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Effective teaching teams: Facilitators and barriers

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Within the current context of school reform, teaching teams are being promoted across Australian education systems as the new basis for implementing and sustaining many initiatives that promote improvements in student outcomes and teacher job satisfaction. More recently, the formation of such teams has been identified as a critical issue for Australian middle school reform with teacher teaming underpinning several of the signature features of a middle school philosophy (Pendergast et al., 2005). Factors that enable or hinder the successful implementation of teaching teams can be identified at individual, team, and school levels.

The data used in this paper have come from teacher interviews and participant observations during a study into the formation and development of middle school teaching teams over one year. The study involved teaching staff from four middle school (Years 6-9) teaching teams ($N = 24$) that were operating within purpose-built middle schools in Queensland. One teaching team was studied from each of two outer Brisbane P-12 schools, and two teaching teams were studied from one outer Brisbane high school with a 7-12 class range. Results from this study included the compilation of a list of facilitators and barriers to team formation and maintenance at individual, team, and school levels. It has highlighted a gap between what the middle school literature says about collaboration and teaming and how it is being implemented in these three Queensland middle schools. At an individual level, it takes time for teachers to learn and perfect new forms of instruction (Slavin, 2004). It was also shown to be untenable to assume that collaboration would occur as a natural phenomenon and that teachers would perceive teaming as enhancing their teaching and their students' learning. At a team level, team processes and protocols were shown to need administrative support (i.e., resources both human and physical), and at a school level, the ethos of the school was shown to affect how the norms and customs that shape a school's culture either promoted or frustrated teaming practices.

Introduction

A teaching team can be described as where two or more teachers have joint responsibility for all, or a significant part, of the instruction for the same cohort of students (Erb & Dickinson, 1997; Freeman, 1969; Jackson & Davis, 2000). The rationale underpinning teaching teams in middle schools is that it creates small learning communities of teachers and students. It has been argued that teaming reduces teacher isolation, increases collegiality with colleagues, increases sharing of ideas and resources, and capitalises on each other's strengths. 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).

Teaming is not a new idea (Freeman, 1969; Thomas, 1992; Wraga, 1997). Freeman (1969) reviewed evidence of an effort to implement team teaching in the USA in the 1950s. These teams were a top-down construct. The National Association of Secondary School Principal's Staff Utilisation Committee sponsored school "experiments" in team teaching. Mirroring these experiments, team practices spread quickly throughout other schools in the USA for the perceived benefits for teachers and students. In these early experiments, teachers implementing teaming practices tried to avoid rigidly defining team teaching because they considered that the strength of team teaching was "not in details of structure and organization but in the essential spirit of cooperative planning, collaboration and unrestrained communication" (Bair & Woodward cited in Freeman, 1969, p. 24). According to Thomas (1992), teaming practices in the UK have dated back to the 1960s. However, in the UK, these initial teams were a teacher directed (bottom-up) construct to combine expertise, share resources, or share teaching spaces. Most of these teaching teams consisted of teaching partnerships (i.e., two teachers working together). Thomas (1992) also found that these teaching partnerships mainly consisted of teachers who shared similar teaching philosophies and worked together to share resources and expertise.

In the Australian context, the use of teaching teams has been gaining wider acceptance over the past two decades and, more recently, as a critical part of the middle years' reform effort (Pendergast et al., 2005). Within this reform effort, these teams have been imposed by a top-down approach through policy. That is, change has been dictated from "without" the school with the expectation that the new policy will change what goes on "within" the school. However, such policy implementations and recommendations for change have not focussed on internal practices and structures. That is, teachers have been required to manage the process of forming and developing as a team and then sustain effective teaming practices, in many instances, without guidance.

Teaming as part of a middle school reform

Teacher teaming, one of the signature features of middle schooling recommended by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), has been the most visible and generally accepted feature adopted in Australian middle school reform efforts. That is, the establishment of teaching teams to create small communities of learners has been seen as a priority in the implementation of a middle schooling philosophy. It can be argued that the introduction of teaming is also the one area that has had the most

significant effect on the work histories of teachers working within this reform: Teachers are expected to work collaboratively rather than in isolation. It has also been the expectation that, once teaching teams are in place, other signifying features of middle schooling such as interdisciplinary teaching and curriculum integration would follow as a natural consequence of team practices.

A growing body of evidence has revealed benefits of teaming for both teachers and students (Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Pounder, 1999; Spry, Sultmann, & Ralston, 1992). In this respect, the move towards implementing teaching teams appears warranted. However, the top-down mandate of teaching teams in Australian middle school reform efforts is at odds with the reality of the bottom-up requirement of untrained teachers to establish effective teams.

Individual factors

Tradition has teachers working in self-imposed and professionally sanctioned isolation, but, over time, researchers have reported benefits for teachers who work collaboratively. Freeman (1969) noted that “teachers in teams learn much more from each other than they can when each teacher is isolated in his own room” (p. 37; see also, Fullan, 1993). Other reported benefits for teachers have included (a) increased skill variety in their work, (b) closer relationships with students, (c) increased growth and general job satisfaction, (d) increased professional commitment, and (e) improved teacher efficacy compared to their nonteaming counterparts (Pounder, 1999). However, Murata (2002) cautioned that to reap the benefits of collaboration, teachers needed to first conceptualise or visualise the benefits that collaborative practices or a genuine collegiality deliver and then engage in those practices to sustain the vision. In other words, teachers need to “value” the benefits of collaborative practices in order to embrace them.

In a large-scale report on middle schooling across Australia, Pendergast (2006) observed that “inadequately trained staff” was a possible inhibitor of the establishment of middle school teaching teams (p. 18). It is an often ignored truism that, where reforms require new ways of “doing”, school reform and teacher education must occur concurrently (Goodlad, 1999). In Queensland schools, team skills at preservice and inservice levels have not been taught concurrently with the introduction of a middle schooling philosophy. It should be noted, however, that individual skills are not effective in an inhospitable environment (Fullan, 2003). That is, even if individuals have strong teaming skills, the potential of those skills will be unrealised if resources and supports are not in place to assist individual teachers and teams.

Working in teams

Main and Bryer (2007) outlined a research framework to evaluate middle school practices based on a threefold process of acceptance, effectiveness, and sustainability. For teachers, “acceptance as part of planning alternative practice” (i.e., choosing to be part of a team) has been shown to be critical factor in the effectiveness of middle school reform and, thus, teams (Main & Bryer, 2007, p. 91). Research in the USA has shown teams to be

more successful when the decision to “team” was based on teacher choice (informed consent) rather than an administratively imposed (top-down) mandate (Murata, 2002). Choice about “who to team with” was also found to be an important aspect of acceptance and success in collaborative practices. That is, teachers must be willing to work together (Milonopoulos & Fordred, 1997). However, choice in one’s colleagues has not been an opportunity routinely available to many work placements in education.

Thomas (1992) noted that the most significant difficulty facing teams is team members’ uncertainty about their roles, lack of knowledge of team processes and protocols, and lack of administrative support such as the scheduling of common planning time. Teachers who have diverse backgrounds and experience have been placed in contrived middle school teaching teams, often without guidance or training as to “how” to team effectively. Placement in a team environment without choice and featuring expectations of close collaboration has heightened incompatibilities with different personalities, differences in teaching styles, and nonshared pedagogical beliefs among teachers (Kruse & Louis, 1997).

A lack of stability in core team membership has been shown to negatively affect the development of strong teams. It has also been established that “good” teams with strong interrelationships take time to develop (Milonopoulos & Fordred, 1997). That is, individuals need time to “gel” as a team and work through the life-cycle of the team together (i.e., forming, storming, norming, and performing; Tuckman, 1969) to be an effective team.

Developing a school-wide culture of teaming

A school’s culture refers to the rituals, customs, traditions, group norms, espoused values, formal philosophy, rules, climate, shared meanings, and the hidden symbols that are imbued in the physical space of the organisation (Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Roach & Kratochwill, 2004; Schein, 1992). The introduction of a middle schooling philosophy into Australian education has required a number of significant changes to the traditional culture of schools. The holistic implementation of middle schooling can be likened to a revitalisation movement (Wallace, 1956) where a new culture or way of doing is introduced, accepted, implemented, and established in a short space of time (i.e., years not decades). Unlike an evolving culture that develops over time, the introduction of middle schooling has required immediate wide-spread changes to many traditional practices (i.e., pedagogy and curriculum). Early research evaluating middle schooling in Australia has highlighted areas that are critical to the effective implementation of a middle schooling philosophy in the shortest period of time (Pendergast et al., 2005). A key factor identified as being able to fast-track between the initiation phase and establishment phase of the reform implementation was effective teaming practices (Pendergast, 2006, p. 18).

For teachers new to teaming, many of the collaborative practices assumed and expected when working as part of a team challenge dominant traditional practices that have

persisted over time and the work histories of most teachers who have been teaching within the isolation of a single classroom. At a team level, there has been an expectation that teachers would work together harmoniously and productively and know and establish the processes and protocols necessary for effective teaming. However, without training or support this expectation is unrealistic. At the school level, a school's culture has been shown to have a significant influence on the types and level of collaborative practices (i.e., teaming practices) that are undertaken (Main, 2008).

The study

Teachers ($N = 24$) from four middle school teaching teams were observed over the course of one year to document issues relating to the formation and development of their teams. Teams were selected from 3 purpose-built, government run middle schools in outer Brisbane. One team from each of two P-12 schools and two teams from one Year 7-12 school participated in the study.

Teachers participated in semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the year to explore their personal skills and attitudes across four areas (i.e., attitudes towards teaming, understanding of goals and roles when teaming, the perceived benefits of teaming for teachers and students, and individual communication skills). The researcher worked as a participant-observer within each team for one day per week during Terms 1 and 3 of the school year. Final structured reflections were sought from participants at the end of the school year. All data was analysed through careful line-by-line coding of themes and cross-matched using the automated data mining software programme Leximancer 2.21 (Smith, 2005).

Results and discussion

Within this study, a number of facilitating and hindering factors were identified that influenced the effectiveness of middle school teaching teams in Queensland middle schools. These facilitating and hindering factors included aspects surrounding the professional and personal dynamics of individuals within teams, the dynamics of teams as they progress through their life-cycle, and the dynamics of a school's culture and its effect on teams. The presence or absence of these factors or their positive or negative manifestation influenced team functioning in these schools. It can be argued that while no one model can be advocated for all teams in all situations there are certain criteria that are common and critical for the effective functioning of a team. A summary of these factors is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Facilitators or barriers to team formation and development

Individual factors	Team factors	School factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Attitude ▪ Experience in teaming ▪ Teacher choice ▪ Training in teaming ▪ Recognition of benefits of teaming ▪ Communication skills ▪ Conflict management skills ▪ Support from administration staff ▪ Intrapersonal skills ▪ Self and team evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding of team processes including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Team rules ▪ Team goals ▪ Team roles ▪ Common planning time ▪ Team meeting protocols ▪ Staff stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Physical set up of school ▪ Routines and traditions that facilitate teaming ▪ Administrative support of teaming practices ▪ Staff stability

Main, K. (2007). A year long study of the formation and development of middle school teaching teams. Unpublished PhD, Griffith University, Brisbane

Comparisons of data within and across teams revealed six main characteristics that were found to either positively or negatively influence teaming practices in the four teams participating in the study. These characteristics concerned (a) training (i.e., both preservice and inservice); (b) administrative support throughout the teaming process (i.e., from formation to establishment and maintenance); (c) attitudes of team members to teaming (i.e., a willingness to participate in a team and experience and confidence in contributing to the team); (d) relationship building; (e) conflict; and (f) school culture. These results resonated with the research literature on the experiences of middle school teaming practices in the USA. Sub-set factors within these six areas have been shown to either facilitate or hinder team effectiveness at an individual, team, or whole-school level. Some factors, such as administrative support, were shown to have an effect at all levels (i.e., individual, team, and school). That is, where administration did not provide common planning time to teams as part of a whole school commitment to teaming practices, teams struggled to find sufficient time to plan effectively and individuals did not feel supported in their efforts to work with others.

Individual

A number of individual factors that could either positively or negatively affect a teacher's ability to work effectively within a team were identified in this study (see Table 1). Whether these factors facilitated or hindered the teaming process often depended upon other conditions. For example, an individual's positive attitude towards teaming was shown to improve team performance, and, conversely, a team member's negative attitude towards teaming was shown to hinder a team's performance (see, also, Knackendoffel, 2005; Lester, Korsgaard, & Meglino, 2005). In deed, the most salient single factor affecting an individual's capacity to team was teacher training (either preservice or inservice).

At an individual level, all teachers reported that a lack of explicit training in team processes and protocols, communication skills, conflict management skills, and decision-making skills which made working in teams challenging. In all teams, teachers reported and were observed to have limited and ineffective means of dealing with conflict, which, in most instances, caused team development to stagnate or regress. Teachers reported and were observed to “avoid” conflict with other members of the team or to work around a difficult team member. In two instances in two separate teams, the conflict escalated to a point where the teachers involved “exploded” and attempted to “have it out” with others. In both instances these events resulted in teachers reverting to working independently rather than as part of a team.

When interviewed all teachers were able to report a number of benefits that they had experienced or perceived would result from working as a team. All teachers reported a positive attitude to teaming. However, teachers with prior teaming experience tempered this enthusiasm with the frustration that they had little if any choice in teaching partners and thus, had a set of rules that would be applied in any new teaming situation. For example, one teacher reported that she would “lay on the line” her expectations for new team members including common rules and expectations for students and for team members. At the beginning of Term 1, teachers in one team were collaboratively planning and teachers in three of the teams were collaboratively planning, teaching, and administering assessment to students. By the end of Term 2 teachers in all teams were all still collaboratively planning and two teams were still collaboratively assessing but no teams were observed collaboratively teaching. In deed, by the end of Term 4, all teachers were observed to be working within the isolation of their individual classrooms.

Team

Teachers were unaware of the importance of establishing team goals, assigning specific roles, and setting team rules and expectations at the beginning of the year to the effective functioning of their team. Where some or all of these processes or protocols were ignored or overlooked, teams struggled to progress past the forming-storming stage of their development. However, in two teams, where some of the team members had some previous experience in teaming practices, rules and expectations were established at the beginning of the year. Setting rules and expectations early in the year was shown to circumvent a number of problems that were experienced by the other two teams. For example, common rules for all students in the pod were reinforced by all teachers in the same manner creating consistency across the classes.

It was difficult for teams in this study to stabilise and move forward as a team due to the high staff turnover in three of the four teams. Where members within a team were constantly changing, teachers were forced to regress to the forming stage of the team’s development. Thus, teachers were unable to develop the trust, open communication, and history that foster team maturation into an effective collaboration and progress the team’s development along a positive trajectory.

School

Varying levels of administrative support available to teams in this study affected their levels of collaboration. Within all of the schools in this study, there was a high level of expectation from the respective administrations that team members would work together. Three of the four teams were left to be “self-managed” teams with a head of department or head of curriculum situated within the team to give direction to the team and to be the “link” between the team and the administration. The fourth team had an assigned mentor for the first 6 months of the year, and, during this time, this team was observed to make considerable progress towards becoming a “performing” team. However, a change of one of the core team members coinciding with the removal of the additional administrative support at the beginning of Term 3 and saw this team regress to the forming stage of their development. Relationships within this team did not rebuild and collaborative practices undertaken were reduced to a minimum by the end of the year.

Summary

The data from this study suggest that for teachers to be able to work effectively in teams that a number of factors should be considered and implemented concurrently at an individual, team, and school level. At an individual level, where possible, teacher choice about (a) being part of a team and (b) who they work with should be afforded. That is, teachers should be willing to work in teams and have some input into who they work with. It was also shown that there is a need for explicit training in team skills (see Table 1) in pre-service education courses as well as ongoing professional development for teachers working in teams. Ongoing professional development in these schools was reported as being piecemeal and not tailored to the needs of individuals.

At a team level, members of the team need to understand and implement team processes and protocols including the establishment of team goals, rules, and roles. Common planning time was also shown to be necessary for teams to plan and work together effectively. Where common planning time was not scheduled into the weekly timetable, teachers found team work more difficult. Issues of staff turnover within a team were also found to affect the functioning of a team. Any change to team membership caused teams to regress in their life-cycle.

At a school level, factors that were shown to facilitate team practices included (a) the physical set up of classrooms, (b) routines and traditions of the school (i.e., the expectation that working in teams is part of the school culture), and (c) physical and human resources. Additionally, where school leaders had a holistic view and commitment to team practices and provided support at an individual, team, and school level, teams were shown to work collaboratively in more areas.

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