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## **A Phenomenological Study of Teacher Collaboration Using A Professional Learning Community Model**

### **About the Author(s)**

Dr. Kimberly Jones Goods is an educational leader whose passion is to empower teachers with instructional strategies that will help better meet the needs of students. With over 12 years of experience in education, Dr. Jones Goods has held many titles, some of which include, experience as an administrator; beginning teacher support coordinator; mentor trainer; master teacher, and adjunct professor.

### **Keywords**

teacher collaboration, professional learning communities, school culture, alignment, student learning outcomes



## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TEACHER COLLABORATION USING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL

Kimberly Jones Goods

### Abstract

This study explored teacher collaboration in a school in North Carolina. Through data collection and analysis of teacher focus groups and interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol, the perception of teacher collaboration on student learning outcomes was investigated. The study included 22 participants. Common themes were identified and explored. Participant's statements were provided. The findings of this qualitative study align with relevant research in that school leadership cultivates effective teacher collaboration.

*Keywords: teacher collaboration, professional learning communities, school culture*

### Introduction

School leaders face increasingly high demands to increase student achievement. The professional learning community (PLC) model supports the collaboration of all stakeholders through shared vision, language, practice, and supportive conditions. School leaders are the catalyst for launching and sustaining PLCs.

The increased levels of teacher accountability focused on improving student achievement levels for students in all of America's public schools has created an immediate need to foster collaboration among teachers. Teachers who collaborate inherently improve their own and each other's capacity. Baruti Kafele in his essay, *Collective Work & Responsibility* (2017), states:

...there are schools out there where collaboration amongst staff either doesn't exist or it's minimal at best. This is particularly troublesome because those same schools are comprised of so many brilliant, extraordinary educators, both veteran and new. When they hold all of their pedagogical knowledge within themselves, no one else on staff benefits from their presence. Each have their own unique experiences in the classroom and in their preparation. Each have something special and unique to share.

His assertion aligns with that of relevant research on teacher collaboration and improved student achievement. Teachers who collaborate can share their knowledge, skills and resources for the growth of their students and school.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers in a North Carolina high school who participate in teacher collaboration. After a review of current and historical literature, the following questions guided this study:

1. What factors contributed to the school refocusing on their professional learning community model?
2. How have school leaders created a culture of collaboration?
3. How have school leadership supported the practice of PLCs?

### Literature Review: Professional Learning Communities

Teacher collaboration can be defined as any system in which teachers consistently work together for the common purpose of improving student learning. DuFour (2005) defined teacher

collaboration as a “powerful collaboration” as a “systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice” (p. 36).

Professional learning communities is one model of teacher collaboration with an expressed outcome for teachers to create a common mission, vision, and values, participate in collective inquiry, utilize collaborative teams, is action oriented, and focused on improvement and results (McCarthy, Brennan & Vecchiarelo, 2011). In a professional learning community model, teachers are collaborative in their analysis of data, the development of instruction, common assessments and tasks, the examination of student work and the implementation of corrective action for intervention.

Research exists on the positive results that collaboration that has on the school. A study conducted by Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, (2015) examined teacher collaboration practices in 336 Miami-Dade Public Schools between the years of 2010 and 2012. The study involved over 9,000 teachers, and found that teacher collaboration has positive effects on teachers and their students.

With increasing foci on accountability for student achievement, many teachers struggle with finding the time to collaborate with others to practice effective collaboration. Effective collaboration models do not emerge spontaneously; the school principal must cultivate them. The context and conditions that support teacher collaboration are important. As instructional leaders, school administrators can encourage buy-in, model and support and cultivate teacher collaboration by providing dedicated time and space, and accountability for knowing and using the data to develop instruction. To develop the leadership capacity of the staff, the principal must work with intention and urgency to create structures that allow teachers to participate in the PLC process. Williams (2010) supports this when she contends:

For collaboration to gain momentum, principals must establish a sense of urgency for teachers to work together to address the challenges of students, and they must elicit from teachers the belief that students will learn more because of what is being done in the classrooms (pg. 155).

### **Method and Theoretical Framework**

The nature of this research study called for a phenomenological qualitative approach as outlined in Creswell (2014). Vygotsky’s Social Learning Theory grounded this study. Vygotsky recognized that learning takes place in social contexts. Educators create this social context through professional collaboration with other teachers. This principle is the foundation of collaborative learning and indicates that teachers should create a supportive community of learners (Vygotsky, 1980).

### **Participants**

Participants were selected by a convenience sample. Creswell (2014) outlines a convenience sample as one in which respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability. Participants in the convenience sample were selected from one school. The participants self-identified as educators in the state of North Carolina who participated in collaboration using a PLC model, but did not feel that it was effective. All participants agreed to use the PLC “Snapshot” protocol developed by the researcher for teachers and administrators, in order guide them through analysis of the data and conversations for one school year.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A series of focus group interviews were the primary data source. Interviews were conducted by focus group interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions based on relevant literature. An interview protocol facilitated the discussion of the research questions. The data were transcribed and the transcripts were shared with the

participants to allow them to check for accuracy and verification. In an effort to maintain the anonymity of the individual interview participants, the material does not identify their names or positions.

### **Results**

The participants provided information regarding their experience with teacher collaboration. Participants provided a descriptive analysis of the factors he or she believed contributed to teacher collaboration. Sentiments shared by participants are highlighted below and align with relevant research on teacher collaboration in the literature review. Responses to the study questions yielded several key themes.

#### **Theme #1: The Need for a Professional Learning Community**

Question 1: What factors contributed to the school refocusing on their professional learning community model?

This theme focused on factors that contributed to the school's need to refocus on their professional learning community model. Based on school leadership and teacher participant responses, the most pressing factor was to increase student achievement and to rebuild a culture of climate of collegiality. The school for the past few years experienced high teacher turnover and continued slow growth in student achievement. There was an immediate need to provide equitable instruction for all students and decrease the gap in student performance by the race and ethnicity, and students with disabilities subgroups. The participants all agreed that the pursuit of student achievement for all students in their school drove the need to refocus their commitment to a professional learning community.

One participant stated:

We were not being true to the school mission and vision and we definitely did not collaborate to analyze data or use the data to guide decisions regarding our instruction for our students; provide corrective instruction and share teaching strategies that we have used in our classes that have proven to be successful with our specific content. Student achievement was not growing and instruction was not equitable for all students because we just were not sharing ideas and strategies that have worked for us. We isolated ourselves from each other. By doing this, we continued to maintain the gap in student achievement.

#### **Theme #2: Culture of collaboration**

Question 2: How have school leaders created a culture of collaboration?

At the first faculty meeting of the school year, school leadership revisited the reasons the staff became educators, and each made one commitment to our students for the upcoming school year. Through this, school leadership found that there were lots of commonality among them. They felt that they would not have realized this otherwise, because many of teachers stayed within their four classroom walls and did not have many real professional conversations with each other. This dialogue was the impetus for school leadership to discuss the impact of isolation of the school. The school leadership used the previous years' data and the achievement gaps that persisted within the school due to a lack of collaboration, common language and collective learning application and data analysis to begin the conversation on refocusing their commitment to collaboration and PLCs. As a school, staff watched videos of their students, who were now in college, discuss how a lack of collaboration affected their cross-curricular learning. The previous years' data corroborated the students' personal stories.

A participant stated:

This got us to refocus on collaboration. After hearing these stories, it was surprising to see that there seemed to be a consensus that we would make an intentional commitment to collaborate in order to improve student achievement.

A participant stated:

Once the process of collaboration became the school culture, we began to exchange ideas, resources and strategies with each other. We unified around the school's vision. I think students could see that we had a sense of unity; we respected each other, we cared that each student had the same opportunity to succeed and we demonstrate that by providing students with common assessments for like content classes. They see us collaborating and creating a sense of collegiality.

Many participants voiced that their perception of their influence on colleagues drove their initial reluctance to collaborate with others in a professional learning community.

A participant stated:

I think we all had that same fear. I wanted to escape the isolation of teaching and exchange ideas with my colleagues but did not feel confident that my ideas would be accepted. I now enjoy working with my colleagues again and demonstrating to them that I can help support student growth. We have begun looking outside of the box for strategies that work for our student population and have made small success. We are renewed again and looking forward to the benefits that PLCs have to offer!

### **Theme #3: Supportive Leadership**

Question 3: How have school leadership supported the practice of PLCs?

This theme examined ways in which school leadership supported for PLCs. There was agreement that school leadership not only encouraged but also actively participated in professional learning communities. This belief enabled teachers to buy-in to collaboration while understanding that greater accountability for themselves and their students would be a direct result of the professional learning community model.

One participant stated:

I taught in a school previously where school leaders did not set expectations for our collaborative time, nor did they provide structure and protocols. Here, school leaders encourage collaboration and we have structured, dedicated time to do so each week. We are encouraged to pre-plan for our PLCs and bring the necessary artifacts we will need to advance our conversations (notebooks, laptops, a copy of standards, student benchmark assessments, intervention strategies, and student work samples) towards student achievement and doing what is right by our students with the development of our tasks, assessments and check for understandings. This helps us to focus our instruction.

A second participant stated:

...that it helped to have a school leader participate in our PLCs. This shows that we are all in in together and it built our capacity to become teacher leaders. The administrator's expectations of collaboration are transparent and as they engage with us in professional learning communities. They provide us with a great model of what collaboration looks like, school-wide. Our team developed an atmosphere of trust, so when an administrator was not presents we were comfortable enough with each other to have intentional conversations about the data and student learning. We always remained focused on continuously improving student achievement.

Another participant stated:

It helps us to have conversations using common language about the struggling students and the immediate interventions they need. School leadership holds us accountable for knowing our student data. We began capturing our data on a “PLC snapshot” which helped us to guide our conversation and stay focused. Our completed snapshots serve as historical data that we can reference in the future. Our school leaders also take notes on their own snapshot. Documenting our PLCs allows us to make sure we are providing interventions for students who are struggling and enrichment for those students that are on grade level or exceeding. When administrators participate with us, we do not mind being held accountable. It only makes us reflective in our practice and better educators.

A school leader reported:

We have intentional conversations using common language among teachers and ourselves. We’ve used data more intentionally and used a structured protocol to guide our conversation and capture notes in PLCs. We made data analysis and accountability a top priority in our leadership meetings and conversations with teachers. When refocusing our PLCs, we communicated to have an intentional focus on the urgent need to decrease the achievement gaps within our school; provide a consistent time each week and space to collaborate; ensure data were used to inform daily instructional practices, and engage teachers in collaborative and reflective practice. As a leadership team, we devote time during our own leadership team meetings to discuss how we can successfully support our efforts by providing resources and support. We encourage collaboration all the time!

#### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers in a North Carolina high school who participate in teacher collaboration. Literature suggests the following PLC structure: (1) shared and supportive leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) collective learning and application, (4) shared personal practice, (5) supportive conditions: relationships, and (6) supportive conditions: structures (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Hord & Summer, 2008). The three themes from this study: (1) the need for professional learning communities, (2) a culture of collaboration and (3) supportive leadership, align with literature on professional learning communities.

The participants of this study shared similar positive experiences regarding teacher collaboration at the school in this study. School leadership communicated clear expectations for teacher collaboration consistently throughout the entire school and aligned their expectations with the school’s vision, mission and beliefs. Teachers were expected to actively engage in collaboration whenever possible and were provided dedicated collaboration time and space. Teachers felt like they benefitted for school leadership’s participation in professional learning communities, and appreciated that school leaders held to direct conversations and maintained a measure of accountability. Teachers were encouraged to create common teaching approaches, assessments and activities to reach students in a range of academic abilities and move them forward.

The teachers and school leaders in this study believed that their instructional practices were enhanced by collaboration. Teachers and school leaders were able to see the value in collaboration and hope that by remaining intentional, this model will yield an increase in student achievement. Teacher collaboration is not a new topic. The participants of this study reinforced relevant literature that schools with a culture of teacher collaboration can affect the gains desired for their children and improve student achievement. The researcher acknowledges that there

were limitations related to conducting a study that involved only one case and understands the findings may not be generalizable. Further studies should be conducted using multiple sites and a mixed method design to find quantitative data to support sustaining professional learning communities as a model of teacher collaboration that has a positive impact on student achievement. Further studies should also discuss the characteristics of the school's instructional leader as a factor that creates a culture of collaboration that increases student achievement.



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## Appendix A

<b>PLC SNAPSHOT</b>		
Team Members: _____		
<b>What data is guiding this meeting?</b>		
<b>QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PLC</b>		
1. Which groups of students were more successful or more challenged by our instruction? 2. Of the students that struggled, what do you perceive to be their greatest challenge 3. Was one teacher more successful with this content? If so, how can this teacher be utilized for corrective action? 4. How will this affect our instruction next week? 4. Who are our struggling students? What can we do to support them? 5. How are our ESL students progressing with our instruction? What additional supports are needed? 6. How are our EC students progressing with our instruction? What additional supports are needed? 7. What have we already done to teach standard, concept, or content? How did it go and how do we know? 8. What can we do differently to ensure students master the content? 9. What rigorous tasks/activities have I incorporated into my instruction? 10. What is our plan?		
<b>Planning Common Assessment</b> (ex. Discuss standard/skill, instructional strategies) Notes:		
<b>Planning Tasks/Activities</b> Notes:		
<b>Unpacking the Curriculum</b> Notes:		
<b>Re-teaching Enrichment Plan</b> (Discuss previous instructional strategies, what new high leverage strategies will be implemented, discuss how the enrichment plan be monitored, what evidence will be collected to support that students have mastered the content) Notes:		
<b>Beginning Level 1's</b>        Ex. Got right < 40%	<b>Progressing Level 2-3's</b>        Ex. 40% < got right < 55%	<b>Proficient/College &amp; Career Ready Level 3-5's</b>        Ex. Got right > 55%

Appendix B

<b>ADMIN PLC SNAPSHOT</b>			
Team Members:			
<b>What data is guiding this meeting?</b>			
<b>QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PLC</b>			
<b>What do we want out student to learn?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What essential learning(s) will we focus on?</li> </ul>	<b>How will we know if they have learned it?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What common assessments will we use?</li> <li>• Which ones will be formative?</li> <li>• Which ones will be summative?</li> <li>• Are they already developed or do we need to create them?</li> <li>• If already developed, do any changes need to be made?</li> <li>• How often will we administer the assessments to see how we are progressing toward our goal?</li> <li>• How often will we analyze results?</li> </ul>	<b>What will we do if the students do not learn it?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will we modify our current practices to increase the achievement of our current students?</li> <li>• What strategies or interventions can we use?</li> <li>• How are we differentiating our instruction?</li> <li>• Where can we look for additional ideas?</li> <li>• What are other PLC teams doing in our building?</li> <li>• What structures can we change to provide students what they need?</li> </ul>	<b>What will we do if the students already know it?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What enrichment activities or extensions can we use?</li> <li>• How are we differentiating our instruction?</li> <li>• Where can we look for additional ideas? What are other PLC teams doing in our building? How can we be creative with scheduling and time? What further training might we need?</li> </ul>
<b>EVIDENCE</b>			
<b>What is the evidence to support “What do we want our students to learn?”</b> Notes:			
<b>What is the evidence to support “How will we know if they have learned it?”</b> Notes:			
<b>What is the evidence to support “What will we do if the students do not learn it?”</b> Notes:			
<b>What is the evidence to support “What will we do if the students already know it?”</b> Notes:			