvement does not happen naturally. It requires commitment and effort from each and all members on the team. It also requires a method—how to identify problems worth working on, how to plan instruction collaboratively, how to test the plan in the classroom and preserve observations, how to analyze the effectiveness of the instruction delivered across multiple classrooms, how to refine and improve the instructional plan and delivery based on the analysis of effects, and ultimately how to identify and articulate instructional findings from the total collaborative experience. This handbook is designed to introduce and explain the methods that have emerged from our research and development—certainly not THE collaborative method, necessarily, but a method that has proven promising and has been valued by the teachers and administrators with whom we have worked.

1.4. Collaboration’s Contribution to School Climate

Teachers want to feel a sense of accomplishment. They want to know their efforts benefit the students they teach. Sustained over time, teacher collaboration yields student achievement results (see next section) and those results in turn contribute to a positive school climate. Our colleague in this work, Claude Goldenberg, has described the effect on school climate as the formation of a group ethos (Goldenberg, 2004)—a character and identity formed around the notion that the staff can work together to meet even the most daunting challenges. We have observed the emergence of such a positive school climate at numerous research and development sites. It starts first within grade level teams. As collaborations evolve, the language among the team gradually shifts from “my students” to “our students.” The collaborations around a common goal and the study of specific practices and methods help to build a collective sense of responsibility towards all the students at the grade level rather than an individual responsibility to the students assigned to each teacher’s class. As the collaborative work gradually leads to discernible results—in many cases, small but important incremental improvements—the team compiles an emerging body of work that they share: “Last year we worked on teaching our students how to draw inferences about characters based on descriptions of the characters behaviors, thoughts, and words. This year, we have expanded that work to connect inferences about characters to the larger theme or meaning of the selection.” The shared work contributes to a team identity.

Thoughtfully led by the building administrator (see Chapter 12), the positive attitudes of individual teams contribute to a positive climate among the staff. As each team hears about the work of other teams—in faculty meetings, through informal conversations, and also through the Instructional Leadership Team—teachers throughout the staff recognize that everyone is working on improving their teaching. As described by a teacher at a previous research and development site:

- T: First we evaluate the student work and as we evaluate the student work we look at strengths and weaknesses. Then we decide on what kind of instruction we’re going try in the classroom. And we try the instruction in the classroom and then we go back and re-assess to see if the instruction is working. If it’s not working we just, we try to take a different approach until we meet those goals and those standards and objectives.
- C: Would that be true in Kindergarten, [grade] one, two, three, four?
- T: Absolutely (Teacher Focus Group, C = Interviewer; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2005)

In our experience, neither social activities nor team building exercises contribute as strongly to a positive school climate as productive collaboration—figuring things out that have discernible, positive effects on student learning.

1.5. Collaborations' Contributions to Student Achievement: The Basis for This Volume

We have been working on teacher collaboration for twenty- five years. Following in the traditions of those who mentored us (Goldenberg, 2004; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) we have focused our research and development on improving achievement in schools with historically low levels of achievement (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009). Across several successive projects involving a range of official topics—school improvement, transitional bilingual programming, literacy instruction, performance based assessments, standards-based reform, principal and teacher leadership—a major mechanism for actually making change happen and improving student achievement has been teacher collaboration.

The work began with a case study of one of the lowest achieving schools in one of the lowest achieving districts in California, the Freeman project (Goldenberg, 2004). The first author was a researcher on the project and the second author taught fifth grade at the school, was the facilitator of the fifth grade team, and over time became the teacher-leader of the school's Instructional Leadership Team. Over a six-year period, the staff developed their own grade level ELA and Math standards (pre-standards movement), summative and formative performance assessments, and studied, refined, and implemented various instructional practices (e.g., instructional conversation, writing-as-a-process, the experience-text-relationship approach to studying literature, dictation). Within the years of the study, the school climbed from the lowest to the highest achieving school in the district. At the heart of the work was teacher collaboration—grade-specific teams, an academic expectations committee, an academic assessment committee, and self-selected teacher workgroups focused on instructional conversation, writing-as-a-process, thematic teaching, math problem solving, and technology. The most important finding from the Freeman project was the importance of establishing, scheduling, and protecting time and place for teachers to work with one another. The importance of "settings" is called out in the title of the Goldenberg (2004) volume: *Successful school change: Creating settings to improve teaching and learning*.

Based on the success of the Freeman study we were awarded funding to "scale" the school improvement model to multiple schools—also with historically low levels of achievement—in another area of Southern California: the Scale-Up project (McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2007; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2005; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009). Over a five-year period, all nine participating elementary schools established an Instructional Leadership Team (that met monthly) and settings for weekly or bi-weekly grade level meetings. All grade level teams administered, scored, and analyzed results from trimester ELA assessments, and used a protocol we developed with the teams to address specific student achievement needs. Participating schools were matched with comparable schools from the same district and geographic region. Achievement data, teacher surveys and interviews, and observations of teacher and classroom settings were collected over the five year period at both participating and comparable schools. While both sets of schools produced increases in student achievement (as measured by mandatory state tests), the increases at comparable schools mirrored the average increases of elementary schools throughout the state while participating schools made gains significantly greater than those of the comparable schools and the rest of the state (see Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009, for details).

Teacher surveys, interviews, and first hand observations also revealed differences favoring participating schools in terms of school climate and collective commitment, the effectiveness of leadership and grade level meetings, and also teachers' expectations and attributions for student achievement (see McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2007, for details). The most distinct difference between participating and comparable schools observed by the external evaluator involved teacher collaboration within grade level meetings:

Qualitative analyses indicated that ...meeting procedures and outcomes...differed appreciably...all suggesting more positive environments at [participating schools] than at comparable schools:

- (a) more consistent focus, planning, and time for academic topics, goals and indicators; less time discussing topics or doing tasks of a non-academic nature, such as duplicating or collating materials, and planning field trips;
- (b) analysis of students' products above and beyond State or district-mandated assessments; for example, [trimester] assessments;
- (c) discussing the relation between instruction, student outcomes, and the need for instructional changes;
- (d) modeling instructional methods for colleagues;
- (e) assigning and completing goal-related assignments, and using academic data with follow-up at subsequent meetings;
- (f) preparing and evaluating mutually agreed upon teaching strategies;
- (g) teachers' consistent versus sporadic attendance and participation at the meetings;
- (h) teachers' punctual arrivals and departures versus late arrivals and early departures;
- (i) principals' participation versus non-attendance at meetings;
- (j) teachers' use of typed agendas and prior awareness of meeting topics versus no agenda and limited, or last-minute, awareness of meeting topics;
- (k) scheduled, weekly, 'hands-off' meetings versus 'more loosely' scheduled meetings that were frequently cancelled, curtailed, rescheduled, changed at the last minute, or otherwise disrupted. (McDougall, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2007, pp. 64 and 70.)

We have studied the what, why, when and how of teacher collaboration very closely because over time we came to understand it as a means to an end—that is, a means to improving student achievement. Everything described in this volume contributes to producing the kind of teacher collaborations that—as we have analyzed it— result in improved student learning and achievement.

1.6. A Key Concept to the TTN Approach to Collaboration: Settings

We devote a subsection of this chapter to the term, settings (Sarason, 1972), because it represents a key concept in our approach to collaboration. In terms of its most direct relationship to collaboration, a setting is a specific time and place, scheduled, calendared, and protected over a period of time for specific individuals to collaborate—that is, to work on an agreed upon goal or goals. The importance of this concept is this: making teacher collaboration *work* is a matter of making the settings for that collaboration *work*. As we describe in subsequent sections, making collaboration work involves making it productive (Chapter 4), efficient (Chapter 5), collegial (Chapter 6), relevant (Chapter 7), sustainable (Chapter 8), and enduring (Chapter 9). That may sound like an overwhelming undertaking, but, in fact, it becomes do-able when we focus on achieving those qualities in *the settings* established for collaboration, that is, within the context of grade level team meetings, the monthly Instructional Leadership Team meetings that support grade level meetings, and also the classroom where we test the instruction we've collaboratively planned. As Goldenberg explains:

We can improve the performance of our schools by creating a sustained, coherent, and focused school-wide effort aimed at improving identified student outcomes. Doing so is only partly a matter of 'organized common sense' [Fullan, 1991]. It is far more difficult than most people realize. It requires the creation of settings in the school where professionals can, over a sustained

period, focus on important student outcomes and receive assistance in improving student learning in their classrooms and school-wide (2004, p. xiv).

Fortunately, many districts and schools have created time for collaboration either by releasing teachers during a time when students receive instruction in physical education, the arts or technology and/or by banking minutes and establishing a day per week when students arrive at school later or depart from school earlier. Such time becomes a setting when at least three things can occur. First, specific teams (or groups) are formed to work within that allotted time—e.g., grade level teams. Second, each team (or the teams as a collective) agrees upon a specific goal or goals to be worked on during that time. Third, the teams use that time (or some agreed upon portion of it) consistently from one meeting to the next to collaboratively achieve the stated goal(s). A setting is comprised of a series of meetings sewn together by sustained collaborations around a specific, agreed upon goal. One meeting is related to the next, and the next, and the next.

T: [We] formulate an objective. Assess for that objective. Look at the result. Did we meet the objective? No... let's go ahead and, you know, do it again. We all know this process.

T: Very focused.

T: We all know what we're doing at this meeting. We all know what we're doing at next week's meeting. We have an idea of what we will be doing, you know, two months from now.

C: Is that school wide? It's not just something at one grade level only?

T: School wide. (Teacher Focus Group, T = Teacher, C = Interviewer; Saunders & Goldenberg, 2005)

1.7. Using Collaboration to Implement Mandated Educational Reforms

While every research and development project we have completed over the past twenty-five years involved one or more focus areas (e.g., school improvement, programming for English learners, literacy instruction, teacher collaboration), each project also functioned within the larger educational reform context. As such, our work with teachers and administrators addressed the particular research focus but, out of necessity, it also had to address current and successive state and federal reform mandates: program quality reviews (early 1990's), state-wide performance assessments (middle 1990's), changes in language of instructional policies (late 1990's), the introduction of state-authored content standards (late 1990's), mandated curricula for elementary reading instruction (early 2000's), annual achievement growth accountabilities (early 2000's), and, of course, program improvement requirements and consequences (middle 2000's). With the development of new English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics standards in 2009 (corestandards.org)—adopted by many states and by California in 2010—and the gradual development and implementation of new assessment policies and practices (smarterbalance.org), we decided to focus our current research and development on these particular mandated reforms: How do schools and districts successfully transition from one set of standards and assessments to a new and more rigorous set of standards and assessments?

Since 2011-12, we have partnered with four Southern California school districts to undertake and study the process of transitioning to the new standards and assessments. Teacher collaboration has been the primary transition mechanism: studying the standards, developing and testing lessons and units of study, studying the new assessments and the performance standards upon which they were developed, reviewing and in some cases adopting new curriculum, designing new report cards, etc. In each of our partner districts committees of teachers and administrators have collaboratively engaged in transition

tasks and decision-making. In addition, in each of our partner districts, all teachers are part of a smaller, school-site team—grade level teams at elementary schools and content area teams at secondary schools. Within their respect teams, teachers work on changing and improving their teaching in accord with the content and rigor of the new standards and assessments. Most of the schools in our partner districts use the same concepts and methods described in this handbook, that is, each team has a designated facilitator that serves as a member of the school’s Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), and ILT members use the Plan-Do-Analyze Reflect protocol to facilitate team meetings across the year—planning, delivering, analyzing and reflecting on lessons and/or units of instruction designed to help students meet the new standards and perform well on the new assessments.