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Reaching Children Communally: School Improvement through Teacher Collaboration

Abstract

From a Christian understanding of both learning and community, this research examines the impact of teacher collaboration on student achievement and school culture in North American schools. Particularly in high schools, due to structural challenges, lack of administrative support and teacher satisfaction with the status quo, peer collaboration is not common. Five cases are examined. The first three demonstrate a positive connection between teacher collaboration and school improvement. The fourth demonstrates that teacher evaluation can also benefit from a much more participatory role for the teacher. The last case examines some of the challenges of centering collaboration in high school subject departments and suggests ways in which the departments should work collaboratively within the learning community. The role of school leadership in promoting teacher collaboration is also examined. Implications of the research for Langley Christian High School are identified.

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Reaching Children Communally:
School Improvement through Teacher Collaboration

by

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B.A. Calvin College, 1974

Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
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Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa
November, 2008

Reaching Children Communally:

School Improvement through Teacher Collaboration

by

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Abstract

From a Christian understanding of both learning and community, this research examines the impact of teacher collaboration on student achievement and school culture in North American schools. Particularly in high schools, due to structural challenges, lack of administrative support and teacher satisfaction with the status quo, peer collaboration is not common. Five cases are examined. The first three demonstrate a positive connection between teacher collaboration and school improvement. The fourth demonstrates that teacher evaluation can also benefit from a much more participatory role for the teacher. The last case examines some of the challenges of centering collaboration in high school subject departments and suggests ways in which the departments should work collaboratively within the learning community. The role of school leadership in promoting teacher collaboration is also examined. Implications of the research for Langley Christian High School are identified.

Introduction

Today's schools reflect the individualism of North American culture. Even though they are taught in communal settings, learners rarely take responsibility for the education of their peers. The purpose of education is frequently identified as a way for students to realize personal career goals. Teachers get along, but do not always discuss their craft with each other. The educational enterprise is in need of a strong dose of communal reflection and practice.

Educational mission and vision statements commonly challenge this individualistic spirit by describing schools as *learning communities*. For example, Langley Christian School, a Pre-K–12 system in Langley, British Columbia, speaks of developing “a *community* (italics added) of students, staff, parents and supporters who seek to worship Jesus Christ in their educational pursuits and life” (www.langleychristian.com/philosophy, 2004, para. 1). The Langley Christian High School Student Handbook (2008), refers to the school as a “*community* (italics added) of learners and leaders” who together build an “environment where a spirit of caring, responsibility, and justice is daily practiced” (p. 14). It is clear from Langley Christian School official documents that the school believes that students reach their full potential in community.

These documents are not clear however, about the role of teacher collaboration within a learning community. This research explores the correlation between teacher collaboration and students' opportunity to reach their full potential and will consider some implications for Langley Christian High School.

Among North American educators there has been long standing consensus that secondary school teachers too often work in isolation from their colleagues (Warren, 1990). Personal relations between colleagues may be strong, and staffroom discussions may be friendly, witty, and intellectually stimulating. Yet strong, collaborative professional development, where colleagues converse about their students, their courses and their lesson plans, is less common. High school teachers seem to live their professional lives in the “parallel play stage” (Barth, 2006, p. 10) performing similar tasks in isolation, as “a bunch of independent kingdoms connected by a common parking lot” (White & McIntosh, 2007, p. 30).

Before concluding that high school teachers are by nature less collaborative than their elementary and middle school colleagues, we need to acknowledge structural barriers to collaboration. Scheduling realities and teaching assignments often deny high school teachers the common planning time they need. Secondary teachers are typically specialists, and do not have the interdependent teaching roles that teachers at the middle and elementary levels enjoy - even within their own departments. Secondly, high schools are busy environments. Somewhere between lesson planning, evaluating, extra-curricular activities, and other professional responsibilities, teachers need to find ways to collaborate professionally that do not add to the time pressures they already face.

A third barrier to meaningful collaborative professional development is the absence of peers in the teacher evaluation process. Content to merely assess teacher performance, traditional methods of teacher evaluation have failed to encourage professional growth. “Teacher evaluation has generally been defined as a mechanism for appraisal in order to determine fitness for employment rather than a means for improving

performance”(Goldstein, 2007, p. 487). This has been acknowledged for some time already. Wagner and Hill (1996) had also concluded that there was a “lack of a clear link between teacher evaluation and teacher development” (p. 6).

School administrators need to ask themselves some soul-searching questions regarding the absence of serious collaboration in secondary schools. This problem has not been seriously addressed in most North American high schools (Little, 1990). Regrettably, secondary school leadership may be satisfied with the current “safe” arrangement, with teachers ensconced in the isolation of classrooms. Perhaps the simpler collegial atmosphere produced by the status quo is preferable to the volatility a culture of collaboration might produce.

The cynic is tempted to explain this phenomenon in terms of Michel Foucault’s (1977) *panopticon* metaphor. The panopticon was English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s prison design which allowed guards to observe all the isolated prisoners without their knowing whether or not they were being watched at any given time. Foucault’s premise is that throughout much of the history of western civilization, our society has increasingly been ordered by the “disciplines” (p. 209) of panopticism. Through the “disciplines,” people are treated as individuals, separated from one another, and controlled. Our institutions seek to control by managing, cataloguing, grouping, assigning, observing, evaluating. Communal expressions and activity are discouraged.

Says Foucault:

We are much less Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine (p. 217).

The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities (p. 201).

School administrators need to ask themselves how they view knowledge. When knowledge is limited to information, communal reflection and deliberation are compromised. Knowledge should never be used as a power chip to control or manipulate teachers. School leadership rests not on possession of information that others don't have, but on the identity and team building gifts on the leader. The choice for leadership is to use knowledge to imprison, or to build a school culture where knowledge is generated in community as truths that liberate are explored and discovered.

To be sure, the "fault" lies not only with school leadership. A more balanced explanation would consider the myriad of administrative duties facing principals daily, and would urge teachers to think of themselves as members of learning communities rather than isolated classroom pedagogues. But creating collaborative school cultures remains one of leadership's most crucial priorities. Unless school administrators provide time, encouragement, and opportunity for collaborative professional growth, teacher insecurity will often win over bold vulnerability to share professional joys and challenges.

Research Questions

Children and teenagers are the *raison d'être* of our schools. Although teachers and administrators may be content with professional isolation, the crucial question is whether students pay a price. The hypothesis of this research is that educators working together produce better schools. The question that this research will attempt to answer is: What is

the impact of collaborative professional development on student achievement and school culture? Subsequently, the following related questions will be considered:

- How can collaborative professional development support the teacher evaluation process?
- What are the implications of these findings on the tradition of grouping secondary teachers by departments rather than a different type of grouping?
- What should school administration do to promote professional collaboration?

Definitions of Terms

In the interest of clear communication, it is important that the meanings of terms in this research be concise. The definitions listed here are the researcher's unless otherwise indicated.

Professional Development – Danielson and McGreal (2000) define professional development as “the process by which competent teachers achieve higher professional competence and expand their understanding of self, role, context, and career” (p. 99). In Christian schools, teachers achieve ‘higher professional competence’ when they bring practice in line with the school community’s mission and vision.

Collaborative professional development – Collaborative professional development refers to any professional development undertaken with one or more colleague.

School culture - DuFour and Eaker (1998) point out that “the culture of an organization is founded upon the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norms for that organization – norms that shape how its people think, feel and act” (p. 131.)

Student Achievement – Student achievement refers to the degree to which students succeed in developing their intellectual, social, physical, aesthetic and spiritual gifts. It is understood that progress in some of these dimensions is more measurable than in others.

Collegial work – Collegial work is understood to be professional work performed in groups, by educators, to promote the vision and mission of the school. Collegial work therefore should be educational and should directly or indirectly benefit students. The terms **collegial** and **collaborative** will be used interchangeably.

Formative Evaluation – Formative evaluation is understood to be an evaluation process in which the teacher is an active participant. It identifies strengths and weaknesses, and is aimed at the professional growth and development of the teacher.

School Improvement – School improvement denotes improvement in student achievement and school culture.

Learning Community – Learning community refers to the all people involved in the process of learning in a given school (students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents). All have their unique roles, but they grow, explore, and discover together as they live out a common educational mission and vision.

Literature Review

An exploration of the impact of teacher collaboration on student achievement and school culture forms the first and most significant part of this research. A few brief studies are reported on, followed by three more thorough case studies which shed light on the main research question. Collaboration and teacher evaluation is then examined in a case study on a peer assistance and review program. Another study focuses on the suitability of high school subject departments as the locus for meaningful professional

collaboration. The literature review concludes with a brief look at the role of school administration in promoting collaborative learning communities.

Teacher Collaboration and Student Achievement and School Culture

It would appear from the literature that when teachers collaborate, schools improve. DuFour and Eaker (1998) argue convincingly that such forms of peer collaboration as reflective dialogue, peer teacher observation, joint planning and curriculum development will improve practice and student learning. Benefits of collaborative curriculum development which they identify include: (a) more focused planning which enables teachers to focus on essential outcomes, (b) increased probability that students will access the “intended curriculum”, (c) better tests, (d) improved ability to identify areas of low achievement levels, and (e) increased teacher motivation to excel.

. In *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (2004), from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, teacher collaboration is presented as one of the key avenues towards positive change and growth for America’s high school students. Throughout this document schools are understood to be learning communities, and the authors promote a wide variety of collaborative professional activities such as observing each others’ classrooms, shared lesson and curriculum planning, identifying student weakness, sharing and discussing professional literature, and collective decision making. Educational benefits in terms of student learning and building healthy school environments are also identified. At the end of their report this consortium of educators provides thirty-two recommendations, the second and third of which require peer collaboration:

2. Each high school will establish a site council and accord other meaningful roles in decision making to students, parents, *and members of the staff* (italics, added) to promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.
3. A high school will regard itself as a community in which members of the staff collaborate to develop and implement the school's learning goals. (p. 151)

It is clear from the organization of this volume and articulated in its introduction, that these two recommendations are foundational to the document. Twenty-nine educational recommendations follow, and they all assume meaningful collaboration of teachers in a learning community.

Several case studies demonstrate clearly that collaborative professional development produces school improvement. A middle school in Loveland, Colorado had its lowest test scores ever in 2002. Changing the way teachers used their professional time to more collaborative activities which encouraged reflective self-analysis as well as analysis of student achievement and instructional strategies, improved reading scores by 19%, writing by 27% and Math scores by as much as 40% (Lauer & Matthews, 2007).

Another study demonstrates how peer coaching arrangements positively affect achievement and school culture. A South Carolina school district initiative saw the addition of a science "coach" for each school. One hundred forty-four coaches are working with 2,500 elementary and middle school teachers and administrators from forty-five school districts. The coach is an elementary teacher whose responsibility is to assist elementary teachers with their science lessons. S/he moves from one classroom to the next, assisting teachers with their science lesson plans, observing and reflecting on

lessons, sharing excitement about successes and disappointments, modeling lessons, and locating resources. This one-to-one peer collaboration has single handedly produced dramatic increases in science test scores (Dempsey, 2007). Dempsey reports that school culture was positively impacted as “continuous engagement with the coaching cycle over time changed ... teachers. And their change has changed students” (p. 13).

A third study clearly shows how teacher collaboration can be more effective in achieving school improvement than the more traditional approach of providing workshops for entire school faculties. Teachers at a school in Monroe Township, New Jersey, decided to spend much more of their professional development time working collaboratively instead of inviting outside consultants to present “one-shot workshops”. Tienken and Stonaker (2007) report that the school’s professional development committee found that: (a) teachers learn best outside the constraints of large-group workshops, (b) learning is an outcome of personal interactions, (c) teachers are motivated by participating in a community of learners where knowledge is created and shared among its members, (d) small groups facilitate communication and learning (p. 25).

In their exhaustive case study, Mac Iver, Ruby, Balfanz, and Byrnes (2003) investigate the effect of a highly collaborative school-wide program aimed at improving student achievement and school culture at a low-performing school. They point out that, while the focus of professional development has been on “one size fits all” sessions for the whole school, research suggests that such generic staff development has little or no effect on classroom practices or achievement scores. What is needed, they say, is professional development and coaching that is immediately useful and focused on the teacher’s specific instructional program.

Mac Iver et al report extensively on a Philadelphia school that was falling so far behind that it was at risk of “reconstitution” – a process that would have seen the closure of the school and its students assigned to other schools. Jay Cooke Middle School, serves children and families in a densely populated neighbourhood in north-central Philadelphia. At the time of the study, 81 percent of the students were African American, 11 percent Asian, and 8 percent Latino. Ninety percent of these children came from low-income families. To prevent reconstitution by the state of Pennsylvania, and more importantly, to meet the needs of their students, the educators at Cooke Middle took the bold step of implementing the Talent Development (TD) model. This research and standards-based program was characterized by “multiple tiers of teacher support” (Mac Iver et al, 2003, p. 4). Inside the classroom, skilled curriculum coaches provided collegial, nonjudgmental support in the form of “modeling or co-teaching a class, observing and providing constructive feedback, advising on specific questions, and modifying lessons and approaches” (p. 4). Teachers who shared the same students were given common planning time to form interdisciplinary teams in order to collegially address student challenges. Implementation of the program evolved into valuable collaborative professional development. Talent Development’s curriculum coaches met regularly with the school’s leadership team to assess implementation of the program and the professional development that was taking place. This enabled teachers on the leadership team to “speak with one voice” (p. 5) when they met with other teachers to refine implementation as the process continued. It also helped distribute the school leadership, further promoting an ethos of communal professional development. The research of Mac

Iver et al focused on whether the TD program produced the gains in student achievement needed to take the school off the list of schools at risk of reconstitution.

In a quasi-experimental design, a control school was selected. In terms of race, standardized assessment scores, attendance and promotion rates, this school was Philadelphia's closest match to Cooke, thus diminishing the likelihood of these variables compromising the validity of the study. Student surveys were used at both Cooke and the comparison school to assess implementation levels in the English, Math and Science classes. By availing themselves to the 1997 – 2001 Stanford 9 Achievement test results for 4th and 7th graders in the Philadelphia School District, the study used a pre-test – post-test format to measure the effects of the TD program on student achievement.

The study credits the collegial training, the continual encouragement from the curriculum coaches, and “a ‘we’re all in this together’ spirit”, (Mac Iver et al, 2003, p.8) with a very strong implementation level. The TD program, dependent as it was on continual, significant collaborative work, significantly improved student achievement at Cooke Middle School. SAT 9 Reading Achievement results (i.e. pre-test and post-test) showed that, while Cooke students, who had “significantly lower reading comprehension scores than their peers at the comparison school” (p. 9) in grade 4, had completely closed that achievement gap by grade 7. The impact of the TD collegial program on reading comprehension was “significant and substantial”, the study concluded. A similar gap was eliminated for Math and Science as Cooke students out-gained comparison students by as much as 36 percent for Math (p. 12) and 40 percent for Science (p. 14).

It would follow logically that Cooke would also see an improvement in promotion rates. While before TD implementation there was no difference in promotion rates

between Cooke and the control school, there was an average difference of 7 percent between the 1997-98 and 2000-01 school years, with significant individual year differences. This is demonstrated in Table 1. (Mac Iver et al, 2003, p. 18)

Table 2 (Mac Iver et al, 2003, pp. 18, 19) shows the consistent achievement gains in all three subjects over the four-year period. The total index number reflects progress in achievement in all three subjects as well as growth in school culture in terms of improved attendance and promotion rates. The table is visual documentation that collaborative professional development favourably impacts both student achievement and school culture.

Table 1

Comparison of Promotion Rates Pre- and Post-Implementation of Talent Development Model

	1995–1996	1996–1997	1997–1998	1998–1999	1999–2000	2000–2001
Cooke	96% (642/940)	95% (798/1228)	100% (867/1079)	99% (886/1076)	97% (978/1070)	90% (849/945)
Control	96% (517/754)	95% (622/987)	94% (621/901)	95% (739/996)	86% (785/949)	83% (812/930)
Difference	0%	0%	+6%	+4%	+11%	+7%
P-Value	0.777	0.980	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Table 2

Cooke Middle School Gains on School District of Philadelphia Performance Index Since Implementation of TD Model

	1996– 1997	1997– 1998	1998– 1999	1999– 2000	Change
Reading	51.2	53.5	60.8	63.1	+11.9
Math	31.2	41.3	44.7	48.3	+17.1
Science	39.8	47.7	46.1	51.8	+12.0
Total	57.2	65.0	65.9	68.5	+11.3

Mac Iver et al (2003) conclude from this study that low-performing schools, even those with a high number of students from low-income families, “can substantially improve over a relatively short period of time” (p. 19). As keys to this improvement, they cite “on-going professional development” and “the development of school-based experts to sustain the reforms” (p. 19). These experts provided collegial support to help their colleagues grow professionally in order that their students could grow academically. They emphasize that “the success of the reform depended on the cooperative nature of the effort” (p. 19).

Mac Iver et al (2003) point out as well that such traditional methods as exhortation and standardized testing have proven not to be strong enough tools to ensure

good instruction and a coherent curriculum. They maintain instead that the tools needed by teachers in high-poverty urban middle schools include “useful monthly staff development focused on instructional programs”, and “individualized coaching by respected peers who know how to distinguish effective variations in implementation from toxic modifications and who also know how to provide feedback that is useful but not evaluative” (p. 20). These tools very clearly require teaching professionals to work with their peers to improve student achievement.

The study should be reassuring, they say, to other schools looking for ways to implement improvement plans in response to the *No Child Left Behind Act*. The Cooke Middle School story is proof that change need not be merely bureaucratic and that major improvements in student achievement can occur. On the basis of their study, Mac Iver et al continue to encourage other schools implementing school improvement programs to focus on providing collegial support as they offer excellent instruction day to day.

Another in-depth study that speaks clearly to the value of authentic teacher collaboration towards improving schools, is that of Joyce and Showers (2002). They report on a case at the US Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS) in Panama, in which “staff development played a key role” (p. 2) in producing significant school improvement. What started as serious collective concern about low reading levels for elementary students, turned into a major initiative across the school district. A task force was formed to conduct an empirical inquiry into the problem, lest the project be based on mere suspicion or opinion. The inquiry collected data for 14 weeks from student reading logs showing the number of books they had read each week. The results, shown in the “baseline” columns of Table 3 (p. 4.), were disturbing.

The learning community flew into action by initiating the “Just Read” program. The district task group intentionally created a cultural climate that would promote reading. They organized a campaign kick-off, lots of communication with homes, campaign newsletters, contests between grades, T-shirts with “Just Read” logos, and the like. Knowing that on-going formative assessment achieves better results, “data were collected and organized weekly so that leadership teams and study teams of teachers could reflect on them, (and) classes and teams of students could see their progress” (Joyce and Showers, 2002, p. 3).

Table 3

Books Read by Grade and Period: Comparison of Baseline and First Target Period

	Baseline		First Target	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Grade 1	21	0–28	47	7–89
Grade 2	35	2–71	50	8–104
Grade 3	10	3–24	11	1–23
Grade 4	4	1–5	8	3–29
Grade 5	3	1–5	16	4–38
Grade 6	3	1–5	18	6–38

Finding many ways to celebrate progress, teachers focused on the goals of the program. The per grade reading results of the 14 week (First Target) period after the campaign kick-off were then compared to those of the initial 14 week base-line period. Table 3 (p. 4) demonstrates the measurable benefits of this collaborative project.

Using the California Test of Basic Skills, subsequent standardized reading test scores showed that “the 5th grade mean had increased from the 48th percentile to the 66th percentile. The effect size of about 2.0 was computed using comparable students in other schools as the control” (Joyce and Showers, 2002, p. 4). Joyce and Showers conclude their report by stressing that “embedded staff development” in the form of “discussions, modeling data collection and analysis, and modeling action plan development...sustained the initiative” (p. 5). The DoDDS experience demonstrated that significant gains in school improvement occur when teachers collaborate together to address an educational problem.

The last case study examining the impact of teacher collaboration on student achievement and school culture comes from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement’s Center for the Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995). This Center mandated a longitudinal study of schools which were well on the way to restructuring. The focus was on how restructuring affected teachers’ work over a three year period. Researchers “were interested in developing a theoretical basis for understanding the intersection between school reform and teachers’ work” (p.17). One of the themes that motivated the study was “understanding the nature and development of professional communities within restructuring schools” (p.17). The study clearly connected collaborative professional development to both student achievement

and school culture. Researchers focused on inner city schools, as these were considered to be schools where the students would be most likely to be “at risk”.

In this ethnographic research project, data was collected at each of the sites by faculty members of the Center, or by advanced graduate students, each of whom spent between 30 and 45 days at the site over the 3-year period. These researchers interviewed all the teachers, administrators, district administrators, external evaluators and experts who were brought in to help. They collected data on classroom observations as well as on all meetings that occurred while they were on site. Together the research team decided on the topics for which data needed to be gathered. The case studies were based on field notes taken by the researchers over the three year period. Great care was taken to protect the data quality. Researchers used multiple informants and observations, triangulated multiple data sources, and became familiar with their site’s context, which allowed them to interpret and to ask follow-up questions.

“Collegial challenge” (Louis, et al, 1995, p. 19) was another way of protecting the study’s validity. Regular meetings were held with other members of the team, who were doing similar studies at other sites, using the same data collection methods. The researchers shared their written reports with their colleagues for “critical review, questioning, and emendation” (p. 19). These colleagues would often challenge the site visitors’ interpretation or ask for evidence to substantiate a conclusion. The research report was reviewed by key faculty at each school, as well as by the advisory board of the Center for Organization and Restructuring of Schools, who could raise questions about preliminary findings, data, and methods.

As each field worker produced a case study on their site, the “within-case analysis” of the topic of professional community at one of the sites is helpful to this research on whether collaborative professional development leads to school improvement. Thomas Paine High School, “occupies an entire block of a large city in the Midwest” (King & Weiss, 1995 p. 77). The school has a noble history of educational stability and athletic success, but in recent decades has been considered the “worst in the city” (p. 76) as it has struggles with problems common to urban schools: inconsistent attendance rates, an extremely high rate of student turnover, and unstable families. For the past 10 years Thomas Paine has performed poorly on achievement test scores, and the threat of school violence compromises the possibility of a healthy school climate. To make matters more challenging, the city has an open enrollment policy, prompting neighbourhood students to opt for other schools with better reputations. In spite of this all, Thomas Paine’s facilities are described as “surprisingly adequate” (p. 79), and teachers have enough educational resources for their students. The school has an active media center, a computer lab and a fully functional gym. Leadership of the school has been effective, but experiencing unpreventable changeover in recent years. Of the 730 students, 47.9 percent are African-American, 41.7 percent are white, while the remainder are from other minorities.

In 1990, the school principal began the process of rebuilding Paine’s programs, focusing on improved student achievement and faculty collaboration. The first thing she did was to set up teaching teams, each of which was empowered to research and implement change. These reforms ranged from investigating and applying the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools to developing an International Baccalaureate (IB)

program and collaboration with external agencies. The collegial activities, aimed at school improvement, were all forms of professional development as individual teachers grew professionally while learning from each other. Besides regular department meetings two to four times per month, Paine's teachers were also part of "student centered" instructional teams (teams of faculty members who taught the same students), so that student needs could be collegially addressed. These teams also met at least twice a week.

It appears that these and other similar initiatives paid off for Paine and for their students. Teachers reported significant changes that reflected a higher level of collaboration. It was no longer possible to "hide out" (King & Weiss, 1995, p. 82) one said, and the collaboration produced more "innovative" (p. 82) teaching to the point where it was no longer possible for teachers to "teach out of (their) file cabinet day by day" (p. 82), because students noticed ... and complained. While complete 5th year achievement data was not available when the study by King and Weiss was published, there were already significant indicators that academic achievement was on the rise. Because of the reforms, Thomas Paine is one of only two schools in the state to implement a program called "Multiple Options, Multiple Opportunities", aimed at improving student post-secondary options. Because of this program, no "general math" class is offered, and all grade 9 students take algebra. The Math department faculty collaboratively learned the new "Interactive Math Program", aimed at making Math more applicable and relevant and thereby improving student achievement. At the time of publication, this program showed great potential for increasing the number of minority students eligible for enrollment in the IB program. Perhaps the best indicator of the success of the collaborative reforms was that in March, 1994, when the 10th grade

standardized achievement test results were released, Paine was, “for the first time since anyone could remember” (p. 95), not ranked last.

There were measurable indications of a significant improvement in school culture as well. The Renaissance program, which offers incentives such as free admissions to movies and athletic events, has resulted in an impressive improvement in attendance rates. The number of students honored in school assemblies for improved attendance jumped from 185 in 1991 to 404 in 1994. Teachers universally attest to improvement in school ethos. One of them put it this way:

When I first came to Paine High, it was not what it is today. This is a much better place.... I see students who are very friendly. I see students who are happy. I see students who are more willing to do better work. I see more involvement in the classroom than I did before. (King & Weiss, 1995, p. 76)

The results of the study of Thomas Paine High School and the other schools demonstrate a strong correlation between the collaborative professional growth that accompanied school reform and marked improvement in both the school culture and student achievement. The success of a school and of its graduates depends more on the effectiveness of the school as a working, collegial community than it does on expertise and gifts of individual teachers.

Teacher Collaboration and Peer Evaluation

At this point consideration will be given to whether collaborative professional development could possibly make a difference to the process of teacher evaluation.

Dufour and Eaker (1998) point out that collaborative work among peers provides teachers with useful feedback on their performance, linking peer professional development to teacher evaluation.

Danielson and McGreal (2000) identify collaborative professional development as an integral component of teacher evaluation. “....A(n evaluation) system that builds in collaboration, particularly if that collaboration demands reflection on practice, is more likely to yield genuine effort than one that does not” (p. 24). While insisting on the role of summative evaluation for beginning teachers and those who need remediation, they argue for formative evaluation for tenured teachers, much of which should be of a collaborative nature. Through peer collaborative work on curriculum, instructional strategies and action research, as well as structured professional dialogue on educational topics, professional growth occurs resulting in improvement in both school culture and student achievement. They promote collegial professional growth plans “that result in the continuous improvement of student learning” (p. 106).

McColskey and Egelson (1997) include such collaborative professional development activities as observing exemplary teaching, and in-class observations by a peer as integral components of effective formative evaluation. They report an increased sense of professionalism, a more reflective view of teaching, new leadership roles, and improved classroom instruction as results of peer evaluation. A Surry County, North Carolina educator in their study, reports that teachers take charge of improvement in classrooms and are “willing to discuss weaknesses and work to correct deficiencies” (p. 21). Surry County’s administrators and teachers reported more collegiality, collaboration,

professionalism, motivation, and the positive student outcomes that accompany formative evaluation.

Goldstein's (2007) empirical study of the effectiveness of peer assistance and review (PAR) is helpful. The PAR model was first used in Toledo, Ohio in 1981, and has seen sporadic use across the USA since then.

The key players of PAR are "consulting teachers" (CTs), "participating teachers" (PTs), and the "PAR panel". CTs are identified for their excellence in teaching, and are given release time from their regular duties to mentor about 10 PTs - new teachers and veteran teachers in need of intervention. The CT provides pedagogical support, but also formally evaluates the PTs. The CTs regularly report to the PAR panel which is made up of district teachers and administrators. They also seek advice from the panel, and at the Spring panel meeting the CT makes recommendations about each PT's continued employment.

Using a single-case design, this qualitative study focuses on a California urban school district. For the first year of the program, the district selected 10 CTs to provide support for 88 beginning teachers as well as three veterans who had been identified by administrators as "in need of intervention". Using the Miles and Huberman (1994) research guidelines, the study collected data for a year and a half, "with follow-up data one year and three years later" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 483). The sample included the nine members of the PAR panel and 10 CTs. Three of the CTs provided more thorough data. PTs and principals were included "based on their connection to the three case-study CTs, as well as additional principals and PTs who might represent divergent or unrepresented viewpoints" (p. 483).

Methods used to collect data included interviews, surveys and observations. For a period of one year, researchers attended all monthly panel meetings and nearly all CT weekly meetings. Totaling 311 hours, these meetings were all tape recorded and scripted. All CTs and panel members were interviewed multiple times. Eleven principals, 15 PTs, and three district-level administrators were also interviewed, totaling 67 interviews, all but 3 of which were tape-recorded and scripted. Ongoing analysis of the data was based on field notes, analytic memos, and coding. A multi-wave survey with panel members, CTs, principals and PTs was completed during the first year of the study. PTs also completed surveys at the end of the second year, “providing longitudinal data and filling gaps left by the primary study” (Goldstein, 2007, p. 483).

PAR was found to be an effective alternative to the “‘dog and pony’ show of most teacher evaluation systems” (Goldstein, 2007, p. 488), burdened as they are with the problems of limited time and lack of subject expertise on the part of administrators. Findings show that, while one of PAR’s objectives is evaluation, in almost all cases, significant professional growth also flows from the peer collaboration between the consulting and participating teachers. Yes, the end of the PAR process called for a summative assessment, but this was based on hours of ongoing collaborative formative assessment, observation and discussion as well as the CT’s intimate knowledge of the classroom and subject matter of the PT.

While some educators have argued that the goals of summative assessment and collegial support conflict, others have promoted the idea that support and evaluation are both leadership functions, and that they complement each other. (Danielson and McGreal, 2000). Goldstein’s study concludes that linking support and evaluation does not adversely

affect the PT's trust in the CT. Because of the support offered throughout the process by the CT, both CTs and PTs reported a strong rapport and high level of trust.

The study cites "ongoing feedback to PT's about how to teach" as "the most frequently named element of PAR in the research" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 489), mentioned by 94 percent of all interviewees. This is attributed to the pairing of CTs and PTs by grade or subject matter, not possible in traditional evaluation. Many PTs reported this matching as critical to their ability to work meaningfully with their CT, as it enabled the CT to provide classroom-specific help that a principal probably could not. Because of this high level of familiarity with the classroom and the course, the CT was also able to provide individualized support, the kind of support teachers are so strongly encouraged to provide to their students. Because of the time given to this process, CTs could look back over the year to observe what support the PT had received and how s/he had responded.

The importance of professional collaboration is again brought out in this study as it cites teams of colleagues, continually in communication with each other as crucial to the evaluation process. CTs met at least weekly with each other. Given their different perspectives on the PT, CT's would meet with principals to ensure they agreed on professional development recommendations the CT would recommend to the panel. The study names the collegial work of the PAR panel hearings as the most significant public examination of PT practice, removing it from classroom isolation to collegial support.

Deciding on continued PT employment became a process subject to collegial scrutiny rather than the recommendation of one person. This process both encouraged professional growth and diminished the chances that low-performing teachers would be

tenured in their isolated classrooms. Because of the collaborative nature of the process, the panel was much more confident in the quality and accuracy of the evaluations than principals typically are, and were therefore more willing to recommend non-renewal of a PT's contract, as is clear from the following data:

Rating PAR's effect on teacher evaluation in the district, the combined group of principals, panel members, and CTs ($n = 34$) had a mean of 4.60 ($SD = 0.70$), where 5 was a very positive effect. (Goldstein, 2007, p. 495).

CTs were recommending non-renewal, principals and panel members had confidence in their recommendations.... The result was that out of 88 new teachers who were in the program, eleven (12.5) percent were non-renewed for employment in year 1 of the program, a stark contrast to the automatic granting of tenure that often meets new teachers.... In addition, three out of three veterans (100 percent) were encouraged into retirement.... In the year immediately before PAR, only three teachers out of a teaching force of almost 3,000 (0.1 percent) were non-renewed (p. 496).

Unencumbered by administrative lack of time or conflicts of interest, the panel was able to make necessary decisions that principals were reluctant to make, and to stand behind them.

Goldstein concludes her article by pointing out that thanks to programs like PAR, teachers may finally be prepared to take ownership of the "gatekeeper function" (Goldstein, 2007, p. 503) of their profession – an obligation that members of other professions have long readily assumed. Thanks to their knowledge, expertise and collaborative spirits, CT's were granted well a well-earned level of authority. The data

presented in the study suggest that PAR may very well provide the support that new teachers need in order to continue serving effectively in their professions. PAR has demonstrated that, in spite of longstanding doubts on the part of policy makers, educators, and the public, teachers are quite capable of collegially regulating themselves, for the sake of their own professional growth.

Teacher Collaboration and High School Departments

Consideration will now be given to what a collaborative school culture would mean for the practice of organizing collegial work around subject departments, so common in North American high schools. Is this the best way to achieve meaningful collaboration? Little (1990) argues that while school-wide professional development is crucial, teachers learn best when their work is directly related to their specific course work. This is echoed in Sparks' interview with Shulman (1992) who, while affirming the importance of generic, big-picture collaboration, says that "human learning and teaching is highly specific and situated" (p. 1) and argues for improvement in teacher content knowledge and subject specific pedagogical strategies. In the high school setting these goals could be best accomplished in context of subject departments.

Hill (1995) makes a strong case for the potential of subject departments to promote effective "collegial collaboration" and "shared leadership" (p. 126) by highlighting one high school Social Studies department. The department is indeed characterized by creative, committed professionals, always working collaboratively as they find new ways to connect subject matter to children.

Given the demonstrated benefits of collaboration, the students in Hill's case will perform well in Social Studies. The question remains though, do strong departments

encourage student achievement in other curricular areas, and do they stimulate a healthy school culture? Hargreaves and Macmillan (1995) report on two cases taken from a study of eight Ontario high schools which was focused on teacher reaction to legislated de-streaming (ending the practice of grouping students by ability level). This study explores the structured relationships *between* departments, in the context of impending school change. Teachers interviewed represented six school subjects and were chosen based on criteria that would enhance the study's reliability. In each school the principal and at least eight teachers were interviewed on one or more occasions. Semi-structured interviews included a focus on teachers' working relationships with their colleagues within and outside of their departments, as well as their perspectives and practices regarding pedagogy and school subjects. The 1½ -2 hour interviews were taped, transcribed, and reviewed for emergent themes.

The first school was described by its own stakeholders (principal, teachers, parents) as "traditional". Constituents prided themselves in the strong academic program, high academic standards, teacher retention, and *teacher dedication to their curricular subject and department* (italics added). Researchers found evidence of "patterns of balkanization of a subject-based nature" and that this limited the needs of its "general-level" students (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995, p. 147). The collegial structure was based on strong subject identities and teachers worked well collegially within them, though sometimes driven by the agenda of the department chair. Staff members across the curriculum recognized that the needs of academically struggling students were not being met, but instead of addressing the situation within or across departments, a "General-Level Committee" (p. 149) was struck which saw the issue as a self-contained

problem. The study also found that faculties organized into balkanized subject departments obscure individual teacher interest in, and capacities to change: their opinions are systematically ignored, leaving valuable human resources isolated (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995).

The study's second school intentionally moved away from subject departments for grade 9 to a cohort system in which the grade 9 teachers functioned as a team. However, without school-wide commitment and perseverance, and with leadership failure to communicate the vision to all staff, enduring subject loyalties and traditional departmental structures undermined the project (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995).

Hargreaves and Macmillan (1995) argue that strong subject departments do not promote teacher collaboration across the curriculum but instead produce a balkanization, a territorialism that is detrimental to the entire learning community. Individual teachers, as well as many students, particularly the academically weak, are marginalized. Because students are educated in a modernistic setting, characterized as it is by compartmentalization and rigidity, they are ill-prepared for the changing needs of a much more fluid postmodern world. The cross-curricular collaborative teamwork necessary to meet today's changing needs, they say, is sacrificed through exclusive reliance on traditional departmental collaboration.

Hargreaves and Macmillan are not arguing for the abolition of high school teacher collaboration organized around subject departments. But searching for "some sense of unity and wholeness in our schools" (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995, p.165), they argue for more integration of subjects which, they say, brings not only subjects and curriculum together, but also teachers, and can therefore be "a powerful tool for professional

learning” (p. 166). They also suggest that high schools move towards the organizational structure of a “moving mosaic” characterized by “debalkanized” (p. 167) subject departments whose boundaries are more blurred and who work alongside groups organized around other categories.

The studies by Little (1990), Hill (1995), and Hargreaves and Macmillan (1995), show that high school subject area departments have a valuable place within the high school structure, but that they should contribute to a general collaborative ethos, which in turn produces school improvement.

Teacher Collaboration and the Role of Administrators

There remains the question of how the administrative leadership of the school can promote professional collaboration among teachers. According to Danielson and McGreal (2000), the task of school administrators is to create conditions to enhance student learning, and creating a collaborative culture is a prerequisite for such learning.

Leadership is required to maintain focus on the quality of student learning, but within that context everyone in the school is ‘in it together’ to enhance student achievement, and their efforts should be seen as working in concert (p. 29).

Griffin (1990), maintains that at a time when principals are viewed as management and teachers as labour (p. 196), principals need increasingly to view their teachers, not as subordinate workers, but as fellow decision makers in collaborative settings. While typically teachers are decision makers only in their own classroom settings, the wise administrator views teachers as “classroom executives” (p. 196). Such a paradigm shift turns administrators and teachers into decision-making colleagues. Instead of being relegated to one classroom, teacher expertise will be respected and used by the entire

learning community. Such an approach says Griffin, will “promote interaction over isolation” (p. 209). Professional dialogue will more often take the form of collegial deliberation about vision, curriculum and major educational issues, and less often focus on administrative detail.

Like Danielson and McGreal, Griffin assumes “that the school principal is the person who can and should take the responsibility for creating an environment ... that supports meaningful curriculum improvement” (p. 199). He adds that “this view distributes responsibility for the curriculum work across the teacher executive cadre...” (p. 199), i.e. this view of the principal’s role enhances teacher collaboration. Griffin identifies time, schedules, rewards, and their own collaborative behaviour, as ways in which principals can create such meaningful collegiality. It is clear from these authors that for schools to develop collaborative cultures, knowledgeable, creative administrative leadership is required.

Discussion

Summary

The literature is convincing: Student achievement and school culture are sacrificed when teachers work in isolation from each other. When professional development occurs collaboratively, school improvement follows. The case studies of the Jay Cooke Middle School, the “Just Read” program in Panama, and the Thomas Paine High School, all demonstrate that students begin to make significant improvements in achievement when their teachers work in community with each other. They also show that schools are happier, more meaningful places when collaborative professional development produces its results. Extending the collaboration focus to teacher evaluation

has produced a more effective process which honours the participation of the teacher and ultimately improves the learning process. Secondary school subject departments also provide opportunities for meaningful teacher collaboration, but department members need to look for inter-disciplinary collaboration as well, allowing entire faculties to implement the mission and vision of the school together. Viewing their teachers as professional colleagues, principals are called to create conditions under which teacher collaboration and student learning will flourish.

Implications

Langley Christian High School (LCHS) is a strong community which enjoys a common vision, strong relationships, high academic standards and a healthy school culture. Given the reality that there is always room for improvement, the following implications for LCHS are offered on the basis of the above research. These implications are presented in the order in which the corresponding research questions were raised.

Teacher Collaboration and Student Achievement and School Culture

Many LCHS teachers have been participating in courses on Christian worldview, educational philosophy and pedagogy together. This has been a highly collaborative activity which has contributed to a better communal understanding of the LCS mission and vision. They should be given opportunity to share insights with others as a way of continuing the vision conversation.

All-staff professional development should include deliberation about current grading practices. The LCHS staff began a discussion about assessment some time ago, but has not yet implemented the implied changes to grading practices, some of which are inconsistent with solid assessment principles. Sending a team of four or five teachers to

conferences focusing on assessment would be a way of initiating collegial conversation that would address questionable grading practices. It will take time for this kind of collaboration to produce change and growth, but success in student achievement will demonstrate its value.

But sometimes the faculty perception is that, because of the “tyranny of the urgent”, teachers don’t have the time to meet together. This opinion needs to be collegially challenged, so that teachers will understand collaborative work as effective use of their time: the more work that is done collegially, the less would need to be completed individually. Collaborative planning of course outlines, unit objectives, and other professional activities that affect classroom instruction and student achievement should be encouraged. Given the disadvantage that courses are not shared by teachers, it would be wise to provide time and opportunity for teachers to connect with other Christian school teachers to jointly plan for their courses and visit each other’s classes. No, this isn’t collaborative work with a site colleague, but given that effective collaboration is happening on more generic school-wide level, this subject specific collaboration with a Christian colleague will result in better teaching and better student achievement.

Besides school-wide and department-based professional development, peer coaching arrangements need to be developed. Moving beyond mentoring relationships typically arranged for new teachers to facilitate integration into a new setting, peers could visit each other’s classes, discuss instructional and assessment strategies, and share challenges and joys. Excellent teachers need to be trained in individualized coaching strategies. These teachers will know “how to distinguish effective variations in

implementation from toxic modifications and who also know how to provide feedback that is useful but not evaluative” (Mac Iver et al, 2003, p. 20).

Teacher Collaboration and Peer Evaluation

In light of Goldstein’s findings, the advantages of a peer assistance and review program should be considered. The new curriculum leaders at the Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia (SCSBC) have recently advised that “instructional leadership” should receive as much attention as curricular leadership in SCSBC schools. Perhaps in concert with SCSBC, such a program could be implemented. If principals of SCSBC schools would identify teachers who would benefit from this approach, perhaps a full time “consulting teacher” peer could undertake the assistance and review of approximately 10 teachers in SCSBC schools. The cost of this program would be shared by the schools using it, as this would save time for principals.

While it is true that the LCHS staff needs to work collaboratively on the “big picture” to implement the “whole school” vision, much collaboration needs to happen within the context of departments as well. At this point there is no danger that collaboration within departments would trump collaboration in general, as is often true in much larger, less personal settings. Much as the analysis of Hargreaves and Macmillan is accurate, the learning community that is LCHS needs to do both: encourage departments to work collaboratively in curricular areas *and* continue to build on strong interdisciplinary collegiality –in order to meet the ever changing needs of students and to promote the goals of the Langley Christian School community.

Teacher Collaboration and High School Departments

Departments need to set their goals and priorities for the year and review and update their course outlines, in the context of their departmental worldview statements. It would be good for the members of the department to share with each other some or all of the essential questions for their units, so that subject-informed colleagues can celebrate, critique and identify how key themes flow from the school mission and vision. As department chairs are not allocated administrative time within the schedule, they should be given time to initiate and plan how departmental goals and priorities can be achieved collaboratively. Curriculum coordinators should help them in this process.

Teacher Collaboration and the Role of Administrators

It is the task of leadership to initiate and continually celebrate the collaborative vision. Never assuming that teachers know what their administrators are thinking, school leadership needs to clearly and constantly articulate what is meant by collaborative work. The administrative team also needs to model collaboration by distributing leadership wherever possible. The curriculum coordinators, the athletic director, the student events coordinator, the academic and personal counselors, and others with leadership abilities should continually be included in the decision making process, and their involvement should be visible. Faculty meetings need to focus more on deliberation and less on dispensing information. Such leadership promotes a culture of collaboration characterized by teacher talk about their classrooms, their lessons, and their learners – to help take the mystery out of what goes on behind closed classroom doors and to preempt staffroom cynicism.

In order for a collaborative professional culture to grow at LCHS, the administrative team must also provide time and promote opportunity. The structures of schedules and professional development activities need to promote collaborative growth. One of the structural changes that should be considered is to modify the schedule so that, in lieu of three of the current five Professional Development days, teachers meet weekly for two hours (e.g. every Friday from 8:00AM – 10:00AM) on collaborative professional development projects. This would provide much needed continuity to Professional Development, as teachers work together in collaborative school-wide, departmental, or peer coaching settings. The change would require endorsement from the other Christian schools using the same bus transportation system.

This vision for the role of the administrators will preempt leading hierarchically in an attempt to control. Respecting the expertise and ability of teachers to contribute meaningfully to the broader educational goals of the school, will enable administrators and teachers together to build strong learning communities where children flourish and school culture thrives.

Conclusion

Palmer (1993) insists that gaining knowledge is a collaborative, communal process, which produces knowledge that can “be used in cooperative, not manipulative ways” (p. 38). Convincingly he argues that “knowledge” acquired individually has more potential to be used manipulatively, “relieving us of the need for mutual vulnerability,” which would be characteristic of “a community of selves and spirits related to each other in a complex web of accountability called ‘truth’” (p. 39). Palmer exposes the dangers of both objectivism – reduction of all created reality to things “out there” – and subjectivism

– the most common reaction to objectivism, but which produces “knowledge” too dependent on the “in here” of each individual:

Ironically, this effort to liberate the world from objectivism ends up by imprisoning the world once more. If my private perceptions are the measure of truth, if my truth cannot be challenged or enlarged by the perceptions of another, I have merely found one more way to objectify and hold the other at arm’s length, to avoid again the challenge of personal transformation.” (p. 55)

If we are to grow as persons and expand our knowledge of the world, we must consciously participate in the emerging community of our lives, in the claims made upon us by others as well as our claims upon them. Only in community does the person appear in the first place, and only in community can the person continue to become (p. 57).

Palmer’s notion of knowledge and of communal learning call to mind the Pauline “Body” metaphor of I Corinthians 12, and begins to really explain why collaborative professional development is key to student learning and a healthy community ethos. May the triune Father, Son and Spirit, who has modeled collaboration from the beginning when he said, “Let **us** make man in **our** image,” truly enable us to reflect that image in our collegial work. For the sake of his children!

Limitations

Although there were enough results to indicate that significant improvements to student achievement and school culture were on the way, it is regrettable that complete 5th year achievement data of the Thomas Paine High School study were not available to the researcher. Official results would have made this case stronger in demonstrating the

effect of collaborative work. Another limitation of this research is the transferability of cases studied, as modifying variables may not always be reported. Hopefully this research will deliver accurate information to help LCHS. But no two communities are ever identical, and there may be factors unique to LCHS that inhibit application of conclusions reached by research. Lastly, this researcher is a member of the LCHS administrative team, and therefore cannot claim objectivity in analysis of LCHS communal life.

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