

researchsnapshot



A Culture of Collaborative Inquiry: Learning to Develop and Support Professional Learning Communities

Source of Research: Nelson, T., Perkins, M., & Hathorn, T. (2008). A Culture of Collaborative Inquiry: Learning to Develop and Support Professional Learning Communities. *Teachers College Record*, 110(6), 1269-1303.

What is this research about?

This research was undertaken in an effort to better understand how to support secondary teachers' engagement in collaborative inquiry. The researchers set out to learn about fostering and sustaining a culture of collaborative inquiry through the lenses of professional development facilitators. The team's investigation focused on identifying what professional developers must learn in order to be successful through the critical examination of the decisions, contexts, processes, and outcomes that constituted their work as they set out through "murky, unstructured territory" (p. 1275) characteristic of a collaborative inquiry approach to teacher learning.

What did the researchers do?

Professional learning facilitators who supported teachers in "surfacing and negotiating beliefs and engaging in an inquiry cycle consisting of the development of an inquiry focus and design, data collection and analysis, and synthesis" (p. 1274) took a collaborative approach to understanding their professional development practices. Using a narrative case study design, the researchers collected and examined qualitative data in order to understand structures and processes that supported collaborative inquiry.

What you need to know...

The use of protocols to examine data and the "intentional attention to the co-construction and maintenance of collaborative norms" enabled the team's ability to function "as a learning community through challenging times and circumstances" (p. 1298). Continual attention to collaborative norms along with re-examining beliefs about how the team *thought things should be* versus *how things were* helped to facilitate the development of a culture of inquiry. Norms provided for "trust amongst group members which made talking about one's beliefs about teaching and learning safe to do" (p. 1291). The explicit acceptance of collaborative norms also allowed the team to invoke the norms when tensions emerged. "This agreed upon avenue for dialogue" (p. 1291) enabled the team to maintain an inquiry stance.

What did the researchers find?

"A critical aspect of conducting collaborative inquiry lies in the development of the group" (p. 1298).

Critical to the functioning of the team and areas of ongoing knowledge negotiation were: a) the development of a **shared vision**, b) consistent and inclusive avenues of **communication**, and c) **shared leadership**.

Creating a **shared vision** of high-quality teaching and learning did not come quickly or easily for the team; however, recognizing their own need to examine and refine their vision helped professional learning facilitators to structure opportunities for teachers to engage in a similar process. Tensions between team members arose due to unclear or insufficient **communication**. While recognizing the critical need for expanded communication, finding time to interact outside scheduled meetings was difficult. Defining roles and giving attention to **shared leadership** was important. While tensions regarding leadership surfaced early on, trust that was established along with a shared "definition for the direction and detail of the project afforded little chance for leadership tensions to emerge" (p. 1296) as the group developed over time.