

Techniques and Strategies of Communication and Cooperation with Colleagues Inside and Outside the School

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Abstract

The communication and cooperation with colleagues, has been seen that it affects the performance of teachers at school, their desire for work and the love and quality with which they conduct lessons, as well in creating a positive school climate although it is not talked too much and is not addressed in the various reports. This paper aims to develop and understand different forms of communication with colleagues in educational institutions, in order to increase and improve cooperation between them. The paper also aims to bring techniques and strategies that will increase the communication and cooperation skills between teachers, based on the review of a wide literature, its evaluation by bringing contemporary studies as well as different viewpoints regarding the relationship between the pedagogical staff in the school and outside of it. The cooperation helps the realization of the Individual Education Plan, but also the planning of educational work at school. This cooperation aligns work objectives to develop the student's potential and to improve student's results. A bad and non-cooperative relationship with colleagues and managers affects quality reduction. In most of their work, teachers are seen not only as transmitters of knowledge, but also as behavior models and educators of a new generation. It is thought that cooperation has an impact on the teacher's performance, but also on the students' performance and results. The article combines the researcher's point of view, and gives some recommendations as well-planned implementation to successfully influence the collaborative process and progress, teaching staff must function as a team and abandon traditional norms of isolation and individualism. The investment in time to do this kind of practical and applied work should be accompanied by redesigned guidelines that are more coherent and structurally sound.

Keywords: teacher collaboration, teacher performance, director's role, communication, students' performance

Introduction

Nowadays, the school has undergone a change in system and structure, programs and ideas. Albania is one of the countries with the longest transition and also one of the developing countries, and as such its educational system has been part of various transitions and reforms undertaken to improve quality. These reforms and almost all the given recommendations emphasize the structural side of the system and the way the process works, curricular changes and improvements, teaching methods, etc. In our schools, today we talk about teacher-pupil, teacher-parent and vice versa relationships in both cases, as well as the school-community relationship. Of course, these relationships are very important and significant for the school, but it seems clear that an equally important element has been forgotten, the teacher-teacher relationship, the creation of a good climate of cooperation and the exchange of experiences between them, which in contemporary and international literature is seen as a strong point in improving the performance of the school.

The "Framework for School Quality Assessment" in Albania has defined four areas of quality, which are directly related to the entire activity of the school and determine its performance as a whole. These areas are: School leadership and management, quality of teaching and learning, student assessment and achievement, and student well-being and behavior (ASCAP 2020). Even in this document drawn up by the quality assurance agency in pre-university education, the relationships of teachers with each other inside and outside the school are not included, but the relationships of teachers with other actors and partners outside of it are foreseen.

The various researches developed in this direction, conclude that today's teachers and school leaders are more interested in the cooperation of teachers than the previous generations.

Historically, it has been common for teachers to work independently, and not much importance has been paid to the relationships between them. Today, the cooperation of teachers with each other, the sharing of knowledge between them, the discussion of ideas and the joint contribution to solving problems is becoming more and more important. Proponents of teacher collaboration believe that teachers working together have a positive influence on each other and naturally contribute to school improvement and increased student achievement. Specific types of teacher collaboration include working together in teams, sharing responsibilities, providing feedback, and building trust.

Therefore, more and more teachers are being asked to work in a team and school leaders to be the leader of this team. For years, school leadership has been a priority of education policies around the world. The role of school leaders has become a determining factor in improving its results. But what happens in Albania? The position of the head of the school is a "Political" position, which means that it has nothing to do with his skills or preparation, but how much he contributed to the

party that wins the electoral elections. This is an unwritten rule, but one that is known and accepted. Even the changes of leaders in different schools depend precisely on the party and politics. This often causes mistrust among the staff and conflicts between teachers and leaders, as well as the creation of different groups within the staff of the same school. Many studies undertaken have as their object the discovery of the main reasons behind successful schools and at the end of these research it has been found that the greatest achievements of schools are closely related to their successful management. So far, there has not been a single case where the improvement in student achievement of a particular school has not been the result of its leadership by talented principals. (Louis, S Karen; Leithwood Kenneth; Wahlstrom L Kyla; Anderson, E Stephen, 2010).

One of the most interesting findings in research conducted by both Meyer & Cohen and Pellegrin is that when teachers work in groups, they have significantly greater influence in decision-making and policy formulation within the school (Johnson, 1976).

Two findings from other studies indicate that:

a) high levels of support from teachers for each other are related to high self-concept of students and students are less likely to show symptoms of depression (Reddy, Rhodes and Mulhall, 2003).

b) collegial cooperation between teachers and between teachers and school leaders improves the school climate (Rutter, 2000; Rutter and Maughan, 2002).

Recent research suggests that factors related to school organization can improve and sustain teachers' job satisfaction. In particular, job satisfaction appears to vary and depend on the absence or existence of a professional community in the school, the extent to which teachers engage in collegial collaboration, and how much autonomy the teacher can exercise in the school (Stearns et al., 2015). The relationships of teachers with their principals, in terms of socio-emotional and organizational aspects regarding leadership opportunities and professional freedom over classroom policies, influence teachers' job satisfaction and commitment (Price, 2012; Stearns et al., 2015).

Methodology

This article is part of a broader and more in-depth study which analyzes the relationships of teachers with each other inside and outside the school institution. Likewise, in this study, the role of the leader to create a positive climate and to promote positive relationships between teachers is analyzed. The study deals with how these two components affect school performance, the relationship between teachers and the role of the leader in these relationships.

This article is based on the review of the literature, being careful in the selection of a contemporary literature, articles published in scientific journals and with impact factors, considering the adaptation to the Albanian context.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance and the benefits derived from the cooperation between teachers and school leaders, not only on the professional side, but also in socio-emotional support, to present effective strategies and the key points of cooperation between teachers.

Definitions

Montiel-Overall (2005) defined collaboration as the process of co-creation where two or more individuals with complementary skills interact to create a shared understanding that no one previously possessed or could have formulated on their own. At its core, collaboration is a commitment to share resources, power, and talent. Collaboration is not just collegiality, but also involves hard work and confronting difficult questions (O'Donovan, 2007). During collaborative processes, the collaborative team is the fundamental building block of the organization (DuFour & Eaker, 2008). Collaboration is achieved in small steps and is emphasized by the commitment of all teachers and all students will learn from it (O'Donovan, 2007).

During effective collaboration processes, group members develop a shared belief that they are responsible for shaping shared goals and values. The culture of cooperation does not originate from the beliefs and practices that teachers hold about the curriculum and different instructions; instead, it comes from teachers' social and moral beliefs about the relationships between individuals and the communities in which they live (Lavie, 2006). When all teachers are involved in the collaborative process and learn together, then the entire team will produce more substantial results in each subject in which members are committed to helping all students learn. (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karnhanek 2010).

According to Johnson (2006), there is much evidence that interdependent work among teachers can contribute to increased student achievement and teacher job satisfaction. Johnson believed that teachers value the opportunity to work together with their colleagues. To collaborate effectively with colleagues, teachers need to know where they are going academically with students and the specific objectives they wish to achieve. (Hall & Simeral, 2008).

Discussions about the Importance and Benefits of Cooperation

Teaching can be tiring and emotionally draining. Everyone tries to find a balance between work and family life, but regardless of this, stress is part of work and colleagues, so other teachers are invaluable sources of support and relief of this stress. When teachers support each other, they develop relationships based on trust and empathy. These regular interactions are important in forming lasting

professional relationships. When teachers feel supported, they are better able to provide the same support to their students¹.

Teacher collaboration can open doors for personal and professional development and can benefit both students and teachers.

The results of a study conducted with students on the subject of mathematics in Nigeria, revealed that a group of teachers (who worked together) had a significant effect on student achievement in mathematics. Multiple classification analysis showed that students whose teacher engaged in collaborative activities performed better than those taught by a teacher who did not engage in collaboration (Saka, 2021).

But the benefits that come from the cooperation of teachers are not only related to the results of students, which is a direct factor in school performance, but they are also related to other elements that indirectly also affect a good or not good performance. As such we can mention the storm of creative ideas during which different ideas are generated while individual differences are accepted and respected. It also encourages teachers to share their ideas, as well as to expand their knowledge by drawing on the ideas and knowledge of other teachers. Teachers can come up with unique ideas for their lesson plans that they may have never thought of before, or hesitated to implement (Bouchrika, 2022).

Cooperation can help teachers and for professional growth. Thus, teachers, especially young ones, can get the help of other teachers who have mastered the skills they are trying to build at this moment. They can observe each other and inform each other how they can improve their work. Interaction, dialogue, feedback and exchange of ideas help teachers to create good working relationships among themselves. Teachers become more effective when they work with others to improve their lesson plans, which can lead to more engaging classroom lessons (Bouchrika, 2022).

Important benefits for teachers such as a greater sense of belonging, increased confidence and a sense of efficacy come as a result of collaborative lesson planning and discussion of ways to improve future lessons. (Bruce et al., 2011).

In particular, cooperating teachers are more likely to talk with their colleagues about classroom problems, teaching strategies, or the curriculum. Consequently, teachers gain knowledge from each other (Reeves, 2003).

Teacher collaboration has been a common element for years in one or more of these three models: shared time, professional learning communities, and critical peer groups. Each model is different, but they share common characteristics: 1) advance teacher learning, 2) address specific issues, 3) foster collegiality, 4) reduce teacher isolation, and 5) lead teachers to greater knowledge about teaching and learning.

¹ <https://degree.astate.edu/articles/k-12-education/importance-of-teacher-collaboration.aspx>

The overarching element, and perhaps the most important common element, is the goal of improving student learning (AMLE, Oct, 2014).

Analysis of Effective Strategies and Key Points of Cooperation

Planning cooperation time as a professional job for achieving goals by focusing on real and achievable tasks. Surprisingly, theoretical studies on teacher collaboration have often reported time as an important determinant. Lack of time is cited as an important challenge for teachers regarding their collaboration with colleagues (Promethean, 2021). If we want to encourage collaboration between staff members and, in the same way, give pedagogy its rightful place at the heart of this process, it is imperative that sufficient time is allocated for collaboration between teachers within regular school hours (Eaker et al., 2004).

Research by Louis and Marks (2011) found, "Teachers form more stable and productive communities in schools where they are more involved in educational decision-making, and, in particular, schools that schedule regular blocks of time for teachers to meet and planned courses and assignments together". Teachers who were involved in collaborative processes reported that they had great improvements in the joint creation of teaching materials, in joint assessments as well as in the joint examination of student work (AMLE, March, 2014). Such tasks allow teachers to pool their knowledge and experiences and adjust their practice in real time.

One of the ways to be an effective teacher is to schedule shared work time with other teachers. This gives you the opportunity to meet and collaborate with other teachers on teaching and decision-making in the classroom. This involves groups of teachers reflecting on teaching methods, modifying them, and implementing changes in their classrooms to help students learn better (Bouchrika, 2022). Different school administrators plan shared time in different ways. One method is to schedule a time together once a week. Others cut classes on certain days to give teachers time to meet or set aside full days for collaborative work. Whichever way schools may choose to implement it, teacher collaboration can achieve the desired results if it is done with well-defined goals. For example, organizing cooperating teachers who share teaching experiences, teachers who share common planning time, and/or teachers who have identified instructional skills for improvement can potentially produce collaborative partnerships that engage teachers in effective and beneficial professional development (Carrol, Patrick & Goldring, 2021).

Creating a vision and truly shared goals. The level of belonging that teachers feel in the process affects how much they actually invest in collaborative work. A shared vision and goals can lead to that sense of belonging. For example, identify your team's shared vision for caring for students and their learning, set goals related to that vision, discuss how teamwork can help achieve those goals, and monitor

progress frequently. A strong connection between the team's work and vision can help individuals see the goal and be part of the process (AMLE, Oct, 2014).

Gathering together teachers of different profiles and fields to change teaching practices. Most teachers in all subject areas report changes, but science and social studies teachers were more likely to report changes in how they teach than in what they teach, suggesting that not everyone will be perfect teachers, but will be more conscious and strategic about the development of the lesson within their field (AMLE, March, 2014).

Use discussion and dialogue. Whether teachers are integrating curriculum, analyzing data, or studying a new practice, teams must understand the roles and differences between dialogue and discussion. They are equally important to the group process. Discussion moves the conversation forward. In discussion, individuals express their opinions in order to create consensus or make decisions. The purpose of the dialogue is the exchange and expansion of knowledge. Dialogue invites multiple perspectives, values the exploration of biases and assumptions, questions the status quo, and generates new ways of knowing and being. Dialogue requires active listening, a willingness to state beliefs, an ability to withstand the tension of ambiguity, and faith in the transformative potential of the process (AMLE, Oct, 2014).

Emotional support for teachers. The pandemic has disrupted the emotional well-being of teachers. A survey conducted by the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence found that stressful emotions felt by teachers were associated with fear of contacting Covid-19 and balancing the needs of their family while working full-time from home (Bouchrika, 2022). However, even with her passing, the teacher is a human being who faces the problems of life at work and in the family. To effectively support teachers' well-being, schools can create an emotional intelligence scorecard. This includes identifying how teachers want to feel as staff members. They can then share concrete ideas on how to support each other in achieving that feeling. This can be done through supervision sessions. In Albania, supervision has a negative connotation as it is seen as a way of controlling the work of teachers and leaders, while supervision itself has to do with supporting the staff so that they don't go into a "burn out" state. The most pressing challenges for teacher collaboration today are stressors related to mental and physical health.

From an observational point of view, the teaching team seems to work cooperatively and has a relationship of mutual trust and respect. In general, presenters report very positive emotional experiences during the collaboration process. Teachers talk about feeling supported by team members during difficult or stressful times and that the collaborative environment also offers opportunities to reduce frustration (Smart, 2012).

Develop a sense of community. At its core, collaboration is relational. Getting to know colleagues, understanding their passions, and taking the time to connect on a personal level can help members gain mutual respect. Establishing shared values and commitments can unify the group and provide purpose for their collective work (AMLE, Oct, 2014). Other ways to develop community include creating traditions, celebrating accomplishments, and recognizing individual contributions.

Identify group norms. Collaboration can be uncomfortable or stressful at times. When we are transparent about our work and our beliefs, our colleagues can see our limitations as well as our strengths, putting us in a position of vulnerability. Sharing and trusting with colleagues takes courage and humility. A climate of trust can help create the safe environment that is necessary for open communication (AMLE, Oct, 2014).

Sharing of best practices in teaching. Teachers can help their colleagues improve by sharing their experiences. This builds trust in the teacher who shares his experience and improves knowledge in others (Bouchrika, 2022). Sharing positive practices involves several steps:

Define the problem. Identify the problem, its causes, and define what success looks like. Success should be defined in attitudes or behaviors that are measurable.

Determine who should share their expertise. Identify teachers in your school who exhibit behaviors or achievements related to the outcome you desire. The basis for their identification should also be the use of clear, data-driven methods.

Discover best practices. Identify strategies that successful teachers are using in their classrooms. Video recordings of classroom sessions where these instructional strategies are used can be useful in analyzing the success of such strategies.

Design the intervention program. Schools should decide on a methodology that allows them to replicate successful practices in their classrooms. For example, they can also record videos of their teaching sessions to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and other ways to adapt instruction in their classrooms.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The progress of the learning intervention should be measured with analytical tools that collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Share the results. Schools should make the intervention program accessible to a wide audience so that it can be replicated. For teacher instruction videos, schools can create an archive of materials so that they are accessible to those who want to improve their teaching strategies.

Acknowledging the authorship of changes by providing space and support for teachers to design and update materials in accordance with their students to meet the goals. Teachers are using a wide range of resources. The transition to new standards along with digitization has led to an explosion of sharing and adapting learning materials,

some on education-specific platforms, but much more through the use of wider technologies such as YouTube, Pinterest and Twitter. (AMLE, March, 2014). Teachers can identify and create effective teaching materials tailored to their students. School leaders can also give autonomy to networks of teachers to create materials they deem most valuable and relevant to their students, but of course this must be accompanied by policy changes and guidelines for implementation.

Working through conflict. Dialogue can also lead to conflict. It may be helpful for the team to develop a conflict management plan and monitor it. Teams can help manage conflict by providing time, space and support for individuals as they work through their emotions. Individuals should also monitor their emotions and practice self-care.

Using professional judgment, the team can determine when to explore the roots of the conflict and when to provide space for reflection and calm. Although sometimes unpleasant, conflict often provides opportunities for growth (AMLE, Oct, 2014).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) report "Teamwork for 21st Century Teaching and Learning: What Research and Practice Reveal about Professional Learning," published in 2010, provides a synthesis of five research studies. Studies show that when teachers are given the tools and time to collaborate, they become inclusive learners; Educational practices improve and eventually they become capable of improving student success far beyond what any of them can achieve alone. This report highlights 6 key points for success (NCTAF, 2010):

Shared values and goals. Team members have a shared vision of students' learning needs and a clear understanding of how their collective teaching experience can be orchestrated to meet these needs. They identify learning challenges that the team can focus on to improve student success.

Collective Responsibility. Team members share responsibilities according to their experience, knowledge and skills. They hold each other accountable for their success and are collectively responsible for the improvement of each student supervised by the team.

Meaningful (authentic) reviews. Team members hold themselves professionally accountable for student success using assessments and data that give them real-time feedback on learning and teaching effectiveness. These assessments add value and are not necessarily formal assessments.

Self-directed reflection. Highly effective teams create a feedback loop on goal setting, planning, standards, and assessments that are oriented toward student learning needs and consistent with teachers' professional development needs.

A reliable environment. If a team is given the time, space, resources and direction for their teamwork, they can turn a mediocre school into a successful learning

institution. Space and time are "sacred"; they are not used for anything else. Even the best teachers cannot have much impact working alone.

Strong and committed leadership. Highly effective instructional teams are supported by principals who create a climate of openness and trust, a climate that encourages team members to make decisions to improve instructional effectiveness that are directly related to student needs. This support must be balanced by positive and appropriate pressure aimed at continuous improvement of the school's performance, according to the learning needs of the students.

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2010) reported that as the demand for teacher accountability for student achievement increases, collegial support and collaboration from educators is needed. Great damage can be done to the overall school culture if leaders develop collaborative teams that are not genuine or authentic (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Leaders can strengthen relationships in their schools by inviting teachers to participate in the decisions that concern them most. The three ways to involve them are: involvement in recruitment and giving the responsibility to guide and orient new teachers; individual and mutual training, through recognition by the teachers of the work, practice and difficulties of the leader and vice versa by the leader of the teacher; communication, principals are often physically distant from teachers, even when they are in the same room, which can cause unnecessary friction or misunderstandings. Increasing opportunities for functional communication fosters teacher expertise by opening stronger interpersonal connections (Plotinsky, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendation

School leaders - vice-principals and teachers - must work together and commit to a culture of collaboration. They should dedicate time to the organizational model within the school day. DuFour (2011) suggested that collaborative team members must realize that they cannot accomplish their goal of all students learning unless they work together collaboratively.

To help their teachers become involved in a more open professional community, principals should facilitate collaborative activities among their teaching staff by generating a gradual awareness of their many purposes and benefits. These positive actions will effectively shape the beliefs and perceptions of their teachers.

Principals should also carefully consider the issue of teacher workload. Finally, future actions should include creating more opportunities for discussion, which will lead to greater collaboration and providing time allocation within regular school hours for teachers who wish to increase their level of cooperation.

DuFour (2011) stated that the cooperation of teachers by invitation does not work. It is the well-planned implementation of leadership to successfully influence the collaborative process and progress.

Student performance will improve only when the teaching staff works as a team and abandons its traditional norms of isolation and individualism (Leonard & Leonard, 2003).

The investment in time to do this kind of practical, applied work should be accompanied by redesigned instruction that is more coherent and structurally sound (AMLE, March, 2014). McHenry (2009), in her study on the relationship between leadership behaviors and teacher collaboration, concluded that "although teachers are the key players in the act of collaboration, school leaders have an important responsibility in creating in which this type of cooperation to be successful".

Recognition of diversity in teachers' learning goals by school leaders and other facilitators of teacher learning can help motivate teachers to continuously develop their teaching practice (Louws, Meirink, van Veen, & van Driel, 2018). One way to arouse teachers' interest is to start the meetings with an orientation phase in which the central concept is explored collaboratively, without imposing any demand for immediate change on the teachers.

It is necessary to educate teachers on how to collaborate with colleagues and how this collaboration can contribute to their teaching (Sjoer & Meirink 2016).

If principals lead collaborative efforts and support their teachers through the processes, they will not only become better school leaders, but also foster a new focus on the learning environment. Thus, a successful cooperative school can only exist if its leader is committed to cooperation and cooperative values.

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