Leveraging change through leadership processes: creating collaborative cultures

Imagine a system in which students can't fall through the cracks—

because they're backed by a team of teachers, not just the one at

the front of the room (Weingarten, 2011).

Introduction

There are many labels that describe Creating Collaborative Cultures

including: Professional Learning Communities (PLC), Collaborative Teacher

Study Groups (CTSG), Teacher Study Groups (TSG), Team Teaching,

Communities of Practice, and Inquiry Groups, all attached to teacher-

learners. According to Stanley (2011), " they are sometimes independent

entities that are organized and run by teachers for the purpose of sustaining

their own learning" (p. 72). In some situations, administrators, principals, or

external facilitators may lead the groups (D. Fox, personal communication,

November 4, 2018). In this paper, the term PLC will be used to identify a

group of teachers collaborating with or without outside leadership or

facilitation. This paper will cover the following five elements: (1) a range of

definitions for Creating Collaborative Cultures; (2) why this concept/process

is important to leading in the 21 st century and what scholars suggest about

the topic; (3) a representation of related research including findings and

conclusions on the concept in application; (4) consideration for how to

integrate this process into my own leadership approach and; (5) a summary

of the key points.

Range of Definitions

There are many definitions related to the concept/process of Creating Collaborative Cultures based on the discipline and setting. Collaboration can be found across a range of industries including healthcare, financial services, business, marketing, education, and government. However, this paper will focus on Creating Collaborative Cultures in education.

Specifically, *The* Encyclopedia of Educational Leadership and Administration, defines collaboration as a concept/process that:

...is often conceived as a core of concerned educators who [function]ed as an organizing team for bringing stakeholders together and initiating dialogue among representatives of a variety of interests. This collaborative community sets implicit standards for authenticity and respect in group behavior and interaction and creates a shared language and purpose among participants that facilitates collective efforts to improve studentlearning(Fauske, 2006, p. 166).

Historically the concept/ process of collaboration is not novel. There are several thought leaders and initiatives that promote the concept of supporting groups of teachers in sharing their collective professional wisdom to improve student learning. In the mid-1950s, Harvard University advocated teachers work together " to plan, teach, and evaluate a common group of students" (Fauske, 2009, p. 166). In order to accommodate teacher collaboration, schools were re-designed as open classrooms with collapsible partitions. Over time this architectural idea was abandoned due to a lack of administrative leadership and support. However, the concept of collaboration flourished. More than thirty years ago, John Goodlad (1983) recognized that

the " traditional educational structure encouraged teacher isolation rather than collaboration" (Munoz & Branham, 2016, p. 38). He and other researchers considered it a " barrier to school improvement" (Munoz & Branham, 2016, p. 38). Later Richard DuFour and his colleagues " led the effort to transform schools from isolation to PLCs. They defined PLCs as an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (Munoz & Branham, 2016, p. 38). As a result of their research and advocacy, collaboration became an integral part of the fabric of education.

Why is Creating Collaborative Cultures Important?

None of us is as smart as all of us. (Blanchard, 2011, p. 4)

The above quote from Kenneth Blanchard, an American researcher and author from Cornell University captures the essence of collaboration and team work. Through the process of working together for a common good, so much more can be achieved than apart. As global technology grows, Senge (2010) discusses how collaborating is " ultimately about relationships and how they will thrive because of genuine caring and mutual vulnerability" (p. 233). Collaboration in this context creates improved solutions for learning in the 21 st century. Similarly, Fullan (2011) suggests, " the dynamic world is full of adjacent possible opportunities, but leaders must put themselves and their organizations in a position to experience new ideas"   (p. 98).

As an example of the advantages of collaboration and capacity building, Fullan cites an example of a poor school district in London whose proficiency rate in numeracy and literacy was 35% compared to the national average of 58% (Fullan, 2011, p. 98). Their commitment to a purposeful goal helped them to achieve success. MORE HRE…SEE EXAMPLE

Additionally, Panasuk and Sullivan (1999) suggest the success of a partnership is based on the " willingness to work together, mutual respect for ideas, and an openness for discussing problems, difficulties, and confusion (p. 50).

Related Research

The historical trends of collaboration from the 1950s to present day led through various iterations. Thissection or paperwill illustrate an example from research on collaboration. Branham (2016) shared her experience with the following PLC study she conducted with Dr. Marco Muñoz with schools in the Jefferson County Public School District in Louisville, Kentucky. Teachers for each content area and grade level implemented the PLC Process including how they would teach the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), assessed student mastery of the standards with ongoing teacher generated formative assessments, analyzed student data from formative assessments, and decided how they were going to intervene with students that did not yet master the standards. Instructional coaches were provided for each school and assisted teachers in the rigorous process of teaching and assessing the CCSS and maintained the fidelity and implementation of the PLC process. With the introduction of PLCs, there was some teacher " resistance" as the

program was implemented in schools. Prior to the introduction of the PLC process, some teachers " closed their doors" and worked in isolation.

Their findings demonstrate that ongoing, teacher generated formative assessments, quarterly district-wide benchmarks, and annual statewide assessments, provide data for each district and school. After teachers and staff reviewed the data, and the improved student learning outcomes, they were supportive of the PLC process and culture, recognizing collaborative capacity is essential (Branham & Munoz, 2016, p. 38).

The conclusions demonstrate that the schools exceeded their expectations. Today schools in the district are still actively practicing the PLC model. As Branham states, " The real testament of successful implementation is when schools continue with the process long after we are gone" (personal communication, November 1, 2018).

Similarly, Ohlson, Swanson, Adam-Manning, & Byrd (2016)find or foundthat " student outcomes are influenced positively when leaders work collaboratively, when teachers participate in professional growth, and when the school community unites in a common vision" (p. 121). Integrating the Process (A Personal Approach)

In keeping with the spirit of collaboration, this assignment made me recall when I was teaching in the 1980's the collaborative approach was referred to as cooperation. We had staff development meetings on implementing cooperation in our school. The presenter used an overhead projector to present vs a smartboard I use today. She reproduced copies of her hand-outs on a mimeograph machine vs the photocopies or links to a website that I

may provide. Cooperation/Collaboration referred to two or more people to complete a goal or task. It was a novel idea as opposed to working in isolation as most teachers did in those days. The idea was planted, although it did not take root in our school. There was no leadership or reinforcement of the process, just a promise of the outcome. Still, I embraced the concept and looked for opportunities to work with colleagues whenever the opportunity would arise.

Today my work in collaboration has developed through different iterations and voices.   I teach online and traditional (face-to-face) college mathematics courses as an adjunct. One of the colleges where I teach has been in the process of adopting ALEKS, a new Learning Management System (LMS) for adaptive teaching of mathematics. While I eagerly embraced the concept and took the voluntary training to learn how to integrate the new program into my classes, other faculty members were remiss in changing. " There is often resistance to change which can be a reaction to loss. Exercising adaptive leadership is difficult and dangerous, and challenges the status quo. Leadership is a courageous act that requires all of you: heart, mind, sprit, and guts" (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

I knew there would be adjustments. Still, I was thankful that the representative of ALEKS and another colleague and I began collaborating from day one. We discussed the challenges and successes of the program in order to improve student achievement. I encouraged my students often to give me their feedback so I can share it with my colleagues and we can determine what we need to do to improve the program. I share my concerns in a safe environment. I am not threatened to go against the status quo in

order to foster student achievement. Research by Boyle and Kaiser (2017) suggests " how grade level teachers in collaboration with a mathematics coach or teacher educator around task design can make this goal a reality and furnish an enriching experience for both teachers and students" (p. 411).

" When you move back and forth between the balcony and dance floor, you can continually access what is happening in your organization and take correct midcourse action. Thus, adaptive leadership is an iterative activity, an ongoing engagement between you and groups of people" (Heintz et al., 2009, p. 8). DO YOU PUTTHE PAGE NUMBER?

I feel confident about teaching with ALEKS because I see the positive results from the student progress reports and their feedback. In addition, I have a strong commitment from the support system within my collaborative team members. We frequently communicate via phone, text, and email. I appreciate whenever I encounter a conflict or student issue with the program, they are willing to respond as I do for them.

When I encountered a conflict in another collaborative experience in my doctoral program the other team member was not interested in discussing it despite a number of attempts to reach out to them. It makes it difficult to move forward if a team member will not communicate. From this experience, I learned that collaboration needs to be supported to develop agrowth mindsetand skills in conflict resolution where there needs to be a shared vision to do things better or differently. Creating this enabling environment ensures we can all move forward from the experience. The difference

between the two experiences is that in the first one I feel supported and that I am a valued member of the team. What made the difference? Commitment? Mindset? Collaboration requires a team effort. I regret we all missed an opportunity to practice conflict resolution and grow stronger from the experience.

The way I may integrate this process more fully into my own leadership approach is by being available to all my team members and recognizing that despite differences we are all committed to a unified goal, larger than ourselves. I will not presume it is understood and will strive to articulate this to my collaborative group prior to or midway through the experience in order to take action. The stronger our group support, the greater the impact will have on our goal. It is symbiotic. My students also benefit. I convey to them a more positive and confident attitude about ALEKS because I feel supported by my team members.

Transition? To illustrate the importance of collaboration, sorting out what is critical and not important, In the 1970s, Marlo Thomas produced a children's album called " Free to be You and Me." In its timeless wisdom the album consisted of a collaborative effort by many artists who contributed to her project. One of the songs on the album is called " Helping," sung by Tom Smothers. A line in the song reads, " Some kind of help is the kind of help that helping's all about. And some kind of help is the kind of help, we all can do without" (1972). This song, like some kinds of helping, illustrates how Creating Collaborative Cultures is not without its challenges, but when implemented with care and consideration, it can *help* foster unity among communities.

Summary of Key Points

Research and experience show a critical and powerful element is for teachers to engage in collaboration, discussion, goal-setting, and reflection with others who can support, contribute, and analyze new ways to help bring about change and improve students' success in school.

The following key points summarize Creating Collaborative Cultures:

- Represent new ways of collaborative leadership to manage, lead, adapt, and govern to successfully respond to the needs of all the stakeholders.
- Yield improved processes and outcomes for the community, schools, and families.
- Foster reiterative and recursive processes that allow shared responsibility and accountability.
- Provide opportunities for PLCs to discuss successes and challenges to put into motion a plan of action for intervention and change as needed.

As these needs are met and gaps in services are bridged, collaboration will develop innovative support systems and resources to increase teacher effectiveness and improve results for all those we serve.

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