Promoting Collaboration Among Teachers of Different Academic Disciplines in Rural School Districts

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Rural schools face many challenges. From the increased accountability standards to inadequate funding, teachers and administrators alike are utilizing instructional collaboration to raise student achievement. From increased accountability standards to inadequate funding, teacher and administrators alike face many challenges to ensure student achievement. As such, they have to find ways to overcome the obstacles that teaching has historically experienced. Instructional collaboration is among the responses to the challenges of rural education. This study seeks to determine what effects instructional collaboration has on rural school teachers. The researcher found rural schools that promote collaboration share three characteristics: (a) teachers and administrators create intentional dialogue to address instruction and student achievement, (b) administrators alter meeting time and class schedules to allow for collaboration, and (c) the structure of collaborative meetings narrow the focus of its members to address the issues at hand.

The pressure for teachers to ensure that all students learn and experience academic success is highlighted by the national debate over increased standardized testing requirements. From No Child Left Behind (2001) to the current Race to the Top (2012), several pieces of legislation have discouraged educators from teaching their courses to “teaching to the test” (Ravitch, 2010, 2013). With recent debates over the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, schools must adapt to another round of mandated testing. In a recent NEA survey (November 2014), Walker posited that forty-five percent of teachers considered leaving the profession due to the standardized testing (Walker, 2014). Furthermore, Walker noted that “teachers are dedicated individuals and many succeed in focusing on the positive, but the fact that testing has prompted such a high percentage of educators to contemplate such a move underscores its corrosive effect on the profession”. Many teachers have expressed their concerns about the impact of standardized tests on their ability to teach their respective subjects. However legislators seem to have largely ignored teachers’ calls for their place at the discussion table (Gonzalez, Brown, & Slate, 2008).

Rural schools face an additional challenge of increased federal pressures. Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, and Hupefeld (2014) found that rural schools struggle to maintain the requirements of federal regulations in five categories: “funding, staffing, flexibility, regional services, and professional development” (p. 8). Yettick et al., conclude that annual federal financial support often does not cover the costs of professional development, thus forcing districts to stretch their funds even further than their non-rural counterparts.

Review of the Literature
There can be little doubt that effective teachers influence the academic development of students. Within the past two decades, several researchers have confirmed that improving teacher quality and professional development increases student achievement (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Similarly, Sanders and Rivers (1996) acknowledged that the quality of instruction can have lingering academic effects of more than two years. Thus, a student entering high school is likely to be aided or hindered by the quality of instruction from their seventh grade school year.

For many districts and organizations, the term “collaboration” has become a part of their stated mission and core values. However, as Robinson and Buly (2007) suggested, “the word [collaboration] is often used generically, implying the collaboration happens when individuals are working together.” (p. 84). Researchers have expanded this generic belief to incorporate a broad range of possibilities. One aspect of collaboration is defined as the process of creating solutions to mutually shared problems (Idol, Nevin, & Paulocci-Whitcomb, 2000).

Other studies (Ingersoll, 2001) have indicated that a lack of support from administration for teachers to be in control of their classroom instruction is leading to an increase in the number of teachers leaving the profession or seeking jobs in more supportive districts. Conversely, research has shown schools that adopt instructional collaboration raise student achievement and increase teacher retention rates (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1989). McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) found that when schools provide teachers the ability to share effective learning strategies, student and teacher efficacy is improved. Other research has argued that teachers are more likely to utilize new instructional strategies if they are offered in “active learning” envi-
rnments (Cook & Faulkner, 2010; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Mertens & Flowers, 2006).

Since the 1960s, interdisciplinary professional interactions among faculty have been a characteristic of middle school and high school campuses (Cook & Faulkner, 2010). The purpose of interdisciplinary teams is to allot time for two or more teachers to “share the same group of students, same part of the school building, same schedule and planning time, and the responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating curriculum and instruction for more than one academic subject area” (George, Lawrence, & Bushnell, 1998, p. 248-249).

Teacher collaboration through the interdisciplinary team model provides greater opportunities for students to be better known by their teachers (Lipitz, 1984), increase levels of self-esteem and positive perceptions of school climate. Likewise, teacher collaboration led to higher levels of student achievement (Mertens & Flowers, 2006) as well as more positive interaction and increased interaction with their teammates (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000). Lastly, teacher collaborative efforts created higher levels of interdisciplinary team and classroom instruction (Cook & Faulkner, 2010). Padwad and Dixit (2008) studied the influence participation has in a learning community on teachers’ thinking about classroom problems. They noted that participation in learning communities led to better performance in teachers’ ability to contextualize classroom problem and issues of practice.

A recent report (2014) found that seventy-eight percent of teachers felt that they did not have enough time in the school day to collaborate with other teachers. Other barriers to instructional collaboration include lack of instructional leadership among teachers (Mangin, 2007). Much of this frustration comes from a lack of school culture that encourages collaboration. Research has also shown that the decision-making process in schools “are not made by a single individual; rather decisions emerge from collaborative dialogues between many individuals, engaged in mutually dependent activities” (p. 70).

While studies have shown the challenges teachers face in ensuring student learning, little has been done within the context of rural schools. This study asked: What characteristics do rural schools possess that promote instructional collaboration? Future studies are needed in order to expand our understanding of these phenomena.

Research Design and Methodology
A qualitative study on rural schools and communities can be quite challenging. Among the issues in pursuing qualitative research, especially in settings that are wary of outsiders, finding participating districts whose teachers purposefully and formally collaborate was the most difficult. Further complicating the identification and selection of potential research participants was the small number of school districts that utilize Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Hallsbrooke ISD is located within a relatively short distance from the researcher’s home and agreed to participate in the study. Likewise, Atherton High School was a few miles away from Hallsbrooke ISD and also consented to participate.

There were six participants in this study. Each participant was chosen specifically because they represented a broad range of experiences and characteristics. Based on the research questions, teachers were chosen according to the number of years they have in education. Additionally, each teacher agreed to participate in this study. As a result, the selection of the participants was both of utility and willingness of the participants. As Creswell (2013) notes, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites...that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question.”

The data collected throughout this study consisted of three forms of inquiry. Interviews with individual teachers were conducted using recording device to ensure the greatest accuracy of data collection. Secondly, the researcher observed two PLC meetings at each respective campus to document the planning, assessment, and dynamics of each campus. Lastly, the researcher observed classroom instruction of each participant to assess the implementation of the goals of each PLC.

In each of the meetings, the researcher recorded the meetings using a recording device as well as taking observational notes of the teacher group. From the meeting notes recorded in a field journal and the recording device, the researcher transcribed all of the meetings. This allowed the researcher to triangulate the data in order to limit biases. Further, the researcher offered each participant the chance to review the transcripts of each meeting in order to correct any point or comment the participant felt did not reflect their true thoughts.

In order to protect the identities of the school districts and employees used in this research, the author used pseudonyms for the districts
and teachers. The names reflected in this paper are fictionalized and do not represent any person’s true name.

To track each participant in this study, each instructor was assigned a specific “Speaker” number. Hallsbrooke teachers were identified #1-3 while Atherton teachers were assigned #4-6.

Process, Context, and Relationships
Three themes emerged from the research conducted in two rural schools. This review of findings will provide insight into the influence collaboration has on rural teachers. Through a series of coding, recoding, and consistent comparative analysis, three themes emerged. These were (a) intentional dialogue, (b) time, and (c) structure and focus.

Context for Collaboration
Throughout the last ten years, both Hallsbrooke ISD and Atherton ISD maintained an annual lower rating than “Academically Acceptable” as determined by the state legislature. Occasionally, certain schools or groups of students maintained an average higher than their peers. However, each district replaced existing programs in order to raise student achievement on an annual basis. Prior to adopting the PLC model, both districts began implementing programs to foster instructional collaboration.

Hallsbrooke High School is located in a rural area in the eastern portion of a southern state. The community, although small, consists of a school district that serves surrounding rural communities. As such, the student population is larger than what is expected for a town of its size.

Assistant Superintendent Wendy Shearer explained in an initial meeting how the district came to adopt the learning community organizational model. By 2006, the school district struggled to meet the Adequately Yearly Progress standard set by the state. When she was hired, Shearer explained that “I was given three years to turn the district around and achieve the highest rating” the state prescribed. Her comments revealed a sense of desperation in trying to formulate a plan to raise student scores and the district’s rating (Sp. 1, p. 3).

Initially, Shearer implemented rigorous policies designed to raise student scores. However, she hinted that teachers “became worried about their jobs” and emphasized testing androte learning. By the next year, Shearer began attending workshops and conferences geared toward instructional collaboration. While the district adopted the “Professional Learning Community” model, teachers initially struggled to adjust to the drastic change from “teaching in isolation” to “open classrooms” (Sp. 1, p. 5).

By the third year of her tenure at Hallsbrooke, Shearer and the district had achieved their goal of “Exemplary” status. As such, they have become a “Model of Excellence” district by the national Professional Learning Community organization.

Atherton High School followed a different path than Hallsbrooke. For the last decade, Atherton I.S.D. has struggled to maintain its academic rating of “Acceptable”. In recent years, the middle school has annually fallen short of its mandate to retain its accreditation.

By 2009, Denise Spivey, then a high school administrator, obtained permission from the school board to create an Early College High School. During her three years, the Early College High School admitted between twenty-five and one hundred students each year (the program admitted more students each progressive year). However, as students were enrolled in both high school and college courses, the Early College High School saw a dramatic increase of student test scores.

Atherton High School principal Denise Spivey was moved from the district’s Early College High School program to the main campus because of the rate of student success on standardized tests. Spivey agreed to allow the researcher access to the campus meetings in order to observe the processes of the learning community and how it’s collaboration influences the instructional practices of teachers.

Members of the Atherton High School learning communities met weekly throughout the school year in order to select and evaluate instructional practices aimed at raising student achievement. Initially, campus administrators were central in facilitating efforts of instructional collaboration. However, teachers quickly adopted the processes of collaboration and led meetings rather than the campus administrator.

Findings
Intentional Dialogue and Experience
Focused and intentional discussions enabled the development of trust, collaboration, and a commitment to the mission of the learning community. Veteran learning communities experience greater autonomy because they are more accustomed to making instructional decisions without the influence of campus administrators. Learning communities with less experience often rely on campus administrators to guide their decision-
making process concerning instructional pacing.

Hallsbrooke High School’s learning community meetings promoted intentional dialogue of all members. The structure of each meeting was designed to increase discussion about instructional practices. Agendas listed the topics to be discussed as well as the three common questions asked at every meeting.

During one observation, the researcher observed Hallsbrooke High School’s learning community began aligning instructional pacing to meet the demands of the school calendar. Leo Gregory, a first year teacher, asked about the upcoming standardized test and expressed his concern about not being able to cover all the material prior to the testing date. Jonathan Rowan suggested that the pacing of the remaining units must be quicker than normal due to the upcoming test. He stated: “The [STAAR] test is coming up soon and we need to be sure to cover all of the TEKS before that time.” (Speaker 5, p. 5). The discussion then led to specific activities each teacher expected to utilize as well as those they would discard due to time constraints. Leo Gregory suggested using an activity he borrowed from another teacher to maximize what instructional time they had left. In their collaborative discussions, both Rowan and Gregory discussed the challenges they would face in using the instructional strategy while maintaining a quick pace in the course.

Atherton High School’s learning community relied more on their campus administrators to guide its dialogue. Campus principal Spivey chaired discussions on pacing as well as measures to assess student learning. During the second observation, the learning community was given the mandate of brainstorming ideas on how to team-teach difficult concepts to struggling students. In this case, a Social Studies teacher would implement a lesson plan designed for an English course to help students better grasp the influence the Dust Bowl had on American literature. Spivey offered several suggestions on how to design a lesson plan that could be adapted to an American History course as well as instructional practices that would appeal to different types of learning styles. Similar discussions were held throughout the rest of the meeting for teachers of struggling students. Because the learning community had less experience with cross-discipline planning, Spivey had to model what type of discussions and planning she expected from the learning community.

Time

Throughout the seven years since its implementation, Hallsbrooke High School’s learning communities have met at different times of the week. (Int. 2, Sp. 5). Recently, the high school campus adjusted their teachers’ schedule in order to accommodate a “better time for meetings”. Jonathan Rowan explained that in previous years, “we [the learning community] had to meet once a week at 6:15 [a.m.]” He stated: “It was not very convenient for use to meet at 6:15 in the morning, but it was just something we had to do” (Int. 2, Sp. 5). With the support of the learning community, Rowan suggested that meeting during school hours would allow all teachers to participate in meetings. At the end of the school year, the learning community met with the campus principal and requested a change to the next year’s schedule. Through their requests, Rowan explained, “we were able to convince the principal that it would be beneficial for the teachers to be able to meet in the school day.” (Int. 2, Sp. 5)

Atherton High School’s learning community developed a different route for changing the schedule to allow all teachers to participate in collaborative meetings. Principal Spivey altered the bell schedule the previous year to allow teachers a “Ninth Period”. This alteration meant that teachers could meet during the school day during a common period.

During the school year, teachers were required to offer mandatory tutoring to students who were not passing during the previous grading period. Campus administrators designed a rotating tutoring schedule so that teachers of similar disciplines would be able to offer tutoring with another teacher. On specific days, Science teachers would meet in a central location with many of their students to offer instruction and academic help in small groups. Likewise, Social Studies teachers offered academic assistance to students struggling in their classes in the same location as the other Social Studies teachers. This meant that one teacher would be able to help his or her own students while helping students from another class.

Because of the tutoring schedule, Spivey altered the meeting times of the learning communities to occur on a day that no tutoring was offered unless a student requested extra help. As such, teachers of different academic disciplines were able to meet with their learning community on a designated day. As Spivey stated: “It does no good to have some teachers attend a meeting and not others.” (Sp. 6, p. 2). Perez, Wood, and Jacquez (1999) noted that the principal must support teachers in developing new approaches and innovations to instruction. As such, the
Atherton learning community exhibited these characteristics under the guidance of Spivey's leadership.

**Structure and Focus**

Hallsbrooke High School's collaboration time was focused on clear and specific objectives to be accomplished during each meeting. Each meeting followed a similar outline throughout the school year. A campus administrator usually attended each meeting, but remained on the periphery of discussions.

Each meeting had an agenda that each member signed once the meeting was concluded to signify that the goal was discussed and a plan was in place to measure the outcome of the goal. Teachers were provided a list of topics that were to be discussed, including a series of questions that the group leader was charged with providing evidence at a later date that the goal was accomplished. Collaboration time was used to encourage discussion on instructional goals and practices as well as measures to ensure that students had met satisfactory performance in the stated learning objectives.

Meetings concluded with a discussion amongst teachers about how each learning community would measure student success on the instructional goals. Because the district used a common assessment (benchmark tests), there was little discussion about how to measure student success. Each agenda concluded with a question: “How will we know students have understood [the subject] and what will we do if students have not met the goal.” Participants then collaboratively designed a plan to re-teach concepts if students had not acquired the specific skills and knowledge of each learning unit.

Following every meeting, teachers would deliver their instructional lessons to each class and submit student benchmark scores to the learning community. As a group, teachers pored over student data to identify which students needed academic tutoring. Lastly, these meetings concluded with a discussion and comparison of instructional strategies to raise student achievement for those who did not initially pass the benchmark tests. This pattern followed what Schmoker (1999) stated, “If we consistently analyze what we do and adjust to get better, we will improve” (p. 56).

**Conclusion**

In an era of increased accountability, teachers face a difficult challenge: how to collaborate with their colleagues to promote student learning. Rural schools face the additional challenge of meeting the expectations of both the state and the community. Instructional collaboration offers the opportunity to create a community of teachers that seek to promote student success through their own professional learning. However, many barriers exist that challenge learning communities from collaboration.

Schools seeking to employ instructional collaboration to raise student achievement face a difficult challenge. They must promote dialogue between teachers that facilitates collaboration as well as model how the types of collaboration they expect from their teachers. This is increasingly important for teachers with limited experience in schools or in professional settings that demand collaborative dialogue focused on raising student achievement. Further, campus administrators must be diligent in allotting time during the day to devote to collaboration. Providing only limited time for teachers to meet can only produce limited results. Lastly, a structure for collaboration must be adopted in order to effect the changes needed to be made in the era of high-stakes testing. While these three characteristics are not exhaustive, they highlight some possible solutions to increasing collaboration in a profession that has historically been isolated.

In an era of high-stakes testing, it would appear logical to create an atmosphere conducive to instructional collaboration. However, as this study denotes, certain practices can increase the efficiency of collaboration. Three factors promoted collaboration in these learning communities.

**Intentional Dialogue.** Encouraging teachers to participate in discussions of practice offers the opportunity to find new instructional methods as well as connecting different academic disciplines.

**Time.** Teachers struggle to find time throughout the school day to meet in their respective learning communities. As such, it is imperative for an allotted period of time to be devoted solely to the learning community.

**Structure and Focus.** Learning communities must have a structure in place that develops instructional leadership and collaboration. Likewise, its focus must remain rigidly fixed on improving instruction and student success.

**Implications for Rural Schools**

This study suggests that collaboration requires specific efforts to increase collaboration amongst its teachers and instructional staff. In order to ensure that instructional collaboration can occur, administrators and teachers alike must identify how their campus or district can aid in that effort.
For teachers to engage in instructional collaboration, they must create intentional dialogue in order to identify the needs of both the students and campus. From formal PLC meetings to informal classroom observations, teachers and administrators can assess student data based on formative and summative assessments to develop instructional techniques that will address the goals of the PLC.

As with any profession, the issue of scheduling a meeting time that is conducive for all members can frustrate the efforts of a PLC. Administrators should take into consideration the time constraints of the school calendar and organize their schedule to allow the PLC to meet at a reasonable time within the school day. Likewise, teachers can participate in identifying what times they are willing to meet to find a common time that fits within the school day to meet.

Lastly, teachers and administrators must commit themselves to creating a structure that is conducive to instructional collaboration. Like the two PLCs observed, instructional collaboration cannot occur unless there is a process towards reaching that goal. For Hallsbrooke, collaboration occurred in structured meetings with a defined set of objectives to discuss and plan for. Meetings conducted in this manner will provide a forum for collaboration to occur. Others, like Atherton, required that an administrator plan meetings in advance with a particular goal to be discussed. Depending on the experience of the PLC members will help determine who structures meetings to meet their objectives.

References


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