

# Collective responsibility for learning and education



It is often heard that two brains are better than one. And the idea of such makes perfect sense. One would suppose that by working together, more will be accomplished. But does this apply to a school, its administrators and teachers, and its students? As stated in this article, data was provided, hypotheses were assumed, and studies were completed to see if, in fact, collective responsibility does have promising impacts. Throughout the course of this essay, the importance of collective responsibility within a school and its effects on gains in achievement for early secondary school students will be examined, tested, and discussed.

What is collective responsibility? The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy refers to collective responsibility as a shared responsibility (Smiley, 2005). This definition is displayed similarly in a school. Collective responsibility is all members of the school (including but not limited to administrators, teachers, counselors) accepting responsibility for the students' success or lack thereof. Authors Valerie E. Lee (an associate professor of education at the University of Michigan) and Julia B. Smith (an assistant professor of education administration and school reform at the University of Rochester) conducted an experiment to determine if the organization of teachers' work influences students. (Lee and Smith, 1996). This study focused on three theories: the before mentioned collective responsibility for student learning, staff cooperation, and control over classroom and school work conditions (Lee and Smith, 1996). The article states that it is important for a secondary school to bureaucratically distribute knowledge into partitions with each group having its own set of experts. For example, teachers would undertake the role of "knowledge experts". With this, teachers will be cooperating amongst one

another in order to improve upon past teaching methods in hopes gaining student achievement. These educators will not only benefit from face to face interaction with their colleagues, but they will also take part in teamwork. (Lee and Smith, 1996). Lastly, the authors of this article believe that distributing control will produce more effective decision makers as teachers. This idea of empowerment suggests that decision making over resources, technical skills, and curriculum knowledge be handled properly by administrators and teachers. While there is no known relationship between teacher control and student outcome, there is a connection between teacher control and his or her attitude about his or her efficiency in the classroom. (Lee and Smith, 1996). The article states, “empowering teachers would induce commitment, and commitment would in turn influence student learning” (Lee and Smith, 1996). To understand more about collective responsibility, a study was completed to focus on the shared boundary between teachers, students, and schools (Lee and Smith, 1996).

The purpose of this research was to study the correlation between teachers’ work lives and the extent to which their students learn. Three hypotheses were presumed relating to the following subjects: responsibility and demographics, the teacher and his or her work life, and the teacher’s work life and equity. (Lee and Smith, 1996). The first hypothesis suggested that “schools where teachers assume responsibility for learning enroll students who typically do better in school” (Lee and Smith, 1996). These schools are said to be those with more privileged students according to their race, social class, or ability. Understandably, teachers would be more likely to accept acknowledgment for their students’ achievements if they are learning well.

Conversely, teachers would be less likely to accept blame for their students' failures and pass the responsibility onto the children and their families. (Lee and Smith, 1996). The second hypothesis theorized that "in schools where teachers take more responsibility for the results of the teaching students learn more. In schools characterized by high levels of staff collaboration and teacher control, students also learn more". (Lee and Smith, 1996). And the third hypothesis suggested that "features of teachers' work lives may either facilitate or debilitate the learning of disadvantaged students. Specifically... high levels of responsibility for learning are associated with learning that is equitably distributed within the school according to students' social background." (Lee and Smith, 1996). These hypotheses were tested.

Following are detailed descriptions of the method used to conduct this study. The sampling design was derived from a sample used in the "first and second waves of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88)" (Lee and Smith, 1996). NELS: 88 was sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and is an all-purpose analysis of United States students and schools. The article discloses that one thousand middle grade schools (about 25 students in the eighth grade from each school) were tested in 1988. These same students (tracked through questionnaires) were tested again in 1990. (Lee and Smith, 1996). This sample included all NELS sophomores that fit the following criteria:

Students must have full cognitive test data from the base year and the first follow up,

Data must be available from their high schools and their teachers,

Students had to be enrolled in public, Catholic, or elite private high schools, and

Students must have been attending high school with at least four other NELS sampled students. (Lee and Smith, 1996).

After the conditions were applied, 11, 692 students from 820 different schools were studied. These schools consisted of 650 public schools, 68 Catholic schools, and 47 independent schools. (Lee and Smith, 1996). There were also certain criteria for the teachers of the students. In the base year the teacher sample was comprised of “ either the eighth grader’s mathematics or science teacher and either the English or social studies teacher” (Lee and Smith, 1996). The teachers were subject-matched when the students reached the tenth grade in the first follow up according to the base year. Below is a pie chart of how the subjects mathematics, science, English, and social studies were distributed as a major subject area amongst the teachers.

(Lee and Smith, 1996). Four measures were assessed as part of the teachers’ professional community. They are 1) collective responsibility for student learning, 2) the standard deviation of teachers responsibility for student learning, 3) cooperation and support among teachers and administrators, and 4) teacher control. (Lee and Smith, 1996). The outcomes from the base test and the follow up test were altered with item response theory (IRT) methods and ultimately compared to see the difference between the two tests. This difference was referred to as the gain score.. In science and social studies, the outcomes were equal from the base test to the follow up test.

However, in mathematics and English, the follow up tests had to be adjusted to fit the students' capabilities. Demographic measures included the students' social class, minority status, and gender and the schools' average social class, minority concentration, ability level, academic emphasis, and sector. (Lee and Smith, 1996). The analytic approach provided a descriptive analysis of teachers' work lives. The schools were grouped into three categories: 1) high levels of collective responsibility for learning, 2) average levels of collective responsibility for learning, and 3) low levels of collective responsibilities for learning, based on the standard deviation above, within, or below the mean. (Lee and Smith, 1996). After the research had been completed, the results were presented.

To understand the results, one must observe the tables presented in the article. When considering the descriptive differences among students in schools with differing levels of collective responsibility for student learning, note that the students are categorized into three groups based upon the levels of collective responsibility structure throughout the school they are attending: high-responsibility, average responsibility, and low responsibility (Lee and Smith, 1996). The students attending high responsibility schools calculate to a total of 1, 226 students, or 10. 5%, while the students attending average responsibility schools is a much greater total of 8, 801 students, or 75. 3%. Lastly, students attending low responsibility schools fall between high responsibility schools and average responsibility schools with 1, 665 students, or 14. 2%. (Lee and Smith, 1996). These outcomes can be found in table one in the article. Table two in the article display information regarding descriptive differences among schools with differing levels of

collective responsibility for learning (Lee and Smith, 1996). Again, the levels of collective responsibility are sorted into three groups: schools with high levels of collective responsibility, schools with average levels of collective responsibility, and schools with low levels of collective responsibility. The number of schools filed in the high levels of collective responsibility is 134, or 16.3%, whereas the number of schools sorted into the average levels of collective responsibility is a significantly larger number of 548 schools, or 66.9%. The schools with low levels of collective responsibility rest slightly higher than those with high levels but considerably lower than those with average levels of collective responsibility at 138 schools, or 16.8%. The tables go on to show that