

Collaborative Inquiry: The View from the District Office

This paper presents the research findings of the collaborative inquiry efforts of one school district's administrative team. The team learned and used two discussion protocols, the Collaborative Assessment Conference and Consultancy Protocol, as a way to build a more reflective, collaborative team that could deprivatize its practice, focus on issues of teaching and learning, and create a set of shared norms and values. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the paper demonstrates that the learning and use of these protocols built a more professional collaborative community and increased team learning, but did not leverage substantial organizational learning because of inattention to making the practices more normative generally.

During the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years, one suburban school district's administrative team-- the superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors, principals and assistant principals--met monthly for two hours with an outside facilitator to learn and use the protocols. The meetings were supported by a state department of education grant that promoted innovative leadership development strategies at the district level.

Perspective/theoretical framework

The burdens placed on school leaders are becoming increasingly demanding. School leaders are called on not only to be good technical managers, that is, good budget builders, efficient schedulers, effective disciplinarians and rigorous followers of bureaucratic regulations, but also instructional leaders, reflective practitioners, and builders of collaborative cultures who can forge powerful visions for their schools and lead significant organizational change (Cuban 1993; Evans, 1996; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 1993; Hoy & Miskel 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Public Agenda, 2001, 2003; Tucker & Coddling, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992, 2001). Despite the learning that these demands require-- new skills, thinking in different ways, and gaining a deeper understanding of teaching and learning -- districts provide very little support for their school leaders' professional growth or learning (Elmore & Burney, 1998; Fullan, 1993; Marsh, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1989; Tucker & Coddling, 2002).

Districts have paid significantly more attention to the learning and growth of their teachers (Fullan, 1993; Darling Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh & McLaughlin, 2002; Joyce & Showers, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). One innovative strategy designed to help teachers become more reflective, collaborative and able to think more deeply about issues of teaching and learning is the regular use of structured conversations or protocols (Allen, 1998; Blythe, Allen & Powell, 1999; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2003; Nave, 1999; Seidel, 1998). These protocols encourage teachers to expose fundamental assumptions about their practice, to work together, and to reflect deeply about their own learning and the learning of their students (Allen, 1998; Blythe et al., 1999; McDonald et al., 2003).

Two protocols, the Collaborative Assessment Conference (Allen, 1998; Blythe et al., 1999; McDonald et al., 2003; Seidel, 1998) and the Consultancy Protocol (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1996; McDonald et al., 2003) show particular promise for use with teams of administrators. This is because they have been used effectively by groups of teachers in building collaborative, reflective structures that support improvements in practice and increases in student learning (Dunne et al., 2000; Nave, 1999; Seidel, 1998)

The study is framed by theories of professional community, (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann, 1996), team learning (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993) and organizational learning (Dechant & Marsick, 1993; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Improving an administrative team's capacity for reflection and problem solving is thought to be central to developing a professional learning community. Louis and Kruse (1995) describe five elements of schoolwide professional community. They are: (1) shared norms and values, (2) a focus on student learning, (3) reflective dialogue, (4) deprivatization of practice and (5) collaboration. Further, there has been a growing emphasis in the literature on the need for "schoolwide professional cultures," (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann, 1996) "collegial schools" (Joyce & Showers 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989,) and "learning communities" (McLaughlin & Oberman, 1996). Significant research documents the connection between such professional, collaborative school cultures and student achievement. (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989) and changes in teacher practice (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Little & McLaughlin, 1993).

By reflecting collaboratively, administrative team members may develop a team learning capacity and eventually an organizational learning capacity if the team learning is shared with the organization. Senge (1990) and Watkins and Marsick (1993) note that team learning is a critical component of a learning organization, and that it is different from individual learning because it is a shared experience. Dechant and Marsick add that “what it takes for teams to learn is different in many ways from what it takes for individuals to learn” (1993, p. 3).

However, Dechant and Marsick (1993) also recognize that team learning does not guarantee organizational learning. Organizational learning is a change in practice, a change in how the organization does business or operates (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). This study looked not only for evidence of gains in team learning, but also for evidence that the team learning was translated into gains in organizational learning.

Methods

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate how the regular use of these two structured conversations by an administrative team helped the entire team and individual members of the team to: become more reflective, increase their focus on teaching and learning, work collaboratively, and promote team and organizational learning. All sessions were documented and analyzed using a content analysis approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). In addition, the study used the Team Learning Survey (Dechant & Marsick, 1993) to assess team member gains on the dimensions of team and organizational learning.

The study sample consists of 21 administrators in one district, who gave consent to have their sessions documented and analyzed, as part of the team facilitation process. The district is a suburban school district of 4,700 students in a town of 34,000 whose median income is \$18,000 (state average) (DOE statistics). There is a range of socioeconomics (13% free and reduced lunch compared to 24% statewide) in the town with one section of the town having one of the highest per capita incomes and real estate prices in the state while, on the other hand, the downtown has a significant minority population.

Data

Transcripts of the 17 sessions in which the team used the protocols, the written feedback collected from the participants after most sessions, and field notes that documented attendance, seating arrangements and non-verbal behavior were the qualitative data that the study used. The Team Learning Survey (Dechant & Marsick, 1993), which measures in a quantitative way both the team and organizational learning that happens as groups work together, was administered in June 2000 and again in June 2001. All of the members of the team responded to the survey; however, due to changes on the team, only 18 administrators were present for both administrations. The results were analyzed using t-tests for statistical comparison.

Results

First, the results showed, despite little pre-existing experience with collaborative work, that the team learned in a complex way to use the protocols to connect to issues of

teaching and learning, and focus on dilemmas of administrative practice. That is, by the fifth session, they could initiate and sustain discussion with minimal facilitation and prompting.

Second, the group developed specific skills – to be reflective; to ask clarifying and probing questions; to focus on a single topic to improve each others’ work; to share dilemmas of practice and student work; to listen to each other; to collaborate in order to generate new ideas and perspectives; and to challenge each other to reframe and rethink their leadership practice. The learning of these skills seems connected to the gains in professional community and team learning, and even to the few examples of organizational learning that happened.

Third, the particular skills that the team learned were connected to the particular protocol that the team used. Both protocols encouraged the team to be collaborative and reflective. However, with the Collaborative Assessment Conference, the team learned to connect their work to issues of teaching and learning. With the Consultancy Protocol, the team learned to deprivatize administrative practice, ask clarifying and probing questions, and challenge each others’ assumptions.

Fourth, in the same way that particular learning was connected to particular protocols, each protocol limited the learning of the team and no other mechanisms or normative practices supplemented their use. For example, the Consultancy did not support the team’s connecting their work to issues of teaching and learning, and the Collaborative Assessment Conference did little to help the team deprivatize its practice. Individual protocols, by their very design, both supported and ignored different elements of professional community.

Fifth, although this group of administrators showed evidence of gains in team learning, there was much less evidence of organizational learning. The team frequently discussed the need for using the strategies that they had learned both in other team meetings and in their own schools and departments. However, despite some efforts by individual administrators, there was little evidence that the group's gains in team learning and professional community leveraged significant organizational learning across the district.

In this case study, the district's administrative team had no preexisting experience with collaborative practice nor any understanding of the characteristics of schoolwide collaborative communities that can increase student learning. The team first had to build its own professional community, increase its capacity for team learning and only then find a way to share that learning with the entire system. The results of the study suggest that the team made significant progress towards these important and challenging goals, but the work is incomplete and powerful obstacles especially to organizational learning remain.

The obstacles to further progress are: (1) an inability of the group to come to a shared understanding of the purpose of this collaborative work, (2) the lack of a clear connection to important organizational goals, (3) the absence of strategies designed to address the lack of shared norms and values on the team, and (4) the inconsistent behavior of the superintendent with respect to the work. The role that the superintendent played in both promoting and limiting the gains that the team made was particularly significant. The superintendent initiated and encouraged this collaborative work but also

limited the team's learning by not clearly connecting the work to important district goals or helping the team share what it had learned with the district.

Educational importance

The study suggests that the use of these two collaborative inquiry protocols do indeed offer districts a way to begin to develop professional community on leadership teams, to enhance team learning and to initiate organizational learning. Importantly, this team was able to learn these protocols and showed considerable team learning over the two years that they worked together in this format. There was evidence that the team became more reflective, collaborative and able to deprivatize its practice.

However, the results revealed limits to these gains, especially in the area of organizational learning. These limits were connected to the team's lack of understanding of the goals of the work, a critical lack of shared norms and values on the team, the power of the isolated, managerial culture in which administrators work, the behavior of the superintendent and the nature of the two protocols that the team used.

The significant educational implications of the study are two fold. First, the study suggests that these protocols can be a useful starting point in the work of building professional community on school leadership teams, enhancing team learning and ultimately creating organizational learning. Second, the effectiveness of these tools will be increased to the degree that their use is connected clearly to important organizational goals, is clearly supported by the superintendent and takes into account the fragmented, isolated and primarily managerial cultures in which school leaders work.

References

- Allen, David, ed. (1998) Assessing student learning: From grading to understanding. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Annenberg Institute for School Reform (1996). "The Consultancy Protocol." Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
- Blythe, T., Allen, D. and Powell, B. (1999). Looking together at student work. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cuban, L. (1993). How teachers taught: Constancy and change in American classrooms: 1890-1990. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Darling-Hammond, L. and G. Sykes, eds. (1999). Teaching as the learning profession. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Dechant, K. and Marsick, V. (1993). Team learning survey. King of Prussia, PA: Organization and Development, Inc.
- Dunne, F., Nave, B. & Lewis, A. (2000) "Critical Friends Groups: Helping Teachers Improve Student Learning." Phi Delta Kappa Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research. December 2000, No. 28.
- DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement. Bloomington, Indiana: National Educational Service.
- Evans, R. (1996). The human side of school change: Reform, resistance, and the real-life problems of innovation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Elmore, R. F. (2000) Building a new structure for school leadership. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute.
- Elmore, R. F., & D. Burney. (1999). "Investing in Teacher Learning." In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (eds.), Teaching as the learning profession. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. .
- Fullan, M.G. (1993). The new meaning of educational change. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Hightower, A., Knapp, M., Marsh, J., & McLaughlin, M. (2002). School districts and instructional renewal. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hoy, W. & Miskel, C.(2001). Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (1995). "Learning experiences in staff development." The Developer. May, 1995.
- Little, J. W., and McLaughlin, M.W., eds. (1993). Teachers' work: Individuals, colleagues, and contexts. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Louis, K. & Kruse, S. (1995). Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Marsh, J. (2002) "How Districts Relate to States, Schools, and Communities: A Review of Emerging Literature" in Hightower, A., Knapp, M., Marsh, J. & McLaughlin, M. (eds.)(2002) School districts and instructional renewal. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McDonald, J., Mohr, N., Dichter, A. & McDonald, E. (2003). The power of protocols: An educator's guide to better practice. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McLaughlin, M. & Oberman eds. (1996). Teacher learning: New policies, new practices. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J. (2001). Professional communities and the work of high school teaching. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J. (2002). "Reforming Districts" in Hightower, A., Knapp, M., Marsh, J. & McLaughlin, M. (eds.)(2002) School districts and instructional renewal. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis. Thousand Oak CA: Sage Publications.
- Nave, B. (1999). "Critical Friends Groups: An Evaluative Study." Providence RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
- Newmann, F. (1996). Authentic achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Newmann, F. & Wehlage, G. (1995). Successful school restructuring. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, 1995.

Public Agenda. (2001). Trying to stay ahead of the game: Superintendents and principals talk about school leadership. New York: Public Agenda

Public Agenda. (2003) Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools. New York: Public Agenda

Rosenholtz, S. (1989). Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools. New York: Teachers College Press.

Seidel, S. (1998). "Learning from Looking." In N. Lyons (ed.), With portfolio in hand: Validating the new teacher professionalism. New York: Teachers College Press.

Senge, P. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization. New York: Doubleday.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992). "Reflections on administrative theory and practice in schools." Educational Administration Quarterly 28, no. 3: 304-313

Sergiovanni, T. J (2001) The principalship: A reflective practice perspective. Newton: Allyn & Bacon.

Tucker, M. & Coddling, J. (2002). The principal challenge: Leading and managing schools in an era of accountability. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Watkins, K. and Marsick, V. (1993). Sculpting the learning organization: Lessons in the art and science of systemic change. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

