

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

WITH COLLABORATION

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences with collaboration in schools in order to make recommendations for future collaboration initiatives. To gather data and capture the essence of teachers' perspectives on their experiences with collaboration, phenomenological interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017) were conducted with three participants at the same secondary school in British Columbia, Canada. The results indicate a strong desire for collaboration amongst the participants, however this was hindered by organizational structures that worked to counter effective collaboration. Some of the most important factors identified by the participants that are needed for collaboration to be effective include: (1) the formation of trusting, supportive relationships with other collaborators, (2) the allotment of paid time during the school day, (3) teacher choice in what they are to collaborate on and who they are to collaborate with, and (4) running collaboration from the bottom up and being facilitated by the teachers. All these factors need to be considered when planning for collaboration in schools.

Keywords: teachers, secondary school, collaboration, professional learning community, phenomenology, perceptions, experiences.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my participants, as it is your voices that made this possible.

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Acronyms

- i. *PLC*: Professional Learning Community
- ii. *TEP*: Teacher Education Program
- iii. *UFV*: University of the Fraser Valley
- iv. *BC*: British Columbia

Introduction

Context

I am entering my fifth year as a secondary school science teacher. This means that I am no longer in the “just trying to keep my head above water” phase of teaching and have now developed a desire to collaborate with my colleagues in crafting better learning experiences for students. During my long practicum in the Teacher Education Program (TEP) at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) in British Columbia (BC), Canada, I had very positive experiences collaborating with my colleagues in the design and implementation of new and engaging unit plans. I believe that this collaborative process was integral to my development as a new teacher.

The school district I am currently working in is a large and growing district, with over 20,000 students and over 2,500 teachers. The school in which I have been teaching for the past five years has over 1,200 students and approximately 80 teachers. I have noticed over the past several years that it lacks the collaborative community that I had experienced in my TEP practicum. A possible reason for this is that this school has a high teacher turnover rate, resulting in an influx of new, less experienced teachers who are, unfortunately, often only temporary.

My Inquiry

As someone who has always been extremely curious in nature, I am constantly trying to understand the different phenomena going on around me. I know how impactful collaboration was for me when I was starting out as a new teacher and was interested in learning about my colleagues' knowledge and experiences surrounding collaboration. My passion for collaboration led me to the following inquiry question: What are the perceptions and experiences of secondary

school teachers with collaboration, and how have these experiences impacted their participation in collaborative activities?

To answer these questions, I conducted three phenomenological interviews with teachers from my school. When it comes to teacher collaboration and the formation of professional learning communities (PLCs), some research suggests that PLCs can have a positive effect in schools. This is especially true when looking at the influence of teacher collaboration on the summative achievement of students. The potential benefits of PLCs do not stop at student achievement, but may also have an impact on teacher efficacy and wellbeing. My views and experiences with teacher collaboration during my practicum are substantiated by the academic research on the topic. The goal of my inquiry question was to find out if these beliefs are also felt by other teachers in my personal context. What one person or one school community feels about collaboration may be vastly different than another. The purpose of this study was to try and understand the perceptions and experiences of the staff in my current context, so that I can better work to improve collaboration in the future.

As I will be interviewed colleagues that work at the same secondary school as I do, it was important to consider how my relationship with them would impact my results. My relationship with my participants was ultimately a benefit to the research, as they already had a trusting relationship with me. Because of this, were more open and honest with me than they would have been with a stranger.

While researching my literature review, I found numerous quantitative studies on the topic of PLCs and collaboration, particularly on how they affect student academic achievement. However, the number of qualitative research studies looking at the opinions and lived experiences of teachers appeared to be limited. With my research I am hoping to gain some

insight into the contextual factors that may be acting as barriers towards deep and efficient collaboration at my school. This research is extremely personal and important to me because I want to use it as a springboard towards creating a more collaborative culture at my school.

Literature Review

Teachers have long known the power of collaboration when it comes to the design and implementation of the curriculum. A common theme in schools currently is the notion that schools of today are antiquated systems in dire need of reform. It is commonly accepted that schools were designed to create compliant factory workers that would prop up the economy and keep the industrial revolution moving. The times have changed, and schools need to catch up. More and more school districts are looking towards collaboration and the formation of PLCs to enact and sustain school transformation. However, collaboration and PLCs are defined in a number of different ways in the literature, making it difficult to draw empirical conclusions about them. Stoll et al. (2006) describe PLCs as a “group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (p. 223). The purpose of this literature review is to identify the role of collaboration and PLCs on the level of students and teachers, as well as describe some contextual factors that can facilitate or hinder collaboration in schools.

Defining the Structure of Teacher Collaboration

While researching teacher collaboration, it was evident that there is no one size fits all definition of collaboration in the literature. Every researcher has their own definitions and views about what collaboration looks like. I was particularly drawn to an article by Hargreaves (2019), where he compares true collaborative cultures versus what he calls “contrived collegiality” (p.

610). Hargreaves (2019) states that successful collaborative cultures are almost always established “through informality and spontaneity around interests and activities” (p. 610), facilitated by teachers and conducted on their own time. Running collaboration in this manner ensures that teachers are invested in what they are doing, and that they are working towards a common goal.

This is in direct opposition to contrived collegiality, which is more formal, occurring at pre-set meeting times, and is often directed by the district or the administration of the school (Hargreaves, 2019). The result of contrived collegiality is teachers that feel like they are being forced to work on something that they find little to no value in. For collaboration to be successful, teachers need to be given a voice in what the structure of their collaboration looks like. When collaboration is being used as an “exercise of administrative power” (p. 610), the overall purpose or goal of the collaboration can get lost, along with any positive effect the collaboration was supposed to achieve (Hargreaves, 2019).

The Effect of Teacher Collaboration on Student Academic Achievement

There is a rich body of literature describing the impacts of PLCs and collaboration on schools. This is especially true when looking at the influence of teacher collaboration on the summative achievement of students. Egodawatte, McDougall, & Stoilescu (2011) conducted a collaborative teacher inquiry project at 11 schools across four school boards in the Greater Toronto Area of Canada. As a part of this workshop, teachers were encouraged to join same-subject groups and attend workshops on how to collaborate to improve their practice as well as improve the outcomes of their students, particularly in Grade 9 mathematics. At the end of this two-semester inquiry project, the researchers interviewed all of the participating teachers and conducted a qualitative analysis on the results. The researchers found that while working

collaboratively, teachers were able to achieve their individual goals, create better professional development opportunities, and increase student test scores on mock Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) math tests. A limitation of this research is that the EQAO math tests were not part of the researcher's methodology. One of the schools participating in the inquiry project took it upon themselves to implement their own mock EQAO tests as part of their achievement plan goals. As a result of this, we are unable to know how rigorous their methods were in the implementation of these tests, leaving questions surrounding the validity of said tests. However, this study nonetheless points to...(significance for your study?)

Saka (2021) also looked at the effects of teacher collaboration groups on student achievement in mathematics; however, they used a pre-test post-test model. The study involved testing of 135 students from two junior secondary schools in Nigeria. They had two groups of teachers, one group were involved in collaborating in the design and implementation of math lessons, whereas the other group of teachers were isolated with no communication regarding their math curricula. Saka gave students gave students of both groups a Mathematic Achievement Test (MAT) at the beginning and at the end of the semester. They found that students in the experimental group where the teachers participated in collaborative practices, outperformed the students in the isolated group on a post-test (Saka, 2021). The results of this study confirmed the results of Egodawatte et al. (2011) and provides further evidence that PLCs can have a positive impact on student achievement, particularly in the field of mathematics.

Both previous studies focused on mathematics because there is a large movement in the field of teaching mathematics to reform the way it has been taught, particularly in secondary schools (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2007). It is also much easier to assess a student's ability to solve a mathematical equation than it is to test their concept knowledge on a

complex topic such as science. For this reason, it was much harder to find any literature examining student achievement in science and how it is correlated with teacher collaboration. Wigglesworth (2011) attempted to do just that by analyzing the effects of teacher collaboration on students' understanding of Earth Science concepts taught in secondary schools. This study used a similar method of pre-test post-test used by Saka (2021); however, Wigglesworth (2011) combined the test results with student interviews and student surveys to get a clearer picture as to what content knowledge the students had gained.

Wigglesworth (2011) had his colleagues in a Boise, Idaho secondary school collaborate on instructional strategies they would use to meet the assessment goals they had come up with in previous collaboration sessions. Some teachers used the strategies the group came up with, while others used strategies they had come up with in isolation. The results obtained from this study demonstrated that students in the group taught using the collaborative teaching strategies not only performed better on the post-test, but they also had a statistically significant increase in the completion rate of assignments and lab reports (Wigglesworth, 2011). This research was conducted by Wigglesworth (2011) as part of his Master of Science Capstone at Montana State University, and as such has not been subjected to the rigorous peer review process. However, when combined with previous research, such as that conducted by Egodawatte et al. (2011), and Saka (2021), it is evident that teacher collaboration, taking a variety of different forms, can have a positive effect on student academic achievement in the subject areas of math and science.

Impacts of Collaboration at the Teacher Level

Students are not the only ones that benefit from teacher collaboration, there is evidence to suggest that collaboration can contribute to the professional growth and development of teachers. Slavitt et al. (2011) followed a group of middle school mathematics teachers on their five-year

collaboration journey using the grounded theory methodology to collect data from their meetings and interviews. They found that when teachers participated in collaboration using team roles, focused on student learning data, the conversations were far more productive and teachers were able to better achieve their personal goals for students (Slavit et al., 2011). Because teachers were able to attain their goals with students and see their colleagues doing the same, this resulted in a greater overall teacher efficacy among the math teachers at this middle school. Being part of a group that was creating, and enacting change gave the teachers involved a greater sense of confidence, a belief in themselves that they were capable of being change makers in their school. Slavit et al. (2011) also identified an increase in the use of student-centered instructional strategies among the participating mathematics teachers.

Main and Bryer (2005) also looked at collaborative groups in a middle school, this time over a 3-year period. From their observations and interviews they discovered that teachers who collaborated no longer felt isolated and perceived an increased teacher collegiality among the staff (Main & Bryer, 2005). Being part of a teacher collaboration team was also correlated with an increase in professional dialogue, increased job satisfaction, and the formation of a more adaptable learning environment (Main & Bryer, 2005).

Context Matters

The literature highlights the importance of teacher collaboration and the formation of PLCs on the wellbeing of both teachers and students. However, from personal experience and speaking with colleagues, it seems to still be a rare phenomenon in schools. Educational researchers such as Kelchtermans (2006) believe that this is likely due to underlying contextual factors that investigations into collaboration often ignore. Factors such as school demographic,

culture, values, socio-economic status, and balance of power are all capable of influencing the effectiveness of collaboration and PLCs at schools (Kelchtermans, 2006).

In the pursuit of studying these contextual factors of collaboration, Bellibas et al. (2017) used a tool called the Professional Learning Communities Assessment Revised (PLCA-R). This tool is a questionnaire developed by Olivier et al. (2009) that's purpose is to assess the perceptions of a school's staff surrounding the concept of PLCs. The PLCA-R describes a six-factor model, examining a schools shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, supportive conditions (relationships), and supportive conditions (structures) (Olivier et al.,2009). The results of the PLCA-R can be used to determine a school's capacity for developing PLCs, as well as identify possible barriers to collaboration in a school.

Bellibas et al. (2017) used the PLCA-R with 492 staff members at 27 schools across Turkey and compared their results. They concluded from this study that many of the schools had a culture of sharing and collaboration, however their attempts to collaborate were hindered by factors such as limited time, material resource availability, human resource availability, and the absence of school structures to facilitate their collaboration (Bellibas et al., 2017). School staff indicated their desire for collaboration; however, they did not have access to the professional development materials such as access to reading materials and experts in collaboration, to pursue PLCs as a school wide initiative. They also found that these inhibiting factors were far more prevalent in schools having a lower socioeconomic status, a younger staff, and a larger student population (Bellibas et al., 2017). It is important to reiterate that these conclusions are based on a one-time survey of staff perceptions, calling into to question the validity of the results. For more conclusive data it may have been better to use the PLCA-R in combination with researcher

observations to minimize staff biases in the results. This study was a good start in identifying some of the contextual factors of collaboration that need further study.

Conclusion

The literature provides evidence for something teachers have known for a very long time: collaboration and the formation of PLCs can improve a variety of issues, including student academic achievement and teacher efficacy. However, there are also several different methodologies researchers use to assess collaboration in schools, resulting in difficulty comparing studies to one another. A gap in the research that I have identified is the lack of studies tapping into the knowledge and lived experiences of teachers involved with collaboration at the school level. In my personal context, I decided it would be beneficial to use phenomenological interviews as a tool to analyze the perceptions and experiences of teachers regarding collaboration in my school, as well as identify the barriers we may be facing as a school moving towards a more collaborative culture.

Methodology

The goal of my inquiry was to explore if my beliefs surrounding teacher collaboration are felt by other teachers in my personal context. This is congruent with the constructivist research paradigm, as I wanted to make meaning and find understanding of the data I collected from my participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). My ontological belief is that there is no single reality or single truth. Our perceived reality is based on contextual factors and is affected by the ideologies and experiences of the people involved. What one person, or one school community, feels about collaboration may be vastly different than another. My goal was to try and understand

the perceptions and experiences of the staff in my current context, so that I can better work to improve it in the future.

Epistemology refers to the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In my situation, I interviewed colleagues that work at the same secondary school as I do. I believe that my relationship with my participants was a benefit to the research, as they have a trusting relationship with me, and were more open and honest with me than they might have been with a stranger. The constructivist axiology says that the researcher's beliefs and values may influence the research itself (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). As I have personal relationships with all of the people I interviewed, I expected to have some bias towards their answers. I strongly believe that teacher collaboration is a great thing, and I want others to feel the same way so that we can build a collaborative school culture in our building. I was careful to keep these biases out of the interviews that I conducted, and I made sure that I was not using any sort of leading questions that may have influenced the way they answered. I ensured that participants read the transcripts and the conclusions I was able to draw from them, which prevented the possibility of misrepresenting them.

I conducted three teacher interviews as my data sources, which is part of a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative data is sensitive to the contextual factors of the phenomena being researched (Yilmaz, 2013). Since I know the context of my school will affect the perceptions and experiences of the teachers there, I felt this was the best methodology for understanding my participants' perceptions and lived experiences. As I want to touch on the contextual factors of collaboration, I ensured that I interviewed teachers of differing experience to try and understand if teaching experience affects their perceptions of collaboration. I also wanted to interview teachers from different departments. Previous research has provided

evidence supporting the notion that collaboration is less frequent at large schools (Bellibas et al., 2017). I wanted to understand how a department or department size may also affect collaboration.

While researching my literature review, I found several quantitative studies on the topic of PLCs and collaboration, particularly on how it affects student academic achievement. However, the number of qualitative research studies looking at contextual factors such as school diversity, location, size, teacher perceptions, and lived experiences appeared to be limited. With my research study, I was hoping to gain insight into the contextual factors that were acting as barriers towards deep and efficient collaboration at my school. This research is extremely personal and important to me because I want to use it as a springboard towards creating a more collaborative culture at my school.

Method

The qualitative research method that fits the best with my research question is phenomenology. A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of a group of individuals surrounding a specific event or phenomenon. The goal of phenomenology is to find some commonality between the individuals experiences to gain new insights and understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To achieve this, the researcher collects data from participants who have experienced the specific phenomenon being inquired about, which in this case is teacher collaboration. When using phenomenology as a research method, the research “proceeds through an inceptual process of reflective wondering, deep questioning, attentive reminiscing, and sensitively interpreting the primal meanings of human experiences” (van Manen, 2014, p. 819).

The defining features of a phenomenological study include: (a) a focus on the phenomenon being investigated; (b) the participants must have all experienced the phenomenon

or event; (c) a discussion about the philosophy of phenomenology and its subjectivity; (d) bracketing of the researcher to ensure it is the participants voices being heard; (e) interviews as the main form of data collection; (f) data analysis that focuses on what the participants experienced and how they experienced it; and (g) concludes with a description of the “essence” of the experiences had by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.149-150). By interviewing three teachers who all had experiences with collaboration and reporting on them, this study meets all of the qualifications of a phenomenological study.

Managing Bias

Due to the nature of phenomenological research, there is often a relationship between the researcher and the participants. This means that researcher bias is unavoidable. For this reason, it is vital that the researcher takes specific precautions when managing their biases. The participants in this study are colleagues of mine that I have been working with for several years. Because of this it was important for me to use bracketing during the interviews and ensuring that I was not influencing the participants answers in any way. During my time in the TEP, I had very productive experiences collaborating with my colleagues, experiences that helped shape who I am now as a teacher. However, I am also aware that not everyone has had the same favourable experiences with collaboration that I have. I aimed to set my beliefs and values surrounding collaboration aside while interviewing the participants to make sure it was their voices being heard and not my own. Another way that I managed my bias was by sending the interview transcripts to the participants so that they could edit and approve them before I examined them for meaning. By doing this I aimed to minimize misinterpretations of what the participants said versus what they meant.

I used a field journal to keep track of my ideas, questions, assumptions, and biases surrounding collaboration. I also wrote directly on the participants' transcripts so that I could keep track of where my assumptions about meaning came from. I wrote in the field journal after each interview and after the initial analysis of each transcript. This journal also provided me with the ability to keep track of if/how my analyses of the interviews changed from one to the next, making sure that I was not making any unwarranted assumptions. After coding the transcripts, I sent them to my supervisor to review so that she could tell me if any of my codes or assumptions were overreaching based on the data provided by the participants.

I further distanced myself from the data collection process by using open-ended questions in my interviews. By doing so, I reduced the probability that my questions were leading the participants responses or influenced them in any way and an interview script was created well in advance of the interviews. During the interviews I made sure I stuck to the script questions and only went off script to ask clarifying questions. By sticking to this script, I kept myself distanced from the participants' responses. All these steps served to ensure my biases and beliefs on the topic of collaboration were bracketed from the conversation.

Participants

This research study took place at a large inner-city high school in the Fraser Valley region of British Columbia (BC). To assure full transparency, I, the primary researcher, also work as a teacher at this school. For the last two years, this school has had district-prescribed collaboration sessions that occurred approximately once a month that all teachers were expected to attend. During these sessions, teachers got together with their departments to collaborate on inquiry in the classroom. For this reason, I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used in phenomenological studies because it allows the researcher to hand pick the participants,

making certain that those participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is based on the notion that the researcher, to gain understanding and insight, selects a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

I chose to interview specific participants that had at least two years of experience teaching in the district. This assured that they had ample experience with these collaborative sessions. I chose participants from the same school I work at because I wanted to better understand my specific context and use the knowledge gained from this research to enact meaningful change at my school. As the collaboration sessions were department based, I also made sure to select participants from different departments so that I could get a variety of perspectives on the topic of collaboration. One participant teaches Foods and Nutrition, one teaches Mathematics and Science, and one teaches Humanities.

Data Tools

Before recruiting participants, this research study was reviewed and approved by the University of the Fraser Valley Human Research Ethics Board (HREB Protocol #101180, November 17, 2022) and the local school board. Once approved, I emailed potential participants a recruitment letter. This letter summarized the purpose and procedures of the study, the time commitment required from participants, and mapped out a general timeline for the interviews and member checks. Participants were advised that their information would remain confidential, all data would be anonymized before analysis, and would be deleted at the conclusion of the study. Once participants agreed to be interviewed, I hand delivered a copy of the informed consent form, which they signed prior to their interview.

The data collection tool used in this study was a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) of six open-ended questions (Appendix A). These questions were

intentionally designed to get participants thinking about what worked in their collaborative experiences as well as identify any barriers to collaboration that they may have experienced in the past. Interviews allow the researcher to discover information about things that cannot be directly observed, such as thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It is the purpose of the interview “to allow us the enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 426).

Along with the six open-ended questions, I had prepared extending questions that I could use if the need arose. These were questions such as “could you please expand on that thought...” and “tell me more about...”. Using extension questions provided me with the ability to get thicker descriptions from my participants regarding their experiences with collaboration. Other than these extending questions, I was conscious to keep my interjections to a minimum, as to make sure it was my participant’s voice being heard and not my own. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ classrooms after school hours. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length. They were voice-recorded and transcribed using the Otter.ai application on my smart phone. The transcripts were kept on my password protected computer, and backups were kept on a USB thumb drive that was kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

When I was conducting interviews and analyzing the transcripts, I wrote notes, observations, assumptions, and salient thoughts that arose in my field journal. I used these notes as sort of bookmarks that I then used to go back and reread sections of the transcript to better understand what was being said. Once data collection was complete, I cleaned up the grammar of the transcripts, removing repeated words and phrases such as “umm” and “like”. I also anonymized the transcripts by removing any names and other identifying information. The

participants chose their own pseudonyms before the interview took place. Once the transcript had been edited, anonymized, and approved by the participants, I began the process of coding the data.

I started the process of coding by conducting a preliminary reading of all the transcripts to get a better understanding of the themes and overall flow of the interviews. I made sure to make additional notes of key concepts or ideas that emerged in my field journal during this process. This process is referred to as horizontalization of data, and I made sure to consider each statement from the participants as having equal importance to the study (Moustakas, 1994). On subsequent readings, I started to pull out important quotes, entering them into an Excel spreadsheet. On this spreadsheet I had a column for the quote, who said the quote, what page the quote was on, and the emerging code for that quote. Identifying emerging codes was the starting point of first-level descriptive coding (Miles et al., 2014).

Once I had identified as many of the emerging codes as I could, I grouped them into broader themes or “meaning units” as described by van Manen (2014). I did this by writing my codes onto cue cards and spreading them out on my dining room table. This process provided me with the ability to see all the codes at one time, at which point I began putting the cue cards into physical piles that each represented a theme in the data. These themes allowed me to make thorough descriptions of the participants lived experiences with teacher collaboration, as well as gain a better understanding of the essence of their collaborative experiences.

Strength of Study

To ensure the strength of this study, I utilized Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) Triple Crises of Representation, Legitimation, and Praxis. Representation refers to the ability of qualitative research to capture an accurate representation of an individual’s lived experiences (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005). I assured my participants were being represented accurately and not being objectified by providing them with the transcripts to edit and approve. I also made sure to humanize them by asking them to provide context about themselves before the interview. I asked initial questions such as “what is your definition of teacher collaboration”. This made sure that there were no misinterpretations about the definitions of key terms used in the interview. After the interview I asked each participant how they wanted to be represented in the study and what they wanted to see come from it. This gave the participants more control over how their words would be represented.

Legitimation refers to the researcher’s trustworthiness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I implemented legitimation by providing direct quotes as evidence of how participants perceived each aspect of teacher collaboration. By using open-ended questions during the interviews, it gave participants the opportunity to respond without any constraints from the questions. Praxis as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refers to how research findings were used and how they could potentially benefit others. The findings from this research have the potential to inform the school community regarding how to best support staff in productive teacher collaboration.

Results

This section identifies the key findings from the data gained from the interviews of the three participants in this study. To ensure confidentiality, the three participants were assigned a corresponding pseudonym: “Emily,” “Robert,” and “Sam.” Emily has been a Secondary Teacher for four and a half years, teaching both science and math. Robert has been a teacher for a total of 15 years, teaching students English as a Second Language (ESL), Social Studies, and Foods and Nutrition. He has taught students from Grade 5 to Grade 12. Meanwhile, Sam has been a teacher

for 17 years and is currently in a program that teaches every subject to students from Grade 9 to Grade 12. After asking the participants to tell me about their personal teaching histories, I asked them to describe their thoughts and feelings surrounding teacher collaboration. All three participants then began to define what they believed to be collaboration in schools.

Defining Collaboration

It is important to note that all the participants had a generally positive view of collaboration and expressed a strong desire to experience more of it in their current situation. One participant said “I’m not sure why there is not more collaboration happening here. I guess COVID had an impact, but even before that there was not much collaboration happening. I really love collaborating...I wish there was more of that here” (Sam).

The Transfer of Resources and Knowledge

When asked to describe their thoughts about collaboration in schools, the participants were quick to talk about the sharing of ideas and the transfer of knowledge between teachers. Robert described an experience he had collaborating with his colleagues where “we had a very broad and diverse group of teachers that all taught different subjects in different ways. We would all come together once a month and share our ideas and resources with one another.” It was evident from these interviews the value the participants placed on resources, and the distribution of those resources, especially as early career teachers. Sam went on to say that:

[o]ne of the things I love about our school is that the older teachers that are the veteran teachers are so generous to share their wisdom and their resources with the new teachers that come here. Year one [of teaching] was absolutely overwhelming. That was so incredibly helpful for those guys to just share with me. (Sam)

However, this transfer of knowledge and resources does not have to happen in person. Emily described an experience where there was a shared Google drive that all the teachers had access to and would upload lesson plans and projects that had worked well for them. She said “collaboration does not have to always be in-person meetings. With all of the new technology we can meet using Microsoft teams or upload documents to the cloud where everyone can access them.” One issue a couple of the participants had with the shared Google drive was that while they had access to these resources, there was limited information on how to implement them into their lessons. As Sam stated, “most of the resources were hard to implement without having a conversation with the teacher that made them. But I would take a resource and find that teacher to have a deeper conversation about how to use that resource.”

Although the participants’ primary focus was on the sharing of projects, lesson plans, and other material resources, Sam mentioned the importance of teacher collaboration in supporting the wellbeing of students. He said:

Sharing resources is great...however it is the sharing of information that can be invaluable. For example, say you have a student that you are having trouble reaching, it can be beneficial to go to some of their other teachers and see if they have any strategies that helped them break the ice with that student. Or maybe a student’s behaviour has changed, it can be helpful to ask their other teachers if they noticed something similar or if it is just in your class. These seem like small things but can make a world of difference in building a relationship with that student. (Sam)

Clear Direction/Common Goal

Another theme that was a common thread in all the interviews was the importance of knowing where you are trying to go with collaboration. Robert identified the importance of

purpose for collaboration to be effective, stating “[i]t needs to have a clear direction of where you want to go with that collaboration. Are we collaborating just to collaborate? Or is there a goal? ...if you're collaborating just because, why are we wasting our time.” The participants all mentioned that for collaboration to be successful, everyone needs to be working towards a common goal that is significant to everyone involved.

Sam brought up the importance of “shared interests,” stating how “teachers need to be invested in what they are spending their time on. There needs to be a shared interest in the topic of collaboration. Otherwise, why waste our time?”. Sam described how this was achieved in the past by getting teachers to make a list of topics they were interested in, and then forming groups around those topics. “This way,” he said, “we could choose to work on something that interested us, and most importantly, gave us purpose.” (Sam)

The Purpose of Collaboration

When conferring about the purpose of collaboration, the participants’ views could be placed into two categories: (1) the impact of collaboration on students, and (2) the impact of collaboration on teachers.

Student Impact

Participants mentioned the impact collaboration can have on students. Both Robert and Emily discussed how students are far too often, learning in a “bubble”. When I asked them what they meant by this, they explained that there are topics or concepts learned in one classroom that are transferrable to other courses taken by the students. Emily said:

But the students do not realize this. The things that they learn in one classroom are locked into that classroom in their brains. We as teachers need to help guide the students into

making these [cross-curricular] connections. That is much easier to do when teachers from different subject areas are able to collaborate! (Emily)

Teacher Impact

When speaking about the purpose of collaboration, all the participants discussed the positive impact it has on teachers and their practice. Emily mentioned how her collaboration relationship with a teacher in the past “helped me teach my class more effectively.” She described how collaborating with teachers that taught the same subject as her gave her a different perspective on how to teach. “It is easy to figure out a way to do something on your own and then never change. Working with that teacher gave me so many ideas, I realized that the way I had been teaching could be improved.” This notion of improvement and professional growth came up in my conversation with Sam as well. He mentioned how “it is so easy to become stagnant [as a teacher]. Collaboration is the most efficient way you can improve your practice. There is no reason to struggle on your own or try reinventing the wheel. Just find the time to talk and work with your colleagues. Everyone wins.”

Robert talked about his past collaboration experiences giving him a new perspective of what teaching is and what it can be, describing “When I started teaching, I was very content oriented. I focused on getting through the notes. That is what I thought was expected of me and so that is what I focused on.” He went on to say that:

Collaborating with other teachers, well, one in particular gave me a different perspective. They showed me the power of doing team building activities with my classes to help build relationships and facilitate a positive classroom culture. It made me realized that content is not everything. I still cringe when I think about the teacher I was before I met them. (Robert)

Structure

The participants shared the perspective that even if you have all the factors discussed above, it is the overall structure of the collaboration that dictates how effective it can be. When asked about what their ideal collaboration scenario would look like, participants started to describe the structures that they believed were necessary for effective collaboration to take place.

Participation

They all believed that for collaboration to be effective, you need the participation of the entire school. Emily stated that “for collaboration to occur, the whole school needs to be involved. It cannot be a small subset of the population.” Sam had a similar sentiment and said, “effective collaboration needs to get the whole school involved, there needs to something to create teacher buy-in, to create a desire to participate.” When asked to elaborate, Sam went on to describe how some of his past experiences with collaboration were successful because it was a part of the school’s culture:

In my old school, there was a culture around collaboration. We were not forced, but there was an expectation that everyone collaborated in some way. We were told, this is your collaboration time, you are expected to attend a session of interest. I think that expectation gave teachers that push that they needed to get involved (Sam).

This quote from Sam brought up another important aspect of collaboration that was shared by all the other participants as well: the importance of time.

Time

If there is one thing that teachers are acutely aware of, it is the importance of time as a non-renewable resource. All three participants brought up the notion and significance of time throughout their interviews. Robert mentioned how “we need time within the school day to

collaborate. In an ideal scenario, the time for collaboration is built into the school's timetable so we do not have to give up our own time before and after school." Sam shared this belief, stating "...and so the beauty of having it during the school day is that everybody has time available and you're making a priority, saying collaboration matters so much that we are going to include that as part of your paid work time."

Teacher Driven

Another topic that was discussed had to do with the idea of bottom-up, or teacher driven, collaboration. All participants acknowledged that every positive collaboration experience they have had was started by teachers. Emily said:

I think the teachers that have a desire to collaborate, are finding ways to collaborate.

They are working on things that they want to work on with their friends and with people who they want to be working with. My best collaboration experience was with teachers asking me to collaborate with them on the new reporting practices. Nobody told us we had to do it. It was something we were all working on so let's work on it together (Emily).

Having collaboration facilitated by teachers is another way to increase the participation and buy-in of the staff. Sam mentioned this, stating "when I started, it was completely bottom up driven. And so, then there was a significantly larger amount of buy in and desire to participate." Robert summarized the feelings of the participants perfectly when he emphatically said, "It needs to come from the teachers!" He would go on to say, "I have also experienced collaboration that was mandated by the district, and I don't think it was as effective as it could have been."

Identifying Barriers to Collaboration

Although my interview questions were related to what effective collaboration looks like, all the participants shared their beliefs as to why collaboration at our school was not as effective as it could be. When analyzing the transcripts, several “barriers” to collaboration emerged.

Top-Down Collaboration

One such barrier identified by all three of the participants was the notion of top-down, or district directed collaboration. It was evident from the interviews that teachers have different opinions on what they find important and want to spend their limited time and resources on.

Robert said:

The thing is, if you're being directed to do it, you're going to get resistance. People do not like being told what to do. And not every teacher wants to work on the same thing. We need to have a voice in what we are spending our collaboration time on. Otherwise, they are not going to participate. (Robert)

Sam had similar feelings but took it a step further and mentioned how district directed collaboration demonstrates a lack of trust in the teachers. He went on to say “a part of healthy collaboration is trust. Not just trust in your colleagues, but the trust of the admin and the district, that you are capable of using collaboration time without being forced to do so.”

Although the participants were strongly against top-down collaboration, they did identify the importance of administrative and district support. Robert communicated that the role of the administrators and the district should be to “facilitate” and “support” the teachers in their efforts to collaborate. He talked about previous experiences where:

[t]he district provided us with time once a month to meet with other teachers and collaborate. If we needed more time, the admin would bring in a couple of Teachers

Teaching On Call (TTOC's) to cover our classes for us so we could get together and collaborate on our lesson plans.” (Robert)

Isolation

Another barrier identified by the participants was isolation. COVID has exacerbated the issue over the past few years, but even before the start of the pandemic, isolation has been a persistent issue for the participants. They described two ways in which isolation has prevented them from collaborating effectively. The first is isolation via their departments. Most of the collaboration experiences facilitated by schools/districts are organized by department. For example, the Science or English departments get together to collaborate. Robert described how this is isolating because at most schools he has worked at, he is the only Foods and Nutrition teacher. He described how “it is tough because [as a Foods and Nutrition teacher] you are an island unto yourself. You’re the only one in the building, and it is hard to collaborate with yourself.”

The second type of isolation described by participants was social isolation. This was particularly prevalent when teachers were either just starting their careers, or when transferring to a new school. Emily said, “teachers tend to be cliquey, and when you are a new teacher, it is difficult to break into those established friend groups.” She then went on to describe an experience where she had made some friends at a new school, however “...they were in different departments. I was Science, they were Math. So, when the admin told us to get together in our departments to collaborate, the people I wanted to collaborate with were not there.” This statement by Emily highlights something that came up frequently throughout the interviews: effective collaboration requires relationships.

Importance of Relationships

All three of the participants discussed the importance of trusting relationships for collaboration to thrive in schools. Robert said of one of his past experiences with collaboration that “[i]t was organic. We were working with our friends on things we thought were important and wanted to be working on.” Emily mentioned, “I think that’s why it worked. We already knew each other and trusted each other. It is difficult to work with someone if you do not know them and already have that trust built into the relationship.” Sam shared a similar sentiment, and added how relationships can provide accountability:

As teachers we know that learning happens best in relationships...And I'm much more willing to follow through on any commitments that I've made to improve certain aspects of my practice if it's a commitment that I've made to somebody who I'm friends with and works right next door to me (Sam).

It is evident from these statements by the participants that trust in your colleagues is a key factor to effective collaboration. Robert points out that “part of healthy collaboration, at its foundation, has to be mutual trust and respect. And you have to be willing to put yourself out there and share your failures and not just your successes.” He continued by saying “in order to do that, there has to be a climate of respect within the school before any collaboration can occur.” The participants stated that these trusting, respectful relationships need to be formed before the process of collaboration can begin. Sam mentioned how:

I do think to set it up properly, you would need to have a conversation on your first few sessions around what are the norms for our group. How do we maintain mutual respect without you know, bad mouthing somebody's poor lesson behind their backs. Because

any of those kinds of like, behind the back gossip stuff, will destroy trust, and it will totally destroy healthy collaboration. (Sam)

Sam also mentioned that the relationship building is often skipped with school collaboration initiatives, further stating “I’m not sure why. It is so important. Maybe the leadership already assumes we are close to one another because we are colleagues? ...and that just is not the case. Most of us have a few friends that we talk to regularly, but that is it. So, when they try and get an entire department to collaborate, the relationship aspect just is not there.”

In summary, the participants described a desire to collaborate and have a positive overall view of collaboration. However, a lack of facilitating structures has prevented them from doing so. For collaboration to be effective, there needs to be time set aside in the day, there needs to be a common goal/clear objective, it needs to be teacher driven, and respectful collegial relationships need to be formed. These often-overlooked aspects of collaboration are crucial for its existence in secondary schools.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of collaboration had by teachers at a Canadian Secondary School. The participants defined what they believed collaboration to be, discussed its purpose in a secondary school context, identified structures they expressed needed to be in place, exposed some barriers to collaboration, and underscored the importance of relationships when starting a collaborative venture. After evaluating each of these emergent themes, they mirror what has been described in the current literature. These themes need to be considered when planning future collaboration sessions in schools.

Supportive Structures

Olivier et al. (2009) describes everything that aids in the facilitation of effective collaboration as “supportive structures”. These include factors such as the development of trusting relationships, availability of time and resources, and organizational structures, all of which were identified as being crucial aspects of collaboration by the participants in this study.

Relationships

Something that the participants kept going back to during their interviews was the importance of developing trusting relationships with the people they are collaborating with. They agreed that before we can even start to think about collaboration, time needs to be spent on forming positive, working relationships with one another. This is congruent with what was found by Bellibas et al. (2017)., who found that for collaboration to occur, you need to break the isolation, and establish respect-based supportive relationships among the staff at the school. A problem identified by my results was that this is a step that is often skipped by collaboration initiatives. Whether it is seen as unimportant, or assumed to have already been established is unclear. What is clear is that it is an imperative step that has been missing at this school. For collaboration to have a chance at being successful, the implementation of team building strategies and get-to-know-you activities during staff meetings might help combat the isolation felt by the teachers at this school.

Time

It is impossible to have any discourse surrounding collaboration without talking about the limited availability of time. In the past, teachers were expected to give up their valuable preparation time if they wanted to collaborate or do it on their own time either before or after school hours. It had even been asked of teachers at this school to give up some of their lunch

break to make time for a collaboration block in the schedule. When this was the case, only the teachers that were highly motivated or had more free time would be the ones willing to give up their precious time for it. Also, new teachers often need to use their lunches to prep and collect resources, other teachers may run clubs or provide extra help to students at lunch. Expecting every teacher to be willing and able to give up that lunch time is problematic at best and inequitable at worst. Collaboration should be considered work, so the most equitable solution is to set some time aside during the workday that all teachers can use to collaborate with one another.

Circumstances at this school have changed in recent years, with teachers being given a 90-minute block once a month where they are required to collaborate with each other. All the participants described this as being a step in the right direction. They are now being given time during the schedule of the day, where they are still being paid, that they can use for collaboration. However, the structure of this prescribed collaboration time is too rigid for any meaningful collaboration to occur. My data suggests that more freedom is needed in these collaboration sessions. It is imperative that teachers be given a choice in what they want to be collaborating on. If that freedom of choice is stripped away, even when given the time to collaborate, teachers will be reluctant to participate. Study participants suggested that teachers also need to be given a choice in the people who they are collaborating with. For example, professional learning groups should not necessarily be limited to the people working in the same curricular department. There needs to be freedom for the participants to choose who they want to work with, or again, they may be reluctant to participate.

Organizational Structure

My findings indicate that successful school collaboration must be facilitated by the teachers. The common thread between all the failed instances of collaboration described by the participants was the fact that they were directed by the district, or so called “top-down” initiatives. When teachers are told who they need to collaborate with and what topic they must collaborate on, it creates an us-versus-them mentality, leading to a situation of contrived collegiality as described by Hargreaves (2019). When the administration of a school appears to be directing teachers or telling what to do during collaboration time, it creates negative perceptions of collaboration amongst the teachers. Hargreaves’ (2019) description of collaboration is where collaboration is voluntary, spontaneous, can occur anywhere, and is unpredictable. The best collaborative experiences described by the participants echoed those qualities. They were started organically by teachers that wanted to work on their practice with other teachers. Effective school collaboration would integrate this process and giving teachers choice is the first step towards that goal.

Limitations

Due to this study only including a small sample of three participants from one school in BC, Canada, the results cannot be generalized to all teacher collaboration. This study’s findings may be useful for starting collaboration initiatives at the school the participants were from, or at other similarly sized schools with comparable demographics in the same district.

Something missing from the data were perspectives from participants that had no interest in participating in collaboration. This is likely because teachers with that opinion were less likely to sign up for a research study based on a topic that they were not interested in. However, I think it would be beneficial to center their opinions in future studies.

This study was designed to be manageable by both the researcher and the participants, as it was being completed as a requirement for a Master of Education program. Because of this, I limited the study to three participants, which were restricted to a single interview each. This meant that the data retrieved was not as rich as it could have been if more time had been available. If I had the time to go back to the participants and re-interview them to ask some clarifying questions, I think it would have added some richness to the data.

Finally, as this was my first time conducting participant interviews in a study such as this, I was careful to bracket myself and not insert my own views and beliefs into the interviews. By doing so I was able to maintain legitimacy of the study, but likely resulted in the loss of the richness of the data, as two of my transcripts were quite a bit shorter than expected.

Implications and Recommendations

An important takeaway I have gathered from conducting this research is the benefit that can be gained by getting out of my comfort zone and having meaningful conversations with my colleagues. By conducting this study, I have learned more about my colleagues, their values, and their beliefs than I had the entire four years prior. With the majority of my colleagues, we see each other almost every day, but our conversations seldomly go deeper than nodding hello in the hallways. This research has taught me that I need to get out of my classroom “silo” and build more relationships with my colleagues. Each participant echoed one another when they brought up the importance of relationships to collaboration. I am going to use the information I have gained from this research to start the process of building collaboration at my school, starting with the teachers. I’m going to be meeting with the school administrators to see about implementing some team-building workshops during our collaboration time. Hopefully once we start building

those relationships and school community, there will be more motivation for teachers to collaborate in the future.

I also plan on starting a collaboration committee at my school where teachers can come to share their ideas and collaborate on topics that interest them. The participants in this study talked about how successful collaboration needs to start from the bottom up, beginning with the teachers. I am going to be that teacher.

Conclusion

This research study further confirms the importance of collaboration in fostering a healthy and productive school culture. More importantly, it highlighted the significance of how collaboration should be structured for it to have the best chances of success. School collaboration must start with relationships. It cannot be assumed that because everyone is working at the same school, that they are all collegial and are capable of collaboration. Those relationships need to be intentionally built by the staff and administration before effective collaboration can occur.

It is also imperative that collaboration initiatives give all teachers a voice. They need to be able to choose what they want to collaborate on, and who they want to collaborate with. Doing so ensures that PLCs have clear and common goals that they can work towards achieving. Most top-down collaboration initiatives tend to fail when the teachers do not like being directed to work on something that they find little value in. As educators, time is our most valuable resource. However, within a school day, our collegial time is limited. Effective collaboration needs a set time provided by the district, during the school day, where teachers can get together to collaborate. If it is true that we make time for the things that we value...and the school district

thinks it is important for teachers to collaborate, (which they should), then they need to provide the time to do so.

If the supportive structures discussed above are left out, school collaboration initiatives will most likely devolve into the “contrived collegiality” described by Hargreaves (2019). As a society trying to recover from the isolation caused by the global COVID pandemic, getting teachers to come together and collaborate is as important now as it has ever been. Establishing research-based methods and structures will make it easier for schools to implement effective collaboration in the future.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval



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Human Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 101180

Principal Investigator: Mr. Brian Easton

Team Members: Mr. Brian Easton (Principal Investigator)
Dr. Jo Sheppard (Supervisor)

Title: secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences with collaboration

Department: Faculty of Education, Community & Human Development\Teacher Education

Effective: November 17, 2022

Expiry: November 16, 2023

The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) has reviewed and approved the ethics of the above research. The HREB is constituted and operated in accordance with the requirements of the UFV Policy on Human Research Ethics and the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

The approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Approval is for one year. A Request for Renewal must be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
3. Modifications to the approved research or research team must be submitted as an Amendment to be reviewed and approved by the HREB before the changes can be implemented. If the changes are substantial, a new request for approval must be sought. *An exception can be made where the change is necessary to eliminate an immediate risk to participant(s) (TPCS2 Article 6.15). Such changes may be implemented but must be reported to the HREB within 5 business days.
4. If an adverse incident occurs, an Adverse Incident Event form must be completed and submitted.
5. During the project period, the HREB must be notified of any issues that may have ethical implications.
6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.

*Please note a Research Continuity Plan is no longer required.

Thank you, and all the best with your research.

UFV Human Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Hello! Thank you for participating in my research! I just want to remind you that this interview and every question I ask is voluntary. You may choose to stop the interview or skip a question at any time and all documents will be destroyed.

Would you like to choose your pseudonym?

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and your position within the school?
 - a. What department are you in?
 - b. How many years of experience teaching do you have?
 - c. How long have you been in the Abbotsford district?
2. What do you think about when I say school collaboration?
 - a. Do you have an example of collaboration?
 - b. Can you share an experience where collaboration went well?
3. What are your thoughts on teacher collaboration?
4. What does effective collaboration look like in schools?
5. What would be the ideal school collaboration scenario for you?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I will be sending you a copy of the transcript for your approval. You may withdraw from the research at any time, up until you approve the transcript. If you feel you need to talk with a counsellor after this interview, please call UFV's counselling center to book an appointment: 604-854-4528.