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Improving Teacher Professional Learning

How to Use This Chapter

If you are reading this book, you are obviously interested in learning more about how to work collaboratively to support teacher research or how to set up collaborative study groups as a form of professional development in your school. You see its value; however, you may need further knowledge, information, and resources to substantiate its worth or to rally support from others. As a member of a group of classroom teachers, you may need to provide rationale and resources to administrators. As an administrator, you may hope to inform teachers and generate interest.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background definitions and information for you to use as a rationale to gain support for your endeavor. When you are advocating for your project, you may want to provide specific examples, studies, and rationales from this chapter to inform others, such as administrators or funding organizations, of the value of teacher collaboration for professional learning. Consider creating a short presentation or a pamphlet that illustrates this approach for distribution to key people.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequent remarks we hear from teachers when we work with schools and organizations to set up collaborative learning communities, such as collaborative teacher research groups, is "We just don't have the time!" It is true that teachers are often overwhelmed with the day-to-day work of teaching and the many responsibilities that go along with it. How can teachers possibly fit even one more task into their days?

Collaborative learning communities can inspire and energize teachers to commit to this type of professional development—to become part of a community of practice—as a priority in their work.

Consequently, they begin to *make* time in their schedules to become members in these communities. They find the experience and the resultant learning valuable and the process intrinsically rewarding and enriching. Most important, they see how students' learning is affected.

We hope you will agree that one of our most important responsibilities as educators is to teach effectively. This involves staying updated on scientifically based research and teaching methods. We regularly attend conferences and workshops and take classes to develop as educators. As you will learn in this chapter, one of the most effective types of professional development is sustained, on-site learning such as that experienced through site-based collaborative communities. These communities can empower educators to seek out and prioritize professional development and can help members find and strengthen their voices as educators whose knowledge and experiences are valued. This newfound empowerment helps to perpetuate teachers' membership and commitment as it motivates them, focuses them, and encourages them to develop a voice.

We do have the ability and desire to improve student learning and to develop as professionals through collaboration. As the author of the poem that opens Part One describes, silence can be shattered when we are brave enough to share our questions with colleagues and have conversations that fill us with energy. We can and must make collaborative learning a priority in our professional development. Collaboration with interested colleagues can help us overcome those not-enough-time feelings. *WE* can do it!

WHAT IS TEACHER RESEARCH?

Teacher research is becoming a popular means for educators—classroom teachers, special education consultants, administrators, school media personnel, university faculty, and others—to improve classroom instruction and students' learning. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers" (p. 7). By methodically examining daily classroom practices, educators portray an insider's view of how learning happens.

What Is Collaborative Teacher Research?

When asked what stumbling blocks they encountered in their research, Mary Linville and Brittany Steele, teachers from the A. D. Henderson University School in Boca Raton, Florida, told us, "It's always difficult to find the time to implement an action research project and analyze the results with all of the other required teacher responsibilities." However, to overcome this common problem, they said, "We designed and implemented our project as a team, rather than individually. We kept each other on schedule by planning and working together throughout the project." Many teachers have responded similarly to these questions. Yes, teacher research is wonderful and needed; but who has the time? For many, the answer has become, "*WE* do."

Collaborative teacher research involves "individuals who enter with other teachers into a collaborative search for definition and satisfaction in their work lives as teachers and who regard research as part of larger efforts to transform teaching, learning, and schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 298). Groups come together to support each other in a learning community, sometimes face-to-face, and sometimes online or through other communication methods, to inquire about compelling topics directly related to their classroom teaching and learning or schoolwide issues. These inquiries begin with a common question or concern educators have about issues such as how students learn, how to best teach students, or even issues that span multiple

How does using the writers' workshop model consistently in grades one through four influence children's development as writers?
    —Saddlewood Writing Inquiry Group, Pegeen Jensen, Lisa Corcoran, Donna Killiany, Lisa DeStaso-Jones, South Colonie Schools, New York

How can we enhance the coordination between language and reading specialists to increase their effectiveness in helping such students in a classroom setting?
    —Francine Falk-Ross, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois

How can a professional organization encourage and support teacher research so classroom teachers and their experiences can influence state education policy?
    —Tim Fredrick, New York State English Council

FIGURE 1.1. *Examples of Real Questions That Have Inspired Collaborative Teacher Research*

grade levels or districts. Figure 1.1 lists several authentic questions that have prompted teacher research collaboration among colleagues. Note that questions here represent inquiries across grade levels, at a district level, and even at the state level.

Collaborative groups involved in teacher research are finding that the process provides professional development opportunities for them to reflect on their practices and to learn new knowledge (Mohr, Rogers, Sanford, Nocerino, MacLean, & Clawson, 2004). Teacher research involves reading and sharing ideas about current scientifically based research, classic theories, and effective ways to gather and analyze the information needed to answer the research inquiry. These types of professional readings and conversations help inform educators and, in turn, can lead to improved student learning.

In this chapter, to provide a foundation to frame collaborative teacher research, we first look at the relationship between teacher research and professional development. Then we share our experiences with teacher research collaborations, the rationale behind such groups, and what we have learned about other's experiences with these collaborative groups from our research.

Effective Professional Development

As educators, our expectations for students' learning have changed dramatically in the past few decades. We have raised our standards and vowed to leave no child behind (No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001, U.S. Department of Education). As a result, we have pursued effective ways to update and upgrade our teaching practices, knowledge, and skills. Many of us—teachers and administrators alike—have sought optimal professional development opportunities, such as conference attendance and in-service consultants or speakers, to teach us new approaches and scientifically based methods for achieving our goals for our teaching and, in turn, for our students' learning.

What Is Professional Development?

Simply defined, professional development is participation in opportunities that result in the acquisition of new knowledge, understandings, skills, or strategies that enhance and build upon our current knowledge. Our goals for professional development in education may include

- Advancing students' learning
- Exploring options and gaining new perspectives and ideas
- Learning new methods or approaches to advance our teaching
- Acquiring knowledge and skills that transfer to or apply to reformed curriculum
- Acquiring knowledge and skills that help us independently carry out new approaches by applying learned classroom practices

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, mandates that all public school teachers participate in ''effective'' professional development that

- Improves teachers' knowledge
- May be part of a school- or districtwide improvement plan
- Helps students meet state learning and achievement standards
- Develops educators' classroom management skills
- Teaches how to interpret and use data and assessments to inform classroom practice

Furthermore, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) states that to be highly effective, professional development should have a lasting impact on instruction; be based on scientifically based research; be aligned with state standards and assessments; be ''developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, parents, and administrators of schools''; and be regularly evaluated for its effectiveness (USDOE, 2001, p. 1963).

What Works?

Disappointingly, we have come to find that many opportunities in professional development do not lead to long-term curriculum reform and do not meet the needs of the students in our communities (Henson, 2001). As a whole, research shows that professional development in the form of one-day workshops has very little effect on changes to the ways teachers teach, to the organization of schools and curriculum, and to what students learn (Gullickson, Lawrenz, & Keiser, 2000; McKenzie, 1991). The reasons for this are that potential effects are frequently weakened by lack of follow-up and inconsistencies in implementation.

The most effective programs tend to be in-service training programs that offer extended coaching with frequent feedback and follow-up. These programs tend to be much more effective

than attendance at ''one-shot,'' generic workshops or periodic in-service attendance in which outside experts who do not know the personal needs of your students, community, or district espouse their knowledge and discrete skills to improve individual practices (Dobbs, 2000; Gold & Powe, 2001). Research suggests long-term, site-based professional development opportunities engage teachers in the learning process, build from their current knowledge and practices, help them examine their beliefs with intent to transform practice, and allow them to explore authentic and personal questions as they develop answers.

There is considerable research to support that collaborative group learning is the most powerful kind of professional development (Arter, 2001; Garmston, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Zeichner, 2003) and that collaborative teacher research is highly effective (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Cisar, 2005; Knight, Wiseman, & Cooner, 2000; Goatley et al., 1994). The opportunity to collaborate has been cited as the most important factor in instituting change. Stager (1995) suggests collaborative problem solving as the most effective form of professional development. Table 1.1 illustrates how the process of collaborative teacher research connects with the goals for professional development. You can see why collaborative teacher research is reputed as an effective means of professional development.

Collaborative teacher research is collaborative problem solving. Based on the literature previously cited, especially Zeichner (2003), and responses to our survey of collaborative teacher research groups, we propose that collaborative teacher research represents the epitome of effective professional development (Figure 1.2).

Many existing formats for professional development, then, are not effective and long lasting. So, how do we update and upgrade our teaching practices in meaningful ways that will help children learn and acquire skills as we seek ways to develop ourselves further as highly qualified educators? Based on our personal experiences and current research findings that examine various formats for professional development (described later in this chapter), collaborative teacher research fosters meaningful professional development for teachers.

TABLE 1.1. *The Process of Teacher Research Closely Aligns with the Goals of Professional Development*

Collaborative Teacher Research Involves:	Goals of Professional Development Include:
Ongoing conversations with colleagues	Extensive participation with colleagues
Developing purposes and potential research	Exploring options and gaining new perspectives and idea questions for a group study (or individual studies)
Researching the topic for a theoretical framework	Basing instruction on scientifically based research; adding to teacher knowledge
Collecting, organizing, and analyzing data	Learning how to interpret and use data and assessments to inform classroom practice
Determining the results of the study and applying them to classroom instruction	Having a lasting impact on instruction
Evaluating the collaboration	Evaluating the effectiveness of the endeavor

FIGURE 1.2. *Effectiveness of Professional Development Programs Varies*
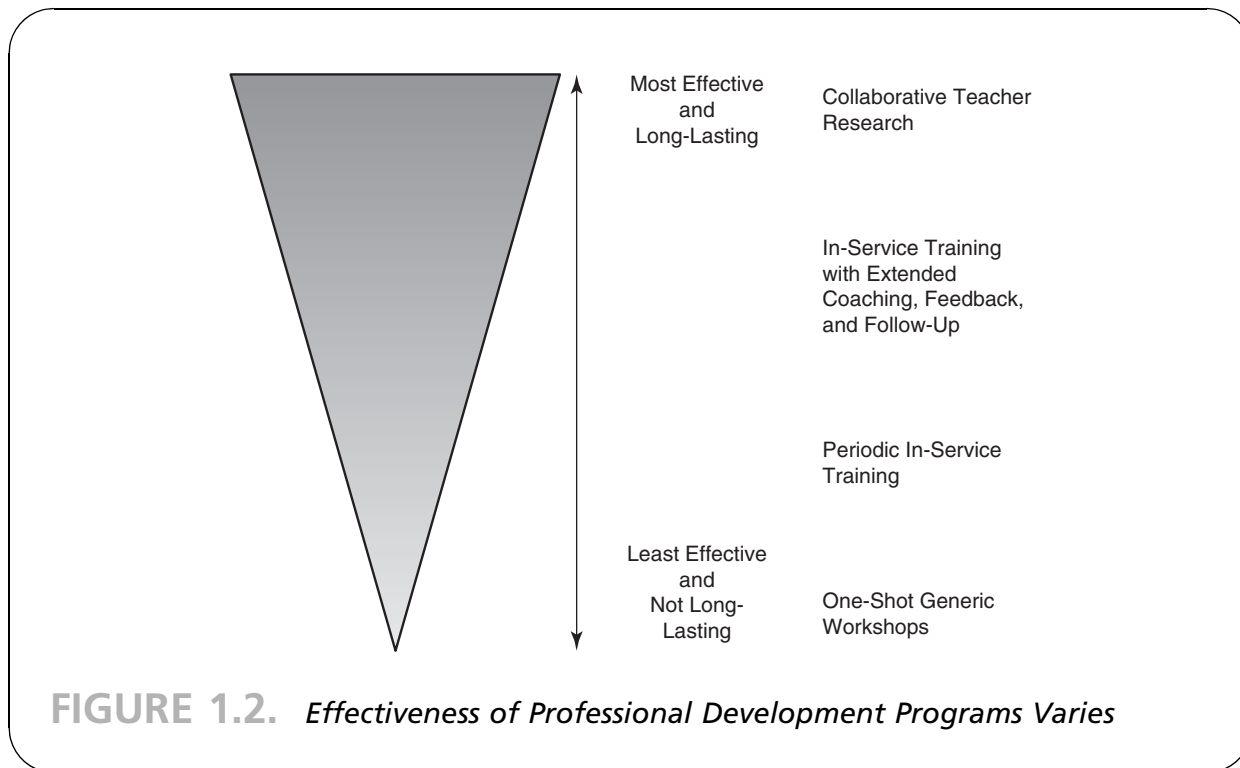
COLLABORATION AT WORK: OUR EXPERIENCES

As veteran educators with over fifty years of combined experience, we have participated in collaborative communities throughout our teaching careers. For example, when Cynthia moved from being a fifth-grade language arts teacher to a college professor in an elementary education teacher education program, she had to adjust to the wide spans of ability level and learning styles between preadolescent ten-year-olds and preprofessional college students. She highly valued the benefits of teacher research in improving classroom teaching and students' learning, so she delved into teacher research techniques to reflect on her pedagogy. She also invited colleagues to work with her to add the more objective eyes of critical friends.

The first study looked at how her students, who were future elementary teachers, learned and comprehended texts through the use of the Book Club Plus approach (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001). A colleague, Karen, teaching a similar literacy course, had been using book clubs in her class, so the two decided to design a formal study. Having used Book Clubs Plus in her elementary classroom, Cynthia had been happy with learning outcomes and students' motivation to read and write about their books. But could this same method be successful with college students? And, to make it successful, what would she have to change from the way she used it with younger students? As the study progressed, the two colleagues asked a third to join the group. Overhearing Karen and Cynthia talk about book clubs, Krislynn added her knowledge of supportive literature and experience in teaching the same course Cynthia did in the past.

To make a long story short, after an academic year, the three concluded from their research that the students were receptive to the Book Club Plus experience (see Lassonde, Stearns, & Dengler, 2005). However, probably the most important result of the study was that the three

had formed a collaborative group that had served as a tool to look intensively at each others' teaching and to discuss critically the effects of their teaching efforts on students' learning. They learned from each other through discussions of everyday events and observations in the classroom, sharing readings, and opening themselves to new ideas by listening to others' perspectives. In the process, they developed a supportive network that continues to benefit each member even today.

Throughout this book, you will read about similar learning communities. As you read, think about how effective this type of inquiry and reflection on practice will be for the teachers involved and their students. Also, consider how much more the groups of teachers will learn from their projects in a collaborative framework versus if they were working independently.

THE RATIONALE

Collaboration in teacher research has been credited with:

- Fostering reflectiveness (Schoenfeld, 1999)
- Triggering new perspectives in fellow collaborators (Morse, 1994)
- Increasing transferability of knowledge (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001)
- Providing social support (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001)

Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, and Stackman (2003) report that "For over a decade, education faculty have used [teacher] research as an effective tool for both teaching improvement and knowledge discovery" (p. 151). In Cochran-Smith and Lytle's article (1999) about the teacher research movement, they identified trends that characterized the movement at that time. These trends included the prominence of teacher research as a form of professional development.

There are many arguments for collaborative teacher research. Probably the most compelling, however, is that it provides opportunities for professional development to be learner centered. In this case, the learner is the teacher researcher. Educators choose which questions they want to answer based on what is meaningful for them to know. When Cynthia's group studied book clubs, it was because the group members decided it was important to them to shape the method to meet the needs of college students' learning. They chose the question based on their personal quest to learn and improve instruction. They chose to work together because they had common questions and felt they could help each other by combining data analysis and interpretation insights, sharing current readings on the topic, and discussing how they would improve the method based on their combined results.

Frequently, a group of educators initiates a study because they experience dissonance or some uneasy feeling or uncertainty that is so gripping that they are willing to put forth the time and effort to find an answer through a systematic collection of information that will lead to the most likely answer. Ultimately, this answer is directly applicable to everyday teaching and improves instruction and learning.

According to Zeichner's study (2003) of collaborative teacher research that looked at five collaborative groups across the United States, the following attributes of such groups transform teaching and learning. Collaborative teacher research groups

1. Create a culture of inquiry in which teachers' knowledge and voices are invaluable to the research.
2. Invest in teachers' intellectual capital as teachers take charge of the research process.

3. Have a ''multiplier effect'' (p. 308) that helps teachers develop dispositions and skills by learning from each other's studies as well as their own. These skills extend to their working relationships beyond the research experience.
4. Create opportunities for intellectual stimulation and challenges that occur as a result of the group discussions.
5. Establish rituals and routines as part of belonging to the group. These rituals and routines help to build community within a safe and supportive environment.

In another study, Henson (2001) looked at how collaborative teacher research affected teachers' self-efficacy. She found that teachers did report they felt better about their ability to influence student learning more effectively as a result of their participation in the collaboration. What's amazing about this study, Henson reported, is that typically experienced teachers, like those in this study, tend to be resistant to changes in efficacy, or in how they feel about their personal and professional skills. However, this study showed that collaborative teacher research did make a difference in their self-confidence as teachers. Furthermore, teachers reported preferring collaborative teacher research to other forms of professional development because it allowed them to actively improve their instruction.

In our communications with collaborative groups, educators stated other reasons for coming together. For some it was a means to gain support in the endeavor for various purposes:

> We wanted to support each other as social justice teachers and to do our work smarter and deeper.
>
> —*Bill Bigelow, Rethinking Schools*

> For me, it was a way to connect to others interested in research in Reading.
>
> —*Debra Wellman, Rollins College*

> We were teaching together. . . . Our motivations were complex and multipurposed:
>
> - Colleagues needed publications.
> - We were doing work we wanted to develop a deeper understanding of.
> - We were already collecting lots of oral and written feedback from [our] students.
> - We were using books and approaches that were new to us and we wanted to document what was happening.
> - We adopted an adult development perspective that offered lots of possibilities for research.
>
> —*Leo C. Rigsby, George Mason University*

For others, a common goal for large-scale reform drew a team together.

> My science team . . . decided to change the style of testing to better meet our needs in assessing what our students have truly learned in the course . . . Since our school has all teachers become involved in action research, this was the perfect opportunity for us.
>
> —*Sue Stephenitch, Highland Park High School*

> We began looking at ways to develop a schoolwide inquiry curriculum at the high school level.
>
> —*Judith McBride, McGill*

OUR SURVEY

In gathering material for this book, the authors were amazed by the number of collaborative communities that exist and are going strong across the world. The concept is growing in leaps and bounds. To gather information, we distributed a survey (see Appendix E) to various teacher groups and professional listservs, such as the International Reading Association (IRA) Teacher as Researcher Subcommittee, the Ethics Subcommittee, the Teaching as a Researching Profession Special Interest Group, the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Action Research Special Interest Group, the International Teacher Research Network, and the National Reading Council. We asked members of these groups to complete the survey themselves and to pass the survey on to other groups they knew. We also did an extensive online search for collaborative groups and found a number of Web sites dedicated to supporting these learning communities. We approached these groups to complete our survey, too.

We found that respondents fell into five categories: K–12 educators, college instructors, school-college collaborations, organizations, and collaborations that resulted as part of college coursework. Although groups said they got together for various reasons, the one common thread was the work. They were all interested in the same goal: finding an answer or a solution to a question of inquiry that was personally engaging and rewarding for them.

This book is not only a resource for collaborative teacher researchers, but it is a model of collaboration and research itself. Throughout this book we will share stories and strategies from our experiences and from the numerous groups who responded to our survey. You will learn from what others have experienced and apply what you learn to forming your own group. We have also invited experts in the field to share their experiences and insights. To begin, see Jane Hansen's ''Thinking Together'' feature that follows. Jane shares tips and strategies for forming collaborative learning communities.

THINKING TOGETHER: COMMENTARY

Contributed by Jane Hansen

Currently, I am part of a collaborative learning community of university researchers and teacher researchers that has seven members: a pre-K teacher researcher, a third-grade teacher researcher, elementary math teacher researcher, doctoral student researcher in a first-grade classroom, doctoral student researcher in a fifth-grade classroom, doctoral student researcher in high-school American studies, and myself—a professor researcher in a second-grade classroom. We represent a range of experiences!

Our particular goal is to learn about students as Writers Across the Curriculum (WAC). To our meetings, we each bring two items for discussion: a piece of writing written by a student that week and a one-page piece of writing written by the researcher about the student's work. In this one-page piece, we write about why we chose to bring this student's sample. The writing we bring is diverse, and so are our analyses. Three of the many reasons for choosing an example are: it shows advancements by a particular student (one of our members is conducting a case study of one child), it shows the influence(s) of mentor texts (this is a particular focus of the pre-K teacher researcher), or it shows the influence of self-evaluation (a particular interest of mine).

(*continued*)

At our meetings, each person reads the two pieces aloud; and we talk. We go around the circle, devoting about ten to fifteen minutes per person. Great energy evolves and carries through the next week!

Teachers' preparation before the meetings contributes greatly to the richness of our discussions. In my current group, we comment on what we learn about the students and about what appears to work (or not) within WAC instruction. We ask questions of each other to figure out what's going on, and we comment on each other's joys and concerns.

The third-grade teacher researcher I mentioned briefly learned from the pre-K teacher researcher that children who can't write their names can write. They apply markers to paper without qualm. Thus, her new student from Puerto Rico, who could not speak or understand English, could write on his first day in her classroom—and his classmates could respond supportively, including him in their classroom writing community.

The elementary math teacher researcher learned from interaction with me about student-generated rubrics, and her students created and used them to intentionally improve their written explanations about their solutions to math problems.

I learned from one of the first-grade teachers about the amazing ability of young children, in the fall semester, to create nonfiction texts—complete with tables of contents and indexes. Plus, for a particular child, this was his entry into writing. Nonfiction writing in science set the stage for him as a learner.

This anecdote describes my current learning community, but I have been engaged in similar groups for more than two decades and all have differed. Some met only to share their own writing, not their students' writing, or they shared writing they composed about their students. This experience gave them tremendous insider knowledge about what they did as writers—information they used as teachers.

THE BENEFITS

You have learned in this chapter that collaborative learning communities of research, study, and inquiry not only build teacher expertise and improve students' learning but also offer opportunities for communities of practice to form that create safe places for colleagues to explore, learn, and bond both professionally and personally. By now you must be anxious to read more about how research and inquiry can lead to educational improvement, which is the topic of Chapter Two. So, let's move on!