Working Collaboratively to Build a Learning Community

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Research Questions

How effective are collaborative teaching models we use for student success? How can we build a more effective collaborative learning community?

Context and Rationale for Study

By asking for the impossible, obtain the best possible

*Italian proverb*

Like the Great Seal of America, this study has two sides, both equally important and relevant to the inquiry of school community collaboration that effect student success. One side presents how our current *inclusion model* TAM (team approach to mastery) operates to provide the least restrictive environment (LRE) to students with disabilities. The other side is an action to build collaboration in our school community so any co-teaching model would be successful. They are both the same process using the same renewable resource. The process is collaboration; the resource learning.

I have been teaching students with special learning needs for ten years, eight of those at my current school, Sussex Central High School in
Georgetown, Delaware. We are one of two high schools in the Indian River School District in Sussex County, Delaware. SCHS has a little over eleven hundred students with approximately twelve percent being classified as students with special needs, however we have a larger population of at-risk students. We currently have a staff of eighty-three, ten of which are special education teachers, and eight of which TAM teach core subject areas. This school year was a milestone for us. We moved into a new (not entirely complete) building and changed from block scheduling to a rotating seven period days. But, we still remain an evolving profession of learners.

Although I received training about inclusion and least restrictive environment models in undergraduate and master classes of education, I was not prepared eight years ago when I entered my first co-teaching TAM class as a special education teacher. There was no guide to follow from the school, only my own research of how to collaborate with other teachers and what model to use. I was fortunate to work in one class with a veteran, organized teacher who welcomed me as an equal partner to help all students learn. We met after school bi-weekly to review lesson plans, strategies and interventions. The next year I worked with a different teacher in a different core subject. And so the story continued until four years ago
when we finally began to keep the same teachers in the same core area. This enabled a consistent working relationship to be constructed with the teachers and an opportunity for the special education teacher to become familiar with core subject material.

When students first walk into a classroom and see two teachers they always ask why and who is really in charge, but that belief is part of a culture that needs to be changed. The purpose of this action/research is to reflect the work we are doing and what we need to do to change our existing culture; to build a professional and collaborated learning community that is sustainable and beneficial to all students.
No changes have been made in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate of the Federal Individual Disability Education Act of 1975. However, on July 1, 2005, the reauthorized IDEA, signed by President Bush in December 2004, will take effect. The *Special Ed Advocate* states:

> Schools will be required to provide "high-quality, intensive pre-service preparation and professional development for all personnel who work with children with disabilities" so all school staff have "skills and knowledge to improve the academic achievement and functional performance of children with disabilities". . . "including the use of scientifically based instructional practices." (Wrights, 2005, p. 1)

Troen and Boles (2005) state that the culture of schools is based on an "egg-crate" model 150 years past its prime (p. 1). Schools are not organizations where teachers can view themselves as part of an "assembly line", working in their own space "to produce the best product at the best
price” (p. 1). We need to work together, taking time to evaluate curriculum, write common assessments and work on intervention plans. The catalytic process of collaboration needs to incorporate the unique knowledge, skills, and attitude of the entire school community. That cooperation relies on “group members who are intent on reaching the same goals, who need specific information from each group member, or who receive the same rewards or consequences for the group's action”. (Idol et al, 1994, p. 6).

When we develop into a Professional Learning Community we will continuously share learning and then take steps to improve student achievement based on what we discover. This process is collaboration and the model relies on “parity and equity of contribution from all collaborators” (Idol et al, 1994, p. 13). The acquisition of contributions depends on us as professionals to continually “acquire expertise in the following three areas:

- An underlying knowledge base
- Interpersonal communicative, interactive, problem solving skills
According to DuFour (2004) three **Big Ideas** must be part of any collaborative learning community:

1. Ensure that students learn
2. Have a culture of collaboration
3. Focus on results” (p. 6)

DuFour goes on to discuss how barriers that exist must be removed.

“School and district leaders cannot merely present teachers with state standards or district curriculum guides and assume collaboration will take place. This will **not** guarantee that all students have access to common curriculum or that teachers are developing a culture of collaboration” (DuFour, 2004, p. 7). The collaboration we organize has to be evaluated and we have to scrutinize the findings. This includes our curriculum and how we assess it and how the state (Department of Education) judges whether learning was achieved. We have to devote a regular **daily** amount of time for our **Professional Learning Community** to be successful.

**Harry Wong** (2003) asserts that a model needs to be in place to structure effective teaching for new teachers. However, the model is needed for all teachers in the community. Teachers need to network, support each other and make a commitment to take on leadership roles in a
collaborating school (p. 2). John Dewey (1933) explains “that the members within an [educational] society cannot exist without outlets to communicate ideas, opinions, expectations and standards (p. 3). It therefore becomes necessary to structure schools not only with ample class time, but ample collaborative teacher time. To meet the goal of being a professional learning community we must re-culture schools communities not get on the merry-go-round of fads or quick fixes. (Christy, 2004)

“Schools reflect the inherent characteristic of community” (Christy, 2004). Our community exists and grows because we develop common values and ways of working together (Garmston et al, 1999). If we reorganize our structure to allow expanded professional roles, networking and cooperation, it has been found that teachers will increase their own sense of efficacy and sustain behaviors that need to stay in our profession (Hord, 1997).

**TOOLS**

*There is no more powerful tool than knowledge.*

Dave Heineman

**Interviews**

All TAM teachers, both special education and regular education teachers were given seven questions about their classroom collaborative
teaching model. Questions included how they define teacher roles, responsibilities and student success. They were also asked if they had common planning time and how much time they spent collaborating.

End of the year summaries were written by Physical Science general education teachers.

Team members of the Learning Focused Team (LFS) were interviewed with questions relating to how collaborative methods have altered their classrooms and filtered within their departments.

**Failure Analysis Report (Physical Science)**

Special education student success rate in the TAM Physical Science classes was calculated from end of year totals.

**Meetings**

Weekly meetings evolved for Physical Science TAM teachers to discuss curriculum and student learning.

Bi-monthly meetings were established for the Learning Focused Team to prepare faculty presentation of exemplary teaching practice and develop a Professional Learning Community.

**Neighborhood Visits**
A checklist of strategies was written and the LFS team spent one day in March, 2005 visiting all classrooms in our school for 5-7 minutes to “count” strategies used in teaching. Teachers were told about visit, but did not know the day.

**Exit Surveys**

The LFS team wrote Ticket Out surveys after each faculty collaborated presentation to assess understanding and obtain suggestions for future development.

**Videos**

Two of four workshop presentations were videoed to be used by the LFS team for reflective evaluation.
There is a direct relationship between the rate of success in TAM class of Ables/Caputo and amount of collaboration time.

**TAM Teacher End of Year Evaluations**

All three TAM Physical Science teachers were asked to summarize our collaborative efforts, the joys and the pitfalls.

- TAM class was a new experience for Moore. Since she began teaching she only has taught chemistry and AP chemistry. She expressed that she became more aware of working as a team player
and she is “sure that the students benefited from learning from two different teachers with different styles of teaching”.

- Addo was also new to the TAM world. Only a second year teacher she commended tasks such as
  - Uniformed agenda
  - Same high standards for student achievement
  - Working with an extremely motivated teacher
  - Willingness to provide additional support
  - Cohesiveness in lecture/lab activities
  - Advance preparation for class

Addo’s needs improvement list was shorter, but succinct in stating that more time is needed to discuss differences in teaching strategies.

- Ables had also not been part of a special education TAM class however, she had co-taught with an ESL teacher. She echoed Addo’s and Moore’s commendation that students benefit because of the division of labor in the classroom. There are more opportunities to individualize instruction and use intervention strategies for struggling students.
Interview Results from TAM Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English TAM 9th grade</th>
<th>Math TAM 9th grade</th>
<th>Science TAM 9th grade</th>
<th>Social Studies TAM 9th grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Special Ed Students</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Collaborative Model</td>
<td>Lead and Support</td>
<td>Lead and Support</td>
<td>Team Teaching</td>
<td>Lead and Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Education Plans reviewed</td>
<td>Only by special ed</td>
<td>Only by special ed</td>
<td>Only by special ed</td>
<td>Only by special ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Planning Time</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 class only</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of time allocated to collaboration (weekly)</td>
<td>1-3 hours</td>
<td>1-3 hours</td>
<td>5-6 hours</td>
<td>1-3 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**ANALYSIS OF DATA**

Interviews revealed that most TAM classes have little time or structure for collaboration. This is an important factor when looking at students' success rates. The fifty-seven percent of special education students that were successful in physical science TAM classes leaves forty-three percent failing, still too large a number. Also apparent is that there is no one TAM model used in our school. Most are lead and support with
teachers stating there are no guidelines for roles and responsibilities of
teachers. Individual Education Plans are not being read by all co-teachers;
the culprit again is time. Teachers’ end of year summaries demonstrate a
willingness to work collaboratively with the proper direction and time
afforded.

**Interviews with Learning Focused School Team**

The Learning Focused School Team was created as part of a district
wide professional development initiative to meet the needs of our diverse
learners. Each school in the district has a team. Our team is comprised of
six teachers and the principal. After working with the team for eight
months to present four mini seminars on organizing learning, I asked their
assessment of our team. A combination of answers gives us a view of what
the team is about.

Our goal is to communicate and demonstrate researched based
teaching strategies that would organize different styles more efficiently
for higher student achievement. We have just planted seeds to the faculty
and although we have a long road ahead to achieve quantitative results, we
are in the right direction and have more going for us than against us. After
four months more than 80% are using organizational strategies to mirror
consistency, such as essential questions. Teachers are calling teachers to ask whether this sounds like a good essential question. Nothing is slower or more consistent that change. The culture of our school can change when we start with the putting out continual positive attitudes and we have a synergetic learning model. We have to expect coherence of teaching strategies and it has to be controlled qualitatively. We’ve organized faculty presentations, neighborhood visits and other activities that support learning and demonstrate that we can become a collaborative community.

The LEARNING FOCUSED SCHOOL TEAM Neighborhood Visit

Sussex Central High School
A Learning Focused School
Neighborhood Visit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Subject:</th>
<th>Beginning/Middle/End of Class (circle one)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher:</td>
<td>Activating Acquisition</td>
<td>Summarizing Extending/Refining Yes/No/Other/Type/Comment Yes = Y No = N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Lesson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy (Jan-Jun)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizer &amp; Type (Jul-Dec)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Focus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential Question or BIG IDEA or Objective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neighborhood visits revealed diverse and differential teaching strategies throughout the school.

Strategies looked for during Neighborhood Visits
Memo

To: All Staff
From: Dr. Hal and LFS Team
CC: 
Date: 3/1/2005
Re: Evaluation / Feedback on 2/28/2005 Staff Inservice

Time ran out for us yesterday to include this in the activities. Please take a moment to give us some feedback on the staff inservice held Monday, 2/28/2005.

Positives: — Word wall gave us an appreciation of all that’s been thrown at us over the past four years. The promise of being given help to best employ some of the “tools” in your “tool box” give hope — we need to be able to bring it all together.

Negatives: — Couldn’t hear the Seatlle Fish Market Video — this is a great motivator — but lots couldn’t hear or see it — you lost a lot at the beginning — they couldn’t come back.

Areas for Improvement next time: — It was obvious that the staff (teachers) put a lot into this — that helps that there are peer trained.

What can we do to enhance your learning experience? — Keep giving — try to anticipate audio/visual problems if there is to be a visual presentation —

*Return to Dr. Hall’s mailbox once you have completed this.

Thank you, LFS Team
What questions do you have?
WHERE DO I'S GO AFTER UNIT IS OVER?

What did you like?
LIKE, ATTITUDE, SEMINAR

SCHS Learning Focused School

Socrates' Accent

What didn't you like?

TO INVOLVE STUDENTS IN DISCOVERING MATER CONCEPTS
Why is it important for EVERY CLASSROOM, and EVERY TEACHER to use an EQ?
Ticket out the Door

HOW DOES A CONCEPT STAND STRONG?
- teach vocab, engage interest
- build background, teach concept, learning strategies

YOUR OPINION CONCERNING TODAY’S MEETING:

I LIKED: “Wax on-Wax off”
- short, sweet & to the point

I DIDN'T LIKE: Everything was well done
- no problems

MY SUGGESTION(S):
- continue feeding us

Ticket out the Door

HOW DOES A CONCEPT STAND STRONG?
- By using different learning strategies as well as developing and implementing them in our classes

YOUR OPINION CONCERNING TODAY’S MEETING:

I LIKED: I think it is good to think about how these activities to think about how what we are doing in our classes

I DIDN'T LIKE:
- That we can know each other a bit better as employees

MY SUGGESTION(S):
- Maybe too
3 Things I learned about organizing my teaching from Yoda
- Break learning into smaller
  achievable tasks
- Be patient
- Model proper techniques/behavior

2 Ways I'll try to maximize student learning in my class
- Ensure students are involved in learning activities
  that maximize learning
- Switch activities frequently

1 Dead horse I'll ride a little less
- Trying to/worrying about
  accomplishing balance

Feedback: Great video - Creative as always!!
### SUMMARY OF TICKET OUT SURVEYS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TICKET OUT Properties</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
<th>Neighborhood Visits</th>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>Activating Strategies</th>
<th>Teaching Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response to Big Idea of Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>To endorse a plan for student achievement that enforces collaborative teaching</td>
<td>To determine what collaborative teaching strategies and methods are currently being used in our school.</td>
<td>To make teachers aware of the essential questions, and how they can incorporate them into their lessons</td>
<td>To show teachers how to initiate strategies to incorporate collaborative teaching</td>
<td>To give examples of some collaborative teaching ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Positive Responses</td>
<td>1. Themes to tie things together 2. Tool Boxes” help teachers to use ALL of their tools in the classroom 3. Community sense to include both teachers as well as all the students</td>
<td>1. Good use of objectives as well as use of the central questions</td>
<td>1. To get students into new habits that involve using the questions 2. To encourage students to focus their learning 3. Consistency in the classroom</td>
<td>1. Small group work 2. Varied activities 3. Visual and hands on examples</td>
<td>1. Don’t leave any students behind 2. Learn by doing 3. Be a master of your subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses that will help collaborate teaching strategies and build a Professional Learning Community</td>
<td>Encourage teachers to work together to encourage learning</td>
<td>Helps monitor how collaborative teaching is actually being used</td>
<td>Help students to relate better to more than one idea, yet still be able to focus</td>
<td>Uses different ways of incorporating collaboration without overwhelming</td>
<td>Completes collaboration ideas by letting each teacher use their own strategies yet still be flexible to others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using a Ticket Out after each faculty presentation allowed faculty to summarize and evaluate our activity. Response was consistently positive.
UNIT/CONCEPT: Learning Focused Schools

Essential Question (EQ):
How do we become a learning focused school?
(How do we make sure that everyone catches the fish/concept?)

Key Questions:
(LEQ's)

Essential Questions
How does a concept grow legs?
(gaining student interest, inspiring exploration)

Activation/Acceleration
How does a concept stand strong?
(building support, scaffolding, vocabulary)

Teaching
How do you teach a concept to run?
(application, practice, extending, refining)

Summarizing
How do you know if the concept won the race?
(answer the E.Q., evidence of student learning)

Some Quotes to Consider:
"Let us walk together and perhaps we will gain strength from each other."—Eisenhower

"...in a professional community of learners we do not fight our battles alone."—Terry Weeks (1988 National Teacher of the Year)

"Collaboration does not work by invitation alone."—Richard Dufour

"Every great leader is clearly teaching, and every great teacher is clearly leading."—John Gardner

"In times of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future."—Erie Hoffer

Key Concepts (Vocabulary):
Shared Vision
STARfish philosophy
Commit
Be It
Coach It
Collaboration
Acquisition
Lesson
Essential Question
Activating
Acceleration
Previewing
Focus Vocab.
Concept Mapping
Teaching
Extending
Refining
Summarizing
Learning Units
Graphic Organizers
Rubrics
Diversified Learning
Implementation
Professional Learning Community

SCHS-LFS Team
Unit Plan to Faculty
3rd Faculty Presentation
Summary and Conclusion

“He who dares to teach must never cease to learn.” - Anonymous

Beneath the foundation of our brand new school is a culture that carries the renewable resource of learning. The Age has come to develop the process to renew that resource, and that is the process of collaboration. As a Professional Learning Community, co-teaching (TAM) classes will no longer look like a black hole. By organizing our tools of teaching we can establish a consistent structure that students can recognize and is inherent within our culture. Our vision for ALL students to achieve learning success is possible.

There is not a factor of the process that includes isolationism; we have to pool our resources. We have to learn to share the roles we play in the classroom and alter the existing belief so our culture can reflect a Professional Learning Community. Dufour (2004) is succinct in stating that teachers must stop making excuses not to collaborate with curriculum, assessment and intervention (p 9).

Collaboration takes time, dedication and commitment. How can we build this community of collaboration, but more importantly how do we sustain it? It starts with profound leadership to make profound decisions.
The Great Seal of the United States displays an inscription below the pyramid that reads in Latin Novus Ordo Seclorum (A new Order of the Ages). I think the time has come to restructure our secondary school to meet the new age of collaboration, intervention and professionalism.

**Policy Recommendations**

We're going to have the best-educated American people in the world

- Dan Quayle

♦ Required pre-service professional development courses for all educational professionals co-teaching or working with student of special needs or at-risk. This course or workshop would be developed by special educators and general teachers that have co-taught in the school.

♦ Restructure of time for professionals in Secondary Schools. Teachers should have established collaboration time that is imbedded each day in the school year. This would not be part of teacher 'prep' time, but outside the time students are in classes, such as in early morning or one hour after school.
♦ **Development of a professional tier organizational structure for Secondary Schools.** Use education professionals who have achieved different levels of knowledge, expertise, and responsibility as supervisors or captains to supervise a collaborated team of teachers, distributing roles of leadership. (This cannot be in addition to teaching six/seven courses each day.)

*New Ideas - New Questions for Research*

> A leader is a deal in hope.  
> **Napoleon Bonaparte**

✓ How can a web page that has structured data tables assist daily/weekly collaboration of teachers?

✓ How would having courses offered either in early a.m. or evening effect rate of graduation for special education students?

✓ What alternatives can special ed and at-risk students use for core subject credit? Can we use pathway courses, such as agriscience for science class? Can we use shadowing/work programs as credits for science, English or even math?
Works Cited


   Web site: http://www.usscouts.org/flag/sealmotto.html

    Web site: www.enc.org/features/focus/archive/isolation

    Web site: http://www.enc.org/features/focus/archive/newteachers/

    Web site: www.wrightslaw.com
Coming together is a beginning,
staying together is progress,
and working together is success.

- Henry Ford