

Rachael Ledwidge

03/13/2021

Applied Project Proposal

EDSP387

High collaboration rates among elementary school teachers and service-providing professionals have been linked to higher student success when that collaboration is intentional and consistent. The higher quality the collaboration, the greater the benefit to the students. (Ronfeldt et al. 2015) If the goal is to educate students and increase student achievement, particularly with disabilities, in an inclusive and rigorous setting then it should be the goal of administrators and teacher-leaders alike to encourage and improve collaborative teams of teachers and professionals in schools. However, it is not just simply the act of professionals gathering that yields higher student success, but the quality of the content and interpersonal skills of those involved in the collaboration.

In a 2015 study of the fourth largest school district in the United States, Ronfeldt et al. found that both student achievement and teacher development increased with greater levels of collaboration. The study included data from 336 schools in the district with 7,881 teachers' recorded responses to the researchers' questions. This study found that collaboration amongst teachers that was centered around instructional assessment (data-driven collaboration) led to higher testing gains in students. Additionally, results from the study suggest any consistent collaboration, whether formal or informal, was beneficial to the growth and development of educators. Another implication of this study was that teachers who collaborated regularly developed as more proficient educators and reported increased confidence in their

In the district we studied, about 85% of teachers now identify as being a part of "a team or group of colleagues that works together on instruction" and report that collaboration in these teams is quite extensive and helpful. (p. 512)

teaching.

Effective collaboration includes opportunities for teacher leaders to use their interpersonal skills to drive important conversation, student or data driven, for the edification of all collaborators. This in turn builds *social capital*, or the “combined assets that can be shared in a supportive environment where group members have common goals,” (Nappi, 2014). Teacher leaders can help facilitate high quality collaboration among educators and educational professionals, reducing the need to bring in outside opinions, administrators, or expert consultants. Teacher leaders develop through these collaboration opportunities and therefore expand their sphere of influence within a school.

Collaboration is beneficial for both student achievement and professional growth of educators. Regarding synergistic collaboration, educational leader and consultant Dennis Sparks (2013) wrote,

“Such teamwork not only benefits students, it also creates the ‘supportive leadership’ and the process and time for meaningful collaboration that enable teachers to thrive and are better able to address the complex challenges of their work.” (p. 28)

Sparks went on to effective teamwork as having four important indicators of success: clear purpose, team accountability, structure of the team itself, and trust among its members (2013). Empirically, in a Dutch study of 53 elementary schools, researchers also found that teachers who reported feeling “well-connected” to their colleagues and participated regularly in collaborative opportunities led to increased teacher effectiveness, which in turn led to great student success. (Moolenaar et al. 2012). This study considered teachers’ social networks (from whom teachers sought advice and counsel) and tracked relationships between colleagues. This suggests that the interpersonal skills of collaborative team members’ matter. Researchers Moolenaar et al. (2012) found,

Results from this study support the potential of strong teacher relationships for creating a work environment that ultimately benefits student achievement. (p. 259)

Consistent and purposeful collaboration is important for student growth and achievement. Likewise, it is beneficial to the efficacy and development of teachers. By developing equitable and trusting interpersonal relationships among teachers, schools can further develop their expert base and build a stronger, more effective work force for the benefit of the students. Teams should exhibit parity, competence, collaboration, and trust in the execution of their shared goals. (Self-evaluation of team members on the climate of the team and their individual participation is the first step in increasing team efficacy and developmental stage. (Friend and Cook, 2017).

In my applied project, I plan to use a slightly adapted survey created by Thousand and Villa on group functioning, known as "Are We Really a Team?" (2000). I will distribute and analyze the data from my Data Team colleagues who teach general education grades 1 and 2, as well as the educational professionals who support us (SLP, Special Education). This survey will provide a quick look into how each person perceives our overall functioning as a team. I will then compile the data from all members and report overall findings of interest to my colleagues at the next Data Team meeting.

My hope is to overcome my own insecurities and increase my interpersonal skills through demonstrating competence and curiosity in my colleagues. In the beginning of the semester, I identified connecting with my colleagues as a weakness. Additionally, when there is disagreement, I veer away from the conversation. My hope is as I get to know my colleagues through these surveys, I might gain more understanding and therefore more empathy for their perspectives and opinions. This data will also provide an opportunity for us as a collective team to evaluate how we are functioning. There could be several concerns that have remained unaddressed for a long time due to lack of parity or feelings of trust. Hopefully, when presented with data from the team, we can problem solve openly and equitably.

In the five hours allotted, I plan to spend 30 minutes explaining the rationale behind and allowing time for my colleagues to complete the survey. I plan to spend 2 and a half hours compiling,

aggregating, and analyzing the data, preparing it to present to the team. I plan to spend one hour explaining and discussing the results with my team (with open invitation to discuss further outside our hour-long Data Team meeting allotment). Finally, I plan to spend the last hour recording results of the discussion around the data including written suggestions generated by the team. I will provide this conclusion to my teammates in the hopes of adopting better practices for future Data Team meetings.

References:

Moolenaar, N., Slegers, P. Daly, A. (2012). Teaming up: linking collaboration networks, collective efficacy, and student achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28(2), 251-262.

Nappi, J. S. (2014). The teacher leader: Improving schools by building social capital through shared leadership. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 80(4), 29–34.

Ronfeldt, M., Grissom, J., McQueen, K., (2015). Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 52(3), 475-514.

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