CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE GRADE-LEVEL TEACHER COLLABORATION

By Adam J. Janquart

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APPROVED BY: Derek L. Anderson

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Abstract

Collaboration between colleagues, in any profession, has been in the work place since the beginning of time, but it isn’t clear what makes collaboration meaningful and effective. Educators are very social but the idea of effective grade level collaboration eludes the best of teachers. Teachers create opportunities for success every day. Making an effort to be even better is sometimes missing in the discussions with colleagues. The information being discussed focuses on effective collaboration and how it can frame the way educators and administrators conduct positive interactions with colleagues.
Chapter I: Introduction

Working together to create a positive environment for collaboration is likely to produce a positive learning environment for children. In order to have an environment that is conducive to learning, colleagues must be able to collaborate and devise a plan to better the learning environment. Effective collaboration is important for educators who work together to serve each child in the classroom. School leaders play a large role in allowing teachers to collaborate effectively and then applying this effective communication to the classroom. Educators and administrators need to work together to create positive learning situations for students, rather than a negative approach that suppresses the learning environment.

Statement of Problem

In my eleven years of teaching I have experienced many positives in education and few negatives. I enjoy working with students and teachers alike, to create positive outcomes of learning and understanding. Much of what makes education negative is that it is hard to work with people who do not want to or do not know how to collaborate effectively to make a scenario more enjoyable and meaningful. Much of the education world involves competition rather than corralling ideas to come to a solution. In all work places, working with other individuals may be difficult, but the most effective way is to do it together. Effective teacher collaboration is very hard to come by. Many views that are disagreed upon can make collaboration difficult in any occupation. The education profession needs to solve problems that demand answers. In collaborative teams, open minds are preferred so solutions can be discovered in different ways create positive outcome.

Effective grade-level teacher collaboration and school leader support for is not easily acquired. There are barriers that keep teachers from working together to acquire effective
collaboration and for school leaders being able to help in supporting effective collaboration. Creating effective grade-level collaboration tools will ensure that situations in education are productive, informative, and positive. Grade-level teams need to learn the skills and strategies in order to work together to facilitate successful learning throughout the grade level and district. The skills available to collaborate more effectively must be supported by administrators and teachers alike. Many strategies are available to unleash the effectiveness of grade-level collaboration.

**Research Question(s)**

- What are the characteristics of effective grade-level teacher collaboration, and how can school leaders create and support effective collaboration?
- What makes for positive and negative collaboration?
- What is the role of an administrator in effective collaboration process?

**Definition of Terms**

**Collaboration** – a mode of working together toward education reforms. It also describes a relationship that collaborative partners want to achieve (Egodawatte, McDougall, & Stoilesescu, 2011, p. 191).

**Positive Learning Communities** - putting the emphasis on learning as opposed to teaching, and creating time for teachers to collaborate (Dodd, 2005, p. 4).

**Dialogism** - a feature of all verbal exchanges in that an individual utterance by one person requires an utterance in response (Crafton, & Kaiser, 2011, p. 109).

**Strategies** – ideas that produce positive outcomes, ways to go about getting answers within a situation that involve different ways of doing something.

**Strengths Zone** – the character strengths that someone possesses (Rath, 2007, p.12)
Chapter II: Review of Literature

Positive Collaboration and Negative Collaboration

It is human nature to question the way something is or the solution to a problem. Knowing the right way to go about getting the answers is key to many studies. Positive collaboration is the way to effectively collect answers to problems. Positive collaboration is working together as educators and producing an outcome that moves education forward. Education creates ongoing questions in our society that are difficult to answer independently. Collaboration is difficult if educators do not enter into the issues with open minds to find a solution to the problem.

Technology

In a study of learning and leading with technology, a program involving a new way of conducting education, McCombs (2010) stated:

The most potent part of the program, however, was the discussion time, when we were able to share our visions, ideas, fears, and plans for the future of our district. From these discussions arose a passionate determination to create a technology-infused environment where students actively engage in their learning. And collaboration, we knew, would have to be a big part of the equation (p. 10).

The people involved in this situation needed to come together to create a collaborative experience to generate technology goals that would benefit their students and district. In 2003, Kannapolis, NC suffered a city-wide mill mass lay off. A fact about this study is that it was one of the biggest layoffs in North Carolina’s history. Graduates who planned to stay in the area for sure “blue collar” work when they graduated from high school, would be looking for opportunities elsewhere. The mill was soon purchased and turned into a plant that catered to
biotechnology and other technology services. This made the district rethink the way they taught their students so they could be successful upon graduation. “We learned about being change agents, facilitating collaborative planning, implementing flexible scheduling, using alternative assessments to evaluate both teachers and student work, and identifying Web 2.0 tools for administrative and instructional tasks” (McCombs, 2010, p. 10). The administrators designed teams for collaboration professional development type activities that were demanded upon all teachers in the district. The teachers collaborated in whole day sessions with technology being the focus. The administrators set the bar for the collaboration. The teachers needed to learn how to effectively collaborate with each other because now the focus of getting the student’s needs met with technology was at a high level. “As a first step, we implemented a strategic plan that began with a dynamic professional development (PD) program for our teachers and administrators that would ultimately lead to unprecedented collaboration among both staff and students” (McCombs, 2010, p. 10).

**Big Improvements**

This table shows the percentage of students performing at grade level before and after we implemented our professional development program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Reading Before</th>
<th>Reading After</th>
<th>Math Before</th>
<th>Math After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implementing a way in which not only fosters an environment that is conducive for collaboration but allows teachers and staff the ability to work together arises when administrators take an active role. “A strategic plan was put in place that began with a dynamic professional development (PD) program for our teachers and administrators that would ultimately lead to unprecedented collaboration among both staff and students” (McCombs, 2010, p. 10).

Technology lends itself to situations that embrace collaboration. Technology creates excellent ways to offer collaboration and inviting ways to work together in many forms. The technology “know how” is always prevalent in any school district which creates an inevitable result pointing toward positive collaboration. Technology is always on the rise and in dire need of being taught to the educator. Collaboration is a must or the result of educating students is not a positive experience. Teachers are going to try harder to collaborate because of the motive that it entails. The results of this study will be skewed due to the absolute need for collaboration involved with new technology.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLC)**

In other studies Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are discussed. More than 600 educators from the southeastern United States gathered at North Gwinnett High School in Suwanee. They gathered to discuss what their students were learning and also to discuss the achievements that each individual teacher has made. The educators were shown ways to develop teams for collaboration as well as uniting teachers at each grade level. The grade levels were instructed to produce ways to take time and talk with each other on what the students were being successful in and what gains they were making as educators (McCombs, 2010). The hope was that they could learn from each other on what was successfully working and what could be focused on to be improved.
The qualitative idea of PLC is just that, creating a community that is professional, and produces constant positive collaboration throughout the staff within a school. The study of 600 teachers coming together to help each other through positive collaboration was the focus. The educators used each other to bounce ideas off, and to accept advice to better their teaching styles and content to enhance student learning. The idea of learning vs. the actual teaching was an emphasis.

The main focus of a professional learning community is to put the emphasis on learning as opposed to teaching. We are asking teachers to put in more time working in collaborative teams with each other. Time can present a challenge if the school doesn’t allow time for them to meet (Dodd, 2005, p. 4).

“The National Educational Service reports hundreds of schools now use some form of professional learning communities” (Dodd, 2005, p. 4). As did this study, the results show that now collaboration is at a very high level. The professional learning and collaboration with colleagues have shown an increase in school test scores and educational abilities. "Professional learning is such a big part of the culture here in Gwinnett County public schools for people at all levels, said Sloan Roach, spokeswoman for the school system" (p. 4).

In order for these ideas to evolve the character of each individual teacher must be analyzed. All teachers in any educational collaboration activity must believe that they can help the group or others involved. In a sense an attitude must be acquired that allows for sharing and excepting each other for what they have to offer. The ideas of one can be shared and accepted, knowing that not one person has all the right answers. It is now an expectation that everyone shares all resources, instructional plans, and insights. The collaborative planning time focused on many ideas, now teachers use Google Talk and Skype for instant messaging and producing
needed information that entails useful ideas (McCombs, 2010, p. 10). Technology also now plays a role in collaborative experiences that seem most positive.

Collaborative work cannot help but be influenced to some degree by teachers who, demonstrate “a dizzing mixture of philosophies, educational backgrounds, subject matter commitments, political and religious beliefs, and opinions about students and learning, as well as varying commitments to their own learning” (p. 991). Such diversity offers resources, generates tensions, and harbors obstacles for change in schools (Gates, & Robinson, 2009, p. 147).

Working within a group is difficult at time depending on what other outside information is conflicting with any collaborative situations. Intangible factors create problems for collaboration processes to take a productive route. Also the attitude and character of each teacher involved in any collaborative experience effects the abilities of a group to produce that desired outcome. In many cases, the truth is that some people are very hard to collaborate with because of the beliefs that are set in one’s mind.

**Coaching, Mentoring, and Dialogism**

In a study of coaching, mentoring and collaborating, the ideas of one can be misconstrued by another. The language or tone human beings use produce yet another problem that can create miscommunication. In most coaching and mentoring collaborative experiences, negative dialogism is an issue that can delete the effectiveness of collaboration. The setting was a rural elementary school in northern Wisconsin where one of the authors served as a literacy consultant for one year (Crafton, & Kaiser, 2009). The teachers and the consultant would meet regularly to see the way conversing was affecting the way the mentoring and coaching process could be negatively affected. In the study the collaborative conversation yielded miscommunications of an
article that was read by the group. The idea of the leader being the rein holder and the mentee was naturally the student, versus the mentee being the leader. The more effective way was considered, allowing turn taking in the dialogue. The study shows the way that some people want to do all the talking and some want to always listen, yet the roles must be practiced by all. Collaboration in this case shows how roles must be considered and must be spread to allow for positive feedback for each scenario. This qualitative study involved a three-person conversation that showed that dialogism is special part of the collaboration process.

**Coach:** Why don’t we start with the chapter? I asked you to write down some insights and connections in your reflection journals. So, tell me, what did you notice? Did anything surprise you?

**Alan:** Well, when I read about the . . . what the teacher did . . . at the beginning of the year, I thought it was great. She let her students know what they were going to do and when she asked them questions to show the kinds of things they could talk about, . . . it seemed she . . . she really got to the important part of the story and kept them thinking.

**Coach:** (nodding and smiling) Yeah . . . I liked that, too. Anybody else?

**Katrina:** I think Alan’s right, it was great to see it come to life in the article and the kids had some really good insights but I would like to see it in real life in a real classroom.

**Coach:** Well, you are in luck – the video I brought today is going to do just that! Later you’ll get to take a look at a teacher guiding a discussion. In the chapter, though, did any of you see anything that connected with your own classroom instruction, those of you who have tried literature discussions?
Marlene: Yeh, I have . . . but when I did it, it didn’t look like the teacher we read about . . . I’ve tried asking those open-ended questions but they don’t seem to go anywhere. I can get students to give different opinions or perspectives but I have to keep asking them. Maybe they just don’t know what to do or maybe this is just too hard for third graders.

Sam: Or maybe they just don’t have enough experience . . .

Coach: Right. Yeah, Sam, that’s a good point . . . What do the rest of you think about what Marlene said? Have any of you had similar experiences with open-ended questions? (Crafton, & Kaiser, p. 109).

The mentioned conversation above is an example that allows for all participants to enter the conversation with an open mind. The discussion has dialogue that is responsive yet respectful. The coach moderates the discussion but does not overtake the conversation. The coach creates a leader in the discussion allowing someone to control the conversation. The discussion also allows the other participants to possess the leadership. Although it has a positive connotation, if the conversation was entered without a chosen leader the conversation might have been more in depth than it was. Each person in this conversation is allowed to give ideas and respects the others ideas and thoughts, but the individuals hold back on observations that they have made. This is a coach directed conversation. Using a facilitator can alleviate problems that might inhibit the conversation with a leader or coach.

Crafton and Kaiser (2009) also chose another approach. The conversation below shows how inquiry type discussion takes over, with Leticia facilitating but not leading the discussion. There is no leader in the example conversation below. This conversation has a facilitator which moves the conversation along not overpowering the situation.
**Leticia:** I liked this article but I wasn’t clear about how she used the word inquiry – this isn’t really what I think... *inquiry is... how do you inquire* into reading, into a novel?

**Max:** Yeh, I’m not sure I got that either – inquiry to me means questions – like when we have small groups researching the same question.

**Juan:** Well, I think it might be... one of the points she was trying to make is that, ... here... on p. 167, she says: ‘It is not surprising that the sound of working to perfect a skill will be very different from the sound of working to explore a text.’ So, talking about lit discussions as inquiry, exploring, and skill teaching as something... more... like... structured.

**Alicia:** Yeh, they seem *very* different – when I teach a skill, I’m doing the talking and *showing* them what to do but when we are trying to do a lit discussion, it’s everybody... if you look at the teacher in this conversation, she’s, like, ... (long pause – silently reading a section)... 

**Juan:** Like helping them understand that part of the book about burying but... she does *tell* them the difference between cremation and burying... Do you think that’s ok? I’m also wondering if just any old talk will do or is there a specific kind of talk that we should be teaching our students?

**Max:** Well, I don’t think you can say just anything... my interpretation is that they are *inquiring* into the text together, the meaning of the story – there’s a certain *quality* to the talk that makes a difference to comprehension – like it’s not the teacher asking them questions to find out if they understood the story... (Crafton, & Kaiser, p. 113).
The conversation makes it much easier for all participants to enter the conversation with more confidence, because they are experts in the conversation, and the comfort level is high. The comfort level is much more at ease than the coach led conversation. Conversing with other colleagues is natural but when each person is considered equals, effective collaboration is more prevalent.

“Dialogism is a feature of all verbal exchanges in that an individual utterance by one person requires an utterance in response” (Crafton, & Kaiser, 2011, p. 109). Dialogue creates problems if the perception of the conversation is not construed as effective. If one participant is a reoccurring negative person, the conversation is already stereotyped to be negative. In short, the way something is said is also portraying a feeling toward what was said. “The language we use signals the meanings we construct; the quality of our discourse determines the quality of our knowledge and how situated identities are shaped” (p. 110). A vital part of collaboration promotes a positive relationship with the person saying what they want to say.

**Professional Development Models: Cognitive Learning Models**

Another study explores several professional development models being used in the US and in other countries to support teacher education, including coaching, and mentoring. The study focused on different ways that new teachers felt they were not supported and the fear of these new teachers keeping them from pursuing education any further. Mentoring and coaching produce a more inviting situation for newer teachers entering the field of education and will sustain a more confident arsenal of educators. Their research shows that when students are paired and work collaboratively with mentors, the student teachers feel more supported (Crafton, & Kaiser, 2011, p. 108). Models for collaboration are also connected to positive learning environments. Understanding cognitive ways of learning versus collaborative professional ways
of learning can show how educators can work together on solutions to any problem. The collaborative professional learning model also makes for a guide to enhance any collaborative learning experience.

**Administrators Role**

Matters of collaborative experiences not only involve the teachers, but the administrators have a role in allowing teachers the time, courage, and responsibility in finding their way in the school community. “New teachers can quickly become disconnected from school goals and isolated from discussion about teaching and learning if they are relegated to a role of passive observer until they gain experience” (Watkins, 2005, p. 83). The administrator of any school faces the problems of keeping teachers, old and new, informed of what the goal is in collaborating on any one topic. The principal has to work with the staff to develop a community of learners who work toward common goals and make decisions based on shared experiences and results (Watkins, 2005). Collaboration controlled easier when the administrator has set goals to accomplish and appoints staff tasks to complete. The development of experienced and new staff will be different, yet both group’s ideas of collaboration should be the same. In an attempt to secure knowledge of proper collaboration, other facets of collaboration along the way will develop as a result.

Not only does effective collaboration provide teachers with honest and respectable ways of teaching children, it also provides teachers with natural professional development. “Collaboration provides teachers with professional development opportunities such as co-teaching, co-planning, and many other positive experiences” (Egodawatte, 2011, p. 192). On the reverse side, there are negative aspects that need to be considered, otherwise known as constraints that keep effective collaboration at bay.
These constraints include but are not limited to the difficulty of making tacit knowledge explicit, the challenge of confronting well-established norms of privacy and non-interference, the disagreement and differences that have to be contended, the insufficiency of structural and social supports, the invalidity of assumptions about learners and learning, and the urgency of the teachers’ other immediate and multiple tasks (p. 192).

One study done in Canada dealt with the effective collaborative experience and found interesting qualitative results. The Collaborative Teacher Inquiry Project was a study done to nurture these issues between educators. In the Greater Toronto Area in Canada, the relationship between a university and four different school boards, focused on an objective to work on a collaborative model. Consensus building that is less hierarchical than a model that one individual party should make all decisions within the relationship of university and the schools. The university was especially concerned with the collaborative process, and how certain groups were making all of the decisions or had all the power, and that some voices were not being heard (Egodawatte, 2011).

The collaborative study reached many conclusions and was supported with results that foster a community of collaborators, not just the teachers but with all involved. University personnel, school board, district officials, and administrators were affected and led to a phenomenal revamping of mathematic curriculum. “The gains of collaboration in the points of view of the teachers under six themes: achieving the goals, student success, professional development, co-planning and co-teaching opportunities, increased communication, and improved technological skills” (Egodawatte, 2011, p. 193).
One major understanding was that the idea of having time to prepare with teammates was challenging. Also, the participants needed to understand the professional teaching style of all members in the team. Another issue that arose was not “keeping intact” members on a team rather than shuffling teachers year to year. Putting new staff members into a team made it difficult, because it felt as if the individuals were starting over again from “square one.” Collaboration was not possible without respect for each member’s professional practice. “The teachers were concerned that changes in staff affect collaboration. They said “staffing (keeping the team intact) and training new members as they come on board, were challenges” (Egodawatte, 2011, p. 200).

The Toronto study is a good interpretation of educator collaboration and how administrators have played a role in the connection of effective collaboration. However, some information is negatively skewed. The study produces a bias, yet a wanted result. The purpose was to create a better learning tool for students. Obviously, what in place was already not working, so any interpretation of this study would result in improvement towards a mathematic curriculum. In turn, what does not work now will work with something else no matter what. The idea it cannot get any worse than it already is seems fitting with this study. Any new curriculum is a result of finding something that will suffice the demands of state standards. Collaboration in the study afore mentioned is crucial in devising new curriculum.
Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

The ideas within the studies alluded to ideas that seem very obvious, yet the criterion that leads us to these assumptions seem unproven. Some of the issues involved with collaboration still elude us in many aspects of education. Some people need explanations in “why” these types of behaviors, actions, or ideas create an environment or atmosphere that promotes negativity. Of the studies that I researched, the things that stood were: attitudes and dialogism, time that is administrator and teacher directed, time to plan, understanding teaching styles, keeping teaching staff intact, professional development in this area of collaboration, (PLC) and creating an accepting environment, administration “taking a stand”, and old teachers vs. new teachers.

Different problems with effective collaboration came up in most studies and showed that the problems that are associated with collaboration and the administrators that oversee the collaboration process can be fixed.

Almost all of the information that was dissected pointed to ways in which human contact is affected by dialogism in some way. What we say and how we say it goes a long way in working with people. Of course, miscommunications are a part of daily conversation. However, trying to alleviate these issues personally and being respectful of all associated with the issues can keep collaboration focused (Egodawatte, 2011; Gates & Robinson, 2009).

Another connection is that attitudes, knowledge, interference, disagreements, philosophies, social supports, invalidity of assumptions, and other tasks teachers focus on play a big part in the collaboration process (Egodawatte, 2011; Gates & Robinson, 2009). One thing that we forget as educators is that some of the greatest collaboration happens when teachers are not discussing school issues. “Hallway” conversations are a way to get to know your colleagues. Understanding someone and respecting them opens the door for work related collaboration. This
helps understand the individuals on a personal level, in turn, allowing a relationship to develop. We need to collaborate more so today than any other time before because of the demands of technology (McCombs, 2010, p.10).

Getting to know your colleagues alleviates any thoughts of competition or negative attitudes with an individual. Finding out what makes them “tick” helps in the way you present yourself or what you want to say to that person. In order to understand them, dialogism plays a huge role. Conversations that develop between two people can be negative or positive before it begins. Crafton and Kaiser (2009) explained that what we say or how we present ourselves, makes a direct reflection on our beliefs and attitudes about any topic. The words that are used make an immediate impression on what we want or how we feel about the other person or topic being discussed. As educators, and teammates, how we present ourselves goes a long way, what we say goes a long way, and what we do goes along way (Egodawatte, 2011; Gates & Robinson, 2009).

Collaboration also involves co-teaching, co-planning, and coaching that develop working relationships (Egodawatte, 2011; Gates & Robinson, 2009). These relationships cater an environment that solidifies collaboration as a priority and a necessity. No matter how the collaboration is happening, it is crucial that educators make an effort to keep an open mind when faced with opportunities of effective collaboration.

Professional development in collaboration is a must. The educators that fall short in being able to function as a positive learning community, creates problems (Crafton & Kaiser, 2009; Dodd, 2005; Egodawatte, 2011). Being able to attain a district goal of accepting each task and making the best of what the district has to offer helps teachers work together with very minimal negative feedback. A lot of what is focused on in studies of collaboration is that the
students are what really matter. “How can we focus on them in a positive way?” and “How can we connect to reach the goals of our learners?” and “How can we focus together to reach these goals?”

The collaborative process involves teachers of all experience levels (Egodawatte, 2011; Watkins, 2005). Educators have to be aware that experienced and new teachers have something to offer. New teachers are “scared” as a new educator and the experienced teacher is one that is “set in their ways”, so to speak. Each type of teacher has its benefits and downfalls but harnessing this in a way that allows the two to respect the other. Most new teachers are feeling overwhelmed yet have the energy to move on. The older or experienced teacher is a resource of knowledge but gets into a rut that has negative effects on students. If the two would look beyond the misconceptions of the other the process would have significant effects (Egodawatte, 2011; Watkins, 2005). New teaching vs. old teaching creates detrimental actions in the process of collaboration. Educators need to believe that the other has many positives to “bring to the table.”

Our classrooms are the tables that feed our students knowledge and each table is different. Miscommunication can produce a tension that deactivates a positive collaboration process. Each type of teacher needs to embrace the attributes of the other to be an effective collaborative team. A universal theme of the studies was that making changes in how educators attempt collaboration might need to be made. The way in which educators go about collaborating, might need to be adjusted in ways that understanding and proper dialogism is focused upon. Most teachers an agenda and sometimes find it hard to create a positive situation in which to collaborate. I believe that the administrator need, at times, to step in and demand collaboration, time, and group focus. The way we perceive something is the way we desire it to be. Collaboration is most effective when all parts are put in place and our attitudes allow for
acceptance of individuals involved. Acceptance of individual thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and outlook of the situation, can provide each participant with a desired outcome.
Chapter IV: Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

Effective Collaboration in education between departments and grade levels is a concept that escapes the best of schools. The idea of people working together through conversations, finding solutions to problems is so basic, yet collaboration is not as effective as it should be. Professional development, coaching, mentoring, attitudes, dialogue, comfort level, and Professional learning communities are ways to improve our collaboration process. These ideas have positives and negatives but are effective for collaboration.

Research is limited for certain concepts of positive effective collaboration. Some of the data is subjective and can rely on what personalities, gender, grade level, department and what type of school. Each district is different and deals with collaboration issues differently. Educators are different but need to learn just as students in classrooms do. What teachers need for complex learning to occur are the same conditions that support students’ meaningful learning (Crafton, & Kaiser). These conditions of understanding, producing connections to material and having positive attitudes for learning are needed for effective collaboration.

Collaboration is not only an aspect for educators. The effectiveness depends on how well your administration deals with this. Allowing negativity within the school the administrator leads creates an unlikely possibility that any collaboration will be effective. Professional learning communities are becoming more common in school districts. The administrators that lead these communities create environments that are conducive for effective collaboration. Coaching, mentoring, and professional learning communities help administrators develop more collaborative atmospheres. “If schools are to increase their effectiveness and meet the needs of all learners, it is necessary for teachers to increase their capacity to work together in
decisionmakingandshowallteacherswhatisexpectedofthemascollaborativeindividuals.
Administratorsneedtomakeavalianteffortineducatingstaffoneffectivecollaborativegrade-
leveilsituations.

PracticalImplications

Oneofthebiggestimplicationsofthisresearchofeffectivecollaborationisgetting
educatorstoconsistentlyunderstandtheneedforeffectivcollaboration.Educatorsneddocompletelycomprehendthepositiveimplicationsofcollaboratingwithcolleagues.Theresearch
shows how each study gives ideas that will surmount atmospheres for students to learn more
effectively.

Educatorsneedtocollaboratemorenowthanneverbeforebecauseoftherisingneedtot
usetechnologytokeepupwiththeever-changingoutsideworld(McCombs,2010).Technology
is an educator’s lifeline and educators need to be proficient with technical type teaching.
Collaboratingeffectivelyasa team can create a substantial advantage to any grade-level team.
Technologyisabundantandsuchpositiveimplications.Thestudywith600teachersonthat
neededtochangethewaytheytaughttechnologyCollaborationcanbeeasilyattainedwhenagroupcanlearnandteachtogther.

Professionallearningandlearningtogetherproducesastaffthatisswillingtocollaborate.
Professionaldevelopmentinthe correctwaycanallowteacherstolearnthecorrectwayto
interactwithcolleagues(Cahill,2009;Crafton&Kaiser,2011;Dodd,2005).Manytimes
professionaldevelopmentdoesnotmeettheneedsofallteachersandstaff.Creatingvaluabler
trainingintheconceptofcollaboratingeffectively,willallowforeducatorstoreadilyunderstand
each other as educators. With all of the other tasks on teacher’s minds it will be hard to create a situation for learning effective collaboration. Teachers need to “buy in” to the collaboration process. Teachers that do not buy in will create an unwanted negative vibe that will have lingering effects to make the professional development be successful. Research shows that the more teachers discuss, understand and work together the more their students will learn (Egodawatte, et al., 2011; Gates & Robinson, 2009).

Professional development is good if the topics that you focus on are worth developing. Developing skills to allow for effective collaboration will develop thinking that caters to positive open-mindedness. Open minds are very valuable for a transition in the way that we do new things. New ideas sometimes fester in some teacher’s minds because it means change (Crafton, & Kaiser, 2011). Change can be perceived as negative. The most important idea with new concepts is to challenge the way educators think. Teachers believe professional development means more tasks and less time. The idea is that administrators need to create more time for collaboration, and extinguish the negative feelings put upon professional development.

Creating time is one concept that is essential to allowing professional development produce teachers that effectively collaborate. Professional development needs time to meet, to develop, and to succeed. Producing time to discuss with colleagues about issues that evolve within the grade level team will allow for camaraderie and a connectedness. This connectedness will further produce a comfort level to understand each other on a more personal level.

A more social group of teachers will likely be able to collaborate in a positive way. Too many times in schools, educators stay in their classrooms and yield to socializing with colleagues. Socializing adds to the opportunities for professional collaboration. The more human beings interact with each other the more social they because, a personal approach creates a
comfort level for educators to collaborate more effectively. Comfort levels play an absolute part in groups that need effective collaboration. Understanding each individual within any group will allow each participant to feel that their ideas will be listened to and collected as fairly as any one person in that setting (Crafton, & Kaiser 2011; O’Shea, Sattler, & Williams, 1999). Good teachers of children and adults demonstrate critical, decisive, intellectual work, and caring, personal interactions. Effective teachers believe in diversity, meeting individual learner needs, and interacting with others to support shared decision making (O’Shea, et al., 1999). Solidifying the personal interactions with colleagues can connect the comfort level to effective collaboration among good educators.

Many the studies point towards attitude and what type of individual will be conducting the collaboration. Knowing someone on a personal level will begin the effectiveness of any collaboration, but we need to look to individuals strengths. Looking beyond colleagues weaknesses and focusing on strengths (Rath, 2007). Focusing on strengths versus weaknesses provides a platform for understanding what someone can bring to the group setting. “Studies indicate that people who do have the opportunity to focus on their strengths every day are six times as likely to be engaged in their jobs and more than three times as likely to report having an excellent quality of life in general” (Rath, 2007, p. iii). “Also having others focus on your strengths can make a dramatic difference within collaboration and all aspects of your occupation” (p. iii).

With Rath’s studies in the Strengths Finder 2.0, administrators can negatively affect the way teachers feel about themselves. The administrator has an even bigger effect on teacher performance if that individual ignores the teacher. Administrators play a huge role in what educators think about themselves. If school leaders focus on weaknesses as educators or human
being in general, the teachers will focus so hard on the weaknesses rather than focusing on strengths. Weaknesses in collaboration can be indirectly affected. You cannot be anything you want to be – but you can be a lot more of who you already are (Rath, 2007). According to a 10 million person survey that Rath studied, of those 10 million people, 7 million people do not get the opportunity to focus on what they do well.

Rath (2007) refers focusing on one’s strengths, as the strength zone. Not being in the strength zone makes workers six times less likely enjoying what they do at their workplace.

When not in this zone you might dread going to work, have more negative than positive interactions with your colleagues, treat people poorly, tell your friends what a miserable company you work for, achieve less on a daily basis, and have fewer positive and creative moments (p. 12).

As educators, not being in the strengths zone can have detrimental effects on the students that they teach or all individuals that they associate with. The connection with the strength zone and effective collaboration is simple. Training educators to enter the strength zone will make an environment that is conducive for working with other people in the most positive way.

Connecting more than one person’s strengths zone in group setting will provide the group with an effective collaboration process. All individuals merely focus on their strengths within the group allowing for a smooth transition to an answer to a problem.

The story below comes from Rath’s Strength Finder 2.0, and connects the thoughts of how others can be in the strength zone, and in turn helping others and be part of an effective collaboration process.

Think of a shoemaker (Hector) in a small town who makes fabulous shoes. Hector makes approximately 30 pairs of shoes in a week. He sells these shoes with no problem, but
fears that if he makes more shoes he will be unable to sell them. He could easily make
100 pairs of shoes but his weakness is being a poor salesman. Hector feels that he falls
short with being an effective salesman. A friend asked him why he did not make more
shoes and he told the friend, because of the fear of not selling the shoes, and terrible at
not collecting payment. So, Hector’s friend introduced him to Sergio, a natural salesman
and marketer. The strength of making shoes, connected with the strength of selling and
marketing the shoes, produced an increase in payment collecting and the manufacturing
of over 100 pairs of shoes (Rath, 2007, p. 8).

The shoemaker and the salesman were able to use the strength they possessed to better the
situation. Much like the collaboration of teachers, each person must use their strength to create
an atmosphere that offers solutions to any issue.

**Areas for Further Research**

Prior research indicates that working in an effective collaborative team involves positive
attitudes, constructive dialogue, comfort levels, strengths focus, and professional development.
The next step is to create the professional development that can account for effective
collaboration. Collaboration that excludes misconceptions of working together and providing a
working relationship that is conducive for learning. More studies are needed for knowing how to
create the best scenario for educators working together. Studies such as those Crafton and Kaiser
(2011) conducted on dialogue and how attitudes, coaching, and mentoring can lead to better
ways to collaborate. Rath (2007) has made great gains in the occupational world by allowing
people to focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses.

The professional development used in the studies can prove that training has adequate
effects on the way educators conduct daily business in classrooms. It may be technology,
strategies for conducting meetings, socializing, creating comfort levels, and finding strengths. Harnessing these ideas in a positive educational way is one step that needs to be prevalent in the transition to effective collaboration. Professional development is needed to train our teacher workforce and to allow them time to perfect collaboration in a much more effective way.

**Proposed Study**

To further investigate this topic, a very large sample size could be used to see if the professional development that is focused on for results. In the McCombs (2010) study, the population was the entire teaching staff. This would be an excellent idea if the professional development would pertain to all at one time. More studies are needed for taking individual groups to use as effective collaborative teams.

Effective collaborative teams are the focus for all groups of individuals on a staff. By using a smaller group first, will provide the information to broaden the study out to smaller groups. Rather than start with the whole population in a school or a district, select a group to accomplish this study. The fourth grade team at an elementary school will place more emphasis on 5 individuals than on 400 individuals. The study then could be branched out to the whole school district after the smaller experimental group. This experimental group will be compared to the control groups in all other teams within the school (ex. 1st grade team, 2nd grade team, 3rd grade team, 5th grade team, etc.). The administrator would be the facilitator on a random team meeting basis.

The experimental group, over a school year, would be analyzed and facilitated by an administrator. By having an administrator in the facilitator role would also show how administrators have a role in the collaboration process. The group and administrator would meet on a weekly basis for 60-120 minutes and collaborate on issues that have been identified as
problem areas within the team, staff, school and/or district. The study will focus on negatives in the group and the positives that seem to work for the group. The focus is on students but how will the group get there to improve student learning. Although the issues being dealt with are of student nature, the underlying focus would be how the educators and administrator work together to accomplish the tasks. How the collaboration process develops is what will be focused on as the group moves through the year.

The Rath (2007) study and the strengths zone would be a positive way to go about finding strengths for the group. Not only is the group an experimental group, the group would become a book study group as well. Roth’s book, *The Strength Finder 2.0*, would be the focus for the group. This book is used for finding what your strengths zone is. Each participant would read this book as the year progresses and focus on each person’s strengths. By working towards this goal, produces camaraderie in accepting the other’s strengths, allowing for feelings of admiration and professional dialogism.

In order to attain knowledge about other participants it is important (Rath, 2007) to focus on the strengths of each individual in the study allowing for each person to excel in the group doing what they are good at. “Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong….And yet, a person can perform only from strength” - Business guru Peter Drucker 1905-2005 (Rath, 2007, p. 15). By seeing what each person is good at will allow them an idea of what they can offer to the group. As mentioned in other research, comfort level is an issue that keeps participants from being collaborative. The strength finder would negate that issue.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Collaboration in schools has been a learning process that has crept into the education
scene with many different branches and phases. Effective collaboration has eluded the education system for at least two to three decades. What makes for an effective collaborative team and what are the characteristics of a good team? Many questions are asked about how a team or group can be effective communicators and have successful collaboration. Crafton and Kaiser (2011) and Egodawatte (2011) have suggested that some of the main aspects of effective collaboration might be; coaching, mentoring, professional development, professional learning communities, and attitudes toward group work. Dealing with co-workers sometimes creates negative vibes, yet we still have to maintain working relationships that are communicable. The further the comfort level is pushed the more comfortable working with colleagues will be.

One major find from the research is educators need guidance at times to be effective communicators, and also need a positive attitude to allow for success in any collaborative group. The obvious thing would be to adjust your weaknesses to be an effective collaborative group and that we find is not the right thing to do (Rath, 2007). Each person’s strengths must be understood to allow for a positive situation in dealing with colleagues. Strengths zone is an aspect that produces a level situation allowing teachers to open up and believe they can offer something positive to the group.

Professional learning and learning together produces a staff that is willing to collaborate. Professional development in the correct way can allow teachers to learn the correct way to interact with colleagues (Cahill, 2009; Crafton, & Kaiser, 2011; Dodd, 2005). The education system promotes lifelong learning. Learning something new and adjusting so it will be effective in real world situations, is what educators desire. Finding the way to effectively collaborate will create a positive learning experience and professional development that is useful.
To be an effective grade-level collaboration team, we must have guidance being that team. The idea that people will immediately become effective communicators is a false statement. The individual must work on strengths and devise a path to follow in professional development to attain such skills. As educators grow in their practice, this has to become a skill that is focused on and not put to the wayside. Much of what we learn about working with other educators does not indicate the most insightful step, working at a level that is potentially effective. Administrators have to make the effort to produce goals and standards for their teachers to work on, so the teams do not fail. Putting educators together to solve problems does not always create positive situations when outside factors keep this from becoming a reality. Personal beliefs, attitudes and uninformed individuals, will squelch any situation that involves collaboration. Collaboration is an ongoing process that needs open-mindedness and a willing to approach tasks in a positive constructivist way.
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