

# Collaboration: A Framework for School Improvement

## Collaboration: A Framework for School Improvement

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**Abstract:** The ability to work collaboratively with others is becoming an essential component of contemporary school reform. This article reviews current trends in school reform that embody collaborative principles and also draws on the literature to provide a theoretical overview of collaboration itself. The article then outlines the findings from a qualitative, self-contained focus group study that involved 16 individuals (parents, teachers, and administrators) who were selected using a purposeful sampling technique. According to Patton (1990), “the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p.169). Accordingly, because of their experience in collaborative school improvement activities, the participants were able to assist the researcher in addressing the general research question, what are the understandings, skills, and attitudes held by participants in school improvement initiatives that result in successful collaboration. This study allowed the essential nature of collaboration to show itself and speak for itself through participants’ descriptions of their experiences. The findings are presented within a graphic conceptualization that not only represents the large number of issues that participants identified in their collaborations, but also demonstrates the complexity of the interrelations between these issues and school improvement. The model provides a framework for thinking about the school improvement process that is anchored in collaboration.

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### *Introduction*

Themes of teacher empowerment and professionalism, school-based management, shared decision making, and choice and voice for parents have dominated school reform in the last decade. As school systems in many countries have restructured their organizational features and activities, the need to develop a more collaborative approach has been a part of the direction. In fact, some authors have asserted that current reform initiatives have relied on collaborative principles (Barth, 1990; Cook & Friend, 1992; Fullan, 1993; O’Shea & O’Shea, 1997). Therefore, shared governance initiatives have been accompanied by endorsements of collaboration as a means of achieving improvement. Consequently, the call for collaboration also has been a pervasive theme within the reform rhetoric (Welch, 1998).

Although collaboration underpins and indeed is at the heart of school improvement initiatives, the interaction among the components in the school improvement process remains somewhat of a mystery (Spillane & Seashore Louis, 2002). Furthermore how does the essential nature of the process encompassing such issues as trust, conflict, mutual respect, diversity, and shared power relate and contribute to best practice in teaching and learning? How do stakeholders collaborate, about what, with whom, and what are the outcomes of collaboration are some of the specific research questions that guided this study. This paper offers a view of collaboration in graphic form which responds to the need to demystify the school improvement process. The conceptualization represents the large number of issues that stakeholders in this study identified in their collaborations within the context of their engagement in school improvement initiatives. The framework embodies and demonstrates the complexity of the interrelations between these issues and factors. As such the model provides evidence of the web of interactions among stakeholders in collaboration and the complex path to school improvement.

The paper begins with a description of the trends that are having an impact on the operation of schools. Next a theoretical overview of collaboration provides necessary background for the study and the paper. Then I provide a description of the research and present the conceptual framework describing stakeholder collaboration in school improvement. Each of the components of the framework including: (a) Why collaborate (choice, goals, needs, relationships), (b) Dynamics (time, conflict, hard work, respect, diversity), (c) Knowledge and Skills (process, content, skills, leadership), and (d) School improvement/Outcomes (learning, synergy, pedagogy, satisfaction, community, decisions and solutions) is examined for its significance in collaboration and contribution to the school improvement process. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the study for practitioners and offers suggestions for future research.

### *From Isolation to Collaboration – Trends and Forces*

Several societal and educational trends, including decentralization, teacher professionalism, building of community-oriented school cultures, partnerships, and the vision of the school as an organic, interconnected whole, have impacted the operation of schools. These new contexts have resulted in changing associations and patterns of interaction amongst all participants in schools (Murphy & Hallinger, 1993; Prestine, 1995). Collaboration may be viewed as a central construct within each of these trends.

Caldwell & Spinks, (1992) described the world-wide move toward self-managing schools as a megatrend in education. Governments and school districts in many parts of the world have pursued initiatives in self-management. Although the language may change from one setting to another such as local management of schools (LMS) and grant-maintained (GM) in England and Wales to site-based management (SBM) in North America, the central components have remained the same. Features have included: a centrally determined framework; a leaner bureaucracy and flattened hierarchy; a shift of responsibility in roles, authority, and accountability in schools; shared leadership; and a well informed community exercising more choice in schooling. Because self-management of schools has involved the transfer of much control of education to the local community, it has required a decentralization of decision making to the individual school. At this level, concerned stakeholders have worked collaboratively to make decisions. The move towards devolution of authority to schools has been

international in scope (Caldwell, 1997; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990).

Second, the trend towards the reinvention of teacher professionalism has become a theme for school reform. The basic tenet within the reform of teacher professionalism is the belief that teachers themselves will have the greatest responsibility for the improvement of practice. Teacher professionalism has different meanings in the literature on school reform. For example, changed decision making in which teachers have had more fundamental choice regarding practice as well as greater participation in administrative decisions has been a part of one redefinition of teacher professionalism (Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992). However, Hargreaves (1994) referred to teacher participation in new forms of collaboration and partnerships as the “new professionalism” (p.24). The new view of the professional has not called for the abandonment of the traditional tenets of professionalism, but rather for an extension and enrichment of the teacher’s role (Caldwell, 1997). Finally, writers such as Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) and McLaughlin (1997) reframed professionalism in terms of teachers’ ongoing learning and the development of a stronger knowledge base for teaching.

However, although teacher professionalism has emerged as a theme for reform (Hargreaves, 1994; McLaughlin, 1997; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999) prevailing norms of privacy (Goodlad, 1984) often have blocked the formation of professional communities. For example, Griffin (1995) found that teachers and administrators equated respect for one another with non-interference and non-questioning of what happens in individual classrooms. Therefore, although there has been a movement toward the development of teacher professionalism through collaborative dialogue and reflection, traditional norms of teacher isolation and autonomy must be challenged if this model of teacher directed reform is to take place.

Third, collaboration reflects the notion of the school as a community. Individuals in much of the developed world have experienced a crisis of community, and have perceived that schools can provide one of the greatest hopes for recreating a sense of community (Hargreaves, 1997). As a result community building efforts have focused on the neighborhood school because of its geographical convenience as well as its connection to the lives of many families. Schools that are characterized as communities hold common values and expectations that shape member interactions. There is a commitment toward interpersonal caring and support that promotes meaningful education. As well, organizational structures facilitate opportunities for colleagues to work together. Collaboration with its emphasis on common goals, relationships, and mutual interdependence (Cook & Friend, 1992; Welch & Sheridan, 1995) is a way to build community as well as being a way of life within a community. Within a community, individuals depend on each other for their own learning and work. Without this sense of interdependence, community cannot exist. Inherent within the movement to create community in schools is the process of collaboration.

Another trend noted in society today is the formation of partnerships amongst schools, community, and other organizations. Welch and Sheridan (1995) suggest that no single agency can meet the need of the increasing number of children with educational, social, and medical problems who are at risk of being unsuccessful in school and society. Educators need to recruit and cultivate partnerships with parents, agency personnel, community leaders, university, and business and come together with unity of purpose that is devoid of traditional “turf issues”

(Hoover & Achilles, 1996, p.15). In so doing, educational needs of children will be addressed by changing teams and partnerships that have the flexibility, freedom, and authority to work collaboratively. Therefore, as boundaries become transparent, the work of the school not only becomes more visible, but also more closely intertwined and interconnected with family and community. As a result relationships have moved beyond merely being social in nature and have become collaborative partnerships that are characterized by the essential components of collaboration including interdependence, equality, and common purpose (Cook & Friend, 1991; Stewart, 1996; Welch & Sheridan, 1995).

Finally, interdependence, an essential component of collaboration (Gray, 1989; Little, 1990), is reflected in the trend to view the school as an organic, meaningful whole rather than a number of isolated parts (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Prestine (1995) stated that interrelatedness requires restructuring that is systemic rather than compartmentalized or segmented. Change must happen in such a way that it becomes interwoven into the basic fabric of the organization. Abowitz (1999) also cautioned that seeing the components of a school as separate entities may reinforce the sense of isolation that is experienced by the people who learn and teach daily in separate classrooms (Goodlad, 1984). Accordingly, the success of a school improvement plan requires interaction between many participants at different levels of the educational system and relies on the interdependence of the parts.

In summary several societal and educational trends including new forms of school governance that have involved decentralized control at the school site, teacher professionalism, building of community-oriented school cultures, partnerships, and the vision of schools as organic and interconnected wholes have changed the context and manner in which schools have traditionally operated. Because all of these trends include collaboration as a central theme, it is not surprising that “the ability to collaborate on both a small and large scale is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society” (Fullan, 1993, p. 14). Collaboration has become and will continue to be a significant and critical factor in the dynamics of contemporary education and school reform (O’Shea & O’Shea, 1997).

### *A Theoretical Overview of Collaboration*

One of the key criticisms of the literature on collaboration has been that it has suffered from a lack of conceptual clarity. Arriving at a definition of collaboration has been difficult because the constructs of collaboration found in the literature have tended to be “conceptually amorphous” (Little, 1990, p. 509).

Authors also have used a multiplicity of terms including collegiality, congeniality, cooperation, consultation, and collaboration to describe a variety of different activities and interactions among individuals. Although the terms often are used synonymously, Little (1987) argued that within each context, participant involvement and interaction vary dramatically in terms of intent, frequency, intensity, and effects.

As well, educators may confuse collaboration with collegiality and congeniality (Barth, 1990). In congenial environments, individuals maintain superficial harmony by refraining from articulating organizational goals, by avoiding systematic review of practices, and by staying away from

topics or situations that might create conflict. Moreover, a pervasive culture of congeniality may mitigate against building relationships in which dissident views are recognized as contributing to effective learning and problem solving. In contrast, collegiality, and collaboration as a form thereof, is not about people getting along with each other at all times. In fact, in collaboration, differences in participants' perspectives often may result in their raising challenging questions about educational practice while engaging in mutually beneficial relationships (Stewart, 1996).

### *Definitions – Key Components*

Within the plethora of terminology and definitions for collaboration, researchers have identified several key components that describe the essential nature of collaboration (Wood & Gray, 1991). Welch and Sheridan (1995) synthesized salient features from varying definitions in arriving at their own. Similarly, drawing on the work of significant authors who have studied collaboration, I outline a definition that includes the following components: common goals (Cook & Friend, 1991; Welch & Sheridan, 1995), joint work or interdependence (Gray, 1989; Little, 1990; Welch & Sheridan, 1995), parity or equality (Cook & Friend, 1991; Welch & Sheridan, 1995) and voluntary participation (Cook & Friend, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994). Each of these elements is considered separately and examined for its significance in collaboration.

*Common goals, joint work, and interdependence.* Participants in collaborative relationships hold common or mutual goals that may be beneficial to their organization, to themselves, and to each other (Cook & Friend, 1991; Welch & Sheridan, 1995; West, 1990). Moreover, the goals are negotiated and formulated by the participants themselves, rather than resulting from an external mandate. The acceptance of shared goals contributes to a sense of bonding among individuals resulting in a mutual commitment to each other to achieve the goals. Individuals having a common goal are motivated to collaborate when they believe that they require each other's contribution to be successful in their own work. Little (1990) referred to the shared responsibility to achieve the goals of teaching as joint work. When engaged in joint work, individuals are interdependent and rely on each other to reach their goals.

*Parity.* Parity or equality in relationship is another essential component of collaboration (Cook & Friend, 1991; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Welch & Sheridan, 1995; Stewart, 1996). In education collaboration may bring together people of unequal status such as superintendents, principals, teachers, and support staff. However, all participants must believe that they have a meaningful contribution to make to the collaborative and that their input is valued by others. Collaboration, then, provides educators who have traditionally been involved in hierarchical and competitive top-down structures with a means of working towards their goals in more horizontal, equitable, and interactive patterns. Lieberman and Grolnick (1997) concluded that "learning to collaborate is about sharing power, knowledge, and influence" (p. 207). In schools today there are a number of people including parents, community members, teachers, administrators, and students who demand an influence in the process of schooling. Consequently when stakeholders in education collaborate their mutual influence involves shared power and equality amongst participants.

*Collaboration is voluntary.* Individuals participate in collaboration on a free and voluntary basis (Cook & Friend, 1991). Collaborative work relations arise not from administrative constraint or

compulsion, but from the perceived value and understanding among participants that working together is productive. Hargreaves (1994) used the term contrived collegiality to describe conditions which may result when collaboration is mandated by administration. Furthermore, when collaboration is imposed on participants by individuals of higher status, the collaborative relationship then also lacks the key component of equality. Therefore, contrived collegiality results when administrators wish to control and regulate more than true collaboration might allow them to do. In the end such mandates simply recreate a new version of top-down, hierarchical organization.

The theory and research on collaboration have offered definitions of the term that have included several key components: common goals (Cook & Friend, 1991; Welch & Sheridan, 1995); joint work or interdependence (Gray, 1989; Little, 1990; Welch and Sheridan, 1995); parity (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Cook & Friend, 1991; Welch & Sheridan, 1995); and voluntary participation (Cook & Friend, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994). Although there is no agreement in the literature on a single definition for collaboration, the key components have served to develop a common language and understanding of the term. Furthermore the key components provide a filter for examining the extent to which school reform embodies collaborative principles.

#### *Scope and Purpose of the Study*

The primary purpose of this study was to present the understandings of collaboration held by parents, teachers, and administrators who had experience collaborating through their involvement in school improvement initiatives. Given that current school reform initiatives such as shared decision making require individuals to work together collaboratively, and further that collaboration has the potential to improve student learning outcomes (Little, 1982; McLaughlin, 1997; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989), the findings from the study offered a rich description of the dynamic interplay of the complex components of the collaborative process and provided a lens to make relations between collaboration and school improvement more transparent.

#### *Design/Method*

The study followed a qualitative focus group research design and used a purposive sampling technique involving 16 individuals, including an equal number of parents, teachers, assistant principals and principals. Included were 12 females and 4 males, with both genders represented in each of the roles. The gender balance in the study is consistent with the demographic representation in elementary schools. Each of the 16 individuals participated in 2 focus group interviews resulting in a total of 8 interviews for the study. The first round of four focus group interviews involved stakeholders in homogeneous groupings that segmented participants by role description. The intent of segmenting participants by role for the first interview was to ensure that participants had something to say about the topic and that they felt comfortable saying it to each other. For participants who may have entered into the study with a certain uneasiness or trepidation, participating in the first interview in the company of others who occupied the same role provided a sense of comfort and trust in the process. For their second interview, participants were grouped in a heterogeneous or cross-role representation.

Although the literature review on collaboration for this study did provide content validity in the focus group interview questions, the open-ended nature of the questions permitted the participants to describe what was meaningful and salient to them without being “pigeonholed” (Patton, 1990, p.46) into standardized categories. For example, in the first interview, the participants were asked to think back to a personal experience with collaboration and describe it. I did not provide them with any kind of universal or researcher definition of collaboration.

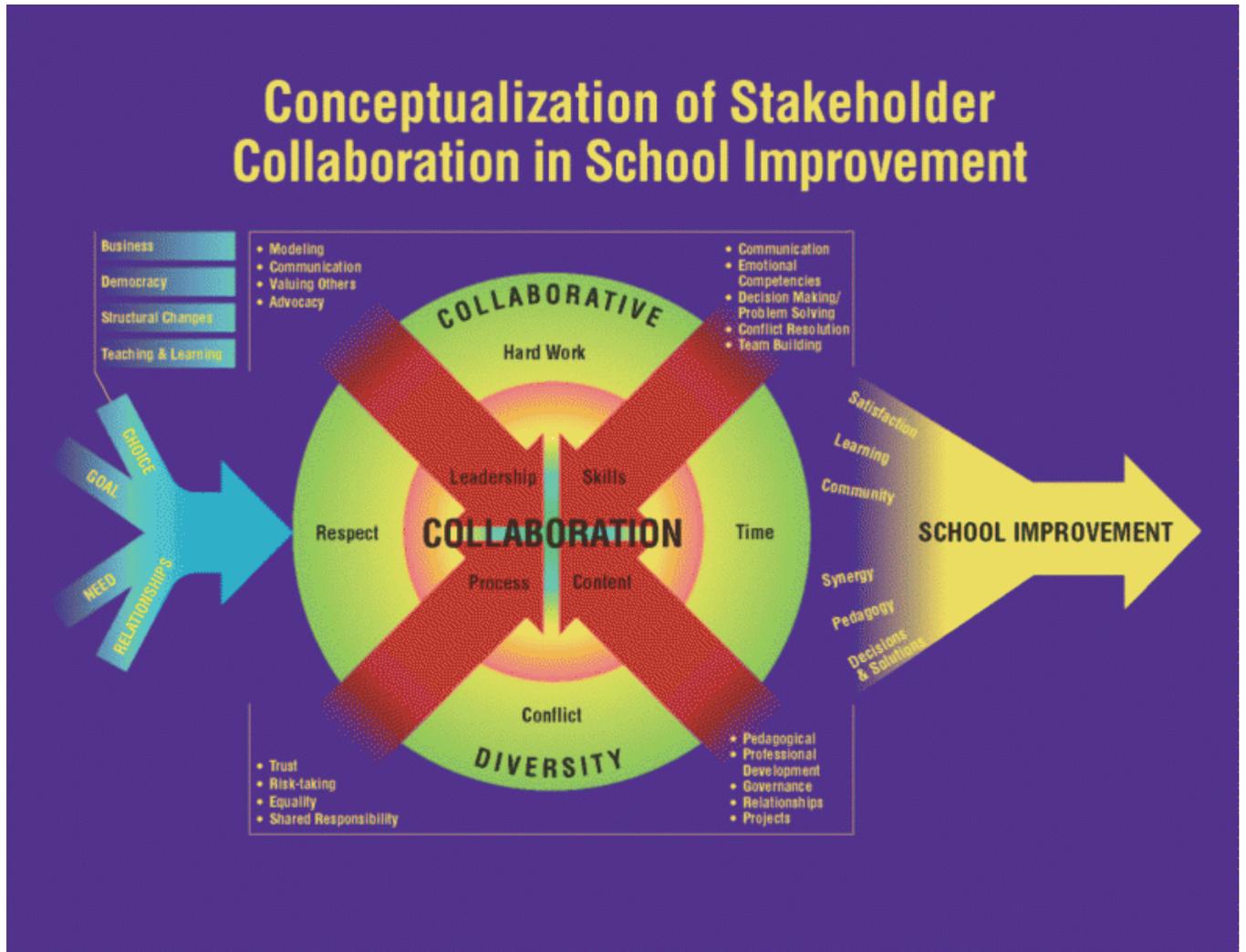
The participants were from 14 elementary schools in a large public school system in Western Canada. Ethics approval was received from the university and the employing school jurisdiction. Data were gathered from the scheduled focus group interviews and were supplemented by researcher field notes. All interviews were fully transcribed by a professional transcriber and subjected to thematic analysis.

### *Limitations of the Study*

The research was delimited to the study of elementary schools. The organization and culture of high schools differ significantly from elementary, and therefore may lead to distinctive forms of collaboration among teachers and other stakeholders at the high school level.

A limitation of focus group interviews is the possibility that participants may censor or conform what they say in responding to the interview questions. Although the moderator may be skillful and competent in facilitating group discussion, nevertheless, the presence of a group may affect what some types of participants say about the topic, as well as how they say it.

# Conceptualization of Stakeholder Collaboration in School Improvement



## *Conceptualization of Stakeholder Collaboration in School Improvement*

The above framework is a depiction of the possible character of stakeholders' experiences and understandings of collaboration as derived from the data in this study. I offer this view of collaboration and its relation to school improvement not as a set of steps to follow but rather as a story of the lived experiences of participants in this study. It is my hope that a consideration of the framework may provide ideas for reflection as others conceive and evaluate their own experiences. To this end, this paper next examines the composite nature of each aspect of the framework and considers its influence on the dynamic interplay within and between collaboration and the school improvement process.

### *Why Collaborate?*

Participants identified choice, goal, need and relationships as key factors for them to collaborate. Although personal reasons varied for engaging in collaboration, participants in this study all agreed that it is crucial that individuals participate in collaboration on a free and voluntary basis—because it is their choice. In contrast, Ken, a principal in the study coined the term

“clobberation” to describe participation that is mandated and prescribed by others. Successful collaboration related to school improvement (as measured by the outcomes of this study) was usually the result of collaboration that was voluntary while collaborative activity that was imposed by others often resulted in participants expressing feelings of frustration, betrayal, uselessness, cynicism, disappointment, pain and anger. Factors that influenced the choice to collaborate included such issues as: (a) influence from the business world, (b) democratic ways of being, (c) structural changes in organizations and families, and (d) changes in teaching and learning.

Having a common goal was instrumental in the formation of collaborative relationships. According to participants in this study, a common goal is what binds people together in their work and enables them to achieve positive outcomes. As Susan a teacher in the study explained, “I think it’s very important for everybody to know the goal and to subscribe to the goal. That goal, right at the top, that’s what we’re all working toward.” Indeed, lack of a common goal led participants to recount experiences in which another individual’s agenda resulted in “fake collaboration” and resulted in outcomes that were superficial and not authentic.

According to participants in the study, need appears to be internally grounded within the disposition of an individual and is directly related to the context in which the individual is situated. Collaboration in this case is a response to the felt need and expressed needs of the individuals in a particular situation. The idea that need is internally driven makes it very personal and context specific.

Collaboration comes out of relationships. Furthermore these relationships must be built. As principal Ken pointedly declared: “You can’t dump somebody in, whether it’s a new administrator, a teacher or whoever and expect collaboration to just happen. You have to build those relationships first. They’re the building blocks of collaboration.” Further to this, participants emphasized the importance of knowing people well in developing the trust and respect that characterizes collaborative relationships. For Jean, a teacher, knowing people means “figuring people out, finding out what they hold true and dear and what their values are and their skills, weaknesses and strengths.” A strong relationship among teachers in a school can have a significant impact and influence on conversations about school improvement (Little, 1990).

### *Dynamics of Collaboration*

Collaboration is not based on like-minded consensus. Therefore the process is characterized by these dynamics: collaborative diversity, conflict, respect, time, and hard work.

Diversity refers to different roles, gender, status, age, ability, learning style, and basically different lots in life. However what matters in collaboration as Fullan (1999) has argued is not diversity per se, but rather collaborative diversity. The comments from participants in this study such as: “looking at all the different possibilities, building on each others’ experience and strengths, and understanding the diversity of their gifts” reflect the importance of valuing different perspectives and are consistent with the thinking of Darling-Hammond (1997) who maintains that the appreciation of other perspectives provides the framework for a broader shared vision that leads to the formation of communities and societies.

Conflict is a natural dimension of the collaborative process that brings together people with different perspectives. Participants in this study felt that working through the conflict that arises when a decision doesn't go the way you want results in better decisions and enables people to live with the decision. Many of the issues, problems, goals, and needs that unite people in collaboration are highly charged topics that involve individuals at a very deep level both personally and, or, professionally. It is not surprising then, that these issues are filled with differences, tension, complexity, and conflict. However conflict often contains the seeds of breakthrough in the change process and as such is related to improvement in schooling. Accordingly, conflict resolution is an essential skill for teachers and administrators within the collaborative reform context of today's schools.

A climate of trust, respect, and openness is required to build and sustain collaboration. Through learning to trust each other a school staff is willing to take risks with their own beliefs and practice and dialogue becomes possible. The dialogue results in new insights, learning, and change for all the participants. Trust is related to the interdependent nature of collaborative relationships. In the school setting respect refers to the honoring of the expertise of others. Without trust and respect parity cannot exist between colleagues and the collaborative process may be blocked.

In summary, a successful collaboration depends on the personal interaction of the participants. Several key elements characterize the collaborative process including trust, respect, and effective interpersonal communication. Collaboration is not a quick and easy process but one that demands much of participants in terms of conflict and tension, time, energy, and new skills and understandings. The complex and contextual nature of collaboration and the influence of the above mentioned dynamics that come into play in the process have made it difficult to follow a step-by-step recipe for the implementation of collaboration. Studies such as the one referenced in this paper that provide rich descriptions of participants' collaborative experiences may lead to new understandings of the process and in turn to improved student learning.

### *Gaining the Knowledge: Learning the Skills*

The general research question that guided this study, what are the understandings, skills, and attitudes held by participants in school improvement initiatives that result in successful collaboration, resulted in my placing the data related to that question at the centre of the framework. However it should be noted that the responses to the core research question are both influenced by and have an influence on the other components of the framework. Therefore the four arrows (content, process, skills, leadership) that describe the knowledge and skills that participants identified as important to collaboration are layered over the background of collaborative diversity and its inherent dynamics which influence the data related to knowledge and skills and relate to outcomes in the school improvement process. The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies related to each of the arrows are described next.

The content of the collaborations described by participants in this study was grouped into five categories: (a) pedagogical, (b) professional development, (c) building and sustaining relationship, (d) governance, and (e) special events or projects. With relation to (a) instruction/pedagogy, the content of the work included team teaching, curriculum planning, conferencing with each other about practice, assessment of students, and sharing resources. Four

kinds of tasks were related to the achievement of (b) professional development purposes, including coaching and peer observation, mentoring, modeling, and discussion. Activities undertaken by participants to get to know people served the purpose of (c) building relationships. As well there were several activities within the context of participant collaborations that supported and sustained the relationship. Specifically in collaborating with each other, participants shared the workload, gave each other mutual encouragement and feedback, and had fun in their work together. The range of activities related to (d) governance, included school improvement planning, school organization, staffing issues and school council. The final content area related to participants' collaboration included stories of collaboration that came together for the purpose of an (f) event or project. From the parent's perspective, Margaret's story is an example of collaboration that evolved around an event or project in her child's school.

A collaboration that comes to mind first was when the whole school did a project. The school put on an operetta and there was such ownership and pride from every child because they either did the set or lighting or were part of the cast or even wrote the operetta themselves. I was helping doing set design-working with the children. The best part was you could all see the work coming together. The energy in that school was unbelievable- not only did they learn a lot about stage and music, but they learned how to work together and how to work as a community together.

The categories described above provide a framework to examine what the actual work of collaboration looks like and entails for participants.

Knowledge of and skill in the process of collaboration is essential. Trust is at the heart of the collaborative process. Although the educational literature has indicated that trust is crucial to collaboration, it has offered little evidence as to how trust might be developed. In this study, as participants discussed their personal experiences with collaboration they offered insight as to how they or other individuals in the group built trust in their particular collaboration. For example, Ken described his experience of being a principal in a new school:

When a principal comes in new to a staff and doesn't know anybody, it's very difficult at first to make that staff your own. You have to work at it. It's a very conscious effort. You have to put yourself at risk in terms of showing, walk the talk, do the things that you would expect other people to do. Be credible. People will start to buy in because they believe that you are who you represent to be.

Ken's story demonstrates that developing trust requires considerable time, shared experiences, and an appropriate degree of vulnerability. Risk taking is part of the collaborative process and is related to the level of trust in a relationship. When the situation feels comfortable because there is a high level of trust, people are willing to offer their perspectives because they don't feel that others will make judgment about them or about what they've said. As well, issues of equality and shared responsibility were identified as important components of the process. Participant views and comments related to the role and influence of power, authority, equality and responsibility in the collaborative process were extensive but their description does not fit within the scope of this paper. However, it is pertinent to include that participants agreed that sharing responsibility

either in a two person partnership or in a larger group is not easily achieved and poses many challenges.

The literature on collaboration clearly has called for participants to have a knowledge base and set of skills regarding collaboration methods (Hudson & Glomb, 1997; O'Shea & O'Shea, 1997; Roy, 1995; Welch, 1998). Using the term collaborative skills, authors have described a variety of different behaviors necessary for collaboration (Hart, 1995). Moreover, the assumption is often made that individuals who have worked in conventional or traditional ways will know how to collaborate effectively. However teachers, principals, and parents have indicated that they often feel ill-prepared for collaboration (McLaughlin, 1997; McPherson & Crowson, 1994; Weiss & Cambone, 1994). As Jean, a teacher in the study reflected on her experiences with shared decision making she explained:

The skills are learning to find your voice, learning to accept that not everyone will agree with you. You don't want to be criticized too much. You're not sure when someone is going to clamp down on you. You've got to learn to feel very comfortable – it takes a long time.

Restructuring plans have not fostered the learning of new attitudes and skills that are fundamental to shared decision making and other school improvement initiatives. As a result, when individuals lack the essential skill, collaboration may not take place.

The skills identified for collaboration in this study include: (a) communication skills, (b) emotional competencies, (c) decision making and problem solving skills, (d) conflict management and, (e) teambuilding. As well, within each category participants described a particular skill-set that they felt was important. For example under emotional competencies, understanding others and self-awareness were deemed particularly important in collaboration.

The traditional role of the principal as sole decision maker in the school is unlikely to enact the school improvement related to collaborative reform. However, it may be a major challenge for principals to add the sophisticated skills required in shared leadership to their already demanding and complex role. One of the research questions in this study examined how the principal influences collaboration. The rich data provided in response to this question are once again beyond the scope of this paper. However leadership behaviors that were identified that supported collaboration included modeling, communication, valuing others, and advocacy. School principals need to build capacity in others to assume leadership roles by letting go of their power and control and by calling upon and accessing the expertise of others required for school improvement. In this end, Jean described how her principal supports the growth of others by valuing who they are:

She lets you be. She lets people do their thing. When she comes around you're not threatened by her, you're glad to see her. She's obviously watching what's going on, but she doesn't come to pry. But when she isn't there she trusts you. That's a nice feeling. You feel like a professional. You feel like your judgment is valued, the things you're doing are valued. If you're not comfortable you're not afraid to ask because when you ask, you don't feel like you're being judged. You're really being supported.

## *Outcomes*

The major purpose of school improvement that includes such collaborative initiatives as site-based management, school councils, shared decision making, and teacher professionalism, is the improvement of student learning (Chapman, 1990). As demonstrated in the graphic in this paper, participants in this study saw their collaborative work as leading to the achievement of personal and professional outcomes that result in or contribute to student learning and school improvement. Participants viewed school improvement as an outcome of their collaborations. Jean, a teacher summed it up well:

I can't imagine school improvement without collaboration. I don't know how you could do that if you don't all collaborate. Why would you think that one person is the keeper of the improvements? One person is not going to be the only one who knows how to improve. Let's listen to everybody's ideas and maybe we'll improve.

Adele, another teacher concurred and explained that in her experience:

A school can't improve without collaboration. That's how we come to agree on a share vision and it's how we develop a school improvement plan. So if school improvement is going to take place, then all of the players and all of the stakeholders need to buy into it. Otherwise it's sentences on a piece of paper that get sent to the superintendent. It's not lived.

Clearly, participants in this study are willing to contribute their time and energy to work together because they feel they are making a difference in the education of children.

## *Implications for Practice*

### *Teachers*

Because changing teacher practice has been identified as the most challenging goal of school improvement efforts, opening their classroom doors to collaborative work may lead teachers to increased satisfaction and professional growth especially as it relates to the enhancement of student learning. Teachers are challenged to move beyond traditional norms of egalitarianism, isolationism, and autonomy to unlock each others' leadership potential and foster its growth. Working collaboratively in the classroom and at the whole school level, with a continuing focus on student achievement, may result in valuable outcomes for the teachers involved and their students.

Teachers are advised to seek new approaches to mentoring which are rooted in social equality and evolve naturally out of personal need (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Mullen, 2000). Without the expert-novice distinction of traditional mentoring, collaboration, as a kind of co-mentoring practice, creates a safe and democratic space in which teachers become co-learners who encourage, support, and critique each other through shared inquiry into their practice.

Teacher/parent collaborations not only have positive benefits for students, but also such partnerships actually build parental support for teachers themselves. Accordingly teachers need

to open up their classrooms to parents and work openly and honestly with them as a way to build parental trust, commitment, and support for teachers and teaching.

Finally, teachers may further develop their abilities and knowledge of collaboration. A key finding in this study in terms of the acquisition of skills indicates that experiential content is at the core of learning how to collaborate. This finding suggests that teachers seek group situations early in their careers in which they are taught to collaborate effectively through the personal experience of trying to make collaboration work to address a recognized real need.

### *Principals*

The role of the principal is different in the collaborative context and there is a change in the skills, knowledge, and behaviors required for collaborative leadership. Principals need appropriate professional development opportunities to assist them in the development of the sets of key competencies identified in this paper that are needed in facilitating groups, reaching consensus, resolving conflict, and team building.

Because previous successful collaborative experiences result in satisfaction and motivation to continue to work in collaborative ways, principals and district administrators could include in their teacher recruitment and selection some strategies for identifying candidates who either have worked collaboratively in the past or appear to have the disposition and skills to work in collaborative ways.

Principals may strive to inspire a culture of teacher leadership and empowerment by acting as “hero-makers” rather than heroes (Barth, 2001, p. 448). Accordingly, principals as leaders of increasingly complex organizations not only require a new compendium of skills but also they need to adopt new “mind-sets” or “ways of being” that include coping with ambiguity, empowering others, and maintaining change momentum within an enhanced accountability context.

### *District Administration*

Central office administrators who are committed to a collaborative ethic for schools can benefit from the implications of this study by understanding that collaboration cannot be mandated or forced on schools. Because collaboration is organic in origin and formation, district administrators may support the process in schools through the leadership behaviors identified in this study that include: modeling, communication, valuing others, and advocacy.

District administrators may support interdependence among principals by making professional dialogue at principal meetings and other district sponsored events a priority. The findings of this study indicate that working collaboratively with colleagues not only has the potential to enrich the professional growth of teachers but also that principal-to-principal collaboration may strengthen and enrich administrative skills and improve practice.

The recruitment of teachers and principals who possess or who can be expected to acquire the personal characteristics and skills necessary for collaboration should be an employment priority and direction for school districts.

## *Parents*

To work collaboratively with other stakeholders in schools parents are encouraged to embrace a view that attends to all children's good, not just the good of their own children. A vision of the greater good needs to guide parental input into choices and decisions made in the school. As well, parents may view their participation in the education of their children as equal to but different from that of the educators in the school.

## *Recommendations for Further Research*

The following five recommendations are offered for further research:

1. The inclusion of students did not fit within the research design of this study. However, because student involvement in decision making is mentioned in the literature at the high school level, a focus group study at the secondary level that includes student voice could contribute further to the understanding of this topic.
2. A case study research design that uses both a purposive sampling technique to identify a school that has a collaborative culture and research questions that are similar to this study could verify whether the full set of factors associated with collaboration have been identified in this study.
3. The findings related to participants' outcomes of collaboration warrant study from a variety of perspectives. The theoretical underpinnings that guided the questions, formation, and analysis of this study were taken from the literature related to management, leadership, communication, and school reform. Other fields of literature, for example the various facets of psychology such as personality, adult development, or social psychology have the potential to provide valuable insight into the motivation, need, satisfaction, and synergy related to stakeholder participation in collaboration.
4. Studies designed to examine the relationship between collaborative school cultures and student learning are recommended.
5. Evidence from this study suggests that some individuals, despite the opportunity to work successfully with others and to acquire the skills of collaboration, prefer to work in isolation. A question that emerges from this study is not just how do we collaborate, but can we? It would be worthwhile to explore the deeper dynamics and factors that influence a person's preference for individual versus group involvement in work, particularly as it relates to teaching. Such findings could shed further light on the potential of collaboration in the school reform process.

## *Conclusion*

This paper began with a description of the trends that are influencing current initiatives in school reform. Because trends such as shared decision making are inherently collaborative in nature, I included a theoretical review of the literature on collaboration. Given this background and rationale, I then described the design of the research study that is reported in this paper. The research findings were presented as a conceptualization of collaboration which attempts both to

describe its essential components and to capture its significant, intricate, and complex interplay as a process. As such, the model provides a framework for thinking about the school improvement process that is anchored in collaboration. As well, the model provides the opportunity to examine how seemingly disparate components such as norms of collegiality, leadership behaviors, cultural diversity and trust relate to each other and to improvement in teaching and learning.

In the lived experience of collaboration recounted so vividly by participants in this study, collaboration has shown its potential to transform individuals and schools.

As evidence of this study suggests, the collaboration that underpins school improvement entails going beyond the superficial structural changes of reform initiatives. Collaboration involves people in deep and meaningful relationships based on trust and respect. It opens up leadership opportunities to more people thereby building capacity and support for change.

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