

Why Collaborative Inquiry Teams?

The National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) supports teams of educators in collaborative, inquiry-based professional learning. Effective collaborative inquiry teams build sustainable capacity in schools by giving teachers skills, structures, and support systems to continually learn from and refine their shared practice. Both empirical research and international comparisons tell us that investments in this kind of adult learning lead to powerful changes in student learning. Research also provides clear evidence about the specific characteristics that make collaborative inquiry teams effective. NCLE's portfolio of supports for collaborative inquiry teams will be closely guided by a framework derived from this research. This document briefly summarizes literature on the impact of teacher collaboration on student learning and the specific characteristics that make teams effective.

The links between teacher collaborative inquiry, school change, and student achievement

U.S. classroom teachers practice their craft in isolation, compared both to how other professionals function and to the working conditions of teachers in other developed nations. The 2009 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher finds that U.S. teachers spend an average of 93% of their official workday in isolation from their colleagues. Compared to other nations that outperform the United States on international assessments, American teachers spend much more time teaching students and have significantly less time to plan and learn together (National Council of Teachers of English, 2011; National Council on Staff Development, 2009). The U.S. is particularly far behind in providing public school teachers with the kind of high-intensity, job-embedded collaborative learning that research shows is most effective in changing practice and improving learning.

A 2010 report by the international consulting firm McKinsey and Co. identifies characteristics of school systems around the world that have demonstrated consistent improvement. One trait that all of the systems studied have in common is that teachers share and work on their practice together, "becoming learners of their own teaching." Similarly, scholar Michael Fullan (2010) identifies "collective capacity" built through planned collaboration as the "hidden resource" that U.S. school systems have neglected to cultivate. And in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (2011), Carrie Leana reports on research linking the "social capital" that educators produce through collaboration to gains in student achievement, going so far as to call social capital "the missing link in school reform." Other studies showing links between professional collaboration and student achievement include Louis & Marks (1998), Goddard et al. (2007), Bryk et al. (1999, 2010), and Odden & Archibald (2009).

HOW does collaborative inquiry improve student achievement?

NCLE and its stakeholders are investing not in the broad concept of “teacher collaboration,” which has reached such buzzword status in the profession as to become almost meaningless, but in the kind of focused, purposeful shared inquiry shown in the literature to have clear links to student learning. To understand how best to support effective collaborative inquiry, it is important to be clear on how it works—what are the specific mechanisms that allow teacher inquiry to improve student achievement?

Scholars of the topic emphasize the notion of collaboration that builds collective capacity. Stoll et al. (2006) define capacity as “a complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support,” concluding from their extensive review of the literature that a focus on building collective capacity within schools is critical for sustainable improvement in student learning. Fullan (2011: p. 72) explains that collective capacity works for two reasons: “One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still—working together generates commitment.”

Similarly, Seashore et al. (2003) specify that “By using the term professional learning community, we signify our interest not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student learning.” Rick DuFour, whose name has become almost synonymous with the concept of “professional learning community,” cautions that putting teachers in a room together is far from enough (2011). Badly applied and/or poorly supported, he warns, collaboration can devolve into gripe sessions, excuse-making, or simply an innocuous activity in which “getting along can be a greater priority than getting results.” To pay off in achievement gains, he argues, professional collaboration must be embedded in the routine practice of the school, must focus on common questions that make a difference for student learning, and must be grounded in the rigorous examination of sound information about student learning.

From our review of the literature on collaborative inquiry that makes a difference for student learning, we have derived a framework of conditions and practices that support effective collaboration, summarized by the following six domains:

- (1) Taking shared ownership for professional practice
- (2) Using evidence effectively
- (3) Creating collaborative culture
- (4) Maintaining an inquiry stance
- (5) Developing and acting on shared purpose
- (6) Supporting collaboration systemically

This framework will guide the investments and support services offered by NCLE to make collaborative inquiry teams as effective as possible. The rest of this document will briefly review the literature supporting each of the domains in the framework as an essential element of effective teams.

(1) Taking shared ownership for professional practice

The recent large-scale international review *Building a High-Quality Teaching Profession: Lessons from Around the World* conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that sustainable systemwide transformation requires teacher ownership: “In moving beyond consultation to involvement, the reform process becomes oriented towards transforming schools into learning organizations, with teachers in the lead” (2011, p. 52). In a learning organization, professionals recognize an obligation to learn from and improve their joint practice (Hord, 2003; Senge, 1990). Michael Fullan uses the term “intelligent accountability” to define an approach to change through positive incentives, investments in capacity building, and transparent data about practice and results (2011, pp. 66-70), all of which tap teachers’ intrinsic motivation to serve their students well. Members of effective collaborative inquiry teams are accountable to each other and to their shared commitment to improving student learning. They make commitments to try new things and to share the results of their experimentation with their colleagues. Making and being accountable to such commitments is part of being a professional, as DuFour (2011) notes, citing examples from medicine, law, aviation, and engineering which define professional accountability as working in a coordinated way to uphold the standards of the profession and meet the needs of its clients.

A large element of professional accountability, and perhaps the most challenging one to enact for a profession historically practiced out of view of other adults, is the deprivatization of practice. In the most concrete terms, deprivatization of practice means that informal classroom observations and debriefs with peers are the norm and that multiple forms of data are widely shared and discussed. NCTE (2011b) defines deprivatization as “making visible tacit knowledge,” therefore increasing the shared store of learned wisdom from practice available to all members of the community.

The review of literature by Cordingley et al. (2003) found that collaborative continuing professional development that includes observation, feedback, and an emphasis on peer support rather than leadership by supervisors has positive impacts on students, including improved motivation and performance. One of the largest empirical studies to demonstrate the impact of such practices on student learning was the massive seven-year study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research and summarized in the 2010 book *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Among the “framework of essential supports” identified in the schools with the largest student achievement gains was “professional community,” defined specifically as “a continuous improvement process within a school [which] requires teachers to relinquish some of the privacy of their individual classrooms to engage in critical dialogue with one another as they identify common problems and consider possible solutions” (p. 55).

(2) Using evidence effectively

Effective collaborative teams ground their inquiry cycles in evidence of how their practice is impacting student learning. Some of the factors that determine whether teams use evidence effectively depend on supports provided by the larger system: timely and accessible data, training in how to use data effectively, and systemwide routines for data use (Copland, 2003). Other success factors depend on how the

team makes use of whatever data and analytical skills the group has to work with. A broad definition of what counts as evidence of student learning, leading to the inclusion of diverse sources, makes it more likely that group inquiry will get to the root of student learning problems (Wayman et al., 2006; Herman & Gribbons, 2001; Huffman & Kalnin, 2003). Close analysis of specific pieces of student work is particularly crucial in developing and applying shared standards for student success.

(3) Creating collaborative culture

Developing a culture that balances safety with rigor is crucial to the success of collaborative inquiry teams. Leana's study (2011) is one of many to highlight the importance of trust among colleagues in allowing them to take risks, learn from mistakes, and be willing to do so semi-publicly, so that other group members can benefit. Bryk et al. (1997) deem social trust "by far the strongest facilitator of professional community," elaborating on the mechanisms by which it operates: "When teachers trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization." With trust as a foundation, collaborative groups are able to develop another normative stance identified by the Chicago research as critical: an orientation toward innovation and acceptance of shared professional responsibility to experiment with practices that will improve student learning (Bryk et al., 2010, pp. 55, 73).

(4) Maintaining an inquiry stance

Two sets of factors regarding the nature of the team's shared inquiry stand out in the literature on what makes such teams effective: the *content* of the inquiry (WHAT they are collaborating about) and the *process* by which they pursue their inquiry (HOW they collaborate). For impact on student learning, it is crucial that teams are focused on what DuFour (2011) calls "the right work," that is, work that directly addresses improving "our professional practice and the learning of our students." In a similar vein, the recent NCTE policy brief on Communities of Practice recommends that teams collaborate around "recurring problems of practice concerned with student learning" that are connected to larger schoolwide concerns. In terms of effective collaborative inquiry processes, many of the findings about teachers as "action researchers" translate to the group context. Effective action research has been variously characterized as a cycle or spiral in which action and formal inquiry inform each other through an iterative process (Costello, 2011). Mitchell and Sackney (2000) define effective teacher collaborative learning as "active deconstruction of knowledge through reflection and analysis . . . reconstruction through action in a particular context . . . [and] co-construction through collaborative learning with peers." Note that this definition does not stop with the analysis—the learning happens by continuing the cycle with testing the knowledge in practice, and reflecting on evidence from that experience with peers.

(5) Developing and acting on shared purpose

DuFour's definition of "the right work" for collaborative inquiry that makes a difference in student learning focuses closely on shared goals for student learning. From agreements about essential student outcomes come agreements about how best to assess them. From data about student progress come the

development of shared pedagogical resources and strategies. A study in the Netherlands (Visscher & Witziers, 2004) looking at the connection between departmental professional community and secondary math scores emphasized that collaboration alone was insufficient to impact teaching practice and thus student achievement. Departments that achieved impact, they report, “consistently translate their shared vision and willingness to cooperate into a system of rules, agreements, and goals regarding teaching and instruction, and evolve their professional activities around this by obtaining data on student performance.” They go on to contrast these lived agreements with the less effective “‘softer’ approach stressing reflective dialogue, sharing materials, [and] shared vision” (p. 798). Thus, effective collaborative inquiry teams achieve one of the holy grails of the last few decades of education reform: coherence. Whereas much of the reform literature stresses coherence through the alignment of top-down systems, collaborative inquiry teams build coherence from the classroom up.

(6) Supporting collaboration systemically

To be effective in the long run, collaborative inquiry teams need formal support from the system in which they work. The most important form of support is dedicated meeting time, protected from other demands, and, crucially, embedded in the regular working day (Louis et al., 1994; Stoll et al., 2003). International comparisons conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond et al. for the National Council on Staff Development and by McKinsey and Co. highlight the paucity of professional collaboration time in U.S. schools and provide a wide range of models for rethinking the use of time in schools. Dedicated time, however, is necessary but not sufficient for collaborative teams to have an impact on student learning. Empirical studies by Gallimore et al. (2009) and Emerling (2009) as well as the review of the literature by Cordingley et al. show that the impact of collaborative inquiry teams on teacher practice and student learning is increased by training in models of collaboration, protocols to support reflective dialogue, and demonstrated leadership support. Powerful forms of leadership support for effective teacher collaboration cited in the literature include protecting time and resources, promoting and rewarding the learning that emerges from collaborative groups, and making it not only safe but expected for teachers to experiment with their practice and act on their learning (see Stoll et al., 2003, pp. 235-241).

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