

# **Relationships and Authentic Collaboration: Perceptions of a Building Leadership**

## **Team**

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## **Abstract**

This research examined perceptions of a Building Leadership Team (BLT) regarding the school climate, collegial relationships, camaraderie, and team-building skills among certified faculty. Participants' perceptions changed from resistance accession once a clear understanding of authentic collaboration developed through five job-embedded professional development sessions. The results from the action research project provided teachers and administration with information to improve and model effective cooperative and collaborative practices to support a positive and effective school climate for all stakeholders.

*Keywords:* collaboration, relationships, trust, teacher leadership, instructional leadership

## **Introduction**

In a vast and ever changing world of technology and stimulation, teaching problem solving skills, effective communication and critical thinking through more engaging, rigorous, and relevant curricula is necessary in today's classroom. However, how can we adopt these expectations without first addressing relationships within the classroom and school building? Do educators support their colleagues through a community of collaboration and camaraderie? Relationships and authentic collaboration among faculty may be the key to creating an effective learning environment for all stakeholders.

## **Problem of the Project**

The principal of the school identified the problem, based on faculty perceptions, as the school climate lacking in trust, camaraderie, and collaboration. Research from Hindman, Grant, and Stronge (2010) supports the significance of positive relationships between teachers and students, but teachers may not have a positive relationship with one another. Troen and Boles (2012) suggest teachers need to construct collegial and cooperative relationships as the first step to establishing rapport, and then through trust and support, the process of authentic collaboration can begin.

## **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this action research was to improve the school climate by determining the perceptions of the faculty concerning collegial relationships, camaraderie, and team-building skills by providing the foundation for successful authentic collaboration between teachers through job-embedded professional development. The results from this project have provided teachers and administration with information to improve and model effective cooperative and collaborative practices to support a positive and effective school climate for all stakeholders.

## **Research Questions**

Guiding the action research project were the following questions:

1. According to the participants' perceptions, what specific areas are most relevant regarding the school climate?
2. What are the perceptions of the faculty participants regarding teamwork as a member of the BLT compared to their GLT?
3. What are the perceptions of the faculty participants after receiving the job-embedded professional development and implementing the practice of authentic collaboration?

## **Literature Review**

If both physiological and safety needs have been satisfied, the craving for relationships and the connection with people is the next essential requirement within Maslow's (1943) well-known motivation theory of hierarchy of needs. Specifically, one may desire a sense of belonging or finding their place within a group. This intense longing may be more valuable than one's own self-esteem. Relationships build a sense of community and are a vital component of emotional human nature

### **Teacher/Student Relationships**

The emotional dimension of engagement supports the importance of relationships between teachers and students as well as teachers to teachers. The comprehensive definition offered by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) includes incorporating the three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. According to McCann and Turner (2004), teachers prefer students "to experience positive and pleasant emotions with the hope that these emotions will foster motivation, engagement, and learning" (p. 1697). Students conceptualize emotional engagement as a feeling of identification and investment and as a sense of belonging, feeling an important part of the school body, and finding value in the school experience (Finn, 1989).

Students deserve to feel valued and the most effective teachers understand how to provide every student with a sense of worthiness (Breux & Whitaker, 2006). "When a teacher's sensitivity to students increases, so does the opportunity to reach them" (Whitaker, 2004, p. 120). Effective teachers make a point to connect with their students

by getting to know them on a more personal level (Breux and Whitaker, 2006). However, Flynt and Brozo (2009) argue deciding when and how to connect with their students is an independent decision for teachers to make.

Hindman, Grant, and Stronge (2010) explain when building a relationship, students must trust their teacher and find them credible. For example,

When a student deems a teacher credible, the relationship is strengthened and bridges to ideas and new knowledge is built. Every day good teachers build relationships and demonstrate caring with their students. They think about both their students' academic performance and about them as individuals. They ask students about their lives and what is occurring. (p. 15)

Teachers putting forth the effort to building a positive relationship with their students are compensated as their students improve cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally. When classroom teachers stress their high expectations for all students without building a classroom community they may confront many obstacles. Teachers should be authentic with their own emotions and provide genuine support to help students assimilate high expectations in themselves (Benson, 2012; Sterret, 2011).

### **Collegial Relationships**

Although caring teachers are devoted to supporting students through their academic success, teachers must also encourage, support, and respect one another. Blimes (2012) explains building relationships among colleagues is no different from students. Colleagues should use various occasions throughout the day to build more personal and professional associations among co-workers. A more respectful and personal approach and a feeling of camaraderie may lead to more problem solving and pedagogical collaboration (Blimes, 2012). The Southern Regional Education Board (2011) suggests, "All teachers need to participate and take ownership both individually and as a group" to build better relationships among colleagues" (p. 2). Karns and Melina (2002) elucidate, "When relationships are poorly managed, burnout and frustration can overwhelm the system's commitment to succeed. The relationships among colleagues must be structured by optimal support...a commitment to goals, and fostering 'relationship capital'" (p. 30).

### **Authentic Collaboration**

Troen and Boles (2012) explain collegial relationships depend on the cooperation of colleagues. Cooperative colleagues assist others in various endeavors through compliant and collegial support. This may mean helping someone else work toward his or her goals. However, many times educators may confuse cooperation with collaboration. Authentic collaboration is a profound, collective purpose to achieve a shared goal among two or more. Collaboration among peers includes an ethical priority to model collegiality, collaboration, and effective teaching (Aleccia, 2011; Troen & Boles, 2012). Because education is a culture of autonomy, teachers may not share their ideas with others for fear of imposing, whereas other teachers will not ask for guidance because they fear being

perceived as a weak or struggling teacher. For these reasons, opportunities to influence colleagues are lost and the potential to collaborate is limited and a positive school climate may be diminished (Levine & Marcus, 2007). De Four and Mattos (2013) share, “The most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning is to create the collaborative culture and collective responsibility” (p. 37) among school faculty.

## **Trust**

When examining the realities of team building, the Southern Regional Education Board (2009) signified the importance of improving relationships and mentoring through increased administrative collaboration. Teachers need leadership support through professional development, common planning, and team building activities. Administration should establish a substantial commitment to not only supporting, but also modeling positive relationships and a climate of trust within the school and community. According to Bell, Thacker, and Schargel (2011) teachers can build trust through worthy efforts to develop the essential academic and behavioral skills of students, share the workload of extra duties, and implement school and district plans. Suggestions for building trust among colleagues include implementing active listening more often than active speaking, consistency, empathy, gauging your reactions, nurturing leadership potential, improving one’s own competencies, and engaging in critical self-reflection (Bell, Thacker, & Schargel, 2011; Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013).

Though trust among colleagues is essential in implementing authentic collaboration, Caposey (2013) explains trust begins with effective leadership, usually through a BLT. The BLT members include administration and faculty representing all grade levels and resource areas within the school building. The BLT must be clear about its mission and responsibility of building a positive school climate and culture of support for all faculty and staff (Caposey, 2013). Lambert (2003) shares insight on how teacher leaders and administrators must foster an environment of reflective practice and standards-based inquiry to improve teaching and learning. Bridging theory to practice requires a multitude of strategies including collaborative learning, modeling, and peer observation to enhance relationships among teachers.

## **Modeling and Observations**

Arnodah (2012) explains trust and rapport offer a form of social support, making peer observations somewhat more relaxing for all stakeholders. This level of trust permeates throughout the climate supporting a more inviting atmosphere and making it more comfortable to exchange information through peer review reducing the culture of individualism. City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teital (2009) explain how instructional rounds in education are more than observations and begin with the instructional core signifying,

In its simplest terms, the instructional core is composed of the teacher and the student in the presence of content. It is the *relationship* between the teacher, the student, and the content – *not* the qualities of any one of them by themselves – that determines the nature of instructional practice, and each corner of the

instructional core has its own particular role and resources to bring to the instructional process. (pp. 22-23)

Kachur, Stout, and Edwards (2013) perceive modeling and peer observations as a principle component of effective instructional practice. Having the opportunity to model and observe others teaching breaks the barriers of resistance, opens the doors to a collaborative relationship and may unleash hidden potential. Teachers need multiple opportunities to learn from one another in a safe environment, feeling supported rather than judged. In addition, teachers need the support of administration for scheduled times to collaboratively and vertically plan together, review student work, share ideas, and truly collaborate to meet the needs of *every* student in the building, not just those on individual teacher rosters (Kachur, Stout, & Edwards, 2013).

## **Methodology**

### **Description of the Action/Intervention**

The purpose of the research project was to improve the school climate by determining the perceptions of faculty regarding collegial relationships, trust, and team building skills as a foundation for authentic collaboration. The researcher conducted the project through action research. Typical experimental research is performed “to explain, predict, and or control educational phenomena” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009, p. 3) as researchers manipulate certain variables to test a hypothesis with a predetermined level of statistical significance. However, Mills (2011) defines action research as,

any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved. (p. 5)

Mills (2011) goes on to explain action research is a four-step process by identifying a problem or focus area, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and developing and implementing an intervention or plan of action to address the problem or focus area.

The intervention provided for this research project included job-embedded professional development based on the practice of authentic collaboration among the BLT participants. The BLT was the primary recipients of the professional development; however, all Grade Level Teams (GLT) received turn-around training using the same information and implementation strategies. The researcher provided job-embedded professional development sessions on five occasions throughout the school year for the BLT by scheduling with the school principal. Scheduled sessions took place in September 2013, November 2013, January 2014, March 2014, and May 2014. The professional development consisted of specifics on how to collaborate effectively with each other based on commitment, building trust, collegial relationships, and team

development skills. In addition, participants were asked to collaborate by reviewing student work samples, observing peers teaching, and completing instructional rounds with a focus on student learning.

When the BLT met for the initial session, the following questions developed by Kachur, Stout, and Edwards (2013) were the topic of discussion:

- How committed are teachers to improving teaching and student learning?
- How committed are teachers to their own continuous learning?
- What is the level of communication, trust and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and administrators?
- How accepting, caring, respecting and encouraging are teachers of one another?
- To what extent do teachers feel safe to say what they really think?
- To what extent are teachers open to examining new ideas and taking risks?
- To what extent do teachers feel supported rather than judged? (p. 15)

Based on the work of Troen and Boles (2012), the identified reasons why teams typically fail provided the topic for participants to reflect through their own personal experiences guided by the following areas during the second session:

- *The complexities of collaboration are untaught*, meaning a group of people does not make a team because team members may come in as novices.
- *Effective teacher leadership is missing*. To teachers' detriment, rejection of another teacher's authority occurs because of lack of seniority or experience.
- *The need for expertise is ignored or misunderstood*. Many teachers are not inclined to admit they need help because of a lack of trust.
- *Pitfalls are unrecognized or poorly addressed*. Teachers often fail to take on leadership roles, do not use common planning time effectively, mistake experience for expertise, do not develop a clear purpose or goal, and talk about the curriculum, but not each other's instruction.
- *Team members give up when they do not get along*. Everyone needs to learn how to have those difficult conversations, put ego, and rank aside.
- *There are no consequences for poor team or individual performance*. Everyone on the team is accountable for every student in the building — not just the students in your classroom. (pp. 11-15)

The third session involved discussions and strategies on building trust. Discussion of trust builders encouraged participants to implement strategies throughout the next months. As homework, the researcher requested participants to observe peers in a vertical position. For example, a third grade math teacher observed first and fifth grade math teachers.

The focus of the fourth session included observation notes, reflections, and shared learning. In addition, participants reviewed student work samples and each participant offered suggestions on how to provide strategies of support for the teacher to meet the students' needs. Homework was again assigned to observe another class, but with the spotlight on student learning. Using the method of Instructional Rounds from City,

Elmore, Fiarman, and Teital (2009) the focus was on *the core*, made up of the teacher, the student, and the curriculum.

The fifth and final session included additional reflections, discussions of instructional rounds and additional designs of vertical planning sessions. The researcher requested participants to complete the Teamwork Survey based on perceptions of teamwork within the BLT and GLT and answer the questionnaire based on the professional development sessions.

### **Setting and Participants**

This action research project took place over 13 months from May 2013 to June 2014 at an elementary school and involved two separate data collections. The student enrollment at the elementary school was 325 students in grades K-5 with 23 certified employees. Demographics reveal 68% of the students were African American, 23% Caucasian, and 6% made up other ethnicities. Furthermore, 88% of the students were receiving free/reduced lunch services qualifying as a Title I school. The BLT involved both the principal and program specialist of the school, but for the purposes of this project only teacher leaders of the BLT were participants. The respondents included 6 classroom teacher leaders each representing one grade level of K-5 and 2 special education teacher leaders representing grades K-2 and grades 3-5. The teacher representing 1<sup>st</sup> grade also served as the BLT Chair.

### **Instrumentation**

The initial data were collected from certified faculty using anonymous surveys the school principal administered at the end of the 2013 school term. The principal of the elementary school requested the certified faculty to participate in a random anonymous survey titled "Survey for Instructional Staff." The principal routinely requested the same survey at the end of each school year to assist with the effectiveness of the principal in areas of leadership, management, communication, and community relations. Surveys were provided to 23 certified faculty members through their school mailbox distributed by the school secretary. The surveys were anonymous and optional as not all faculty members participated with only 18 surveys returned. The survey contained 39 questions; however, for the purposes of this project only seven questions from the archived survey were relevant because they related to school climate. Some example items from the survey were "Whether or not the school was a good place to work" and "Opportunity to provide input on school matters that affect them". Participants were instructed to respond to the questions by circling the most appropriate answer based on their perceptions. The options included 1=*rarely*, 2=*sometimes*, 3=*usually*, and 4=*almost always*, on a Likert-type scale.

The principal did not require faculty to participate. The survey requested was familiar to the veteran faculty, routinely provided on a yearly basis, and was considered optional. There were no names or other demographic information on the survey. The participants' names, grade levels, or positions were not known by the principal when the surveys were returned in a sealed envelope to the principal's mailbox. Many of the faculty retired or transferred to other schools or districts at the end of the school year and

may no longer be employed at the school. Permission from the superintendent was granted to collect the archived data from the principal and access the data for collection after the approval of the Institutional Review Board.

The second data collection period occurred in May 2014 in the same elementary school through an anonymous questionnaire and surveys. At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year, the principal of the school appointed eight teachers to serve on the BLT representing the faculty of school. The BLT included eight appointed teachers and two administrators. The school principal required the BLT to participate in a mandatory professional development workshop on authentic collaboration regardless of whether they chose to complete the questionnaire and surveys. The researcher requested the participants to complete the survey two times at the conclusion of the professional development, one survey based on the membership of the BLT and the second based on the membership of their GLT. There were no names or other demographic data requested or collected, keeping all survey data anonymous. The participants labeled their surveys as BLT and the other as GLT. An informed consent form was provided to participants and they were given an opportunity to ask questions before they completed the survey. The survey contained 32 questions classified into one of four categories: Forming Stage, Storming Stage, Norming Stage, and Performing Stage. Participants were asked to indicate how often they perceived the BLT and GLT displayed each behavior using the scoring system of 1=*almost never*, 2=*seldom*, 3=*occasionally*, 4=*frequently*, and 5=*almost always*. The creator of the survey, Clark (2004), provided permission to use the survey, "Teamwork Survey," for the purposes of this project. Some of the questions included, "Team members do not fully trust the other members and closely monitor others who are working on a specific task." and "We are able to work through group problems."

The questionnaire, created by the researcher, consisted of five open-ended questions regarding the job-embedded professional development provided throughout the school year. Some of the questions included, "How has your thinking changed concerning authentic collaboration?" and "Explain your thoughts on the effectiveness of the authentic collaboration job-embedded professional development." The superintendent and principal provided full support and permission for the project to take place as well as the Institutional Review Board.

## Data Analysis

### Research Question 1

According to the participants' perceptions, what specific areas are most relevant regarding school climate?

The first question of the survey examines whether the participants were given an opportunity to provide input on school matters affecting teachers. The participants reported 39% as *almost always* and 28% *usually* leaving one-third of respondents not perceiving the chance to contribute to the affairs of the school. The survey data reveal similar results on whether the partakers feel the school is a good place to work; however, 61% consider the school to be safe and secure (Table 1).



Moving into the area of cooperation and collaboration with questions 4-7, 44% of respondents report *almost always* and 13% report *usually* spending time with the grade level to plan lessons for a total of 69%. Interestingly, a total of 67% also reveal they *almost always* and *usually* plan in isolation revealing a startling contradiction of planning time. On the other hand, 43% of the respondents revealed they *sometimes* or *rarely* spent time planning with resource teachers supporting isolation planning. The highest score related to perceptions concerning school climate influencing student achievement revealed 78% agreed *almost always* and 22% reported *usually* for a total of 100% in the highest categories. If 100% of the respondents believe school climate *almost always* or *usually* influences student achievement, then these data are the conduit needed to develop the school climate through strengthening the relationships between educators by increasing authentic collaboration (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Faculty Perceptions Regarding School Climate*

“Survey for Instructional Staff”-Questions	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Almost Always
~Opportunity to provide input on school matters that affect them	11	22	28	39
~Whether or not the school is a good place to work	16	12	33	39
~Whether the school is a safe and secure place to work	0	5	33	62
~Plan with their grade level	0	31	25	44
~Plan with resource teachers	19	25	13	44
~Plan in isolation	6	26	21	47
~School climate influences student achievement	0	0	22	78

## Research Question 2

Are there any significant differences as to what stage the participants perceive themselves to be regarding Teamwork Building as a member of the BLT compared to Grade Level Team? Using the Teamwork Survey Worksheet—Team Development Score Sheet, scores of each participant were calculated by tallying the provided scores under the assigned four categories. The members of the BLT completed the survey twice. The first survey scores related to the BLT and the second set of survey scores related to GLT. The highest mean scores reveal the stages of team work to be in the Norming and Performing stages with the lowest mean scores in the Forming and Storming stages. The mean scores are similar between the BLT and the GLT revealing the professional development training provided an effective intervention for the BLT. Furthermore, the members of the BLT provided efficient and successful turn-around training to the Grade Level Teams suggested by the data (Table 2).

Table 2  
*Team Development Scores*

Group		Forming	Storming	Norming	Performing
BLT	Mean	21.7500	18.1250	31.5000	31.7500
	N	8	8	8	8
	Std. Deviation	3.69362	3.35676	3.66450	5.03559
GLT	Mean	22.2500	18.5000	30.1250	30.5000
	N	8	8	8	8
	Std. Deviation	1.48805	4.50397	6.49038	5.37188
Total	Mean	22.0000	18.3125	30.8125	31.1250
	N	16	16	16	16
	Std. Deviation	2.73252	3.84220	5.14093	5.07116

### Research Question 3

What are the perceptions of the faculty participants after receiving the job-embedded professional development and implementing the practice of authentic collaboration? The data collected from the open-ended questionnaire revealed the participants' perceptions changed from resistance to acceptance once a clear understanding of authentic collaboration emerged through the job-embedded professional development sessions. Participants revealed clarification of misconceptions regarding the differences between cooperation and collaboration. Participants began to work collaboratively as trust was gained. Teachers expanded their discussions of instruction and student learning during vertical and collaborative observations and planning sessions. However, one of the most noticeable changes occurred within the climate through a newly found camaraderie as teachers began to give up their own individual planning periods to take over and teach for a colleague so they may go observe another teacher to improve their own instructional practice. A paradigm shift began to emerge. *Every* BLT member began to take on the responsibility for *every* student in the building. This change in accountability was a fluid approach modeled for the rest of the faculty.

### Recommendations

The most relevant findings from this research stemmed from the willingness of teachers to support one another by giving up their own limited planning time to provide observation opportunities for peers; therefore, creating a more trusting and professional learning climate. Principals must afford time for teachers to learn from one another. Providing vertical planning periods and additional observational occasions should be a priority.

Researchers will continue to explore many avenues of best practices to better prepare students for college and career. However, relationships are the key to a successful school climate and camaraderie is essential for building trust and supportive relationships, whether teacher to student or teacher to teacher. Once trust and camaraderie have established a firm foundation for a solid collegial relationship, educators must then use the rapport to move forward into teams using authentic collaboration among grade

levels and the school as a whole. Collegial and cooperative relationships are just the beginning to implementing a resilient authentic collaborative team among educators.

As teachers are preparing 21<sup>st</sup> Century students for college and career, building a strong teacher-student relationship is essential for optimal student achievement. However, educators must also build personal and professional relationships among themselves to model positive communication, collaboration, and camaraderie. Constructing a positive, trusting, and collaborative climate can only provide more engaging, encouraging, and optimistic opportunities for all stakeholders. Additional research should include multiple schools at all levels, but despite the fact, this project was limited to one elementary school some valuable information revealed the misconceptions of teacher leaders regarding authentic collaboration and the significance of trusting relationships to provide an effective learning environment and positive school climate.

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