

Collaborative Research: Working With, Not Working On . . .

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Regardless of the context, team deliberation has been shown to produce knowledge and self-learning for teachers, provide powerful professional development, and encourage greater collegial interaction.

In the late 1940s, Stephen Corey wrote about how Teachers College professors worked with school districts to help them improve various school practices. The range of problems was broad: sometimes it was how to run a better faculty meeting, sometimes how to be a better leader. Corey and his colleagues had been influenced by Lewin's early work at Michigan, in which he dealt with the importance of group work in both educating and helping solve social problems (Corey 1953, Lewin 1948). Some of Corey's interests were shaped by his belief that self-learning was a powerful concept and that through problem solving, college people could help teachers better conceptualize their problems.

The influence of this early work has continued, although it is undervalued in the university because of an elitist view that values the problems and descriptions of researchers over those of practitioners. However, the recent rise of interest in qualitative methodologies has brought increasing attention to viewing schools as complex organizations and teaching as a complex activity. A "working with posture

rather than a working on" (Ward and Tikunoff 1982) has become the cornerstone of a variety of collaborations with teachers and principals to produce research knowledge and professional development as a combined strategy.

Interactive Research and Development on Teaching

In 1976 Tikunoff, Ward, and Griffin began a study of two teams consisting of four teachers, a researcher, and a staff developer. One team was located in an urban area and one in a rural area. Their study yielded six features important in interactive research.

1. The team minimally includes a teacher, a researcher, and a staff developer.

2. Decisions regarding research questions, data collection, and materials development are collaborative.

3. Problems emerge from the team's mutual concerns and inquiries and, above all, attend to teachers' definitions of their problems.

4. The team attends to both research and development concerns, giving attention from the beginning to both knowledge production and use.

5. The research and development effort attends to the complexity of the classroom and maintains its integrity.

6. The research and development is recognized and used as an intervention (a professional development strategy), while rigorous—as well as useful—research and development are carried out.



Although both teams were not completely successful in producing both rigorous and useful research and development, important learnings about collaboration and teaching emerged, and some difficult questions were raised. What does the researcher need to know in order to be involved in collaborative research? How does one break down the continuing problem of communication between researcher and teacher? What teaching problems are researchable? Can different people assume the role of researcher on a collaborative team? Should there be some prerequisite conditions in a school or district before collaboration is possible?

Learnings from "Doing Research"

The team of urban teachers in the Tikunoff study, in framing their research question, responded to a district mandate to increase student time-on-task. The team's research focused on the disruptions that prevented teachers from providing more time-on-task and on coping techniques to deal with them. The details of the team's work are printed elsewhere (see Tikunoff et al. 1979). For our purposes, the significance of the study lies in the kind of question that teachers asked (one that is sensitive to their problems in the classroom) and, in this case, what learning resulted from both the process and the products of the team's deliberation.

Initially the team members were

convinced that outside disruptions were keeping them from doing a better job. The principal and others were constantly using the loudspeaker, parents interrupted the classroom, and students were pulled out, disrupting the flow of work. In short, the teachers' expectations were framed by the teacher folklore adage, "If only they would let us teach...."

The results of their research revealed, however, that there were several categories of disruption—teacher, student, outside, and physical. The most surprising finding was that most of the disruptions came from *within the classroom*. These categories of disruption (see Tikunoff et al. 1979) revealed important distinctions about disruptions and the flow of instruction (see Harrison 1982 for additional research on disruptions). The teachers discovered, too, that they differed in how they coped with disruptions. Some of the coping skills were held in common; others were not. Some of the teachers had a wide array of coping techniques; others had few.

The teachers in this team learned what no professional development workshop could have taught them—that classroom disruptions were primarily *inside* the classroom, that some were caused by the teachers themselves, that some are amenable to change, that some cannot be avoided, and that classroom disruptions are more complex than they had thought. They also learned that some teachers had a limited repertoire of coping

strategies and that they could expand their techniques by learning from their peers and by intervening in their own classrooms. Stephen Corey would have loved this team. There was a tremendous amount of self-learning.

Through working with a researcher and a staff developer, these teachers engaged in "doing research" that concerned them and in "doing development" on their own behalf. Eventually they taught the process to other teachers in the district. Teachers learned to collect information, interpret it, and weigh competing interpretations of the practical problem they started with. Both the process of doing research and the products that resulted provided important learnings for all team members.

Interactive Research and Development on Schooling

Building on the Tikunoff study and many of the questions it raised, Griffin, Lieberman, and Noto (1982) organized three teams in the New York area to conduct interactive research and development on schooling. We wanted to extend the possibility that there might be school problems as well as teacher problems that a team could work on. In addition, we had a hunch that there were other people who could play the roles of researcher and staff developer. But we also wanted to be convinced that such a strategy could work in different contexts and still produce knowledge and provide for professional development.

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We had successes and failures, improved on previous studies in some ways, made new mistakes, and raised new questions. We added new lore to previous studies when we found that:

1. Different people can play the role of researcher and staff developer (e.g., graduate student, administrator, consultant), but well-meaning administrators have difficulty sustaining a long-term interest because of their competing agendas.

2. Collaborative research can indeed be accomplished in a variety of contexts.

3. Regardless of the context, collaborative research can provide professional development.

4. All kinds of issues and problems appear to be of interest and concern for collaborative research; in the case of these three teams: curricular concerns (How do students learn to write?), instructional concerns (What programs are most helpful in dealing with disruptive students?), and larger professional concerns (What are the factors that enable some teachers to maintain positive attitudes about their jobs?).

5. Collaborative research carried out in a district using district personnel appears to have a greater chance of being institutionalized than other contexts studied to date.

6. Context appears to play a major role in the types of questions teachers raise for study in collaborative teams.

Because we were working in three different contexts (a school district, an intermediate agency, and a teacher center consortium), and because our geographic area was more circumscribed than in the Tikunoff study, we were able to closely observe the dynamics. We asked new questions like: What does a team need (and in what forms) to keep it going over the rough times? How much time is "enough time" to do collaborative research? What role do money and less tangible rewards play in the collaborative process for teachers? What accounts for the differing commitments and contributions of the members of the team? What mechanisms can be found to negotiate differences in the norms of colleges and universities and those of schools? (Are well-meaning, open people enough?) What kind of documents are needed to keep the team on-task and maintain adequate records of accomplishments? How can the status differences between researchers and teachers be broken down so that each group can use what they know and achieve mutual respect? What kinds of knowledge, skills, and abilities does the researcher need to work most effectively on a collaborative team?

One team in this study—a group of five teacher specialists, a graduate student who was also a staff developer, and a university professor who was a researcher—was of special interest. The specialists (teachers who ran teacher centers in a large metropolis) responded strongly to the press and other public claims that teachers were burned out. In their work they saw many teachers who were working hard, achieving results, and feeling positive about their teaching. But "burnout," they feared, was such a negative phenomenon that recovery and renewal were almost impossible. Thus, their research question became: What factors enable some teachers to maintain positive attitudes about their jobs? They felt this was researchable and would provide good strategies for

helping others to maintain positive attitudes. They learned that four sub-themes were mentioned in about 60 percent of the interviews with positive teachers. Teachers maintained their positive attitudes by having:

- freedom to be creative and innovative,

- the capacity to influence students,

- opportunities for feedback, recognition, and support from adults, and

- opportunities to share with peers.

More specifically, they learned that the major factors that kept teachers positive were *students* (enjoyment of interacting and influencing them); *adults* (reinforcement, recognition, and respect from administrators, teachers, and staff); *personal characteristics* (pride in being a teacher and viewing teaching as a challenge); *curriculum* (freedom and resources to experiment and be creative); and *setting* (a match between teachers' values and demands of the particular school and grade placement). (See Teachers Center Team 1982.) In order to provide for development of others, these positive teachers interviewed other positive teachers. The old and the new interviewees, along with the original team members, then met to code, sort, interpret, and discuss the information. Eleven schools planned agendas to help increase positive attitudes in their school.

Learnings about Teaching, Teachers, and Collaboration

In the initial discussions, this team experienced outstanding brainstorming sessions in which the team members examined why they thought some teachers, in spite of difficult working conditions, still appeared to have a strong sense of control. Discussions about power and control led to other theories about whether these teachers had personality traits different from other teachers who were more easily discouraged. Initially the team sorted the teachers into three groups:

- teachers who feel powerful and take control, regardless of the situation,

- teachers who might take more control under certain conditions, and

- teachers who have no interest in taking control.

Their speculations led them to identify certain conditions that might lead to differences among teachers, such as

The Benefits of Teacher Collaboration Teams for Research and Development

- Collaborative research and development creates a structure for teachers that facilitates reflection and action on the messiness of teaching and schooling problems.
- The team unites teachers and encourages collegial interaction. It has the potential for encouraging greater professional talk and action related to teaching, learning, and school problems.
- Both the process of group interaction and the content of what is learned narrows the gap between "doing research" and "implementing research findings." The research question and the collection of evidence runs concurrently with plans for development of other teachers.
- Naturally occurring problems that teachers have in their schools may lend themselves better to this type of research and development than large-scale funded research, as it can respect the time lines of the school people rather than the research grant.
- A collaborative team provides possibilities for teachers to assume new roles and exhibit leadership. Feelings of powerlessness can be transformed into a greater sense of empowerment.
- Collaborative research legitimates teachers' practical understanding and their definition of problems for both research and professional development.

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leadership of the principal, class assignments, existence of support groups, availability of supplies, and the physical plant. In examining the literature, they found few studies that offered positive or long-range strategies to help professionals regain their commitment to teaching. Along the way the three groups were dropped because the team found they didn't hold up. Teachers also learned that positive factors could not be solely related to personality, that other factors could account for their positiveness. The slogan for the team became the three Rs for teachers—Recognition, Reinforcement, and Respect—a slogan that could be realized through professional development.

An Alternative to Burnout

By focusing on positive attitudes rather than on stress and burnout, this team opened up a new approach to the study of teachers. Both the interviews with other teachers and the interactive process provided rich data. The findings supported previous research indicating the primacy of rewards teachers gain from students, but they also produced a new area for research—the effect of adults on teachers' positive views of themselves and their attitude toward their work. The three Rs need further work. What needs to happen in a school to pro-

vide for these norms for teachers? Are these findings generalizable to other settings? What other factors help teachers remain positive about their work despite difficult circumstances? What teacher-initiated strategies for professional development work? What kinds of conditions are needed to sustain collaborative work?

The Interactive Process

This team's experiences illustrated once again that the research and development process not only can produce knowledge, but can provide for professional development as well. This team, in interviewing other positive teachers, felt positive about doing research and found their interactions with other positive teachers to be professionally uplifting. The confidence the team members felt in being "researchers" and the faith they bestowed on "positive teachers," who in turn became "researchers" and interviewed a second set of teachers in their school, spread the norm of the three Rs.

The process the team used was an interesting one. Initially all team members felt knowledgeable about teachers and professional development. The teacher specialists, in particular, felt that most research from the university was of little use to teachers. But they were unaware of the time and skills such research required even when the teachers themselves created the questions. In addition, the specialists initially were impatient with the process of data analysis and uncomfortable—sometimes defensive—about their lack of research knowledge. (This was so even though the researcher and the developer showed patience and sensitivity to them). In addition, issues of parity brought conflict to the team. These issues were exacerbated since the researcher and the developer were getting paid and the specialists were not. This conflict ran deep, but it did not take away the tremendous desire of the team members to finish their study. In the end, the interactive process included all the team members working on every part of the study. In spite of the conflict, they developed pride in their work as researchers and as contributors to the continuing professional development of teachers.

Local Problem Solving: An Extension of Interactive R&D

One might get the idea that large-scale, heavily funded research is the only way to conduct collaborative research. But many examples show that this is not so.

In a project reported by Huling-Austin (1981), Texas Tech University organized interactive teams involving local teachers, researchers from the College of Education faculty, and staff developers from the Texas Tech University Teacher Corps project. Six teams participated in collaborative research. The experimental group demonstrated greater changes in both the concerns about the use of research findings and practices as well as more skills in research-teaching and development than did the control group.

In another study (Lieberman and Miller 1984), an assistant superintendent of a Midwest high school decided to do something about teachers' constant complaints that they were not backed up by administrators. They felt that administrators weren't tough enough or consistent and never really listened to teachers' complaints. In fact, teachers had been told for a long time to stop whining and improve their instruction. The administrator formed a group and initiated interactive research and development.

This collaborative process yielded a method for reflection and action. The teachers' definition of the problem was respected for the first time. A structure for cooperation was formed: the team. Evidence was collected: students cut class before school and after lunch and roamed the halls before most classes. Together the teachers formed a strategy: to be present in the halls and gently encourage the students to go to their classes. Everyone in the school was involved: students printed a story about the team in the school newspaper; administrators and teachers worked together. Teachers received the kind of attention from administrators they had been asking for. Students received unexpected attention from teachers. And high expectations for attendance were built collectively.

Again, the content of their deliberations and the process they used unlocked a sense of authority that teachers felt had long been eroding. But more than that, teachers felt support from the administration rather than

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blame. They built a sense of collegiality among themselves. Both the process of team deliberation and the content of their work produced organizational change in one of the biggest problems in high schools today.

The Power of Collaboration

We are learning that collaborative research has great potential for producing knowledge when teachers define the problems of their work. Their definitions are rooted in the complexities of practice. They may arise from curriculum problems, instructional problems, or the social problems of schools in a complex society. We are also learning that participation in the process as a member of a collaborative research team is a powerful means for teachers to establish greater collegial relations with other teachers. □

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