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Bridging The Communication And Collaboration Gap: A Project On Improving School Culture And Student Achievement

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BRIDGING THE COMMUNICATION AND

COLLABORATION GAP: A PROJECT ON

IMPROVING SCHOOL CULTURE AND STUDENT

ACHIEVEMENT

by

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

With the numerous concerns around education in the current social and political atmosphere, I think it is important to keep one idea in consideration - we all want the same thing for our children and future. We all want an education for our posterity that allows them equal freedoms and privileges to achieve whatever their hopes and dreams are. The looming issue is that we just cannot all agree on how to get there. Individuals who have historically been excluded from accessing quality education have now been included and provided (arguably) the same resources and accesses that previously had been denied them. At the heart of education are the teachers who genuinely care for the social, emotional, and intellectual well-being of all students. We have come a long way from the exclusive practices that once haunted the educational institution. Who or what do we have to thank for this? I would argue that the collaborative efforts of general and special educators (as well as all other staff and stakeholders) are directly related to student achievement and the breaking of barriers. I hope to show that we have, indeed, come very far; yet, there is still much to do in the areas of collaboration and communication between general and special educators and its correlative relationship to student achievement.

Personal Importance

As a high school special education teacher, I have the privilege to be able to work with teachers from a variety of grade levels and content areas. I also have the benefit of being able to increase my own knowledge of subjects that I had long forgotten. Even though tenth grade came and went, I still review with my students what the parts and functions are in an animal cell and

how to calculate volume of a cone and even why Genghis Khan was able to conquer such a vast empire. I truly feel privileged to be able to continue to expand my own knowledge and also see how different strategies teachers use in their classrooms have truly changed the lives of the students with whom I work. Although no two teachers do (or, arguably, should) teach the same, the results of their strategies and interventions are apparent in each student they work with in their classrooms.

I have grown to appreciate that each teacher has a unique style to teaching and, although not any one teacher is the best match for all students, each teacher is some child's favorite teacher. Every teacher has at least one student who views them as their favorite teacher - they connect with them, teach to their style, accommodate to their needs, include their interests into their teaching, and more. Education has come far from where it was decades ago; teaching subjects as if they were in a vacuum, exclusively taught within that setting without generalization or connections to other content areas (Neiman, n.d.). Change comes over time and education is no different.

A Focus on Communication and Collaboration

Although many components play into the evolution of education, collaboration and communication has become the locus of change for education (Alber, 2014). The frameworks that are most often used for evaluating teachers key in on collaboration and communication as integral parts of skills valued in teaching (ASCD, 2014). The expectation of collaboration and communication are also not exclusive to the teacher, but is also expected of the student. Students are expected to work in groups, derive solutions to problems, explain their learning, develop plans for projects and effectively work with their peers (AACTE, 2010).

One common issue I have seen over the years is a division between the worlds of special and general education. I have heard, "General educators just don't get it" and "Special educators make too many excuses for their kids." There are times, under great duress and, most importantly, miscommunication and misinformation, that cause educators to lay blame and create gaps between one another. The fact remains - we all want the same thing. We all truly want productive and empathetic human beings to graduate from our school and contribute to our communities. It is my belief that much of the blame and division comes from miscommunication and misinformation. In fact, not all teaching programs are created equal and this creates the foundation for what many teachers believe the other should "already know" or assumes their prior learning or knowledge (Brownell, Ross, Colon & Mccallum, 2005). There are many aspects of special education that are not a part of the general education program, which, given a clearer communication system and framework for collaboration, many divisions and gaps could be bridged.

So, now what?

The question remains: how can we expect students to be future ready learners and develop these skills unless we demonstrate them ourselves? In discussing the work environment with many teachers, along with lack of promotional opportunities and working conditions, communication (or lack of) is often at the top of the list as a main source of stress for teachers (Cooper & Travers, 1996, p. 2). Many teachers often chose to stay or leave their current position based on how well they get along with their colleagues and administrators. In essence, why teachers chose to stay or leave is also related to school culture. Therefore, the importance of collaboration and communication in relation to teacher retention should not go unnoticed.

Furthermore, how teachers interact has a direct impact on student achievement (Garvey, 2012; Killion 2015; Schmalzried & Harvey, 2015; Volkert, 2008). This manifests itself in many ways including: collaborative efforts among staff to provide interventions for students currently identified with special needs as well as students at-risk, communication that accurately explains the roles and responsibilities of staff (general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, IEP team members, etc.), a common understanding of special education terms and policies, and collaborative efforts to best serve all students in order to increase student achievement.

How teachers communicate and collaborate does, indeed, impact student learning, but to what ends? It would be imprudent to think that teaching can be done exclusively in four walls of a classroom, with a single teacher, and a specific set of materials - a vacuum.This is not a novel idea, yet, many teachers continue to work in their realm of what they know. It is true: change is difficult. However, if our ultimate goal is to ensure that all children succeed, we cannot possibly do this alone. How students progress through the course of their education is a direct reflection of the efforts of the staff and all of those that surround them. Those schools that struggle with retaining teachers tend to struggle with student success. In other words, "Simply put, the student achievement gap is largely explained by an effective teaching gap" (Barnett et al., 2009, p. 1).

Project Question(s)

This paper attempts to describe what the literature states about communication and collaboration by defining them and discussing what "meaningful" means in relationship to this, implement a communication and collaboration plan within a high school setting, and evaluate the results and information gathered from the communication. The question that is addressed in this

paper includes: *How do communication and collaboration improve student achievement and school culture?* First, communication and collaboration need to be defined and it should be addressed as to what the most effective (and convenient) form of communication is for a large scale high school among teachers. After all, change is hard.

As previously stated, I firmly believe that we all truly want the same thing for our children and those who will eventually grow up to be the contributing citizens of our community and country. Even if we do not all agree how to achieve this goal, one aspect of education has shown to be a driving catalyst for change in our schools that has led to student achievement and improving school culture - communication and collaboration among staff. In the following chapters, I plan to show what research has stated regarding best forms of communication in a large scale school, scholarly research that shows evidence as to how communication and collaboration is directly linked to student achievement, how they are directly related to school culture, and, finally, implement a project within my own building to determine what aspects of collaboration are currently successful and how I can continue to impact my school through a common communication system.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The means and methods of collaboration and communication have shifted drastically with the advent of technology. Additionally, the sizes of schools has expanded. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 1940's, approximately 66% of all students aged 5-19 were enrolled in schools (1993, p. 6, Fig. 1). With the increase in the population of the United States and an overall increase in students attending (now closer to 90%), how staff in schools communicate with students, parents and other staff has also shifted (NCES, 1993, p. 6, Fig. 1). As populations have increased, school enrollments have ballooned. With the size of schools increasing, the need for consistent and meaningful collaboration and communication has never been more dire.

As a special education teacher, I can share that much of my time has revolved around trying to connect with the teachers whom my students have and collaborating with them in the most productive way possible in order to support our students. This can become difficult in a large building where there are so many teachers, some do not even have a classroom to call their own and who travel to different rooms throughout the day. Often times, face-to-face meeting is not even the most effective form of communicating because more time is spent trying to find the person when an email can be faster and sometimes more "to the point." Of all the reasons why and how general education teachers and special education teachers need to collaborate and communicate, one fact remains: we need to for the sake of student achievement and school culture.

The research question focused on in this paper is: *How do communication and collaboration improve student achievement and school culture?* The following literature analyzes the benefits of collaboration and the varying methods of collaboration and communication (both over time as well as effective and ineffective forms). Within this, the subtopic of collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers is studied. This section discusses how collaboration has typically been seen as a difficult thing to accomplish in large scale schools. I discuss the problems that come along with the requirements of states for teacher collaboration and pressure put on teachers for communication, then I focus on how collaboration can be done in large scale schools, focusing on the districts and schools and describing what is working for them. Within this section includes sub-themes such as the expectations embedded within the collaboration model, what constitutes meaningful collaboration, the definitions of both collaboration and communication, establishing a common understanding of the value of collaboration (and why this is necessary in high-quality collaboration), and the parameters that surround effective collaboration. Additionally, I explain what research states are the necessary components involved in meaningful collaboration and communication and try to specifically analyze this in the context as seen between special and general education teachers. Also, researched are varying forms of communication within a school and what effective forms of communication look like. Different mediums and modes are assessed and applied to various settings (specifically, education). Some literature stems from a business or corporate model aspect but are then applied to the field of education. Finally, the benefits of collaboration and communication in relation to student achievement (both for general and special education students) and school culture will be analyzed.

Collaboration

Collaboration in schools come in many forms. In Minnesota, school districts are now required to provide time for teachers to collaborate in order to make progress toward student achievement (Minnesota Statute 122A.413 & 414). The way in which most schools have gone about implementing this is organizing time for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or Learning Teams (LTs) to meet during the school day and/or providing a benefit of some kind (ie: stipend, come in later on certain days to balance time spent, etc.) if their collaboration time extends past their contract hours. However, schools are generally given free reign in how they wish to implement this, as long as they abide by the general statute requirements per Minnesota Statutes. Districts and individual schools have a variety of needs and how collaboration can be implemented in their schools needs to be differentiated based on a plethora of factors including number of teachers, student population, number of teaching departments, training needed/provided and/or time restraints or restrictions due to other obligations or innovative programs. As suggested by Glazier, Boyd, Bell Hughes, Able, and Mallous, "collaboration comes in different shapes and sizes, leading to radically different ends" (2007, p. 3). Therefore, teacher expectations will often vary depending on the school or district model. However, a fundamental expectation remains that teacher meant fully participate in collaboration.

In the area of collaboration, "[t]eachers find that the size of the social world the school represents has grown faster, and exceeds their capacity to form relationships" but this does not mean that we have to be limited to this in our experiences in teaching in large scale schools (Siskin, 1994, p. 1). As stated previously, school populations are not shrinking and education has evolved as an effect. With so many technological innovations, a multitude of forms for

collaboration (and communication) have been fostered. However, an understanding of how collaboration is defined is necessary for participants. Oftentimes, the definition itself must initially be clear and ineffective collaboration may sometimes come down to an ill-defined notion.

Collaboration defined. Before examining the benefits and expectations of effective collaboration, collaboration itself must be defined. Even though the literature regarding collaboration spans across disciplines, there remains a lack of coherence across disciplines and a many theoretical perspectives impact the definitions, meanings, and understandings of what collaboration means, how it should look, and how its effectiveness should be evaluated (Miller, Perry, & Thomson, p. 1, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, the definitions of collaboration will be confined to those typically used in the field of teaching. Although the definition continues to be wide even when confining to one field, two definitions combined can sum it up: "a process in which two or more individuals work together to integrate information in order to enhance student learning" (Monteil-Overall, 2005, p. 1) and Roschelle and Teasely defined collaboration as "a coordinated, synchronous activity, that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem" (1995, p. 70). Evidently, the individual words around collaboration may be interpreted in many ways but the big picture remains - collaboration includes a meaningful exchange of information from at least one individual to another for the purpose of problem solving or ameliorating a situation, and, in teaching, for the desired result of enhancing student learning. How individual districts take this will certainly vary, but many forms have been successful, as seen from the data. A common understanding, at least within a school building or school district is important for the collaboration to be meaningful and accepted by the

educators who are expected to be essential participants in it. In order to collaborators to achieve the ultimate goal of enhancing student achievement, a common understanding of the definition and expectations must initially be clear.

Meaningful collaboration. Meaningful collaboration only extends by the results of the stakeholders involved and for that individual's purpose of the collaboration. For example, if a principal develops a new collaborative committee around implementing academic vocabulary in all classrooms (cross-curricularly) and expects to see this vocabulary throughout the school, that principal may deem the collaboration effective if they observe teachers in their classroom teaching or using the vocabulary. However, if an English teacher in the collaboration committee wanted to be a part of the committee in order to get to make connections with teachers from other departments that they may otherwise not have had the chance to get to know, they might deem the collaboration effective or meaningful only if they succeeded in making those connections. This leads to one main ingredient of meaningful collaboration - clear expectations. Without a clear set of expectations, the purpose of collaboration is lost and the meaning can dissipate (Brownell, Ross, Colon & Mccallum, 2005).

In addition to clear expectations, meaningful collaboration requires that "groups need to create common understandings about their goals, the meaning of activities and concepts, and communication practices" (Haythornthwaite, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, in addition to clear expectations, a common understanding of what is being collaborated on and what is expected in regards to communication between participants also needs to be clear. Finally, Kelchtermans stated that "in order to properly value collaboration and collegiality, one has to be explicit about both the form and the content of collaboration/collegiality" (2006, p. 224). This reinforces the

concept that purpose and format must be clear to all individuals involved in order for a

meaningful product (material or non-material) to result from collaboration. Lastly, trust in

meaningful collaboration is key because without trust and rapport, there is no point in

collaborative efforts. Essentially, "if no trust exists among collaborators, the collaborative effort

has about as much chance of succeeding as a garden without any sunlight" (Mattesich &

Monsey, 1992, p. 36). Collaboration is a critical component in effective work between

colleagues, especially in regards to establishing a positive school culture and increasing student

achievement. Simultaneously, an understanding of communication and effective forms must also

be evident to all participants in order for the former to effectively work.

Communication

The following section will look into how collaboration can be supported through clear

forms of communication. There are many different ways to communicate with colleagues in a

large scale school and this will look at what the research says are best practice forms of

communication, how they can be implemented, what teachers need in their communications and,

more specifically, the importance of communication between general and special education

teachers.

Communication defined. Communication can be defined as "the channels used by

collaborative partners to send and receive information, keep one another informed, and convey

opinions to influence the group's actions" (Mattesich & Monsey, 1992, p. 26). Although

communication and collaboration appear to be similar, one could argue that communication is

the vehicle that drives collaboration, and collaboration produces the end result. Communication

comes in a variety of forms - from the verbal to nonverbal. Additionally, communication can

come in written format, verbal format, and even symbolically. The impact of how colleagues communicate with each has a direct effective on the culture of the organization or environment that they work in.

Factors for effective communication. Although each individual has a unique way of communicating with one another, some practices have been researched as being the most effective. According to Mattessich and Monsey (1992), first, communication must be frequent and open and, secondly, communication links must be established both formally and informally (p. 13). Communication should come in both formal and informal forms with scheduled sessions and meetings but also impromptu meetings or connections (phone calls, drop ins, emails, etc.) as needed. Therefore, communication can come in many forms, but it is most effective if it is frequent, open, and can be both formal and informal.

As any professional in education knows, student needs or issues are not often "planned". Special education teachers are often helping students with self-awareness and self-management needs and this typically includes self-monitoring their grades, work that needs to be due, and planning for long-term projects or assessments in their classes (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002, p. 59). Weiss and Lloyd also suggested that special education teachers frequently help their students work with their general education teachers to complete missing work, plan for when to complete their work, discuss how to modify or accommodate assignments and assessments and more (2002). These are issues that are quite infrequently planned and having an established open form of communication between all staff is necessary for the welfare of the students. Additionally, because student issues cannot be planned, many different lines of communication need to be open. The easiest, fastest and most professional form in today's day is via email.

Forms of communication in a large-scale school. For the purpose of this paper, large scale refers to a school where, in which one building, there are more than 200 staff and 2,000 students on any given day. Given the sheer size of such a school, different forms of communication may be more or less beneficial than others. The impact of technology on education cannot go unnoticed particularly when the sizes of schools have been expanding and there are more online schools than ever before. In fact, nearly 27% of all high school students in the United States and 21% of all middle school students were enrolled in an online course in 2010 (Nagel, 2010). As suggested by Haythornthwaite, even in a digital world, "collaboration is possible and successful with a combination of attention to social and technical facilitation, appropriate rewards, active facilitation by instructors, with enough space left for students to create their own collaborative behaviors and communities of practice" (2006, p. 19). With the wide range of technological applications to communicate with others (including email, social media and instant messaging systems), many teachers are implementing communication tools in their classrooms, and, sometimes, communicating with colleagues goes neglected. Imagine a communication system in a school where a reward system was in place, teachers had the time and space to collaborate, and the tools were readily available. There really ought to be no argument against such a structured model, especially when, in 2009, at least 97% of all teachers had at least one computer in their classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010, p. 3).

In regards to the keys of principal communication, Lunenburg (2010) argued that the "one constant in the life of a principal is a lot of interruptions" (p. 3) and that individual communication "has to be done one on one - one phone call to one person at a time, one parent at

a time, one teacher at a time, one student at a time; and a principal needs to make time for these conversations" (p. 3). Even though this statement is directed toward the key components of effective principal communication, the same applies to any staff in a school (and, arguably, anyone whose job is to work in a social setting).

Communication among staff within a school is considered internal communication which Rabinowitz (2016) defined as:

communication within an organization…[which] encompasses both 'official' communication -- memos, guidelines, policies and procedures, etc. -- and the unofficial communication that goes on among and between the staff members of all organizations -- the exchange of ideas and opinions, the development of personal relationships, and the proverbial conversation around the water cooler.

The question remains: What is the best form of communication in a large-scale school? This question is not easily answered as "best" will vary based on the individual, setting, and perspective of those involved. The "best" forms of communication will need to vary based on the needs at the time. What teachers must do is be open and receptive to accommodating their form of communication to the demands of the situation.

Some forms of communication in a school setting include face-to-face, via phone, via email, text message, social media and hand-written (usually delivered to the teacher or put in their mailbox). In some schools where overcrowding is an issue, a phone call is not always feasible and neither is visiting a teacher in person as some teachers need to travel in overcrowded buildings - from classroom to classroom throughout the school day - and are not always easily accessible in the moment. It is an expectation of all teachers that they communicate with

administrators, students, parents and other staff. If this expectation is set, and a principal's primary form of communicating with their staff is via email, it is therefore expected of staff to communicate using the same modus operandi. Email and technological communications are even recommended for teachers in order to improve their teaching practice and improve student learning as it is related to connecting with students on their interests, helps prepare students for a digital world, and guides students to improving their communication skills (including "code switching from professional to personal means of communicating) (Bloch, 2002; O'Rourke, 2007). In other words, using email or other technological forms of communicating is not only helpful for teachers to make connections with other teachers in a large-scale school but is also shown that implementing in practice is beneficial for improving student achievement.

Communication between general education and special education. One of the many roles and responsibilities shared by both general education teachers and special education teachers alike is to effectively communicate with fellow colleagues on behalf of all students. Most schools across the nation have co-taught classes offered in their schools. A co-taught classroom can be defined as "the sharing of instruction by a general education teacher and a special education teacher or another specialist in a general education class that includes students with disabilities" (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010, p. 1). In order to effectively share instruction, a certain level of communication and collaboration must be necessary.

Additionally, for the benefit of all students, not solely working on student needs for those who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or for implementing student accommodations, both the general education and special education teachers need to communicate effectively.

Furthermore, since special education teachers are considered experts in their field of learning acquisition, and general education teachers are seen as experts in their content areas, it only makes sense for each to elaborate on their strengths and bring this necessary skill sets together for the sake of students (Murawski & Hughes, 2009, p. 270; Ripley, n.d.). It is clear that both general education teachers and special education teachers are experts in their given fields and their expertise must be cultivated harmoniously for the benefit of all students.

The most communicative teacher teams produce the most preferable effects in regards to student achievement and for the amelioration of teacher-to-teacher relationships. Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Shamberger (2010) found that teacher teams "that struggled demonstrated less collaboration, with differences in teaching styles leading to conflict instead of compromise" (pp. 16-17). Regarding communication among teachers as a whole, Kaufman and Badar (2014) stated:

Our recommendations are few and simple. We special educators should all:

Think carefully and analytically about the short-term and long-term consequences of what we or anyone else says or writes about special education. Try to say and write as clearly as possible exactly what we mean. Call out and confront those whose logic does not accommodate realities, constructed or logico-mathematical. Listen carefully to those who ask us to re-examine our thinking or our words. Show respect for those whose ideas we do not share, but rely to the greatest extent possible on logic and scientific evidence in forming our own views. Doing these things will not solve all special education's problems or address all of its issues. Nevertheless, they will help our profession and our services become better. (p. 17)

These expectations for communication should apply to all staff, not just teachers, and not exclusively special education teachers.The importance of clear communication and expectations on behalf of all teachers is crucial for student achievement and school culture. The way in which educators communicate with one another - respectful discourse combined with meaningful and clear communication - will set the framework for establishing a positive school culture and improve student achievement.

What teachers need in communication. The mode of communication is not the only important aspect of communication. What teachers also need is relevant and meaningful information that is being communicated.

The International Bureau of Education reports that teachers need further learning and understanding in many fields including assessment, motivating students, integrating knowledge and skills, and collaborative learning (Timperley, 2008). Evidently, teachers want to collaborate and communicate with others. Unfortunately, sometimes the framework for which they need to collaborate all not always conducive to the reality.

Darling-Hammond (1998) suggested that teachers need information regarding improving content knowledge, making connections cross-curricularly, and (arguably most importantly) how to collaborate. As previously suggested, not all teachers have the same training opportunities, collaboration experiences, time or resources; therefore, not all collaboration or communication can look the same in each school. Darling-Hammond (1998) also stated that establishing a "profession of teaching in which teachers have the opportunity for continual learning is the likeliest way to inspire greater achievement for children" (p. 6). The criticality of collaboration and communication and its effects on student achievement cannot be ignored. Consider why

many became teachers - to help our future generations become productive, thoughtful and empathetic citizens in our global community. If this is the end result, research states that it cannot be achieved without meaningful communication and collaboration amongst all those involved.

Effects of Collaboration and Communication and Student Achievement

This section focuses on why collaboration and communication are key to supporting staff development as well as student achievement. Specifically, I will look at what is being done in these areas and what the research says are ways to improve collaboration and communication for the benefit of students. As discussed in the research, collaboration "in general and about assessment in particular among teachers is associated with increases in their students' achievement, their performance, and their peers' students' achievement" (Killion, 2015, p. 1). In other words, collaboration is directly linked to an individual teacher's students, as well as the student achievement of the teachers with whom they collaborate.

As suggested previously, the benefits of effective communication and meaningful collaboration cannot be understated. In regards to student success, when teachers work together toward a common goal, students get that much closer to succeeding in whatever their goals may be (whether they are academic, behavioral, social/emotional or even physiologically related) (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco & Pelsue 2008; Nguyen, 2012; Wasburn-Moses & Frager, 2009; Weiss, & Lloyd, 2002). When both general and special education teachers work together, "students remain active members of the classroom and do not lose instructional time in transition; there is greater consistency in academic and behavioral expectations by the co-teachers who work together regularly" (Murawski & Hughes, 2009, p. 274). Furthermore, Moolenaar, Sleegers and

Daly (2012) presented that "recent studies have indicated that dense teacher networks around work related advice support an innovative school climate, in which people are willing to take risks to collectively improve educational instruction" (pp. 252-253). This implies that the effects of collaboration are limited to a direct link to student achievement, but also impact the school environment as a whole.

In addition to the benefits of meaningful collaboration and communication that drive student achievement, collaboration and communication also greatly impact the effectiveness of staff in the workplace. As suggested by Rabinowitz (2017):

> Good internal communication can: provide people the information they need to do their jobs effectively, make sure they know about anything that concerns them, provide people with clear standards and expectations for their work, give people feedback on their own performance, provide them emotional support for difficult work, suggest new ideas about both their work and their lives, allow them to take the pulse of the organization and understand its overall situation, help them maintain a shared vision and a sense of ownership in the organization.

Subsequently, overall productive collaboration and effective communication directly impacts the overall culture of an organization (in this case, a school) and performance of those involved (staff, teachers, principals, and all stakeholders involved). To continue this, the effects of meaningful collaboration are not limited to an individual's classroom space. As Moolenaar et al. (2012) suggested "teachers that exchange advice on work related matters, such as the use of new teaching materials, may benefit from the skills and ability of their colleagues" and "they have the opportunity to build consensus on the use and expected benefits of the teaching material, which

will shape their future expectations" (p. 253). The effects of meaningful collaboration are not central to individual teachers exclusively but rather all of those involved in the collaborative efforts, as well as all of their students involved.

In one midwestern urban school district, researchers Goddard, Goddard and Tschannen-Moran found that "teacher collaboration was a statistically significant predictor of variability among schools in both mathematics and reading achievement" (2007, p. 889). Moreover, in Miami-Dade public schools, the results of two years of research resulted in showing that "teachers improve at greater rates when they work in schools with better collaboration quality" (Ronsfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). In Ronsfeldt, Farmer, McQueen and Grissom's study, they found that the majority of teachers favorably rated their instructional teams and felt favorably toward collaborative efforts in their teams, but they also found that school with larger enrollments had teacher who felt their collaborative efforts were more favorable toward instructional strategies rather than assisting individual students (2015, pp. 20-21). Although there are limitations to one student, this suggests, that more work should be done in large-scale schools in regards to individualizing student achievement.

Additionally, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) suggest that, "Improved student learning depends upon teacher learning; however, [they] argue that the ultimate payoff of teachers' learning opportunities depends upon teachers' opportunities and commitment to work together to improve instruction for the students in their school" (p. 3). McLaughlin and Talbert discuss that the implementation of a collaborative and communicative team of teachers can not only improve student learning, but also reduces the achievement gap whereby "students' socioeconomic status

had less effect on their achievement gains in schools with collaborative teacher communities; in other words, inequalities between students mattered less" (2006, p. 9).

Kelchtermans also argued that "collaborative actions and collegial relations constitute important working conditions for teachers and as such they influence the professional development of teachers and school" (2006, p. 221). The effects of team teaching classrooms on student achievement has also been thoroughly researched. It has been found that "students with learning disabilities in co-taught classes performed better on measures such as report card grades and attendance than students in single-teacher classes" (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010, p. 17). As stated previously, the skills of both the general and special education teacher enhance the learning of all students. Collaborative efforts on behalf of both worlds of teaching needs to be fortified in each school for the welfare of all students' achievement.

Challenges to Collaboration and Communication

As any teacher knows (and as the saying goes), best laid plans often go awry. Many times, hours are spent planning and preparing on units that are meant to challenge students, develop learning, deepen understanding, connect prior knowledge, work on student strengths and learning styles, and lead to student independence. Teachers spend much of their time planning lessons, grading papers, updating grade books and attending required meetings. For some, squeezing in an extra meeting to collaborate could mean taking time away from one of the other many responsibilities of a teacher, in effect, leading to them taking personal time to complete other res responsibilities. If proper planning and teacher input is not taken into account regarding

implementing collaboration or communication innovations, teacher "buy-in" would be lost and there would potentially be a minimal product resultant of the collaboration.

Although it would be easy to state the thesis of this paper in a mathematical formula so that a common understanding is facilitated, such as an $a + b = c$ scenario where $a =$ communication, $b =$ collaboration and $c =$ school culture and student achievement, that would be almost apocryphal. The social sciences can often be difficult to explain and education is no exception. Many factors lead to student achievement and improving school culture. Certainly, many factors (including but not limited to access to resources, teacher training, and administrative support) impact school culture and student achievement. However, for the purpose of this project, two key features - collaboration and communication - are highlighted as the factors that are most prevalent amongst all schools as shaping school culture and student achievement. Collaboration and communication are also the two key areas where any individual teacher can make a personal impact in their teaching practice for the benefit of their school and wider community.

Conclusion

As explained by Berry, Daughtrey, and Wieder (2009), "Raising the quality of teaching and boosting student achievement in high-needs schools require . . . adequate time to work with colleagues and professional development that focuses on systemic, sustained, and collective study of student work where peers critique and help each other teach more effectively" (p. 8). Connecting the dots, general and special education teachers need to consistently and meaningfully collaborate and communicate with each other. This does not simply mean to "be available" or have our office hours open. What it truly means is to self-reflect, consider the

possibility that we can learn from each other, and make crucial accommodations and modifications for the benefit of all of *our* students. What is at stake is not just student progress or success but the overall school environment. Our communication needs to be both formal and informal and our collaboration must be purpose-driven. The effects are innumerable to the students, staff, and community.

With all of this research and these evidence-based practices combined regarding what is best for staff and students for collaboration and communication, how does this look when applied to a large-scale public school? The following chapter will summarize the main research topics as they may apply to the setting and will include data regarding a project implemented in a suburban, large-scale, Midwestern public high school. The results will include mostly qualitative data as to what the effects of collaboration and communication might provide to such a setting.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Understanding the impact of collaboration and communication on school culture and student achievement cannot be done by looking at any one factor as it occurs in a vacuum. This section will discuss the importance and scope of the project, what the project aims to study, the participants (audience) and setting involved in the project, how I plan to develop meaningful communication and collaboration in my school, and analyses the reasons for using this approach to this specific research question.

Rationale

Throughout the discussion on communication and collaboration, two constants remains: communication must be clear and come in more than one form, and collaboration must be meaningful and based on trust. Indeed, other factors impact student achievement and school culture beyond communication and collaboration. However, this project attempts to evaluate the impact these two factors have specifically in the building in which I work.

As thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter, clear expectations, providing multiple forms of communication, and establishing rapport and trust are essential in meaningful collaboration and effective communication. What has been seen as an area of improvement in my school has been the rapport between special education and general education (collaboration) and a lack of common understandings regarding special education topics and issues (communication). Through these two lenses, I hope to have an impact on my school and build a foundation for improving the culture within our school and conclusively increasing student achievement.

Project Description

Volunteer participants were be asked to collaborate during specified collaboration time (a time set aside every other Wednesday) for staff to bring questions to the group regarding issues around communication and collaboration (or other topics as necessary) for the group to discuss. I periodically will send out emails (twice per month) with information regarding important topics from a website link (SMORE) to all staff. The site will include topics related specifically to special education. These may include common acronyms, tips for implementing accommodations, roles and responsibilities of different staff, and other topics brought up by staff of which they have voiced they need further communication or clarification. Upon closure of the project, I will send out a survey that analyzes the impact of the my project (including school culture, student achievement, and awareness of special education issues). This is not an analysis of research, but rather to aid in self-reflection of the impact I can make on my school community.

For purposes of self-reflection and a summary of the results of my project, I will send out a staff survey upon closure of the project. Research has shown that Likert Scales are beneficial for both the participants in the survey to answer the questions as well as the researcher to analyze the data (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011). Secondly, it has been researched that not including a "neutral" option in a Likert Scale can distort results as those who are unsure now have to essentially "pick a side", or research cannot prove or disprove that a mid-point for certainty leads results one way or another (Garland, 1991; Weems & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). For these reasons, a midpoint on the Likert will not removed and will remain a part of the survey. Midpoint results will analyzed in the data, as seen in the following chapter. Although these will

be sent out at the closure of the project, the project, in theory, will continue, as I expect to further impact my school community in improving collaboration and communication between departments.

Setting/Audience

The setting for this project is in a Midwestern metropolitan (to the Twin Cities) area public high school (9-12) consisting of 2,562 students (as of October 1, 2017) with a staff to student ratio of 23 (MDE, 2017). The school district includes a total of 8,425 students (83% White with all other races ranging 4-5%), 13% of students on Free/Reduced Lunch, 11% Special Education, 8% English Language Learners (ELL), with 901 licensed staff members in the district (MDE, 2017). The participants will include all staff members who receive the emails. The "HSStaff" wide email will be used which includes classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, administration, related service providers, and non student contact occupations. I would also like to include all of the students at the high school as secondary participants because, as a basis for this study, they would subsequently be a part of the study whereby the collaborative efforts of the staff would impact student achievement.

General and special education teachers notoriously live in "different worlds". What special educators and general educators do on a daily basis are often very different. General educators often have 100+ assignments to grade on any given day while special education teachers often have to complete paperwork that feels like 100+ assignments. The responsibilities are not necessarily more or less difficult but simply, different. In both fields (general and special education), a need for collaboration, communication and support is necessary for job satisfaction, teacher retention and improving school culture (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1993; Gersten, Keating,

Yovanoff & Harniss, 2001). This project attempts to find any gaps that may exist between the two in this specific setting and possibly make attempts to bridge those gaps. The project aims at identifying areas where general education teachers have voiced they would like more information on, need more training on, or have asked for professional development in this area, and then delivering consistent communications with general education staff (through emails/websites) and continuing to collaborate in person.

Research

In a world of evolving communication systems, the institution of education also needs to evolve in order to sustain the same growth and changes seen in a globalizing world. In a typical school day in a large-scale school, it is not always easy to even find the person you are looking for (not to mention connect with them to discuss a pressing issue). Email communications have become one of the primary lines of communication between staff in schools, but staff attitudes toward the use of technology ultimately relates to the frequency and quality of its use (Zhao & Frank, 2008, p. 809). Attitudes and self-perspectives are not easily (if at all) changed by another and the purpose of this project is not to change those perspectives, but instead to fortify a meaningful and facilitated line of communication and collaboration within a given school.

Email is used as a primary source of information for staff because "electronic mail allows for more flexible means of communication" and can be "read and responded to at the convenience of the users" (Blackerby, 2004, p. 2). The main concern with email communication is that the sender and receiver can misinterpret information and/or impose emotional meanings where the intent was not initially there (Byron, 2008, p. 309). Still, within a large scale school, considering the size of the participant count and the setting, as well as all of the unexplained time

constraints and demands on teachers that were not pronounced in this paper, email communication with a website link remains the most efficient and effective form of communication for this project.

For collaboration, a more formal approach should be taken so that the definition of meaningful collaboration is adhered to - that being meaningful refers to collaboration with clear expectations and is embedded with rapport and trust (Kelchtermans, 2006; Mattesich & Monsey, 1992). In effect, collaboration for the means of this project will be done in a face-to-face model. DuFour and Mattos (2013) suggest that the "most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning . . . [is]by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility" (p.37). Groups will meet every other Wednesday to discuss any topics, effectiveness of the emails and websites and information presented to staff as well as discuss any other pressing issues for the collaborative group. Since the group may bring up important topics, such as assessments, building initiatives, etc., it may be prudent to discuss these in our group as they may impact both special and general education students. Our building is having a major shift in administration and it would be wise to make time for our collaborative group to discuss any changes impacting our school and students. Research has shown, extensively, that collaborative work time is key for teachers. Waldron and McLeskey (2010) suggest that, in regards to research on student achievement,

> a key finding relates to the critical role of collaboration in the school change process. More specifically, the professional literature includes descriptions and analyses of school improvement experiences that address collaboration in relation to a range of education initiatives, including developing inclusive education for students with disabilities,

improving student literacy using faculty teams, and increasing student achievement

through collaborative teacher learning and professional development. (p. 59).

Teams of teachers that utilize time set aside for collaboration, can make a significant impact on

the student achievement and school culture felt within their building and district.

I will work through the summer in developing a website through SMORE where teachers

can easily click on the link via email. One teacher in the district has been using this as a means to

send information to staff regarding her work with English Learner students and cultural

awareness (Devaney, 2017). Although there is little research currently to support this specific

website, the field of online collaboration is certainly growing. He and Jeng (2016) suggest that

"online scholarly collaboration is a new form of academic activity, and both scholars and the

academic social websites are in the process of exploring the optimal mechanism" (p. 21).

I will meet with the first participant/focus group during collaboration time for first

Wednesday. Through this conversation, I will review what other information staff may want to

know more about to include in future emails or to add to the SMOREs. These meeting and

teacher surveys will be informal in nature and will help guide the project but data will not be

formally collected. Following this, I will send out the first TibBit email during the first Friday

after first Wednesday of collaboration meeting. I will continue this pattern (meeting in the

collaboration group and sending out the emails) throughout the school year. The email

communication will be brief in nature, bullet pointing the main pieces that needs to be shared

and include the link to the SMORE which will have more in depth information on the topics

presented in the email.

Although email communication, can be seen as useful and is good for a large scale school as it can often make individuals a part of a whole group (Barnes, 2012), it has been argued that meaningful collaboration should also include a specific time set aside for staff and should also be face-to-face (Cortez, Nussbaum, Woywood, & Aravena, 2008). Given these two forms of communication, I feel that the combination will lead to best results for school culture and student achievement.

Timeline

During the summer, I will be begin a series of ideas for SMORE websites in order to have a prepared a preliminary "package" of newsletters to send to staff. As our collaborative team meets through the year, I will be modifying the newsletters on an as needed basis. For example, if a teacher would like to share how an assessment went really well in their classroom, I will add a "highlighted" teacher section, exemplifying an achievement seen by a colleague. Although this does not apply to all teachers, I think that many teachers value the achievements of others and a sense of parallelism is felt when they see a colleague doing something in their classroom that works that they can easily adapt into their practice as well.

The first email communication will be sent to all staff during October. It will describe what my project is and its purpose, reiterating that it is an informative means to present information to all staff in an easy to find, quick-read, format. There are no requirements of staff to do anything with the information. In this email I will ask teachers to volunteer to be a part of the collaborative group that wants to meet face-to-face. I will collect this information and invite those volunteers to a pre-collaboration meeting (with no minimum meeting time requirements) to discuss what the group's purpose is and gather informal information from them based on what

they would like to possibly cover in the group and what they hope to gain from the collaborative time.

I will be available to meet with a teacher team or 1:1 every other week during our collaboration time on Wednesday morning. Additionally, I will offer teachers to come visit me during my prep period and a list of before and after school times, if they cannot meet during the every other Wednesday. I feel that this is necessary to acknowledge that only half of the teaching staff can be available to collaborate on any given Wednesday, given the structure of "Laker Time", whereby the other half of the staff need to be available to students. I will offer this to teachers with a reminder every other week. I will ask teachers to send emails with questions, thoughts or any feedback that they have regarding the website, information they would like added, useful of the site, relevancy of the information, highlights they would like to share, and any other input they would like to offer.

Summary

Designed to analyze the impact of collaboration and communication between special education teachers and general education teacher, this chapter included an overview of the research, the participants involved and the setting of the research, as well as the description of the project overall. The staff survey was not altered in any way between the all staff survey and the focus group survey. The following chapter looks at the results of the project, connections between the project results and literature, implications of the results and possible limitations. Finally, a thorough analysis will evaluate the possible impact of these results according to teachers' thoughts and feelings and the overall impact on student achievement and school culture and how I can make sure the project does not end here.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to attempt to begin to bridge the collaboration and communication gap seen in the school in which I currently work. Many staff feel that there is little time to collaborate and that there is, in general, an overall lack of knowledge of issues in special education. This project attempts to implement different communication techniques meant to give all teachers a similar understanding of important issues regarding special education.

The information provided to staff was given in a variety of formats including face-to-face opportunities and in written form via a SMORE link. SMORE is a website tool that was purchased by our district for both student learning purposes as well as for staff to use.

Summary of Participation

Out of 240 staff whom the email was sent to (all high school staff, including teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, supervisors, and administrators that work at some point during the day at the high school), 26 teachers participated in providing feedback via face-to-face collaboration. Additionally, 35 teachers engaged in collaboration and/or communication via email related to the SMORE link. Some of these staff had also participated in face-to-face collaboration. **DATED 10/30, revisit numbers upon completion** Within a week of each SMORE link that was sent out, 60+ staff had viewed the link. Altogether, 37 staff members participated in the collaboration and communication process associated with this project. This equates to 15% of all staff at the high school and 30% of the teacher (certified staff) population at the high school.

The first name of the SMORE newsletter is titled "Issues in Special Education". The title of the first edition was called "Acronyms in Special Education". The second edition was titled "Evaluations: What are they and how to do them!". The third edition was called, "Accommodations and Modifications". The final SMORE was titled…

Revisiting the Literature Review

The project emphasized a communication and collaboration model that offered multiple forms for staff to take advantage of. I had sent out website links (catering to those preferring technologically-based information), offered phone calls and email communication (catering to those the like or need to communicate "on the fly") and offered face-to-face communication for those that prefer that format. There is irrefutable evidence that shows that increased collaboration and communication lead to increased student achievement and improved school culture (Berry, Daughtrey, and Wieder, 2009; McLaughlin and Talbert 2006; Kelchtermans, 2006; Rabinowitz, 2017; Ronsfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015).

Furthermore, as our district moves toward implementing more Culturally Responsive Classrooms this year (as we have been starting cohorts learning from Sharroky Hollie's methods of CLR), there has been a deeper interest in learning how to engage all learners and how collaboration has much more to do with student achievement than socioeconomic status does (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006; Hollie, 2011). There is extensive research that shows how when teachers collaboratively work toward a common goal, student success is a resultant (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco & Pelsue 2008; Nguyen, 2012; Wasburn-Moses & Frager, 2009; Weiss, & Lloyd, 2002).

The various forms of communication used in this project included face-to-face and digital. As seen in the literature, both forms are important for improving communication (Bloch, 2002; O'Rourke, 2007; Rabinowitz 2016; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

Implications

The results of this project revealed a few key points. One, is that staff still need an understanding of special education issues. Some quotes from staff include phrases that began with, "I didn't know that . . .", or, "I thought that . . .", which showed that there have been misunderstandings in the past in regards to issues in special education. Additionally, I found that I had much to learn from my collaborative counterparts. From collaborating with other staff in the writing process of the SMOREs to the specific feedback I gained from all staff, I learned that I continue to have much to learn from all staff in our building.

As the results showed, staff still need ongoing professional development in the area of issues in special education. Implies that there is a lack of education and training both before employment - meaning in teacher preparation programs - as well as during the school year for ongoing teacher professional development.

Limitations

Although 30% of the teacher population took advantage of the communication and collaboration time in regards to my project, I feel that 100% of the staff needs to be aware of issues in special education. Perhaps my bias is showing. However, everyone, from the general education teachers, to the custodians, from our administrators to the nutrition services staff, all come in contact with students who are in special education.

I had my content expert review each of the SMORE links for accuracy and clarity of communicated topics. Additionally, I sent them all to my department chair and any specific people whom the topic related to (such as the Evaluation Specialists for the Evaluation SMORE) for their input prior to sending out. What I found to be invaluable was all of their feedback prior to sending out the SMORE. For the most part, I was able to weed out any grammatical errors, but their input regarding any undertones or specific pieces that they thought were important were then included. Lastly, I found great value in sharing these with my student teacher for a few reasons. First, she was a paraprofessional with us for many years. She has a certain insight into the general education teachers and their interpretation of information and their point of view that I thought was quite useful. Also, she has a very analytical mind and looks at small details. She was very thoughtful with her input and I cannot undercut her contributions in the writings of the SMORES.

All of this included, I still feel that my project was somewhat limited in the participation by general education teachers. What may have been included, was a time to set aside specifically for this project. I would have liked to meet with general education teachers or possibly just department chairs to get a better sense of what they felt they needed to know. Lastly, I had originally planned on sending out a SMORE related to responsibilities for paraprofessionals, case managers and general education teachers. However, I was told to wait on this because they are determining these issues at the district level. I do plan to send this out (or it may come from administration) in the near future. Therefore, due some only so much input from staff, I had only sent out three separate SMORE links, which was under my expected number. On the other hand,

I do not feel that I continue to be limited, and I will send out more SMORE links related to

Issues in Special Education in the future.

Future Applications

Although data collection is not required of this project, I wanted some more concrete

information from staff in my school. I wanted to gather the following information from a survey

format so that I can better know how to move forward with professional development in our

school. Teachers all over the building, from all departments, have stated that they would like

more professional development on teaching at-risk students. Moving forward, I would like to

pursue teaching a session on special education issues - which was suggested to me from my Peer

Coach. The following are survey questions I want to request from all staff:

Survey

- I feel prepared to service students on the autism spectrum.

- I feel prepared to service students with learning disabilities.

- I feel prepared to service students with emotional or behavioral disorders.

- I understand the different program that the high school offers for students with
  different abilities.

- I know what the accommodations mean for each student who I service.

- I feel apt to implement the accommodations for each student I service.

- I feel comfortable approaching the case managers of students who I service if I
  have any questions or concerns.

- I understand most of the common acronyms used in special education (ie: ASD,
  OHD, EBD, LD, IEP, etc.).

- I feel that I have been provided adequate training and/or professional development in regards to special education.

- I feel that I can effectively communicate with my colleagues via email.

- I feel that I can effectively communicate with my colleagues face-to-face.

- I enjoy receiving communication with my colleagues via email.

- I enjoy communicating with my colleagues face-to-face.

- If given the opportunities, I would prefer to have more face-to-face time to collaborate with my colleagues.

- I feel when I collaborate with my colleagues, I am a part of a positive school culture.

The questions will be given via a Google form but also presented as a document in an email for staff to print and complete if they so chose to do so. The questions will be presented on a Likert Scale with the following options:

1 - I strongly agree

2 - I somewhat agree

3 - I am unsure/neutral/neither agree nor disagree

4 - I somewhat disagree

5 - I strongly disagree

This survey, I feel will help guide me in leading professional development opportunities for (at first) my building, then, possibly the district, and even the community. I plan to take the results to the professional development committee and make a plea for (a) more collaboration time where staff are not split 50/50 and (b) more professional development on the topic of special

education and at-risk youth. The grave impact that communication and collaboration have on school culture and student achievement cannot be understated. The literature has shown that it is inarguable that they are all interconnected. However, what remains is what to do with this knowledge. How can I use this knowledge of what I learned? How can I continue to impact my school, my district and my community? These questions and more I plan to implement as I further my professional goals as I continue to fortify myself as a collaborative educator, and further my personal goals as I wish to have an impact on my school, community and all of the lives that walk through those doors each day, praying they see a smiling face and teachers that do their best to make their school a safe place.

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