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The importance and benefits of teacher collegiality in schools – a literature review

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Abstract

Strong and healthy collegial relationship among school teachers is regarded as an essential component of school effectiveness and teacher enhancement. Based on literature review, the present article highlights the importance of collegiality among educators and determines the major outcomes and benefits of highly collaborative and collegial cultures in educational organizations. The study suggests that teacher collegiality plays a vital role in augmenting teacher professional growth and development, job satisfaction, organizational and professional commitment as well as school quality and student performance.

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1. Introduction

Research has consistently underlined the contribution of strong collegial relationships to school improvement and success [1] [2] [3] [4] and argued that high levels of collegiality among staff members is one of the characteristics found most often among successful schools. Teachers are increasingly being admonished to move away from the traditional norms of isolation and autonomy and to move towards greater collegiality and collaboration [5].

Traditionally, schools have been isolating places where collegial cooperation among educators is not a common practice [6] [7]. Teachers' extreme busy schedules, course loads, and additional managerial duties make it difficult for them to make the time to talk or work together. Teachers need opportunities to collegiate with each other to best serve their students, to make their work more meaningful, and to transform schooling in a way that keeps it vibrant and relevant [8].

The conception is that educators perform better when working together professionally is supported by organizational theory models which emerged earlier in the corporate sector [9] [10]. Such conceptions view authentic teamwork as an essential characteristic of the successful organization as its members interact regularly to share their ideas and expertise and develop common understanding of organizational goals and the means to their attainment [11].

Numerous benefits from teacher collegiality have been reported as evidence of the need for building a more effective collegial culture in schools. The most significant benefits of collegiality among teaching staff is an improvement in teacher professional growth and development [3] [4], teacher professionalism [12] [13], school quality and organizational effectiveness [1] [14], and student behaviour, attitude, and achievement [2] [15] [16].

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2. Benefits for Teachers

Collegiality is seen as a key aspect of teacher professional development and a vehicle to increase teacher knowledge. The qualities and characteristics that fall under the labels of teacher individualism, isolation, and privatism are widely perceived as threats or barriers to teacher professional growth and development. Schools in recent years are believed to be the best places for teachers to learn and grow professionally and schools are beginning to restructure in ways that provide more opportunities for teachers to learn together [17]. Collegial communities create such a cooperative climate that heightens the level of innovation and enthusiasm among teachers and provides a continuous support for staff professional enhancement [18]. Many educators and researchers have advocated the methods of teacher growth and enhancement that are based on continuous collegial interaction and support [19] [20]. It is suggested that teacher collegiality could modify instruction [21]; therefore, teachers need to recognize the value of working together and to focus on what they have in common. Under the norms of privatism much good teaching goes on unacknowledged while teachers who work in collegial settings become more open to new ideas, teaching methods, and resources.

It is suggested that collegiality among staff leads to increased teacher satisfaction and adaptability [22]. It breaks the isolation of the classroom and brings career rewards and daily satisfactions for teachers. Collegiality stimulates enthusiasm among teachers and reduces emotional stress and burnout [23] [24]. It also creates a sense of belonging among organizational members and makes the bonds more cohesive. Collegial cultures make teachers more committed to their organization [25] [26] and to their profession [12] [13]. It is reported that collaborating teachers perceived themselves as more committed to their goals and to their students [27]. It is also found that collegiality influences the motivation and career commitment of teachers and the extent to which they are willing to modify classroom practice [28].

Collegiality provides more systemic assistance to beginning teachers [29]. It avoids the sink-or-swim, trial-and-error mode that novice teachers usually face during the initial stages of their career. Collegiality brings experienced and beginning teachers closer together to reinforce the competence and confidence of the beginners [29] [30]. Schools having a good collaborative culture and strong atmosphere of collegiality have lower attrition rates as compared to other schools [23] [31].

Collegiality helps teachers to cope with uncertainty and complexity, respond effectively to rapid change and create a climate that values risk taking and continuous improvement [32]. It is stated that teachers who work together become more flexible in times of change and cope better with new demands that would normally exhaust the energy and resources of teachers working on their own [33]. The key to promoting change in schools is through establishing collaborative cultures based on the principles of collegiality, openness, and trust [34].

Teacher collegiality has also been linked in a positive way to teachers' sense of self-efficacy by many researchers [20] [35]. Norms of individualism and non-interference have been shown to weaken teachers' confidence about the efficacy of their own practice which eventually limits the possibility of improving student learning [36]. Collegiality is considered as the most important energy giver and it is claimed that when teachers have strong emotional connections with colleagues their teaching energy is high [37].

Hargreaves listed eleven benefits of collaboration among school staff: moral support; increased efficiency; improved effectiveness; reduced overload; synchronized time perspectives between teachers and administrators (i.e., shared and realistic expectations about timeframes for change and implementation); situated certainty of collective professional wisdom; political assertiveness; increased capacity for reflection; organizational responsiveness; opportunities to learn; and continuous learning [38].

It is found that joint work saved teachers' time and effort, enhanced their access to instructional resources, and facilitated consensus building and decisions to adopt or abandon innovations [39]. Teachers benefit greatly from the collective generation of ideas and suggestions, enhanced communication, willingness to seek and give help, improved practice, and enhanced repertoires of techniques [39]. Other miscellaneous studies that have reported positive outcomes of collegiality for teachers include more positive attitudes toward teaching [40], open communication among colleagues [41], high morale [42], and increments in the levels of trust [43].

3. Benefits for Students

Research on the extent of teachers' collaborative school improvement practices as related to students' academic achievement suggests that schools with higher levels of teacher collegiality had higher achievement scores [2] [44] [45]. This perhaps is the most fundamental reason for pursuing collegiality among school staff members.

It is believed that higher collegial relations among teaching staff lead to higher quality instruction and, in turn, increased student academic achievement [46]. It is assumed that nurturing a collegial culture in a school would benefit student learning more than using structural change to improve student learning [47]. The schools where teachers take collective responsibility for student achievement, students show greater gains in core subjects [16]. In a comparative study of two high-performing and two low-performing schools in Michigan, it was found that teachers in the high-performing schools reported more occurrences of collaboration than teachers in low-performing schools [48]. It was therefore, concluded that school culture needs to change to be less isolating and more collaborative.

A study that specifically focused on teacher collaboration as one of the best practices in elementary schools in Tennessee found that all the high-performing schools had some kind of mandated time for horizontal collaboration in place, although the frequency of these collaborative activities varied from daily common planning time to required meetings once every two weeks [49]. Another study indicated that fourth-grade students have higher achievement in mathematics and reading when they attended schools characterized by higher levels of teacher collaboration [2].

4. Benefits for Educational Organizations

Collegiality is one of the most important factors in determining the quality of a school. It is assumed that the task of developing collegiality may be integral to the task of improving schools [50]. Collaboration appears to be the unifying theme that characterized many of the new developments in the successful schools of the 1990s. Even the recent literature on school improvement has also shown that the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability among school personnel to function as professional collegial communities [1] [14].

A workplace study of 78 schools in 8 districts in Tennessee affirmed the importance of the social context as the researcher concluded that professional communities in schools support adoption because educators in these social environments naturally look for improvement strategies [51]. Another study conducted in less advantaged public schools in Chicago found that schools with strong professional learning communities improved four times faster than schools without these communities [52].

5. Conclusion

Teacher collegiality is necessary in an era of continuous change and improvement. It is seen as an opportunity to involve many individuals in solving the complex educational problems of modern times. A wider range of demands can be addressed by using a collaborative approach than by individual, isolated efforts [53]. Schools that do not support collegiality among their staff and allow their teachers to work alone in their classrooms waste human resources and contribute to disenchantment with teaching as a career [54]. It is warned that collegiality in any organization does not happen by chance; it needs to be structured, taught, and learned [16]. It is pointed out that laying the groundwork for a collaborative and collegial culture is essential for school leaders, 'who realize that a collection of superstar teachers working in isolation cannot produce the same results as interdependent colleagues who share and develop professional practices together' [16].

The process of collegiality is likely to work only when a significant number of teaching personnel at a specific school becomes convinced that it will actually lead to improved teaching and learning. The overall analysis of the research studies on teacher collegiality determines that effective collegiality in schools is a vital source of enhancement in staff professional growth, student learning, and organizational effectiveness.

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