From Where Two or More are Gathered: Understanding an Interdisciplinary Team

Glynnis Childress
Montclair State University, childressg1@mail.montclair.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cimle

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, and the Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons

From Where Two or More are Gathered: Understanding an Interdisciplinary Team

Glynnis Childress
Montclair State University

Introduction

This study explores the types of professional learning teachers report when participating in an interdisciplinary team at the high school level. Most research on interdisciplinary teaming focuses on the middle school level, and it is unclear whether the benefits of teaming can be realized at the high school level. Analyzing teachers' reported experiences within this particular approach to collaboration is especially interesting because collaboration among teachers is often described as though it was a "natural" and "easy" thing to achieve, when in reality, rich and authentic collaboration can be quite difficult to foster. High-quality collaboration and teamwork are essential in all areas of life (e.g., schools, businesses, families) if outcomes are to be optimized. Focusing on interdisciplinary teaming at the high school level is of particular interest because much of the research pertains to teaming at the middle school level, and yet, high schools seem to be ideal contexts for facilitating teaming because often times students struggle with attendance, academics and dropping out during the first two years of high school and teaming offers a proactive approach to address these issues (Teaming, 2013). For this reason, I use social learning theory to analyze the professional learning of a newly created team of high school teachers. In addition, this is a participatory action research project, in which I serve as a participant on this newly formed high school team.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Interdisciplinary teaming embodies a multitude of benefits for teachers, ranging from positive personal and professional growth, communal support, and increased job satisfaction rates (McLaughlin, 1993; Husband & Short, 1994; Flowers, Mertens & Mulhall, 2002; Shah, 2012, Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015). For example, in some school settings (e.g., U.S. middle schools) teachers are divided into interdisciplinary teams expressly for the purpose of working together to improve classroom practice across all content areas (Flowers, Mertens & Mulhall, 2000; Moolenaar, Sleegers & Daly, 2012). Unsurprisingly, too, teachers working in interdisciplinary teams have reported an increase in professional dialogue and sharing of resources and ideas (Cook & Faulkner, 2010; Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Wilson, 2007). Thus, it is easy to argue that collaborative opportunities, such as interdisciplinary teaming, offer teachers real and rewarding contexts within which to work and learn from one another, and that these benefits may easily translate to the high school level.

Interdisciplinary teaming affords teachers a space in which to socially interact and exchange ideas in a supportive environment. Social learning theory, developed by Brown and Adler (2008), provides an innovative way of understanding learning when compared to more traditional conceptions of learning. Social learning theory is based on the "premise that our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about the content and through grounded interactions, especially with others, around problems or actions" (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 18). Thus, a social learning perspective draws directly on Vygotskian theory and

focuses attention on the ways in which individuals socially interact during the learning process—which may or may not be tied to a particular task or project (Brown & Adler, 2008; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). For Brown and colleagues, learning often occurs when we least expect it, but it does require regular and ongoing opportunities to pool knowledge and to talk about ideas from different angles.

In developing their understanding of "social learning," Brown and Adler (2008) drew on a range of studies, including Richard J. Light's (2001) landmark study of college students at Harvard University. By compiling more than sixteen hundred in-depth interviews, Light discovered that students in small study groups benefitted directly from the social interactions that took place within these groups and were "far more engaged and far better prepared, and they learned significantly more" than students who worked independently (p. 52). In short, this social view of learning exemplifies the belief that learning is socially constructed by means of participating in conversations or working together on a shared task.

In many ways, interdisciplinary teams also encourage or provide spaces for participation in that they bring teachers together regularly to talk, share and collaborate. Thus, while much is known about interdisciplinary teaming in the ideal; that is, in terms of what it should look like under ideal conditions, there are few wide scale studies at the high school level of what interdisciplinary teaming looks like in practice and how teachers themselves report their own professional learning. A key assumption underpinning this entire study is that the outcomes may well hold useful insights for teachers working in teaming environments through an ordered accumulation of responses to the research question posed: "What happens when we as high school teachers participate in an interdisciplinary team?"

Methods and Data Collection

In order to successfully analyze what happens when teachers collaborate in interdisciplinary teams at the high school level, I conducted a participatory action research study at Oakwood High School (pseudonym), a public high school located in a racially and ethnically diverse school district within a northern state. By conducting a participatory action research study, I was able to become not only a researcher but also a participant in the learning. Additionally, participatory action research allows the researcher to have an insider perspective (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007). For the purpose of this participatory action research study, I developed and participated in an interdisciplinary team at my current high school setting. The interdisciplinary team of four teachers (English, social studies, science and math) was situated in the ninth grade. Additionally, the interdisciplinary team of teachers had at least five students in common who were considered to be "at-risk" prior to entering high school. The interdisciplinary team met once a week during the schedule collaboration period and met once a month during the district required Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) meeting time.

Interviews. An integral part of this participatory action research was to "enable participants to describe their situation" (Stringer, 1999, p. 68). The use of interviews highlighted the participants' views, ideas, and experiences of being a member of an interdisciplinary team. In a semi-structured format, I asked my colleagues about their experiences, understandings and implementation of this interdisciplinary high school team. Consistent with the theoretical framework of social learning theory, I coded these interviews for instances when teachers reported learning from their colleagues and the nature of that learning (e.g., about students, content, or instruction).

Participant observations. Acting as a teacher-researcher as well as participant, I observed and wrote field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) during the interdisciplinary team meetings and monthly PLCs. Similar to coding of interviews, I coded field notes for explicit instances of teacher learning, and type of learning, and general topics of conversation. I also coded exchanges between teachers for any instances of collaboration or uptake of ideas across the team.

Reflective journal. The final part of my data collection was to keep a reflective journal. The use of a reflective journal became an integral part to the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). By offering the teachers involved in the study an opportunity to journal developed a community of reflective learners and decision makers. Participation in reflective journaling created a space for thoughtful dialogue and contributed in the research data.

Preliminary Results

Although data collection is ongoing, data from interviews and field notes provide preliminary findings for the ways in which interdisciplinary teaming provides a space that influences teacher relationships and professional learning. General patterns and common themes emerged and included the following: opportunities to exchange share practice freely, engaging in purposeful communication, and developing a space for social bonding. Data analysis to date suggests that teachers in interdisciplinary teams demonstrate collaborative interactions through positive and meaningful conversations, which focus on supportive communication to foster interpersonal relationships. Supportive communication was found to be an integral part of the interdisciplinary team. For example, teachers reported different kinds of supportive communication "moves" or strategies that they found useful within their team. This included discussing frustrations with one another, nurturing better teacher-student relationships and providing a sense of a welcoming environment and security to seek advice about pedagogy and students. As such, teachers were more likely to view teacher collaboration positively when they are comfortable with the people with whom they are working, have opportunities to share and communicate, and feel a sense of team cohesiveness. In addition to the strong interpersonal relationships fostered among the team, teachers reported learning about individual students during team meetings. Perhaps because each teacher on the team is responsible for a different content area, teachers did not report much learning about content, but did frequently share instructional strategies during team meetings.

By acting as a teacher-researcher in this participatory action research study, I was able to witness that the implementation of an interdisciplinary team at the high school level was a rewarding opportunity for the teachers involved. First, the professional development opportunities enabled teachers to understand and participate in effective collaboration with other colleagues. Next, the purposeful and productive collaborate time equated to a positive work climate. For example, I noticed that the team members created a family atmosphere, uniting together to help one another, and encouraging one another. Finally, the journaling experiences for myself and other interdisciplinary team members created a platform to reflect on practice and team meetings.

References

Anderson, G., Herr, K. & Nihlen, A. (2007). *Studying your own school: An educator's guide to practitioner action research.* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Brown, J. S., & Adler, R. P. (2008). Minds on fire: Open education, the long tail, and learning 2.0. *Educause Review 43*(1), 17-32.

Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher 18*(1), 32-42. doi: 10.3102/0013189X018001032

Cook, C. M., & Faulkner, S. A. (2010). The use of common planning time: A case study of two Kentucky schools to watch. *RMLE Online 34*(2), 1-12. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2010.11462075

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fairman, J. C., & Mackenzie, S. V. (2015). How teacher leaders influence others and understand their leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education 18*(1), 61-87. doi: 10.1080/13603124.2014.904002

Flowers, N., Mertens, S. B., & Mulhall, P. F. (2000). What makes interdisciplinary teams effective? *Middle School Journal 31*(4), 53-56. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2000.11494640

Flowers, N., Mertens, S. B., & Mulhall, P. F. (2002). Four important lessons about teacher professional development. Research on middle school renewal. *Middle School Journal 33*(5), 57-61.

Husband, R., & Short, P. (1994). Interdisciplinary teams lead to greater teacher empowerment. *Middle School Journal 26*(2), 58-61. doi: 10.1080/00940771.1994.11494412

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New literacies: Everyday practices and social learning* (3rd ed.). Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press.

Light, R. J. (2004). *Making the most of college*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

McLaughlin, M. (1993). What matters most in teachers' workplace context? In J. W. Little & M. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Teachers' work: Individuals, colleagues, and contexts* (pp. 79–103). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Moolenaar, N. M., Sleegers, P. J., & Daly, A. J. (2012). Teaming up: Linking collaboration networks, collective efficacy, and student achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *28*(2), 251-262. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2011.10.001

Newmann, F. M., & Wehlage, G. G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The Qualitative Report 13*(4), 695-705.

Stringer, E. T. (1999) *Action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Teaming (2013, October 13). In S. Abbott (Ed.), *The glossary of education reform*. Retrieved from http://edglossary.org/teaming.

Wilson, J. L. (2007). Virtual teaming: Placing preservice middle level teachers on interdisciplinary teams. *RMLE Online 31*(3), 1-15. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2007.11462046