What Does a "Good" Teaching Team Look Like in a Middle School Classroom?

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Observations of teams have been made during 3 years of ongoing experiences in several local middle school settings. These observations have occurred in the course of teaching middle school classes as a participant-observer, conducting a single case study of a state P-12 school that established a middle school program (Main, 2003), and undertaking a major study in progress of four teaching teams in three middle schools. These observations have provided a basis for reflecting on the current practice environment for middle school teaching teams. Using teaching teams in middle schooling has been justified in terms of benefits for teacher collegiality, student learning, and creation of a flexible environment. That is, teaming allows the creation of a larger working space and more adaptable working time, which then enables teachers to incorporate virtually any teaching or learning method with any combination of students at any time during the normal timetabled sessions of a school day. However, this flexibility raises questions not only about "what", "how", and "when" to team-teach but also about how teachers manage the process of forming and developing as a team. What does a "good" teaching team look like?

Introduction
In 2000, the Carnegie Corporation (Jackson & Davis, 2000) proposed a theoretical framework for middle schools that outlined seven recommendations to improve the educational experience for students in the middle years. One of the integral recommendations in this report was the introduction of small learning communities. In Australian schools introducing a middle years program, these small learning communities have been implemented as teaching teams. For the most part, teachers currently working in middle schools have obtained their professional training in either a traditional primary or high school setting. Observations of teaching teams in Queensland schools have highlighted the difficulties faced by teachers attempting to work collaboratively in teaching teams.

What is a teaching team?
Working in small teaching teams has been characterised as a non-negotiable feature of middle schooling practice. The rationale underpinning teaching teams in middle schools is that it creates small learning communities of teachers and students. Team teaching involves two or more teachers working together with the same group of students. A working definition of a teaching team is that two or more teachers combine their talents, expertise, interests, and resources to take joint responsibility for any or all aspects of teaching the same cohort of students. A range of benefits has been expected when
teachers work together (Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Sandholtz, 2000). It has been argued that teaming reduces teacher isolation, increase sense of collegiality with colleagues, increases sharing of ideas and resources, and capitalises on each other's strengths. Reported benefits for student of teachers working together have included improved academic achievement and improved attitudes towards school and learning (Erb, 1997).

Teaming activities may include all or any of six features: (a) sharing of physical space; (b) planning curriculum; (c) collaboratively teaching, either as a whole class or with each teacher taking different combinations of students across the classes for specific lessons; (d) establishing common rules across classes; (e) sharing of resources; and (f) collaboratively planning and administering assessment tasks (Northern Nevada Writing Project Teacher-Researcher Group, 1996). This joint responsibility can create a positive interdependence between the members of a teaching team in which each member of the team has specific responsibilities in relation to the planning, teaching, or assessing of the class(es). This interdependence recognises that combining one's own expertise with that of others can result in better outcomes for students (Thousand & Villa, 1990).

In the complex profession of teaching, however, any intervention to reform the system must accept that changes in complicated systems will require close scrutiny of the process and outcomes (Main & Bryer, 2005). Interference in a system without a clear model of the operations of that system can be not only constructive but also destructive. Gump (1980) reported that reform of any interdependent ecological units of schooling often caused unintended consequences in other units: Some students and teachers did not prosper in the reformed teaching and learning environment. Therefore, any school reform being established should undergo careful evaluation and monitoring of system interconnections. The dynamics of team formation and establishment are critical to the implementation of middle school reform but have received little research attention. Listing of effective team attributes and identifying examples of good established teams have not actively focused on how a operational team develops into a successful learning community.

Insofar as middle school innovations have changed the teaching canon of historical and traditional practice, the introduction of teamwork has affected the conventional understanding of professional practice. In terms of Gump's model of ecological analysis of a school's social setting, the use of teaching teams has created an opportunity to make system-wide changes across school operations. Teaming can change the physical teaching spaces of classrooms, the teaching practices, and the program delivered to students. Within the interdependent operation of space and time, human mix (e.g., teachers, students, others), and programming of activities, the social ecology of a team working together on a task (Gump, 1980) can involve not only social processes of working together (e.g., collaborative planning and coteaching) but also task processes of working for some shared outcome (e.g., integrated curriculum or integrated assessment). These teams can be operating in various spatial and temporal parameters within a school and with various kinds and combinations of students. Consequently, the elements of a particular team working in any school, including any particular middle school setting, can contain many variables that influence its operation.
For those teachers who have embarked on a "teaching team" experience in a middle school, current descriptions of teaching teams can be a starting point but are not a prescribed script for team operations. Moreover, team "organisation" and team "teaching" have been viewed as being synonymous, but Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2002) recognised that team teaching (in which two or more teachers share "instructional" tasks for students) does not necessarily have to emerge as part of the teaming "plan" (see, again, Gump, 1980). Teams can define teaming differently, and members of teams may bring to team formation a range of different, implicit, and sometimes fuzzy notions of teaming (e.g., collaborative planning processes, or sharing teaching tasks; see, also, Gump, 1980). Each new team accommodates differences among team members (i.e., levels and types of expertise, personalities, and understandings of team practices) as well as the interdependent functioning of physical layout of classrooms (e.g., open plan, multi-room, single room, etc.), students (i.e., age, year level, class configurations, etc.), and the school program under which the team will be operating (i.e., interdisciplinary team or interdisciplinary curriculum; primary, middle, or senior school).

Taking into consideration these differences, teaching teams and how they operate can look very different across grade levels, within grades, and from setting to setting within schools. In an inspection of existing research on middle schools in Australia, one of the most salient features of these descriptive analyses, testimonials, and research papers was the visible differences in and across contexts, middle schools, and teaching teams within these schools (Chadbourne & Harslett, 1998; see, also, Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005).

Benefits and challenges of teaching teams
Employing collaborative practices such as team teaching has been identified as a key strategy for teaching teams to improve the instructional effectiveness of teachers through professional dialogue (Hargreaves, 2001). Although most teachers have a work history of teaching within the isolation of a single classroom, this teacher isolation has been identified as the foremost barrier to educational reform (Lieberman, 1995). Building on this identified need for teachers to collaborate, share ideas, and offer each other instructional help, many reform efforts have increasingly promoted practices such as teaching teams as a form of teaching practice in which it is possible to foster collaboration and create professional learning communities among teachers (Brown, 2002; Flowers et al., 1999; Kain, 2001; Pounder, 1999).

Benefits have been identified for both students and teachers, when teachers work together as a team. Where teachers choose to work together, the benefits of teaming include a reduction in personal isolation (Mills, Powell, & Pollak, 1992). This reduction in isolation can help keep teachers motivated (Spry, Sulmann, & Ralston, 1992), increase their sense of work-related enjoyment through socialisation (Flowers et al., 2002; Sandholtz, 2000), and increase the professional dialogue and sharing of ideas and resources between the teachers (Newman & Wehlage, 1995).

Teaching teams have emerged locally as both a top-down initiative (i.e., administratively mandated) and a bottom-up response (i.e., a conscious choice by teachers to "combine" classes). Teaming practice has received bidirectional support from...
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administrators and from practitioners because it has appeared to offer a more effective way to teach young adolescent students in the day-to-day challenges of the classroom. Some teachers, however, may not be "sold" on the benefits of teaching teams.

Hargraves and Dawe (1990) cautioned that, when teaming has been mandated, teachers have been placed in a situation necessitating a "contrived" collaboration (p. 239). The notion of professional autonomy has pervaded the history of teaching practice such that teachers value their ability to choose their own teaching methods and to make decisions about their own classroom (Wheelan, 2005). An individual's professional autonomy, authority, judgments, and ideals of "best practice" have been dominant traditional practices that have endured over time. Some teachers who take a position in a middle school team may anticipate disadvantages and conflict with established philosophies and practice.

Consequently, a close interactive environment for team teaching featuring expectations of close collaboration can stimulate a paradoxical response that heightens incompatibilities among different personalities, differences in teaching styles, and nonshared pedagogical beliefs. Furthermore, some practitioners may perceive teaming as a means of enforcing conformity of practice and as a method of monitoring the professionalism of individual teachers. Teachers need to be shown the benefits of collaboration, to be informed about the potential educational benefits of combining various disciplines, and also to receive individual mentoring and group support when joining with colleagues.

Teaching teams in the middle school

The philosophical and organisational features underpinning middle schooling have dictated that many teaching and non-teaching practices require teamwork between teachers. Teaming has been described as the keystone of middle years education (Clark, 1997). Teachers working in a middle school environment are organised into small teaching teams that plan and teach together. However, this middle school practice has demanded some reshaping of complex and multiple relationships among teachers. Because middle schooling overlaps the traditional primary and secondary divide, interdisciplinary teams in middle schools can bring together teachers from both sectors. Traditional training and practice differ substantially. Murata (2002) argued that subject centred attitudes, organisational restrictions, and pressures of accountability reduced the willingness of high school trained teachers, in particularly, to team. Main, Bryer, and Grimbeek (2004) found that, in one middle school, teachers from early childhood backgrounds adapted better to teaming than did teachers from other backgrounds.

Thomas (1992) noted that the most significant difficulty facing teams is team members' uncertainty about their roles. It has been recognised that lack of preparation for the role or support in the role are basic reasons for such uncertainty. Teachers entering middle schools who have diverse backgrounds and experience have been placed in contrived teams, often without guidance or training. Administrators and practitioners then expect that a natural and harmonious relationship will develop and that good "team teaching" in some form will result. There are few grounds justifying these expectations in either preservice preparation of practitioners or in inservice support by administrators.
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At the undergraduate teacher education level, little or no emphasis has been placed on developing team membership skills, team process skills, or leadership skills. The main focus of teacher preparation has been pedagogy and curriculum. Specific courses dedicated to teaching the explicit macro and micro skills of team teaching have been absent from regular primary and secondary teacher programs in Queensland universities (Main & Bryer, 2004a).

Some middle school teachers have started to enter middle schools in the Australian system, as universities have offered specialised training for this phase of schooling (Main & Bryer, 2004). Australian research has yet to be published about how a middle-trained teacher with certain formally articulated expectations begins to operate within mixed teams with dissimilar training or even in similarly trained teams. In a small study of initial teaching experience of primary-trained teachers in two middle school programs, Main & Bryer (2004b) found that quality of support affected positive expectations. When administrators actively inducted a new practitioner into the program and when a senior teacher actively mentored this new member of the team, then these structured supports assisted transition into the setting.

How is "good" team teaching measured?

Measuring the success of teaching teams is more difficult than measuring the success of business teams, in which a good bottom-line is an indicator of success. The difficulty in defining and identifying good or effective teams has become the focus of a new wave of research (Erb, 1997b; Flowers et al., 1999, 2000, 2002; Pounder, 1999; Sandholz, 2000). One large scale investigation of "teaming" in the United States has measured the success of teams by how much teachers agree that their teams have a positive climate, are effective in their work, and have positive relationships with students, other staff, and the wider community including parents (Flowers et al., 1999).

The literature on team teaching has also listed general characteristics that are present in "effective" teaching teams. Six indicators of good practice have been identified. First, each team member has a clear role with a definite purpose in the team. A positive interdependence between team players then fosters a "do or die" responsibility on each team member for the success or failure of the team. Second, an equitable distribution of responsibilities amongst team members is required. Third, team members are flexible and able to adapt to changes in both pedagogy and curriculum. Fourth, there is regular and open and honest communication amongst team members, and differences are dealt with as they arise. Fifth, the team has clear and attainable goals. Sixth, the team makes use of the expertise of all members of the team to gain the best possible outcome for students (Flowers et al., 1999, 2000, 2002; Pounder, 1999).

What does a good teaching team look like in middle schools?

One of the dangers when establishing teaching teams is to create and follow multilisting of practice indicators as a rigid orthodoxy for an effective team (i.e., all these characteristics must be present). Lists for teams can combine (a) characteristics attributed to good team teaching, (b) an exhaustive list of team tasks, and, (c) in a middle school, the features of a middle school program. Effective teams that are implementing listed practices require optimal structures and processes (i.e., they just don't "happen").
Individuals joining new teams need to receive training and support in order to commit to and invest in the group process as well as induction in order to understand the personal benefits from teaming.

**Observations of early stages of team development**

The success of a teaching team is affected by the team’s passage through the developing and storming stages of the team's development (see Tuckman's group process stages in Dwyer, 2002, p. 437). It should be noted, however, that these stages may not be sequential, may overlap, and may fluctuate back and forth. Stages may be omitted completely. The developing or forming stage of the team occurs generally at the start of the year when teachers are formed into teams. This stage is the "getting-to-know-you" process in which team members find out about other team members; look for ways to be included and contribute to the team; determine one's own status within the team; identify the strengths, weaknesses, and attitudes of other team members; and establish the team's goals. At this point, team members look for "support, guidance, and direction" from a team leader (Dwyer, 2002, p. 437).

However, teams can get "stuck" in this forming stage and fail to progress as a team when team members change during the course of the school year. Examples of changes in locally studied teams have included teacher transfers, illness, completion of short-term contracts, unpaid leave, teachers leaving the profession, or contract teachers leaving to take permanent work. When changes of members of a team have occurred frequently throughout a year, it has created great instability within the team, confusion and disunity amongst the remaining members, and a disjointed and less favourable learning experience for students. For example, one team of four teachers that were observed over the course of a year had four teacher changes (not all in the same class) during that time. Each time that a new teacher joined the team, they repeated the process of getting-to-know-you, establishing each person's position within the team, and reviewing the team's goals. However, original members of the team reduced their investment of time and commitment to this process, when incoming teachers were on short-term contracts. Recycling through the establishment phase under such circumstances tended to pursue a downwards spiral.

The next phase that a team may experience is the storming stage. This phase begins when conflict emerges within the group. Conflict about leadership, group goals, individual performance, personal agendas, commitment to group goals, and issues relating to inclusion may all be manifested during this stage. Research has shown that any educational reform relies on the acceptance and willingness of teachers to implement it and carry it through (Connell, 1998; Koios, 1999; Whitehead, 2000). Research on collaborative or group practices within education has also pointed out that individuals can "sabotage" the work of the group (Achinstein, 2002; Hargraves & Dawe, 1990; Jarzabkowski, 1999).

Group practices may fail at this point in the team’s life cycle if teachers fail or refuse to contribute to the task. Furthermore, Alexander, Murphy, and Woods (1996) noted that teachers tended to revert to what they know and understand in practice despite whatever innovation may be implemented by the school. To this end, teachers need to be
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trained in the skills and processes necessary to manage conflict in the team effectively. Teams were observed to begin the year with the goal of an "open door" policy when adjoining classrooms combined for the majority of instruction. Where team members changed and, in one case, differences in teaching philosophies emerged, teachers reverted to the more traditional "one teacher-one classroom" practice. In another team, differences in personalities created tensions within the team because some members no longer "trusted" others to do their part. In this situation, team members used "common" planning time to plan work individually for their own classes. The inability of some team members to confront niggling issues with other teachers caused ongoing tension in the team and demonstrated an apparent lack of conflict resolution skills within the team.

Reflection

Informing teacher practice for middle school teams starts with the need for schools to improve team establishment processes. Team practices in some middle school settings have experienced many disruptions. Barriers to good team practices have been easy to identify (e.g., staff turnover and lack of team process skills). There is a literature on what "good" teams look like, and "good" teams have been observed. Established teams have stabilised and progressed. Getting past the early phases, however, requires skills and support. In the implementation of teacher teams in Queensland middle schools, relevant literature has not informed establishment of teams. Bridging this wide gap between research and local practice will require energetic participatory action.

References


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