

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 115

SP 040 472

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TITLE Team Teaching in the Elementary School: A Long-Term Qualitative Study of Teacher Planning and Decision-Making.
PUB DATE 2001-11-14
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (30th, Little Rock, AR, November 14-16, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Planning; Elementary Education; *Participative Decision Making; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Collaboration; *Team Teaching; *Teamwork

ABSTRACT

This study examined collaborative planning and decision making in a grade level team of elementary teachers during team meetings. Fourteen teachers in a suburban district participated over 3 years. Participants were predominantly white and female and ranged from first-year to experienced teachers. Teachers were observed during regular weekly team planning meetings involving curriculum planning and team business. Team captains conducted all meetings. Data collected during these team meetings included observations of team members' levels of participation and field notes on discussion topics and actions toward consensus and decision making. Team members were interviewed about their perceptions of team teaching in general, the functioning of this particular team, their role in shared decision making, and their perceptions of the evolving roles of team members due to several significant changes in leadership, personnel, philosophy, and interpersonal issues. While the original team was a strong, high-performance team, the many changes over time resulted in a variety of challenges and eventually to a diminished ability to achieve team goals. External leadership from the principal and internal leadership from veteran teachers with needed skills acted together to bring the team back to its previous high level of functioning. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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Team teaching in the elementary school:

A long-term qualitative study of teacher planning and decision-making

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South

Educational Research Association, Little Rock, Arkansas, November 14, 2001

Abstract

This study synthesizes various elements of a longitudinal case study of collaborative planning and decision-making in a grade level team of elementary teachers. The purpose of this study was to examine planning and decision-making of an elementary grade level team during grade level team meetings.

Fourteen elementary teachers in a suburban school district in the mid-South participated in this study over a three-year period. Three first-year teachers were part of this group at various times, while other teachers ranged in experience from one to more than ten years. One was a Caucasian male; thirteen were female. One female teacher was African-American; the others were Caucasian. The teachers were all members of a grade level team that met together to plan and carry out administrative functions.

Teachers were observed during regular weekly team planning meetings; some for curriculum planning, some for team business. Team captains conducted all of these meetings. Data collected during team meetings included levels of participation of team members and field notes on discussion topics and actions toward consensus and decision-making. Team members were interviewed with regard to their perceptions of team teaching in general, the functioning of this team in particular, their role in shared decision-making, and their perceptions of the evolving roles of team members due to changes in personnel.

Critical issues addressed in this paper include the role of the team captain, the effect of variations in experience and philosophical stance among team members on team functioning, and the role of continuity in team building.

Team teaching in the elementary school:

A long-term qualitative study of teacher planning and decision-making

Since the school reform era began with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, much attention has been focused on improving the quality of teaching. Included in this focus has been the quality of teachers entering the profession, the quality professional development opportunities for teachers, and the quality of the environment in which teachers work. One aspect of this discussion has centered on the need for collaboration between teachers as a means of improving the professional life of the teacher, described as isolated and lacking in professional interaction (Goodlad, 1984; Holmes Group, 1986).

In the 1970's collaboration at the elementary level took the form of team teaching. In these settings, two to five teachers were assigned to teach all subjects to 50 to 150 students, frequently in open space classrooms (Goddu, 1975; Sterns, 1977). Many of these attempts were abandoned because their adoption was a top-down decision not supported with adequate preparation (Goodlad, 1984). Collaboration in the elementary school has taken a different form in recent years. Instructional teams at the elementary school level may now consist of all the teachers at a given grade level, each responsible for a separate classroom of students, but meeting together to plan instruction and carry out grade level administrative tasks (Lambert, 1995; Shields, 1997). This type of collaboration is the focus of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The present study examined the collaborative planning and decision making of a grade level team of elementary school teachers over a three-year period. The purpose of this study was to examine the evolution of the planning and decision-making processes of an elementary grade

level team during planning meetings, and the perceptions of team members regarding the process and their role in it. The analysis of these data was intended to provide insight into team decision-making as practiced in this situation.

Research Questions

Questions that this study is intended to answer include:

1. What practices are more and less effective in collaborative planning?
2. How do changes in leadership and personnel and differences in teaching philosophy and style affect collaborative planning?

As a case study, this investigation does not purport to generalize to other situations. Instead, it is an attempt to provide a rich source of data about how elementary school teachers work together to make decisions and plan curriculum for their students.

Related Research

Teacher collaboration has taken different forms at different levels of schooling. Institutional structures at the middle and high school level have provided the impetus for collaboration in those settings, while elementary schools have used a variety of plans for teacher collaboration.

Collaboration in middle schools has taken the form of interdisciplinary teams, a group of teachers teaching their subject matter specialities to a common core of students, using a common planning time to coordinate activities, deal with problem students, and integrate curriculum (Erb & Doda, 1989; McQuaide, 1992; Schumacher, 1995; Martin, 1995). In high schools, departments made up of subject matter specialists have developed and implemented curriculum within their disciplines (Siskin, 1990; Siskin, 1994; Siskin & Warren, 1995), and attempts at curriculum integration have also been made (Pettus, 1994). At both the middle and high school

levels, subject matter specialization is a critical variable in collaboration. The middle school model attempts to eliminate barriers between subject areas through the interdisciplinary team, while the high school focuses on the content expertise of teachers through the departmental organization.

At the elementary school level, collaboration had been attempted prior to the current school reform era (Sowers, 1968; Goddu, 1975; Moody & Amos, 1975; Sterns, 1977). Many elementary schools experimented with team teaching – placing several teachers in simultaneous contact with a group of students, frequently through creating open space classrooms – in the 1960's and 1970's. In these settings, two to five teachers were assigned to teach all subjects to 50 to 150 students. In the best of these settings, teachers took on differentiated instructional roles, some with small groups, some with large groups, some working one-on-one. In other settings, teachers taught as they always had, without the benefit of walls between classrooms. These approaches were in large part abandoned by the end of the 1970's in response to the “back-to-basics” movement and the realization on the part of many educators that many children needed the stability of an individual teacher for most of their instruction.

A more contemporary approach to team teaching in the elementary school acknowledges the shortcomings of the open space teaming model and leaves students in self-contained classrooms. Teaming takes place through the use of a common planning time (a device borrowed from the middle school model) during which time teachers collaborate on administrative issues and curriculum (Lambert, 1995). Little research on this form of team teaching has been published, but its potential has not gone unnoticed.

The value of collaboration as a means of enhancing teachers' continuing professional development is one focus of a major report of the U.S. Department of Education (1999). The

report, which includes data from a nation-wide survey of teachers, criticizes traditional professional development opportunities for teachers, such as workshops and conferences, because they lack connection to the classroom. In addition to mentoring and induction programs for new teachers, peer collaboration “has been heralded by teachers, researchers and policy makers as essential to teachers’ continuous learning.” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 28).

Teachers surveyed for the USDOE study reported a high incidence of regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers, including “a common planning period for *team* teachers [emphasis added] (USDOE, 1999, p. 30). The nature of team teaching assumed in this report is not stated, so it is unclear if teachers who share only a common planning time are considered team teachers. Thus the prevalence of a common planning period during which elementary teachers collaborate on curriculum planning is not established. Regardless, 40% of teachers who did participate in team planning during a common planning time believed that this collaboration helped their teaching a lot.

The day-to-day work of contemporary team teaching approaches in the elementary school has been the subject of few studies. Shields (1997) reports that successful team collaboration not only requires administrative support, but also hinges on personality traits and positive interaction between team members. Honesty, flexibility, the ability to communicate, and confidence were contributors to team success. Egotism, cynicism, and non-cooperation were personality traits associated with unsuccessful teams.

Team Teaching, a project of the Northern Nevada Writing Project Teacher-Researcher Group (1996) provides rich anecdotal data. A Nevada law mandating a 16-1 pupil-teacher ratio in grades 1-3 resulted in many teachers undertaking team teaching arrangements. Most

elementary teachers in this study were paired with another teacher in the same room, so the collaboration was closer and more intense than simply sharing a common planning time.

Collaboration among teachers in elementary schools is advocated by many, but has been studied by few. Riley (1999) studied the level and types of participation by elementary teachers in team planning meetings. In this case study, veteran teachers dominated discussions and led the team through the force of their personalities. In a follow-up study, Riley (2000) found that team members had significant differences in perceptions of how their team functioned, based largely on length and type of experience with team teaching.

Methodology

Subjects

Fourteen elementary teachers teaching at Fountain Valley School, a large elementary (K-5) school in a suburban school district in the mid-South, participated in this study. Three first-year teachers were part of this group at various times, while other teachers ranged in experience from one to more than ten years. One was a Caucasian male; thirteen were female. One female teacher was African-American; the others were Caucasian. The team is one of two looping teams at Fountain Valley; i.e., it follows a group of fourth grade students for more than one year, through the end of the fifth grade. In the following fall, the team would receive a new set of fourth-grade students who would be with the team for the next two years.

The team was selected for study after consultation with area principals. It presented a wide range of teaching experience levels, a sufficient mix of veteran and novice teachers to examine the contributions of each, significant experience with this form of team teaching, and the potential of examining the evolution of team functioning over a period of time, due to personnel changes for the upcoming school year.

Data Collection

Data were collected by using case study methods outlined by Stake (1995). The researcher observed the teachers during their regular team planning meetings – Monday afternoons after school and Wednesday mornings during the students' physical education period. The team captain conducted both of these meetings. During these meetings, the researcher collected and coded quantitative data on levels and types of participation by team members (Riley, 1999), and compiled field notes on discussion topics and actions toward consensus and decision-making. The researcher interviewed team members with regard to their perceptions of team teaching in general; the functioning of this team in particular, their role in shared decision-making, and their perceptions of the evolving roles of team members due to changes in personnel. Interviews were tape-recorded, and transcripts of the interviews were prepared. More detailed analysis of the interview phase of this study may be found in Riley (2000).

Findings

Over the three-year period covered by this study, this instructional team underwent significant changes in leadership, personnel, and level of functioning. At the beginning of the study, it was comprised of eight teachers whose level of experience ranged from one to nine years' experience. Under the leadership of Kathy Henry, the team routinely achieved its basic performance goal: team members left their planning meetings with plans and ideas to take back to their classrooms.

By all accounts, Kathy Henry led the team by the force of her dynamic personality and her wealth of experience. Teacher Marsha Curry stated,

Kathy was a natural leader. Even when she wasn't the leader she really was. I think Kathy worked really hard to try to make sure everybody liked everybody. She really worked hard at that, and it took its toll on her because it was a tough thing to do.

Under her leadership, team members met weekly to plan curriculum and share instructional ideas. While she was a highly active participant in team meetings (Riley, 1999), she also relied on an experienced group of team members. She seemed completely at home in her role. She exuded confidence, yet was able to provide empathy and use humor throughout the meetings. The team frequently would diverge from the agenda in a hilarious discussion of something that happened that day. Interestingly, she provoked or abetted most of those diversions herself (Riley, 1999).

Team meetings included discussions of activities and materials relevant for upcoming topics. Veteran team members routinely warned novice teachers of potential pitfalls for students and provided advice on the pacing of instruction. Joint efforts at instruction and coordination of scarce materials (e.g., videotapes, etc.) were common. At the conclusion of team meetings, teachers left with a set of ideas and activities that they could use to plan their individual lessons. According to Nancy Dennis, school principal, this team met the standards for a high-performance team (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

After the first year of the study, Kathy Henry left the team to stay home with a newborn child. The new team captain, Lynn Taylor, was chosen in part because Susan Collins, another veteran teacher universally admired by team members, did not wish to serve as team captain. At the same time that this leadership transition took place, three first-year teachers were added to the team to replace Kathy Henry and two teachers who transferred to other schools. These significant changes in both personnel and leadership changed the dynamic of the team significantly.

Lynn Taylor, the new team captain, had far less teaching experience than did Kathy Henry, and little of the strong personality that had galvanized the team in the past. Her primary

goals were building consensus and trying to make all team members feel valued. Previously, there were no obvious differences in teaching philosophy among members of the team. But differences became apparent soon after the transition. Two of the new teachers, Pat Seymour and Brenda May, aligned themselves with two veteran teachers, Marsha Curry and Anne Melton, to take a less-traditional approach to teaching mathematics. Those four teachers began meeting together with a lead teacher from another school to plan their math apart from the full team. Team members differed in their perceptions of these meetings. Those who did not participate saw them as exclusionary, and this perception undermined the sense of common purpose on the team. Anne Melton stated, "I don't think we've always been open about things that we disagreed on. You hear it through the grapevine on our team that there is a disagreement, but you never knew there was a disagreement." Pam Russell summed it up by saying,

It feels more kind of split; this side of the table and that side of the table. I didn't feel that much last year, maybe a little bit towards the end. This year it's kind of like, "We're a team but we're two teams."

Lynn Taylor took little direct action to resolve these differences outside of occasional discussions at team meetings, best summarized as "agreeing to disagree."

In the third year of the study, the team membership changed again. Susan Collins and Kathy Henry both left the team to stay home with young children. Pat Seymour transferred to another team within the building. Because of an increase in enrollment, one additional member was added to the team. The new members were different than those added in the past, in that all of them had experience teaching in the system, two at Fountain Valley, one at another school. The team dynamic changed as well. The veteran teachers, especially those who had worked on other teams at the school, expressed frustration with the team's inability to meet their goal of helping them plan detailed instruction. Teacher Anne Wall commented,

Obviously the people that were new to the team were missing something that happened last year that we didn't understand. But we could figure it out. I would like for us to walk away with something useful . . . it should just be running like clockwork a little bit more. That's what teaming is about is reducing the amount of individual work by doing it with other people. I would like to see that.

At this point, Nancy Dennis, the principal, undertook two actions that assisted the team to refocus. At the school level, she provided yearlong training for all teachers in the processes of teaming. While veteran teachers at the school had experienced training of this sort in the past, significant personnel changes schoolwide indicated the need for an update. This training included an assessment of preferred work styles. This assessment gave the team a better understanding of each other, and a common vocabulary to facilitate that understanding.

But no significant changes took place in team functioning until the principal took more direct action with this team. She met with the team to refocus them on their performance goals. She related an incident in which she discussed the team planning process with the parent of a student on the team. She made it clear that she and the parent both expected the team to meet together to formulate not only long-range plans, but also assist each other in unit and daily planning. She did not address personality or philosophical issues, focusing instead on the performance goal – helping teachers plan for instruction.

This action energized the veteran teachers who were new to the team. Two in particular, Donna Davis and Anne Wall, provided needed skills. Anne Wall focused her energy in helping the team plan social studies content, reflective of her specific technical knowledge. Donna Davis used her significant interpersonal and leadership skills to move the team to act. Both moved into leadership roles the following year, Donna Davis as an assistant principal at another school, and Anne Wall as the new team captain replacing Lynn Taylor.

Discussion

The evolution of this team's functioning over the three-year period of the study can be analyzed using principals enunciated by Katzenbach and Smith (1993). Under the leadership of Kathy Henry, the group approached the status of a high-performance team. Teachers accomplished their primary performance goal, that of effective unit and daily planning. She acted to "foster team performance best by building a strong performance ethic rather than by establishing a team-promoting environment alone" (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 13). But she also paid attention to that environment as well, using her highly developed sense of humor to prevent and alleviate stress during team meetings. As noted above, Kathy Henry introduced more off-task interactions than any other team member, a perhaps surprising finding for a team captain. The team had fun when they met, fulfilling another characteristic of high performance teams identified by Katzenbach and Smith. Yet at the same time they spent over 80% of their time on agenda items (Riley, 1999).

The new team, under the leadership of Lynn Taylor, spent more than a year trying to recapture that level of productivity. When new teachers Pat Seymour and Brenda May began meeting with the two veteran teachers, Marsha Curry and Anne Melton, to discuss mathematics instruction, a rift developed in the team. Personality and philosophical issues, while discussed only obliquely at team meetings, seemed to dominate the concerns of members. The situation represents a classic case of what Katzenbach and Smith (1993) termed a stuck team.

On stuck teams, interpersonal conflicts and entrenched positions often get interpreted as a lack of commitment on the part of one or more individuals to work as a team. The team gets diverted from its performance goals and falls into endless side-bar conversations, out of earshot of the full team, about personal styles and biases. This, in turn, further weakens the trust and respect so critical to the mutual accountability and commitment required for team performance. (p. 157)

The actions of Principal Nancy Dennis helped to refocus the team on the primary purpose for team planning. She avoided the pitfalls described by Katzenbach and Smith (1993) when she met with the team. She did not touch on philosophical or personality issues. By using her discussion with a parent, she reminded the team that their purpose was to help children learn, and that they could do that best when they developed useful plans. She called them back to a more basic and yet higher purpose.

The team was also able to capitalize on the significant skills of two new members who nevertheless had prior successful teaming experiences on other teams in the school. Anne Wall was an acknowledged leader in curriculum, having served on a district-wide committee to write a new social studies curriculum guide. She provided the necessary technical expertise (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993) that allowed the team to experience success in unit planning. For example, at one point in a team meeting, she explained the concept of Manifest Destiny to her teammates. Donna Davis demonstrated many of the interpersonal skills identified by Katzenbach and Smith. She took the interpersonal initiative by drawing non-participants into discussions, using active listening to assure their points were heard, and moving discussions toward closure when it seemed appropriate to her.

According to Principal Nancy Dennis, the team has moved closer to its former level of performance since Anne Wall succeeded Lynn Taylor. The source of one of the initial irritants that undermined team functioning has been turned into a performance activity. The lead teacher from the other school who met with Pat Seymour, Brenda May, Marsha Curry and Anne Melton, now meets occasionally with the entire team, and, according to the principal, the team has been able to meet the needs of all the teachers in

the area of planning math. It is significant that the team has used a performance goal to address interpersonal concerns, rather than the other way around.

The challenges faced by this instructional team over the three years of this study included leadership changes, major personnel changes, and philosophical and interpersonal issues, which eventually led to a diminished ability to achieve its performance goals. External leadership from the principal and internal leadership from veteran teachers with needed skills acted together to bring it back to its previous high level of functioning. These challenges force the question, "Is it worth it?" The comments of two veteran teachers assert that it is. First, Pat Lynch reflected on her teaming experience at another school in the district:

If you fail terribly, somebody's going to be there hopefully to pick you up and continue to cheer you on. Especially when you've had an extremely difficult child, and you've pulled out every trick in the book and you still cannot get through to that child, and your day has just been horrible, you go home thinking, "Why did I even decide to do this? Why did I even pick this career? Why am I really here?" There's always been somebody there for me to say, "You really are good at what you're doing. You may want to try this."

Finally, Anne Wall stated that "when you team with someone else, you have that check of approval from someone, the sort of checks and balances of it all. It gives me more confidence in what I'm doing because I've shared."

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