The Continuing Trouble with Collaboration: Teachers Talk

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The institutionalization of collaborative working environments is widely considered to be critical to the creation and maintenance of schools as professional learning communities. Prevailing thought suggests that improved student performance may be fully realized only when teachers routinely function as teams and abandon their traditional norms of isolationism and individualism. This interpretive study involving teachers in 45 North Louisiana schools suggests that while some schools and school districts are indeed characterized by elements of the `learning community' others remain largely mired in customary practices that are counterproductive to realizing the newer collaborative standards. Participating teachers report that, despite the rhetoric, major impediments to joint professional work remain and they make suggestions for better meeting the continuing collaborative challenge.

There has never been a time when the expectation has been greater that teachers work together in meaningful job-embedded ways. While the prevailing call for routinized collaborative practice has been evident for the past couple of decades, it has intensified with the more recent systemic reforms based in heightened curricula standards and more stringent accountability mechanisms (Peterson, 2002). The conception that educators perform better when they work together professionally is buoyed by elements of organizational theory models which emerged earlier in the corporate sector (e.g., Argyris, 1978; Covey, 1991; Drucker, 1985; Lawler, 1986; Senge, 1990). Such conceptions view authentic teamwork as being an essential characteristic of the successful organization as its members come together regularly to share ideas and develop common understandings of goals and the means to their attainment.

Building organizational capacity through collegial interaction in schools has become prominent in much of the literature on education reform and school improvement. Administrators and teachers at all levels of the education practice are encouraged to build professional learning communities based on shared conceptions of vision, purpose, and means (e.g., Barth, 1990; Lambert, 1998; Leonard & Leonard, 2001a; Speck, 1999). Indeed, the thrust for educators to collaborate has taken on wholly international dimensions. For example, the Australian College of Education encourages teachers to "work collaboratively with their colleagues" (Brock, 1999, p. 11) and the General Teaching Council for England advocates that the bases for raising schooling standards lies largely in "collaborative enquiry and open, active professional learning" (2002, Introduction, 4). In Canada, the Ontario College of Teachers asserts that teachers are educational leaders who collaborate with their colleagues, parents, and members of the community (1999, p. 8).

In the United States, state-mandated school reforms of the past several years - and, more recently, the new federal school accountability initiative articulated and legalized through the Bush

administration's *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001) -- have greatly increased expectations that educators do more to ensure that all students better meet standards of learning performance, particularly as measured by standardized testing procedures. Concomitant with these governmental and agency imperatives are newly revised professional standards adopted by prominent professional agencies and learned societies and which compellingly endorse the collaborative initiative. For instance, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2001) includes the proposition that effective teachers are members of learning communities and that accomplished teachers contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development (NBPTS, 2001, 5). As well, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) recommends that new teachers be prepared to "foster relationships with school colleagues" that help "support students' learning and well being" (INTASC Standards, 1998). The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) also place high emphasis on the need for schools and school districts to create and sustain organizational cultures that are characterized by elements of professional shared learning. The NSDC process standards recommend that teachers be "provided with sufficient time during the work day "to learn and work together to accomplish the school's mission and goals" and that "staff members learn and apply collaborative skills" (NSDC Standards, 2001). ISSLC notes the need for school administrators to promote student learning by sustaining a culture of "staff professional growth" in "an effective learning environment" (ISSLC Standards, 1996).

Cultural Norms and Teacher Collaboration

Notwithstanding the noted prevailing expectations that schools exemplify recognized components of professional learning communities, historical norms have not reflected such circumstances. Almost three decades ago, Lortie (1975) reported that teachers worked in circumstances that placed them physically and intellectually separate from their colleagues and that there was limited professional sharing among them. Indications of individualistic and isolationist orientations were also evident in Goodlad's (1984) seminal work *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* as he reflected upon evidence that teachers tended to interact little either within or among schools, a circumstance further noted by Rosenholtz (1989). By the mid 1990s, Elmore determined that although there was increasing recognition of how

schools might better operate there appeared to be little incentive for teachers "to change their practices in their daily work routines" (1995, p. 15). The relevant literature of even more recent years has provided limited evidence of the melding of expectations and practices (e.g., Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Welch, 1998). Nonetheless, there are persistent claims to what professional collaborative cultures can and do achieve, among them, teacher empowerment, collegial trust, and organizational change, and school improvement (Hall & Hord, 2001; Maehr and Midgley, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996) all of which are resolutely linked to the ultimate goal of enhanced student outcomes.

Of course, discussion of collegial behavior must be embedded in an overriding conceptualization of societal and organizational culture. Despite the diversity that exists in American society and its multiple micro-societal layers, "individualism as an ideal is extreme in the U.S. core culture" (Banks, 2003, p.9). It is not unreasonable to expect that this macro-culture of individualism would penetrate an organization's culture. A school's culture simply reflects what its members collectively value and believe about the world and their place in it (Schein, 1985). It includes critical and interactive elements such as shared expectations of behavior, the nature of professional development, mutual respect, and orientations toward collaboration and learning (Peterson & Deal, 1999; Speck, 1999). Peterson (2002) identifies two forceful and opposite school cultures: `positive' and `toxic'. Positive cultures reflect norms of common purpose, continuous inquiry, and shared practice while toxic cultures thrive where there is a lack of purpose, collaboration is discouraged, and there are hostile relations among staff. Toxic cultures can defy individual efforts toward educational improvement and, because of their entrenchment, can even stymie collective reform efforts. Authentic teacher collaboration - that which is directed ultimately toward student learning - is unlikely to occur within the realm of a negative school culture. As Wagner and Masden-Copas (2002) warn, the primary goal of continuous school improvement will not be realized "unless teams of teachers improve together" (p.43).

In spite of the potential benefits accrued to cultural norms of collaborative practice, problems may persist in sustaining schools as learning communities founded in notions of professional interaction - that is, teachers meeting regularly to exchange ideas, set goals, and make plans to address shared purposes. Inherent in such a supposition is, of course, that teachers themselves actually retain commonly-held beliefs about the value of collaborative activities and that they are able to avail

of organizational circumstances and conditions that regularly generate them. Inhibitors to such collegial professional interaction have been noted often in the literature, among them: time constraints, fragmented visions, competitiveness, conflict avoidance, and lack of administrative support (for examples see Dipardo, 1997; Knop, LeMaster, Norris, Raudensky & Tannehill, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1997; Leonard, 1998).

Recent research undertaken by one of the authors (Leonard, 2002) with 238 Louisiana teachers confirmed several of those suppositions and provided additional insights. In that study, appropriate revisions were made to an earlier survey instrument developed by the authors (Leonard & Leonard, 2001) and which had been based upon Schein's (1985) underlying dimensions of organizational culture. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed to 500 systematic randomly selected teachers in 88 schools in 10 public school districts or parishes in Northern Louisiana. The instrument was comprised of 52 items, 24 of which were of Likert-type response format with the remaining items addressing descriptive aspects of the teachers' schools, demographic information, as well as a selection checklist of various common forms of teacher shared work. These forms of shared activities included team planning, peer observation, joint inservice (i.e., participating in workshops with school colleagues), extracurricular activities, and other forms of joint, or common, activities. From the teachers' reported perspectives, and generally speaking, the research findings were summarized in the following five statements:

1. Teachers do not consider their schools to sufficiently exhibit expectations of or support for regular, high levels of collaborative involvement.
2. Teacher work continues to be characterized by competition and individualism and lacks the type of trusting, caring environment that is more conducive to collaborative practice.
3. There needs to be greater articulation of underlying values and beliefs about educational practice that is tempered with respect for diverse professional opinions and practices.
4. Teachers are dissatisfied with scheduling and appropriations of time, which often serve to deter collaborative practice.
5. Teachers need professional development directed at improving their collaborative skills.

As noted earlier, the follow-up Louisiana research, which is described below, served to further probe the nature and extent of collaborative practice in schools. Such inquiry is needed in order to learn more about how cultures can be fostered to "systematically address school improvement and student learning" (Hipp & Huffman, 2002, p. 39).

As noted above, the research reported here primarily addresses data received in a follow-up survey addressing aspects of professional collaboration in North Louisiana schools. The questionnaire addressed teachers' *beliefs* about collaborative practice compared to what they perceived as *actual* collaborative conditions and circumstances in their schools (see Leonard, 2002). Of the 238 teachers who completed the initial questionnaire, 101 indicated that they would be willing to participate in the follow-up survey which would delve more deeply into the nature of teacher shared work in schools. The second questionnaire was distributed in the spring of 2002 with 56 (55.5%) teachers from 45 schools in 8 districts returning completed instruments. Twenty-five of the respondents taught at the primary/elementary level, 16 in the junior high/middle school grades area, and the remaining 15 in high schools. School enrollment size ranged from a low of 168 to a maximum of approximately 2000 students. Teacher experience ranged from 3 years to 34 years.

In open-ended question format, the follow-up survey asked teachers to reflect upon specific aspects of collaborative practices at their schools as well as at the district level and beyond. Teachers were also asked to assess administrator and organizational expectations and support for professional collaboration as well as evident impediments to such practices. Inasmuch as common language is essential to effective communication -- and in an attempt to avoid possible misconceptions about what constitutes professional collaboration -- the survey document contained the following guiding definition: "For the purpose of clarity in this discussion, `professional collaboration' is considered to occur when teachers work together regularly, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for achieving educational goals - that is, principally in terms of improved student learning. (We are not, in this instance, including such things as hall or lunch supervision or extra-curricular activities.)"

Results

The data analysis of the written responses to the open-ended survey questions employed a basic qualitative enquiry technique by initially structuring the data along question topics and then allowing additional themes and sub-themes to emerge. Large portions of the data were coded independently by the researchers and, later, categories and themes were re-examined collectively to determine agreement. The method allowed for high inter-rater reliability and

reasonable confidence that the written opinions of the respondents were being perceived correctly. The coding process resulted in the emergence of two principal themes: 1. The nature and extent of professional collaboration in schools, and 2. The nature and extent of professional collaboration at the school district level and beyond. Each category is discussed in turn and then considered together in overall terms.

School-Level Collaboration

The most frequent forms of collaborative practices cited by the 56 responding teachers included faculty meetings, departmental meetings, grade-level or subject area meetings, and special education meetings. They also noted curriculum meetings, team teaching, lesson planning, and faculty workshops. A number of the teachers provided explication of the forms collaborative practices took at their schools. For instance, this high school English teacher related how she and her colleagues meet to discuss student progress:

> We discuss what the students didn't seem to get before moving on to a new level in hopes of the lower level teacher focusing more on those skills with the next group. We do this because we have found that there are some skills entire groups are not acquiring.

An elementary teacher noted that teachers in her school are "paired together" to "plan their units" while another recounted how the workload is shared as each teacher is required to "get materials and tests ready for all teachers". As did a few other participants, this middle school teacher described how departments regularly come together:

> Several times in the course of the year, all departments meet to discuss how to meet state benchmarks and provide curriculum for each subject area. Reading and English work closely in collaborating writing creatively with assigned stories read in class.

A few others referred to various forms of "informal gatherings" or "when we are passing each other" as opportunities for sharing ideas "by word of mouth". Occasional reference was also given to addressing student discipline problems by consulting with each other. Table 1 contains a summary listing of the various ways the teachers reported collaborating with colleagues.

Notwithstanding the extensive record of ways that the teachers engage in collaborative practices, there were also those teachers who reported little such activity was to be witnessed in their schools and some indicated that collaborative activity was virtually non-existent. One high school teacher said quite succinctly that the amount of collaborative work was simply "none" while another estimated that

"very little collaboration of any kind is done at our school"; a third person stated flatly that "teachers really do not collaborate." Of those who did recount various forms of shared work, most (73.1%) lamented that efforts were still largely inadequate. One elementary respondent put it this way:

> Although we do collaborate on various things, we do not meet often enough. Most of the time we see each other in the hall and have quick conversation. It is usually short.

Table 1:

Various Forms of Professional Collaboration Reported by Teachers

Faculty meeting	Departmental/subject meetings
Grade-level meetings	Beginning-of-year meetings
Lesson planning	Examination preparation
Workshops	Sharing materials
Informal meetings	University graduate classes
Team teaching	Special education meetings
Committee meetings	Peer observation

The research literature on professional collaboration has consistently cited a number of prevailing barriers to meaningful interactions [see for examples Dipardo, 1997; Knop, LeMaster, Norris, Raudensky & Tannehill, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1997, Leonard, 1999]. Most of these impediments to shared work activity were cited by the participant teachers. Not unexpectedly, the ubiquitous issue of time was prominent among them. Frequently, respondents bemoaned that lack of time is a major problem in their schools and one high school teacher attributed it to there being "so many programs, activities, etc. that we are involved in planning and conducting until no time is left for professional collaboration". This sentiment was echoed by another secondary teacher who stated: "We have a lot of responsibilities and not a lot of free time." Increasing amounts of "paper work" was cited by a number of others. This elementary teacher explained circumstances this way:

> It's hard to find extra time to devote to collaboration. Extra time is spent on developing lesson plans, helping children who were absent with make-up work, running papers, gathering materials for lessons and school committee work. I teach 4th grade and average about forty

conferences a year. This takes a lot of out time also.

A few of the teachers pointed out that they did not think it appropriate that teachers should be expected to utilize after-school time for collaborative activities, especially, as one elementary teacher noted there is little opportunity to meet after classes since teachers "usually have children of their own or errands to run after school". Other comments incorporated notions of being "too busy", "too tired", and "overwhelmed" by other professional and personal responsibilities. A couple of teachers also noted that some teachers have other employment and, consequently, are often "in a hurry to leave and get to their other job". This high school teacher summarized the prevailing time-constraining situation in this manner:

> We have twenty minutes for lunch, and 10 minutes for recess. Otherwise we have only our planning period, which does not coincide with other teachers' periods. Most do not want to stay after school.

The teachers noted a number of other obstacles to teacher collaborative practice. Prominent among them was the apparent attitude and lack of commitment by teachers as well as the lack of compensation. They talked of "lazy people" who wished to avoid additional work and others who prefer "to work alone" and stay in their "comfort zone". References were also made to "resistance to change", "competition" among teachers for high test scores, and a genuine "lack of interest" in doing things differently. One middle school teacher was particularly dismayed with the attitudes of some of more experienced teachers toward newer faculty members:

> [They are] reluctant to accept ideas of new teachers; sometimes they don't want new ideas; sometimes I think they feel threatened by the presence of the new teachers who are up to date with current technology and who are excited about teaching methods.

The respondents were also critical of a lack of appropriate compensation for additional work. They noted that "collaboration takes effort and organization" and, without monetary reward, "no one is willing to do it." One teacher with more than 20 years experience put it this way:

> I have noticed over the years I've been teaching that there seems to be a lack of commitment on the parts of teachers to give time, especially after school or during the summer, without monetary compensation. But, without pay, who can blame them?

Other noted barriers to collaborative opportunities included "tight scheduling" --

especially in smaller schools -- teacher personality conflicts, and lack of administrative support.

There were marked contrasts among some respondents in terms of how they viewed the extent of administrative concern for collaborative practices among teachers. While some respondents were highly complimentary in their perceptions of principal support others were considerably less enamored. The former spoke of how their principals had arranged for regular subject and grade-level meetings, accommodated schedules to model a collaborative orientation, and provided additional opportunities for teachers to come together during workshops and special teamwork sessions. This junior high school teacher was clearly pleased with the efforts of her chief school administrator:

> Our principal is very supportive! Each faculty meeting we share ideas and plan schoolwide activities. Next year we have a schoolwide theme planned for 6th, 7th, and 8th. Activities are being planned now for next year. We also have a summer retreat when we plan as a faculty the activities and policies we plan to implement.

Another junior high school teacher related how his principal regularly visited meetings, encouraged teachers, and provided them with necessary information.

Not everyone was as satisfied with the efforts of their school administrators. Some noted that collaboration was largely left "to each grade level to take care of" or was "only ostensibly encouraged" in the realistic recognition that "we can't do it". Others were pithy in their appraisals that administrator support for collaborative practice was "very little" or "does not exist". Recommendations for improved administrative support for collaboration included suggestions of: scheduling that would better facilitate teacher interaction during the day, arranging for team teaching, providing substitute teachers to free up teachers to work together, organizing classroom allocations more effectively, providing directives and incentives for after school work, and setting stronger expectations that teachers actually collaborate in meaningful ways.

Collaboration at the District Level and Beyond

The variation that characterized collaborative practice and support for collaboration at the school level seemed largely to be reflected in circumstances at the district or parish level, as well. Some teachers spoke of their districts providing multiple and varied opportunities for teachers to engage in professional interaction with counterparts at other schools. Other respondents spoke of beginning-of-year initiation gatherings, of occasional district grade-level meetings during which teachers

addressed state curriculum benchmarks, of district supervisors meeting with subject area teachers to "share collaboratively", of grant-writing workshops, and of the notification of regional meetings of interest to teachers. A number of teachers felt these efforts were quite effective in meeting teacher professional development needs. This junior high school faculty member put it this way:

Our parish is constantly trying to offer programs to help teachers in their classrooms. If there is something we need and if our parish doesn't offer the workshop they will find another place that does. If there is enough interest, they will bring one to us.

As with some school-level administration, some teachers perceived a lack of direction for collaborative engagement at the district level. Their descriptors ranged from "none" to "very little". One primary teacher went so far as to suggest that she did not think the superintendent "really cares" while this high school faculty member reported a perceived pattern of indifference at the district level:

Unfortunately our parish administration doesn't promote or encourage collaboration in schools or among schools. This has been the case for my entire 23 years.

The Louisiana teachers offered a number of ways for improving the promotion of collaboration at the district level and beyond. Suggestions included mandating intensive collaboration training at all schools, providing more opportunities for teachers to collaborate with other schools and at the district level, coordinating the dissemination of the latest teaching techniques, providing sufficient numbers of teachers at the school level, and promoting newer ideas by recruiting teachers from outside the district and state. There was also strong support for the notion of paying teachers extra for collaboration time beyond the normal school day and for the supply of more substitutes so teachers could work together more frequently during the school day. Some also spoke of the need to better utilize web-based teacher networks, to work with colleges and universities in designing more practice-based courses, and to allocate more funding for attendance at professional conferences outside the state. There were also admonitions that district administrators should not perceive non-teaching time as "time off" and that they more routinely and effectively consult teachers prior to making decisions that impact directly upon them and their students. Table 2 summarizes teacher suggestions for better promoting professional collaboration at the school and district levels.

Table 2:

Teacher suggestions for promoting collaborative practices in schools and school districts.

Collaboration training for teachers	Increase number of teachers
Arrange common planning time	Reduce teacher paperwork
Increase opportunities for collaboration	Better disseminate new teaching methods
Recruit teachers outside area	Pay for collaboration beyond school time
Provide additional substitute teachers	Provide web-based teacher networks
Increase funding to attend conferences	Design more practice-based courses
Better utilize inservice time	Listen to teacher suggestions
Set expectations for collaboration	Increase administrative support

Conclusions and Implications

The teacher perspectives about the nature and extent of collaborative practices in 45 North Louisiana schools contain insights that are meaningful, yet, in and of themselves, are not exceptional. Forms of teacher shared work have been commonly noted in the research literature - as have been identified barriers to its manifestation (for examples see Dipardo, 1997; Knop, LeMaster, Norris, Raudensky & Tannehill, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1997). What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that the realization and maintenance of schools as so-called `professional learning communities' seems to remain, in many instances, little more than an elusive aspiration. While the data presented here indicate that there are indeed multiple forms of teacher collaborative practices occurring in many of the schools of the survey respondents, others remain mired in traditional norms of teacher individuality and organizational isolationism. Even in those instances where teachers reported relatively high levels of regular professional involvement among colleagues, dissatisfaction with at least some aspects of prevailing circumstances persisted.

Earlier research reported by the authors demonstrated that teachers themselves value attributes of collegial enterprise that are based upon strong customs of routine professional interaction (Leonard, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 2001a/b; Leonard & Leonard, 2002). Through recent revisions to their professional standards and guidelines, various

education-based associations and agencies strongly advocate continuous collective reflections and shared work among teachers (e.g. NCATE, INTASC, NBPTS, ISLLC, NCTM, etc.). Furthermore, policymakers and administrators at all levels of the public education hierarchy regularly espouse the need for teachers to devise new ways to work together to address professional needs and, by extension, to effect improved student learning. The NCLB Act (2001) as well as various related federal and state education department directives, position papers, and professional development funding allocations reflect the recognition that teacher collective learning is a crucial factor in achieving successful education reforms.

Enigmatic to this apparent universal recognition of the inherent value in maintaining routines of professional collaboration and in the ostensible thrust to create cultures of collegial engagement is that, for many schools, this idealism may not match the reality. The impediments to sustaining norms of professional collaborative practice seem as troublesome today as they did decades ago (see Lortie, 1975; Goodlad, 1984). As this study signifies, many teachers continue to depict severe limitations in the capacity to work meaningfully with colleagues in ways that allow them to address the common goal of enhanced student achievement. The obstacles to collaborative practice today are hauntingly similar to those reported years ago. Teachers still complain that the scarcity of opportunities to collaborate is promulgated by increasing work demands and decreasing time availability. They also continue to lament persisting negative mindsets about the actual desirability of shared work and the resistance to moving beyond the traditional models of teacher relationships. While some schools seem to be headed by administrators who value and promote elements of the `learning community', others clearly are not. The distinction is important and it may be time for district level administrators and policymakers to unequivocally communicate expectations of the former to current and potential school-level administrators. School principals who continue to personify traditional leader traits in the currently emerging educational environment not only minimize professional growth, they may also optimize student mediocrity.

Attempts at school improvement cannot be individual and fragmented but rather must be embedded in collaborative practices that address the day-to-day needs of students (Louis & Marks, 1996). To that point -- and perhaps most debilitating of the concerns that teachers continue to espouse about efforts to establish learning communities founded on

principles of professional collaboration -- is the lack of consistent resolve at the district and state levels. While many schools have creatively juggled schedules and identified additional resources that are used to occasionally free up teachers for shared work, many others have not. If habitual teacher collaborative practice is truly valued, it should not be left to the vagaries of particular schools and personnel who demonstrate the will and the means to endorse and enact it. Rather, it should be a certain expectation that is clearly espoused at the highest policy and administrative levels and supported in actual measures. Making provisions for teachers to work together during and outside school hours may indeed require reallocation of resources or securing additional funding. If such is the circumstance, then the strong political will of leaders buoyed by a supportive constituency may be the best chance for addressing the ongoing collaborative challenge.

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