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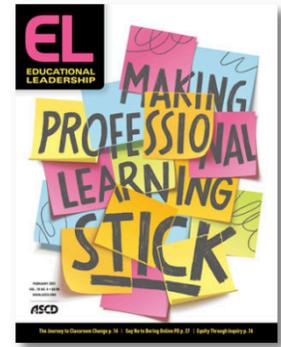
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Beyond Collaboration: The Power of Joint Work

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When professional learning is interdependent, a teacher's individual success hinges on the efforts of the entire team. Here's why that's a good thing.



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Teacher learning influences student learning and achievement. Students get better when teachers get better—and teachers get better when they come to know and understand their practice differently and thus shift their beliefs about what they and their students are able to accomplish. When the learning of teaching is done collaboratively and teachers' everyday work becomes the source for professional learning, it has a lasting effect on classroom practice.

An example of how this process unfolds comes from our experience working with a team of 2nd grade teachers in a large elementary school in Sarasota, Florida. Many of their students were having difficulty identifying patterns in mathematics; addressing that gap became the main focus of the team's "joint work" (more on this later). Although the team had been meeting weekly, they recognized their student outcomes were not improving over time, so they needed to rethink how they were working together. Thus, we helped them to engage in a lesson study process. By deconstructing the mathematics standards and co-creating lessons, the teachers were able to draw upon each other's knowledge and expertise. By observing the delivery of those lessons and resulting student outcomes (misconceptions and eureka moments), the teachers were able to gain a greater understanding of what students were experiencing. By debriefing as a team, finally, the teachers were able to refine their teaching strategies and make improvements to their individual practice.

As a result, their students' understanding increased and the team realized measurable improvements in academic achievement. The teachers' sense of efficacy and their expectations about what their students were capable of accomplishing increased as well. A first-year teacher noted, "When I saw what the others

had their students doing, in my head, I thought 'my kids can't do that.' But through our work, I have realized otherwise." This is the type of learning experience all teachers deserve; the challenge is making it happen.

Characteristics of High-Quality Professional Learning

Over the past four decades, education experts have agreed on the characteristics of high-quality professional development: It involves collaboration, is conducted in context, and allows for experimentation and feedback. In her seminal article, "The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers' Professional Relations," Little (1990) noted that collaboration is a powerful way to change teaching practice when it involves joint work, including critical inquiry, sustained scrutiny of practice, analysis, and debate in search of improvement. Darling-Hammond (1998) pointed out that an optimum setting for teacher learning would provide opportunities for inquiry, where teachers try, test, talk about, and evaluate the results of learning and teaching. Lieberman and Miller (2004) advocated for opportunities for teachers to learn through their own problems of practice and Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) noted that we must understand "that professional learning 'in context' is the only learning that changes classroom practice" (p. 25). And finally, Hattie (2009) asserted that a powerful way to learn is "when teachers meet to discuss, evaluate, and plan their teaching in light of the feedback evidence" (p. 239).

From Independence to *Interdependence*

So, the research is clear: Collaboration is required. The challenge for leaders is to figure out how to operationalize what we know into rich collaborative learning environments. This demands more than a superficial notion of how to work together. It demands what has been characterized as *joint work*. Joint work, according to Little (1990), goes beyond storytelling, aiding, and assisting or sharing ideas, methods, and opinions. It is characterized by teachers' collective action and a level of *interdependence* where individual success is contingent upon the efforts of the entire team. This sophisticated level of interdependence doesn't happen by chance. Leaders must intentionally foster joint work.

To understand what interdependence might look like in a school, we can consider two types. *Goal interdependence* guides the degree to which efforts are interdependent based on the type of goal leaders encourage teachers to set. Goals can be individual in nature (e.g., to improve my use of questioning and wait time in my classroom) or shared by all team members (e.g., all 2nd grade students will be able to identify, describe, extend, and create repeating patterns, growing patterns, and shrinking patterns by the end of the first quarter). The latter goal example implies more shared responsibility and anticipates collective action. Everyone's contributions and efforts are needed to achieve interdependent goals. When teams have a specific, interdependent goal, they are more likely to persist and less likely to give up

easily. In addition, when teams recognize that their current actions are not helping them progress toward their interdependent goals, they devise better strategies to get them there.

The second type of interdependence, *task interdependence*, refers to how interconnected teachers are based on the tasks they engage in while working collaboratively. Some tasks require very little interdependence. For example, event planning. When planning for events like a community math night, teachers usually take on individual roles and assignments. One teacher might create a community invitation, another gathers math manipulatives, and another orders snacks and beverages. While coordinated efforts are important in this example and help to ensure greater efficiency, interdependence is reduced when teachers approach tasks with the intent to "divide and conquer."

Tasks requiring a high degree of interdependence, on the other hand, help to strengthen collective efficacy. Let's return to the example from the 2nd grade team of teachers in Sarasota. They collaborated to design, deliver, and debrief lessons to address their problem of practice of helping students become more proficient in identifying math patterns. In doing so, they drew on each other's experiences and expertise, pooling ideas, methods, and materials. They examined their practices publicly, and they gained new knowledge and skills through trial and error, feedback, and reflection based on evidence. They engaged in joint decision making on matters of teaching, learning, and assessing.

Getting to goal and task interdependence requires more than assigning teachers to teams, identifying times for collaboration, and using a series of predetermined questions as the focal point of conversations. To achieve greater interdependence, learning designs must allow teams to pose relevant questions, hypothesize answers, and use evidence to support or show fallibility of claims. The hallmark of learning is the ability to synthesize new information, compare it to existing understanding, and then act on the information and reasoning even when it challenges pre-existing beliefs. Multiple opportunities to examine the impact of instructional practices, question their efficiency and effectiveness, and discuss implications are required.

This sophisticated level of interdependence calls upon leaders to understand the complexity of the system they are working in and then thoughtfully and deliberately organize learning so that connections can be formed.

Creating the Conditions for Joint Work

Creating the conditions for this level of interdependence necessitates heavy doses of the following practices by school leaders:

1. *Actively engage in team processes.* One of the surest ways to create the conditions to support interdependence is to observe teams in action. For the same reason a maestro listens to the different sections of the orchestra, school leaders need to participate in team meetings. The business of teaching and learning unfolds during educator collaboration, and leaders need the context of this rich work to lead effectively and to ensure that it is progressing toward joint work. We aren't advocating for principals to

take over these meetings, but the principal (and assistant principals) must recognize their leadership role as key to interdependence. Their job is to support teachers (by clarifying, posing questions, and listening) as they work to improve their practice, while also learning alongside teachers about what is making a difference for students.

2. *Foster open-to-learning conversations.* According to Robinson (2014), "open to learning conversations" are those that uncover the viewpoints of individuals rather than making assumptions about individuals' beliefs or motivations. Open-to-learning conversations are characterized by listening and asking probing questions designed to help understand the underlying theory of action of those involved in the discussion. These conversations allow individuals to uncover the differences in theories in order to identify a common path forward. Asking open-ended questions such as, Why do you think this approach would be the most successful? or What are your thoughts on what we have been discussing? help to uncover differing points of view so common ground can be established. Returning to the 2nd grade team of teachers from Sarasota, while engaging in joint work, they constantly asked the question, Why should we adjust our teaching approach in this manner? This helped them discover their different points of view and led to better solutions about how to move forward based on new shared understandings. This type of conversation is critical to task interdependence because it doesn't bypass differing views; rather, it engages individuals to develop actions based on mutually agreed upon understandings.

3. *Engage teams in interdependent goal setting.* Clear and focused goals for improving student outcomes are as essential to educators as blueprints are to architects. Imagine building a house and having workers—plumbers, carpenters, electricians—show up and do whatever they want to do. This sounds crazy because it is. And yet this is what we force teachers to do when they work in schools without well-articulated and enacted goals. Interdependent goal setting is a process of deciding and setting goals together through observing, listening, and prioritizing student learning needs.

In our work with the Sarasota teachers, the team's interdependent goal was that "all 2nd grade students will be able to identify, describe, extend, and create repeating patterns, growing patterns, and shrinking patterns by the end of the first quarter." Principals can support teams in setting interdependent goals by establishing a sense of purpose for the work, engaging teams in analyzing data on the learning progress of all students, and encouraging teams to reflect on what they are trying to achieve with students and how they are trying for that goal. Principals can encourage teams to assume responsibility for achieving interdependent goals.

4. *Coordinate the use of student evidence.* The real work students do day-to-day serves as the vehicle for achieving interdependence. This type of data provides ongoing information in real time. Student evidence includes writing samples, reading responses, exit slips, open-ended math problems, and problem-solving

tasks—any artifact that makes student learning visible. In addition to specific artifacts of student learning, evidence also includes information gathered through observations and conversations.

The team in Sarasota gathered information about student learning by observing students (in their own and each other's classrooms) and engaging in conversations with them about where they were in relation to the learning intention and success criteria and their next steps. The questions teachers asked students included: What are you learning today? What excites you about what you are learning today? How do you know you are on track? and What are your next steps? This information is pivotal to helping teachers answer the question, Is learning taking place? Student evidence is the best formative data available to teachers and leaders; without this information, joint work falls flat.

5. *Focus on outcomes.* Creating tight interdependencies requires a laser-like focus on student outcomes. Linking the work of collaborative teams to student results, both large and small, helps teachers see their direct impact, upping the value they place on this work. It also allows teachers to adjust practices in real time, increasing the likelihood of continued mastery and vicarious experiences.

Creating this focus requires clarity around learning: what students need to learn (learning intentions) and, equally important, how students and teachers will know learning has happened (success criteria). This, however, isn't enough. Teams (and formal leaders) need time to reflect on outcomes in a manner that allows them to identify what their role was in achieving these results and what they will do in the future to sustain results. Giving teachers time to identify what they did differently and how their actions contributed to positive outcomes helps them see their place in the process. When leaders help teachers view outcomes from the perspective of a growth mindset, it helps to enhance collective efficacy.

This effort-based feedback might sound like, "Our hard work and collaborative efforts paid off. Look at the progress our students have made." Once teachers realize that it was their combined efforts that produced the improvements in student outcomes, the motivation to continue engaging in joint work becomes strengthened.

The Difference Maker

The shift to joint work doesn't happen overnight. As evidenced in the example from the 2nd grade team, it takes task and goal interdependence, open-to-learning conversations around student work, and a focus on outcomes. According to Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), "No profession can serve people effectively if its members do not share and exchange knowledge about their expertise or about the clients, patients, or students they have in common" (p. 3). We would add that effectiveness also requires deep levels of interdependence. Tending to the goals and tasks teams engage in is the difference maker. The promise of collaboration—improved student outcomes—can be realized when we turn our attention to joint work.