A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER COLLABORATION AT DUCHESS PARK SECONDARY SCHOOL

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to identify issues and barriers to teacher collaboration within Duchess Park Secondary School (DPSS) and offer strategies to improve practice. An assessment of the successes and failures of the current mechanisms for collaboration was conducted through a broadly-distributed, anonymous questionnaire to DPSS staff, and through a narrowly focused interview process which targeted individual members of collaboration groups in varying disciplines and demographics at DPSS. Once data was collected it was analyzed using qualitative thematic data analysis. The main barriers to successful teacher collaboration at DPSS were individual personality conflicts, lack of leadership within collaboration groups, a lack of predetermined collaboration objectives and agenda, and in some cases isolation and teacher work load. These barriers lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with collaboration sessions, frustration, and uncertainty, which further complicated the success of collaboration teams. Successful DPSS collaboration groups were those who: Exhibited a positive team mentality enabling the group to work together, had a clear group leader to organize and mediate the discussions, and who prepared an agenda and objectives for the group prior to the collaboration session so that each group member could prepare and participate. It was recommended that groups displaying the main barriers identified in this study work at primarily resolving these in order successfully collaborate. It was noted that individuals who do not believe in true collaboration or those who do not believe that change is needed within the PLC may not have participated in the general questionnaire and therefore their opinions may not have been reflected in this study.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Past and current educational research have focused on the importance of developing strong Professional Learning Communities (hereinafter, PLCs) (Dufour, 2004; McIntosh & White, 2006). Specialists view common grade assessments that focus on learning, curriculum development and collaboration, as components of PLCs. There are definitive data and literature available on why educators should abandon old pedagogical methods such as teacher isolation and ranking students. For instance, Dufour (2004) outlined how Stevenson high school focused on student learning rather than simply ranking students. At Stevenson, teachers and staff used interventions and timely checkups to identify struggling students. Their model was based on the goal of making sure each student was given the help needed to meet learning outcomes. Even though the PLC model has been widely accepted to have numerous benefits to student learning and achievement many schools have not successfully transformed their culture into a functioning Professional Learning Community. Collaboration within a PLC is one area where more research could be focused. There is insufficient information on the barriers teachers and schools face when developing a collaborative culture. Moreover, successful practices and strategies must be developed and shared between teacher-leaders and administration to overcome the barriers to successful collaboration.

Significance of the Project

Public education continually pushes for rapid change but maintains relatively inert in comparison to other professional industries. Educational research has offered many models and chances for innovation but there has not been widespread success in implementing systems and converting pedagogical practices. There are countless explanations for the lack of development in education that include: The diversity of students, overcrowding of classes, infrastructure,
teacher burn-out, and funding. The bottom line is that many teaching professionals are not changing with the ever-changing world around them.

The insurgence of the Professional Learning Community model has brought teacher collaboration blocks into the timetables of some schools. Locally in the Prince George school district, two high schools have made these significant changes. D. P. Todd Secondary and Duchess Park Secondary School (DPSS) have created an alternative timetable to encourage teacher collaboration. This time during the work week offers staff the greatly needed opportunity to collaborate on pressing student learning issues. There is a slight difference between the two schools. At DPSS, the collaboration block is within the timetable and is part of the paid workday, whereas at D. P. Todd, it is not, and teachers may spend this time however they choose.

Administration teams seem to have student learning at the forefront of school agendas by creating time for collaboration. However, this reform is in its infancy and it may prove challenging for staff to effectively collaborate with their colleagues as they have had no training on how to do so.

**Background and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this action-research project was to identify issues and barriers of teacher collaboration within DPSS and offer strategies to improve practice. Many teacher collaboration teams within public education are not as effective as they could be. Hargreaves (1991) argued that teachers had difficulties with the implementation of collegiality and collaboration. From my personal observations a significant number of teaching professionals lack deep understanding of collaboration to effectively implement a collaborative culture. In addition, there is not enough support, in the form of strategies and success stories, to help improve productivity of collaboration groups. Improvement of collaboration teams in public education is important as
teacher collaboration has dramatic effect on teaching strategies and student performance. Chance and Segura (2009) demonstrated that teacher collaboration was integral to school improvement and changing teacher practices. These changes altered teacher’s methodology and ensured that students learned. Therefore by improving teacher collaboration at DPSS an improvement to teaching should also occur and more importantly gains in student learning could be seen.

Personal Location

As a teacher on staff at DPSS and a researcher for the University of Northern British Columbia Master of Education program, I played two roles. As part of the staff, I had insider information on the staff dynamic and understood the belief systems of fellow colleagues. While an active participant in my teacher role, I gained firsthand knowledge on what was working and what may need to be refined. I also had relationships with staff members that had been built over the last five years of working at DPSS. As a researcher I had to put aside my biases and maintain an open mind when collecting data and conducting interviews.

Conceptual Lens (Theoretical Orientation)

This study used qualitative analysis through the lens of action research. Qualitative analysis differs from traditional quantitative research methods. Creswell (2008) argued that qualitative analysis focuses on broad questions that are answered by participants in verbal or text form. From this information researchers described and analyzed data for themes and, subjectively completed the inquiry.

Specifically Sagor’s (2000) model was implemented in the study of collaboration at DPSS. From the Institute of Inquiry in Education, Sagor (2000, p. 3) defined action research as:
A disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions.

Sagor argued that the action research process is broken down into seven steps. My study followed these steps:

1. Select a focus
2. Clarify theories
3. Identify research questions
4. Collect data
5. Report results
6. Take informed action

This study did not use the last step of Sagor’s model due to time constraints. Taking informed action is characterized by changing current techniques to improve practice based on the results of the action research. In other words, data generated from this study would be used to implement improvements to collaboration procedures. Tentative plans for improvement to collaboration at DPSS includes calling on teacher leaders and administration to create a strategic plan to improve PLC teams within the school.

Overview of the Project

The purpose of this project was to identify issues and barriers of teacher collaboration within DPSS and offer strategies to improve practice. An assessment of the successes and failures of the current mechanisms for collaboration was conducted through a broadly-distributed, anonymous questionnaire to DPSS staff, and through a narrowly focused interview process which targeted individual members of collaboration groups in varying disciplines and
demographics at DPSS. Once data was collected it was analyzed using a qualitative coding
scheme and conclusions were drawn which outlined what DPSS staff viewed as the main
successes and barriers to collaboration.

The following sections of this project will include a literature review, detailed
methodologies, results, discussion and conclusions. The literature review includes references to
other studies on teacher collaboration, which provided a framework for this study. Fundamental
information on what potential barriers to collaboration exist, how the manifest, and exactly what
collaboration is or means to individuals was provided through review of Dufour (2004), Fullan
(2007), Creswell (2008), Chance and Segura (2009), among others (See Chapter 2). The methods
section of this study detail how the research was carried out; qualitative design was derived from
Sagor (2000). Underlying ethics and research procedures are detailed in Chapter 3;
confidentiality agreements and interviewing techniques are described. The results of studying
teacher collaboration at DPSS are presented in Chapter 4. The findings of both the interview
process and teacher questionnaire are detailed, and a general discussion is carried out to elucidate
commonalities and other significant findings generated from the study. Conclusions,
implications and recommendations are outlined in Chapter 5: included are the project's potential
weaknesses, personal accounts and recommendations for promising teacher collaboration at
DPSS.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this action research was to better understand the barriers that inhibit
successful teacher collaboration at DPSS. The PLC is the newest wave of teacher reform but
differs from other models as it seems to have had more success by focusing on the learner rather
than the teacher. There is still resistance to the PLC and, more specifically, teacher collaboration.
A qualitative approach to action research was used in this study in order to identify barriers to collaboration teams and to help improve practice.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 1 outlined how limited growth in pedagogical practices has been the current trend and how teacher collaboration is a promising practice within the PLC, and introduced the main objectives and parameters of this study. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature concerned with the Professional Learning Community and demonstrates the need to conduct research studies on teacher collaboration.

Understanding how teacher collaboration, within a PLC framework, actually works requires both practical experience within the public education system and an in-depth review of the literature surrounding the topic. There were several fundamental sources in educational research that were pivotal in shaping this research project. Dufour (2004), Fullan (2007), Creswell (2008), and Muhammad (2009) are just a few of the individuals at the forefront of the research on educational reform and collaboration. A large body of literature exists on the PLC as an entirety, but few focus specifically on collaboration as one single aspect of the PLC. Chance and Segura (2009) and Elbousty and Bratt (2010) discuss informative aspects of school reform and barriers to school reform which were important in their application to teacher collaboration; a new technique in modern pedagogy that will undergo transformation through implementation. There are many facets involved in teacher collaboration and in order to improve practice, these facets must be fully understood. Teacher collaboration is affected by educational reform, staff dynamics, administrative leadership, teacher resistance, the extent of trust, and, of course, the actual method of teacher collaboration being used at the time (Mayer-Smith et al., 1998; Chance and Segura, 2009; Muhammad, 2009). This chapter is separated into sections based on the background of the PLC, collaborative culture, promising practice, resistance to collaboration and
staff divisions. Although the chapter is sectioned, these individual facets must be investigated in a holistic approach as teacher collaboration is much greater than the sum of its parts.

**PLC In Education**

The Professional Learning Community has been greatly popularized in recent public education history as the new model for our public schools. Dufour et al. (2006), Fullan (2008), and Jessie (2007) argued that the PLC model is different from past failed educational reforms as it follows three overarching ideas: (a) to ensure students learn, (b) to create a culture of collaboration, and (c) to focus on results. Dufour (2004) argued that these ideas combined with a critical teacher mindset are a promising practice for public education’s future.

Ensuring that students learn seems like an obvious pillar to the public education system. Unfortunately, the truth is that many students are not learning in the current educational system. The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2011) reported that in 2010 only 80% of students enrolled in high school graduated within six years of their start date. The remaining 20% of today’s students that start high school do not finish on time or at all. If students are unable to graduate, it could be that the current educational system is not focused on student learning. Dufour (2004) argued that the PLC’s first mission is to make sure that students learn. Teaching is not as simple as creating and delivering a lesson. If the best-planned lesson failed to ensure that students have learned, then changes would clearly need to be made to the pedagogical techniques employed. Class sizes, time tables, non-differentiated instruction, little time for collaboration and cut-backs that force more and more students into packed classes are all contributing to students’ inability to learn. The PLC shifts focus from teaching to a focus on learning.
Collaborative Culture

A culture of collaboration is something new to public education. In the past, the idea of teacher autonomy and isolation has stalled the progress of educational advancement (Elbousty and Bratt, 2010). For decades researchers have argued that individuals that remain closed off from their colleagues have little opportunity for professional discourse. Davis (1987) argued that without professional dialogue with other teachers, or collaboration, teacher burn-out and lack of pedagogical development is inevitable. A professional learning community focuses on teamwork and building collaborative structures. Within these collaborative structures varying viewpoints and perspectives are utilized to create new ideas solve lingering problems. Dufour (2004) defined collaboration as a:

systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement (p. 9).

There is more to successful collaboration than having teachers work together. It is imperative that collaboration has a structure wherein teachers are encouraged to conduct open conversations. What was normally private now becomes public. Collaborative time where teachers open up their practice with one another while focusing on student learning is a promising practice for improving student learning. Collaborative structures will help educators reform their teaching practices in a safe, team-orientated atmosphere.

The success stories and methods to best develop a well-structured collaborative team are not well known. Studies need to focus on how to administer the institutional changes necessary
to implement meaningful collaborative teams. In addition the information needs to be better circulated and delivered in a form that will not overburden teachers.

**Promising Practices for Teacher Collaboration**

Chance and Segura (2009) studied educational reform. Their study of a rural high school examined the events and behaviors associated with the improved and sustained student achievement based on organization development (OD). OD is a planned institution-wide change that is delivered from the top down in order to improve effectiveness. The study gathered data from three main sources: (1) in-depth interviews with staff, students and administrators; (2) school documents dealing with school improvement, and; (3) observations of locations such as classrooms and staff meetings. Chance and Segura (2009) found that structured collaboration was the single most important factor driving school reform. They argued that its success was dependent on three main factors: time within the school day to collaborate, structured meetings with an agenda, and administration to ensure student-focused collaboration. Successful teacher collaboration was credited with improving graduation rates at the rural high school. School documents reported that students as a whole showed measureable improvement in test scores, progress reports and attendance. Specific recommendations for successful teacher collaboration resulting from the study by Chance and Segura (2009) include:

1. Time allocated within the school day for teachers to meet in collaborative teams; teachers asked to meet on their own time are less likely to participate in collaboration.

2. Structured, agenda-based collaboration versus an informal meeting; Organized collaboration from predetermined objectives encourages teacher preparedness and ensures accountability. Furthermore, properly focused agendas would enable administration to guide teacher collaboration in the desired direction.
Ensuring that collaboration was student focused (by administration); administrative leadership was seen as an invaluable aspect to the collaborative teams.

In terms of professional development, collaboration is the most effective way to improve education because it impacts teaching directly and instantaneously.

**Resistance to Collaboration**

Teaching practices and student learning have shown promising improvements with increased teacher collaboration. Unfortunately, the reality is that many teachers still work in isolation with little chance for change and improvement in their teaching. The reasons for this isolation are not fully understood, and identified barriers are specific to each school.

Elbousty and Bratt (2010) have conducted research in resistance to the PLC as a whole. They examined an urban East Coast school characterized by teachers working in isolation. Their study surveyed teachers regarding their PLC. Questions were both multiple choice and open-ended essay formats. The survey results outlined teacher attitudes towards their own Professional Learning Community. From their data, Elbousty and Bratt (2010) formulated two main resistances to the learning community: Active and Passive resistance. Active resistance to the PLC was demonstrated by teachers flat-out refusing to work as part of the team, which obviously prevents any collaboration from taking place. Passive resistance was defined as pseudo-collaboration and demonstrated by teachers only working with selected group members. Passive resistance prevents teachers from obtaining new or different perspectives and ideals. The failure to challenge one’s thinking is the failure of growth. Opposing opinions in teacher collaborative groups, while focusing on results, will force teachers to think critically about what they are doing and how it affects student learning. This critical discussion and analysis produces more beneficial outcomes than collaborative teams who are always in agreement.
The Role of Trust in Reform

In the infancy of a school’s PLC reform there may be just cause for collaborating in like-minded teams. For those individuals new to collaboration or those who are struggling, a like-minded and, more importantly, positive collaborative team would be hypothesized to build trust, skills and the relationships needed to transfer into true collaboration. Mayer-Smith, Pedretti, and Woodrow (1998) studied collaboration between teachers and researchers for the purpose of improvements to secondary school science curriculum and pedagogy. They initiated a project called "Technology Enhanced Secondary Science Instruction" in which secondary teachers and university researchers worked together to gain insight into successful implementation of technology. Through this study of collaboration, Mayer-Smith et al. (1998) found that for teachers to undertake any reform, trust needed to be present within collaboration groups. Furthermore, scaffolding techniques create a virtual safety net for those averse to taking risks.

Teaching professionals understand that trust must be established with students before they will open up and encourage critique. If a student feels threatened or unsafe they will undoubtedly not take risks and expose their weaknesses. Teachers are not so different; they must learn to collaborate by learning to expose weaknesses and focus on student learning and achievement.

Musanti and Pence (2010) also came to the conclusion that trust was an integral factor in collaboration through an investigation of the foundations of teacher resistance to collaborative methods. Using a longitudinal qualitative study, they obtained data from teachers and facilitators that belonged to the federally funded Collaboration Centers Project (CCP). The CCP was initiated to address the needs of English language learners (or English as a second language) that were in their classrooms. During their three years of data collection and field notes, interview transcripts and written work from participants were collected and analyzed. Furthermore,
interviews were coded for themes and patterns and finally reduced to main categories. Of their many findings, trust was the essential component to teacher collaboration. Musanti and Pence (2010) warn leaders that teachers have individual identities. By dictating team teaching and mentoring, some individual teachers will be negatively affected by the grouping of teachers, because trust has not been established. More research is required on this topic.

Staff Division

Muhammad’s (2009) research on school culture provides a crucial understanding of individual personalities within the PLC. In his book he outlines four distinct groups that make up public educators and further argues that in order to change schools into a positive learning environment leaders must understand where each individual fits into the whole. In his research, Muhammad (2009) identified the following four groups: (a) Believers, (b) Tweeners, (c) Survivors, and (d) Fundamentalists.

Believers are the teachers that focus on and demand improvement in their teaching. According to Muhammad (2009), these individuals are the ones that believe that all students are able to learn and that a student’s learning depends on the lessons and teaching that they produce. Although he did not outline how or why Believers have certain characteristics, he did outline that they shared many traits. Muhammad (2009) believed that these teachers have high intrinsic motivation, a personal connection to school while applying positive pressure on students but still are able to be very flexible. In all places of work there are individuals that are willing to put forth more than what they are asked to do. In education the teachers that sought opportunities to add to the school community and learning environment were motivated to positively affect students. Muhammad (2009) argued that the Believers had a drive or an intrinsic motivation to improve their school. These individuals were not concerned with administration efficacy. Their
motivation to improve their school came from within. Believers were also engaged in lifelong learning and professional development. Muhammad (2009) surveyed the Believers and found that they were more engaged in voluntary professional development. The intrinsic motivation to continually improve was a teacher trait that helps produce a positive school culture. Believers actively make choices that build their lives into and around their community and school. Muhammad (2009) argued that the individuals that belonged to the Believers group had a closer connection to their schools and communities than others. Flexibility is a trait that is needed for all individuals that work in Education. Unfortunately Muhammad’s (2009) study found that the Believer group was the only group that was able to work flexibility into their daily routine. It is commonsensical that teachers must be flexible with deadlines as the lives of young students are sometimes packed with problems. Nevertheless Muhammad (2009) demonstrated that only the Believer group was capable or showed flexibility with deadlines and important dates. These teachers also showed agility when dealing with discipline and classroom management. Finally, Believers refused to allow students to simply give up and fail. Muhammad (2009) outlined positive pressure as simple acts that made the student meet learning outcomes. Things such as calls home, seating arrangement and tutoring made students understand that failure was not an option. The positive pressure from teachers was driven by educators believing in success for all students.

The opposing factions of the Believers in the teaching staff are the Fundamentalists. The Fundamentalists are typically known to maintain the status quo and want to keep the traditional model of schooling. It is key for individuals who wish to bring upon purposeful educational reform to understand that Fundamentalists: (a) are opposed to change, (b) believe in a normal distribution and (c) have varying levels of pedagogical skill. Fundamentalists are opposed to
change and that is exactly why they pose the greatest threat to educational reform. Muhammad (2009) argued that Fundamentalists enjoyed being “professional educators” and had a strong attraction to the traditional aspects of school. On the surface the descriptions of Fundamentalists might not seem undermining, but upon deeper understanding, the following traditions were outlined “punishments, curricular autonomy and local control” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 62).

Interestingly Fundamentalist attributes described by Lortie (1975), were individuals who did very well in the traditional school, thus would have no reason to change. The belief system of Fundamentalist that resists change with the greatest strength is the want for teacher autonomy. The issue is that autonomy from the old system was more closely related to rogue teachers that were not, as Muhammad (2009) would describe, accountable. The rogue teachers did not use standardized assessments and lessons developed by collaboration. The result was that struggling learners simply did not learn, which is completely unacceptable in public education.

The normal distribution is a primitive paradigm that relies on inequality for the purpose of ranking students. Muhammad (2009) argues that Fundamentalists believe in the inequality of knowledge and that it is natural as not all students are able to learn. The belief of the normal distribution is not necessarily correlated with educators being anti-child or not wanting each to succeed. These teachers may care for their students deeply but remain rooted in the mindset that there are certain limitations for each student. Muhammad (2009) furthered by outlining that Fundamentalists were Social Darwinists and that it was the natural order of society that some students were destined to be doctors and others garbage men. Fundamentalists regardless of age and teaching experience have a huge range of pedagogical skill levels. Although it is clear that a Fundamentalist viewpoint is not conducive for public education, many Fundamentalist teachers are in fact very good at teaching. Muhammad (2009) makes a strict argument that a
“Fundamentalist is not an ineffective teacher” (p. 69) but some of their values do not work to promote learning for all.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined literature that is relevant to teacher collaboration within the PLC framework. According to Chance and Segura (2009), requirements for successful teacher collaboration included: Time within the school day to collaborate, structured meetings with an agenda, and administration to ensure student focused collaboration. Barriers to collaboration emerge from a host of sources. Elbousty and Bratt’s (2010) active and passive resistances demonstrated that teachers who work only with like-minded peers are preventing progress just as much as unwilling participants. Muhammad (2009) pointed out how staff division can create a corrosive environment that must be tackled before teachers can work successfully together. Teachers may need to undergo significant ideological reform before pledging to true collaboration. The fundamentalist mindset is of great importance to school reform and thus to collaborative frameworks. Trust was also shown to be significant when trying to create a collaborative culture in schools. Musanti and Pence (2010) argued that without trust no progress could be made as positive critique would not be accepted from students and teachers alike.

The next chapter outlines how research at DPSS in Prince George, BC, was conducted such that teachers and administrators will be able to formulate plans to produce the best possible teacher collaboration at their schools.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

As discussed in Chapter 1, there has been limited growth in pedagogical practices in comparison to other professional industries. A promising practice within the PLC movement is teacher collaboration but it is a new reform to Duchess Park Secondary. To improve teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary barriers must be studied and strategies applied to operation. Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature and demonstrated a need to conduct this study on professional learning communities. This chapter outlines the methods and procedures of my study of the barriers to teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary. Finally, my project provides a means to improve the effectiveness of teacher collaboration within Duchess Park Secondary. I have determined the root causes behind the barriers of current teacher collaboration sessions. Therefore my project goal was to conduct a case study of Duchess Park Secondary’s teacher collaboration structure and participants. After the collection of data and interpretation, common themes or barriers that emerged were documented.

Description of the project

Research Questions. The guiding research questions for this study were:

1. What are the barriers preventing successful teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary?
2. How can teachers overcome the barriers to collaboration to improve student achievement?

Methods

Data collection commenced September 2012. Formal interviews varied in length although they were scheduled for 20 minutes within the scheduled collaboration block at Duchess Park Secondary. One interviewee that struggled with opening up and offering in-depth
Running head: TEACHER COLLABORATION

answers produced a short 10-minute interview. The other nine interviews offered over 20
minutes of answers as participants were confident discussing collaboration and the issues that
have arose in collaboration groups. I received approval from School District 57 and the UNBC
Research Ethics Board of the University of Northern British Columbia prior to commencing the
research.

**Types of data collected.** Interview logs and teacher questionnaires were the main data
sources of data. Data were collected through personal interviews with 10 major participants
selected to represent individual subject departments. I utilized a general questionnaire
administered to every teacher at the school which augmented the interview data.

Personal interviews were mostly one-on-one and were scheduled during the Duchess
Park collaboration period. The Shops and Fine Arts faculties had very few members and were
interviewed together to obtain all points of view. Although one-on-one interviews were the most
time consuming, they provided many benefits. Patton (1990) argued that interviews are ideal for
collecting data that the researcher cannot observe. Furthermore detailed personal interviews offer
information regarding feelings, thoughts and even intentions of the participants that cannot be
observed. For my project, I was not able to join in with other staff collaboration groups without
significantly altering the group dynamics; therefore an interview was the best option for
collecting data in this specific situation. Personal responses from participants gave unbiased
opinions of successes and barriers to their specific collaboration experiences.

During the scheduled interviews, participants had 20 to 30 minutes to elaborate and
discuss interview questions. I used open-ended questions for the interview process. For example,
“What is your group doing during collaboration time?”, gave the interviewee a chance to talk
about what he or she deemed as important. Merriam (1998) discussed that open-ended and less-
structured questions allow participants to express their unique experiences without being constrained by highly structured questions. Clearly, it was important for participants to have the freedom to outline their views in order to collect sound data of teacher collaboration within Duchess Park Secondary. I used probing questions or prompts (e.g., “tell me more about…”; “please clarify”) during the interview process to help prompt discussion and further descriptions of teacher collaboration events. After the teachers answered the predetermined interview questions, there was opportunity to discuss any other areas that participants felt were important. Some interviews brought up ideas or other strategies that participants had used in the past to promote collaboration in the school.

I used questionnaires in my study to help strengthen the evidence of the 10 major interviews. Collecting other forms of data that justified main ideas and themes made the research more accurate. Triangulation utilizes the corroborating evidence from varying forms of data or individuals to help improve validity (Merriam, 1998). I used the information from interviews and questionnaires to build a strong data set for this study.

**Instruments and procedures.** The one-on-one interview process required a semi-structured process. Questions were designed to elicit in-depth responses from the participants. I asked the following questions during the main interview process:

1. What is the purpose of teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary?
2. What is your group doing during collaboration time?
3. What is working well in your collaboration group?
4. What are barriers to your collaboration group?
   a. Does it have to do with infrastructure? (timetable or scheduling)
   b. Does it have to do with individuals?
5. What can be done to improve teacher collaboration in your situation?
6. Do you have any ideas on how to improve “buy-in”?
The questions were purposefully open-ended so participants were able to choose their own ways to respond and discuss all facets of teacher collaboration that they felt were important. The questions also enabled participants to explore tangents which might have helped non-surface or deep-rooted issues with the collaboration process.

When participants struggled to answer or elaborate on interview topics, probing questions helped energize the interview. The following were possible probes used during the interview process:

- Tell me more about…
- Could you explain what you meant by…
- Could you add more detail?
- What does “not much” mean?
- Could you clarify what you just said?

The quality of the interview process was dependent on my ability as an interviewer to read the body language and emotional state of participants. The timing and tact used when probing for more detail was undoubtedly important in the interview process. Timing and tact was important as pre-observations showed both strong support and resistance to our teacher collaboration so it was important to appear neutral when interviewing participants.

I developed a structured interview protocol to help guide the interview process and record details of the session. Aside from the reasons above, it was practical to use the protocol form to provide extra notes that were not recorded with the audio recorder. Creswell (2008) noted that along with the general questions for the interview, it is wise to incorporate the purpose of the study, reminders for interviewer and participant, the interview questions, and finally, gratitude for participating in the study.

I used a digital recording device to record the interview. I placed a simple stationary microphone on the interview table and connected to a laptop computer. It was important to help
ease anxieties by discussing some icebreaker topics and questions with the participants before beginning actual interview process;

**Analysis.** I categorized the collected data from one-on-one interviews using thematic data analysis to determine the main barriers to collaboration at Duchess Park. I used a word processing program to transcribe the interviews and preliminarily code the responses; I segmented text and coded the entire document.

Creswell (2008) argued that a preliminary exploratory analysis is important when conducting a qualitative study as it gives the researcher a general sense of the recorded data. It also gives the researcher opportunity to add memos to the transcriptions and time to start the organizational process for the study. Once I completed the preliminary coding process, I moved on to finalizing the coding; I merged the initial codes and eliminated the redundancies until there was a manageable number of different code types that each expressed a different component of the collaborative process. The Individuals code, within the Success theme, was merged with several other codes. The Individuals, Like-mindedness, Easy to work with, Good Communication, and Positive Attitude codes were all similar. Therefore, these five codes were condensed into the Individuals code belonging to the Success theme. With streamlined codes, I created final themes: Experience, Faculty, Resource, Success, Collaboration, Barriers, Time, Student Specific, Emotion Codes and Personal Growth. Creswell (2008) discussed in his text that minimal themes described in detail is best for creating arguments within a qualitative study.

Initially (during the pre-coding and first round of coding processes), there was significant values for the department and experience codes. These codes belonged to the Experience and Faculty themes. At first it appeared that these two themes would generate useful data however, after the first round of re-coding and final coding process the two themes did not help answer the
research questions and ended up being merged with more suitable codes. Therefore few codes occurred in the Experience and Faculty themes.

I used a Likert-type questionnaire for this project and analyzed it using quantitative techniques. A Likert scale is used to assess attitudes and this scale asked participants to “indicate if they strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree or strongly disagree with a series of statements about the topic” (Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh, 1990, p. 234). The project used 10 statements concerned with teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary such as this statement: “My group’s teacher collaboration is having an impact on student learning and achievement”. I analyzed the scores using quantitative techniques, in particular, statistical analysis. This technique generated means, greatest response values and response percentages of the staff. Furthermore, responses to questions were tallied to determine trends or commonalities within the staff. From the percentages calculated, I was able to better understand the opinions of the staff in regards to teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary.

The information collected from the survey was primarily used to strengthen and corroborate the findings of the interview data. The questionnaire was used because the in-depth interviews were limited to 10 participants. Having only interviewed a percentage of the teachers there was a need to hear more teacher opinions. The questionnaires were issued to all teaching staff members and were able to reach those who were unable to participate in the in-depth interviews. The questionnaires generated useful data as it was able to corroborate some aspects of interview findings and refute others. It also helped stimulate conversation within the interviews and allow participants to think critically about how productive their collaboration group actually was.
Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methods used in order to study the barriers to teacher collaboration at DPSS. The core of this project relied on the information gathered and coded from practicing teachers during the interview process. Qualitative methodology was then used to uncover the barriers to teacher collaboration, success in collaboration and associated teacher emotions related to their collaborative processes.

In conjunction with the interview data, quantitative data was collected from opinion surveys that were distributed to DPSS teaching staff. The data from the surveys produced broad answers as it was distributed to all teachers and was used to support findings from the in-depth interviews.

The overlying goal of this project was to uncover techniques which will be used to improve practice of teacher collaboration at DPSS. Ultimately the techniques are planned to be implemented within the collaboration groups to enhance the learning environment; enabling students to be more successful.
Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 1 indicated that there has been limited growth in pedagogical practices in comparison to other professional industries, and outlined the structure and purpose of this study. To improve teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary School (DPSS), barriers must be studied and strategies applied to operational practice. Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature on collaboration in teaching and demonstrated a need to conduct this study on Professional Learning Communities and Chapter 3 outlined the methods and procedures used in this study. Chapter 4 will present the results from both the interview processes and teacher questionnaire used in the case study of teacher collaboration at DPSS. This chapter will also present commonalities, deviations, and other possibly significant interpretations of the data generated from the study. All data are presented in fashion to answer the research questions: (1) What are the barriers preventing successful teacher collaboration at DPSS? and (2) How can teachers overcome the barriers to collaboration to improve student achievement?

Results

Nine major themes were identified from the interview data gathered: Experience, Faculty, Resource, Success, Collaboration, Barriers, Time, Student-Specific, and Emotion. The trends in collaborative practice at DPSS, resulting from the analysis and interpretation of data within these themes, are revealed in the following chapter.

Perceived Barriers to Collaboration and Related Emotions

Teacher collaboration at DPSS has faced resistance from its implementation. The data collected from the in-depth interview process revealed significant issues with collaborative meetings. The Barrier and Emotion themes had the highest occurrence of code data; these two themes are directly related to the interaction of individuals with the collaboration group and to
Individuals Infrastructure Focus Leadership Don't know planning Teacher work load

Figure 1. Code frequency within the Barrier theme, in the case study of Duchess Park Secondary School. Error bars represent standard error.

Group dynamics. Within the Barrier theme; Individuals, Focus, and Leadership codes had the highest counts: n = 67, n = 46, and n = 25 occurrences. The barrier that was coded the most from the interview process was Individuals. For instance, the following excerpt was coded under Individuals: “Having two dominant people running it, instead of people working ... equally”.

After averaging the data, the Individual’s code was counted a significantly greater number of times than all other barriers, with the exception of Focus. Individuals as a Barrier accounted for an average of 7.5 occurrences per interview. Focus was also counted a significantly greater number of times than all other codes, except Workload and Individuals (refer to Figure 1).

In the Emotion theme: Dissatisfaction, Frustration, and Uncertainty codes had the highest frequency with n = 33, n = 21 and n = 15 incidences. Dissatisfaction codes were generated from passages such as “I hate going to ... meetings”.

A relationship was observed between the
Table 1

In-Depth interview code responses from the Barriers and Emotion themes, in the case study of Duchess Park Secondary School.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>4</th>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emotion and Barriers themes: The two teachers that scored the highest in the Dissatisfaction code, under the Emotion theme, had the highest responses concerning issues with individuals in their groups (Barrier theme, Individuals code). Therefore, in these cases the Dissatisfaction is resulting from a barrier, specifically an individual or relationship with an individual that is preventing successful collaboration. The teachers that discussed Dissatisfaction topics the least consequently had the fewest issues with individuals within their collaboration groups.

Some departments at DPSS have very few faculty members or consist solely of one teacher. The teachers in departments with the fewest number of faculty members scored the highest frequency for the Isolation code data. It was clear that statements such as “I’m a lone
Table 2

In-Depth interview code responses from the Success theme, in the case study of Duchess Park Secondary School.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

department essentially” would be coded as Isolation. Interviewee nine and ten scored n = 1 and n = 4 for the teacher Isolation code and consist of three and one faculty member(s). Conversely, none of remaining eight interviewees had Isolation code data and all eight belong to faculties with four or more members.

**Contributing Factors for Success of Teacher Collaboration**

Contributing factors for the success of teacher collaboration at DPSS were themed under the Success theme. As seen in Table 2, Planning (n = 18), Individuals (n = 16) and Leadership (n = 14) accounted for 48 of the 54 tallied codes in the Success theme. The Location code, which was concerned with the physical location of the collaboration meetings, scored only six of the 54 occurrences. Interviewee number four’s interview, in particular, had five codes tallied in the Location code indicating that the location of their meeting may contribute to successful collaboration. The other nine teacher interviews only reported one-or-below in the same code category.
Table 3

*The In-Depth Interview Code Responses from the Collaboration and Time themes, in the Case Study of Duchess Park Secondary School.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>1</th>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
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**Collaboration Processes**

A significant number of tallied code occurrences were noted in the Scheduled Time code within the Time theme, but the data were hard to interpret as it was not always possible to define the interviewee's use of the code type as a positive or negative. Some interviewees discussed the time of day that collaboration occurred as a positive, some viewed it as a negative and others believed it had no impact. Eight of the 10 teacher interviews scored between one and three occurrences in the Scheduled Time category. During the recoding process all comments regarding time were combined in the same code. It was difficult to differentiate between negative, neutral and positive feelings toward the scheduled time of teacher collaboration meetings, and therefore, this code is inconclusive.

The Instruction, Success and Planning codes that belong to the Collaboration theme were mentioned throughout most teacher interviews. Instruction counted for \( n = 32 \), Success tallied \( n = 24 \) and Planning tallied \( n = 18 \) of the Collaboration theme. In total these three codes
Table 4

In-Depth Interview code responses from the Resource theme, in the case study of Duchess Park Secondary School.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

accounted for 80 percent of the total codes generated in the Collaboration theme. This information may be positive step towards a collaborative culture, as it shows that many teacher collaboration groups are discussing instruction, planning and teaching practices in general. However, it does not definitively help to answer the research questions of this project as the Collaboration theme, similar to the Time theme, included both positive and negative responses. For instance, “there were two times when we had it planned out but the other eight weren’t” demonstrates a negative association within the Planning code whereas “we got more out of it [collaboration] if it was planned... we actually learned some ideas” shows a positive direction.

The Resource theme had most code occurrences fall into the Assessment code category. Assessment was mentioned seven times more frequently than the Technology code, and over five times more frequently than the Learning Material code. The majority of Assessment code responses came from only three of the 10 teachers interviewed, two of which were from the same department. This could indicate that that particular department had a focus on collaborating for assessment purposes due to the fact that staff have a lack of resources available to them in terms of assessment, or that teachers are unsure about assessment reform and are collaborating more often about this issue in order to determine the best course of action with regard to assessment, for positive learning outcomes.
Table 5 displays the results of the survey process conducted with teachers at DPSS. Although each teacher received a survey in their mailboxes only 21 of 47 handed back completed surveys. The teacher questionnaire differed from the interview process by producing conflicting results. Question three stated “My teacher collaboration sessions are organized”. Eighty-one percent of respondents somewhat agreed or agreed that their groups were organized. In contrast, from the interview process, the codes that scored the highest in the Barrier theme are related to organization (Focus, Leadership and Teacher Work Load). Question six on the teacher questionnaire stated that “Individuals with differing views are unable to collaborate
together”. 57% of respondents disagreed with this statement in the questionnaire. The interview process had conflicting results, as Individuals as a barrier to collaboration had the highest number of occurrences among all other codes.

Discussion

Teacher collaboration within the PLC has the potential to help teachers develop new methods of pedagogy. Looking critically at one’s own teaching methods within a trusting group has demonstrated improved student learning and achievement (Musanti and Pence, 2010); yet many teachers refuse to take part or simply lack the skill set to engage in successful, structured teacher collaboration. Research on known barriers such as passive and active resistance, lack of trust, and staff division (Elbousty and Bratt, 2010; Musanti and Pence, 2010) must be expanded and applied to the school setting to help facilitate the implementation of new PLC models. This research attempted to integrate the concepts from past research studies on collaboration within the PLC, with findings from a case study on Duchess Park Secondary School (DPSS) to help understand and then overcome the barriers to successful teacher collaboration groups at DPSS.

This section discusses each major barriers to collaboration identified in the study, and how aspects of teacher collaboration positively or negatively impact pedagogical improvements and the PLC at DPSS.

Perceived Barriers to Collaboration and Related Emotions

Prior to the initiation of this case study, DPSS already followed some of the recommendations available in new literature on collaboration. The school has already allotted time within the work day for teacher collaboration that is aimed at improving student learning (Chance and Segura, 2009). Informal surveys of the departments have shown that collaborative groups have a learner-focused agenda. This agenda enables teachers to plan for the meeting and
stay on track (Chance & Segura, 2009). A clear difference between DPSS and the recommendations put forth by Chance and Segura (2009) is that the teachers are creating the agenda and objectives, not the administration. Informal talks with the current DPSS principal have shown evidence that the teachers are encouraged to be self-directed as long as they have learner-focused agendas.

This study investigated how the teachers form collaboration agendas and how the agenda affects the dynamics of the group; codes addressing this issue were the Planning and Focus codes within the Barriers theme. The Planning code within the Barrier theme was among the highest frequency code response for the study (n = 21). The Planning code occurred a few times over each interview, with a large number of occurrences with interviewee number six; this indicates that the department where this interviewee works may need to put more focus on planning. Chance and Segura (2009) argued that collaborative time needs to be structured with an agenda. The collaborative agenda, like any meeting’s agenda, increases the accountability of each member of the collaborative team and allows teachers to prepare for the predetermined meeting objectives. At DPSS, collaboration meetings are not always structured with a clear agenda. This could mean we are not giving teachers a chance to properly prepare for meeting objectives, thereby reducing teacher accountability and taking away from the positive impacts that the collaborative session would have on student learning (Chance and Segura, 2009). The questionnaire conducted for this study supported the findings of the coding results from the interviews. The questionnaire responses provided by DPSS teachers showed that the majority of teachers “somewhat disagree” and “somewhat agree” to questions three (“My teacher collaboration sessions are organized”) and four (“My group sets goals for each collaboration period”) (74% and 76%, respectively). This shows that the majority of the collaborative meetings
are likely to not have predetermined agendas. The coding results from the interviews conducted for this study supported the findings of the questionnaire.

The Focus code within the Barrier theme was also among the highest frequency code response for the study (n = 46); and it is evident that the Focus code is highly related to the Planning code. The lack of focus within the collaboration meetings at DPSS can be corrected by effective agenda planning prior to meeting times. In this case study it is evident that making a clear agenda, set prior to the collaboration time, will affect the productivity and accountability of meetings. What is not clear and what can be further investigated is who should be in charge of setting the agenda. Teachers should be capable of creating an agenda by themselves during initial collaboration meetings. Unfortunately my findings show that teachers at DPSS are not currently successful at creating and following meeting agendas. Therefore it may be necessary for teachers or administration to appoint collaboration team leaders to help organize the collaborative groups.

Active and Passive resistance, as defined by Elbousty and Bratt (2010), are two barriers that are of concern for any new PLC. These resistances to the learning community relate directly to the Individuals and Teacher Work Load codes in the Barriers theme. Active resistance to the PLC is demonstrated by a teacher flat out refusing to work as part of the team. The rejection of working as a team was believed to stem from the idea that groups and PLC activities caused more work for the teacher. Teachers that actively resist are also described to feel that collaboration was unfair (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010). Active Resistance to the PLC, in the form of refusing to participate in collaboration meetings, was not evident at DPSS. Initially, I hypothesized that Active Resistance would have significantly contributed to poor collaboration. From my personal accounts in 2010, during the initial reform of the collaboration block schedule at DPSS, many teachers regarded the PLC as another add-on to their already overburdened
workload. However, the questionnaire revealed that teachers value their collaboration time. In fact 95%, or 20 of 21, teachers responded that they somewhat agree and agree that they “valued teacher collaboration”. If teachers did not participate in collaboration they would clearly not value the time to meet with their colleagues to discuss professional practice. This was not evident, therefore, there appears to be no evidence of Active Resistance towards collaboration and the PLC at DPSS. One issue with the data collection is that not all teachers responded to the questionnaire. Teachers that may show signs of Active Resistance may have simply opted out of participating in the questionnaire. Having the input of these teachers would be invaluable as it may provide data on underlying issues to school reforms.

Passive Resistance is pseudo-collaboration whereby a teacher restricts his/her collaborative efforts by only working with selected group members. Although the teacher is meeting in a group and talking about student learning, “...this willingness to collaborate only with those most like oneself is antithetical to the development of the PLC” (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010, p. 7). Elbousty and Bratt's (2010) Passive Resistance also does not appear to influence teacher collaboration at DPSS. Passive resistance refers to a teachers' inability to fundamentally change their practice because they collaborate with only like-minded individuals and therefore no one pushes their teaching boundaries. The influence of different minded individuals within collaboration groups adds new or different perspectives to the group discourse. It may seem frustrating to many teaching professionals to have opposing ideas but it will allow for growth. According to the interviews and questionnaires of DPSS staff, there is no evidence of passive resistance within the DPSS PLC. The interview process identified Individuals as the single biggest barrier to teacher collaboration, but did not reflect the disadvantages of passive resistance. Some of the discussion of individuals as barriers to collaboration was associated with
the Isolation code. Teachers who have been working in isolation for a long duration and have not
had any true collaboration with other professionals may have difficulty in the initial
collaborative reform process.

The DPSS teacher questionnaire refuted evidence of passive resistance. Seventy-six
percent of teachers disagreed with the statement: “Individuals with differing views are unable to
collaborate together” and 95% of teachers agreed and somewhat agreed that they had a
“respected voice in their collaboration group”. It can be inferred that although teachers at DPSS
are very diverse, they are able to collaborate together and thus do not show passive resistance to
the PLC. Passive resistance prevents teachers from obtaining new or different perspectives and
ideals. The failure to challenge one’s thinking is the failure of growth. Opposing opinions in
teacher collaborative groups, while focusing on results, will force teachers to think critically
about what they are doing and how it affects student learning. This critical discussion and
analysis produces more beneficial outcomes than collaborative teams who are always in
agreement (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010). DPSS has created collaborative teams based on subject
area. If there is a form of monoculture within departments an unintentional form of passive
resistance may have been fashioned; conversely, departments with multiple personality types
will have a challenging but productive collaboration future.

Muhammad (2009) identified the following four types of teachers: (1) Believers, (2)
Tweeners, (3) Survivors, and (4) Fundamentalists. The two main factions of school staff at DPSS
are the Believers and Fundamentalists (Muhammad, Chapters 3 & 6, 2009). The Tweeners and
Survivors are important parts of the school culture but were not found to be prominent
personality types at DPSS. Teachers interviewed at DPSS viewed differing opinions and
personalities as a main barrier to collaboration. The interview process showed that 67 code
occurrences belonged to Individuals as a barrier. Believers are the teachers that focus on and demand improvement in their teaching. According to Muhammad (2009), these individuals are the ones that believe that all students are able to learn and that a student’s learning depends on the lessons and teaching that they produce. Fundamentalists are typically known to maintain the status quo and want to keep the traditional model of schooling. It is key for individuals who wish to bring upon purposeful educational reform to understand that Fundamentalists: 1) are opposed to change, 2) believe in a normal distribution and 3) have varying levels of pedagogical skill. It is obvious that, with these two personality types in one collaboration group, conflicts will arise.

Interviews with DPSS staff revealed that the discussion of individuals as a barrier was associated with the Dissatisfaction, Frustration, Uncertainty, and Isolation codes in the Emotions theme. This supports the idea that collaboration groups are composed of a variety of personality types, some which may be Believers, and some whom are probably Fundamentalists (Muhammad, 2009). Clips from the interview process such as: “...in [our group when] two personalities go off task, we never get back and two years ago I thought it was a complete disaster...” describes the frustration that was felt during meetings. It is important that when groups face the challenge of varying points of view and differing opinions, they embrace this and work through the challenge to come to an agreement on an issue: this leads to a true collaborative culture and allows for the most growth within the PLC. In order for groups to be able to work through these kind of personality conflicts, it is essential that trust is established between collaboration group members.

Collaboration reform has caused stress within departments, somewhat due to the fact that collaboration makes what was once private, individual thoughts and knowledge, become public. This could be a result of a lack of trust among colleagues, and unwillingness for an individual to
"put himself/herself out there" to express a new thought, opinion, or idea. Trust, although clearly commonsensical plays a major role in successful PLC activities at DPSS. A lack of trust between teachers and administrators is a powerful barrier to school reform. The prerequisite to any successful collaboration is trust between teachers and administration. Without trust, nothing can be accomplished as teachers will not be willing to openly communicate and thereby to critique and reflect on their teaching practices. Some individual teachers may be negatively affected by the grouping of teachers for collaboration, team teaching, and mentoring because trust had not been established (Musanti & Pence, 2010).

Although it appears that individuals and differing opinions are the main barrier to teacher collaboration, it could also be a symptom of a different issue. The frustration that teachers felt in collaboration meetings could be remedied by having more structure. If proper planning and leadership was implemented, it is possible that negative personal feelings, such as dissatisfaction, frustration, and uncertainty, would decrease because each team member would know and understand what was going to be addressed at the collaboration session and fully prepare themselves with the information they require to convey their ideas and thoughts to their colleagues in a clear and concise manner. In other words, planning and preparation reduces "putting people on the spot" which reduces uncertainty and unwillingness to contribute to discussions. As teachers move from isolation to collaboration and truly become part of the school’s PLC; teachers will build trust among the groups, become better team players, and progress toward promising teaching practice.

**Contributing Factors for Success of Teacher Collaboration**

Assessment was discussed meaningfully in the interview process. The Assessment code dominated the responses in the Resource theme during the in-depth conversations that I had with
teachers. There are a few reasons why these findings are of importance, which point toward promising practice. Firstly, teacher collaboration groups that are focusing on assessment during collaboration time are in turn dedicated to improving their practice. Secondly and more importantly, it shows that collaboration, although in its infancy, is working at DPSS. By focusing on assessment during collaboration teachers are working on promising professional practice; they are ensuring that students learn by focusing on student-oriented results. Fostering a PLC that focuses on student learning through a collaborative culture is supported by Dufour et al. (2006), Fullan (2008), and Jessie (2007) who argued that a culture of collaboration will lead to promising practice for the future of education. It is evident that, although there are barriers identified within the collaborative process at DPSS, collaboration is working. This success must be celebrated and talked about with all staff. These successes will promote more successes if they are built upon and discussed with all teaching professionals that comprise the DPSS teaching team; teachers need to clearly embrace what is working within the collaborative team, and what changes need to be made to improve the process.

The success of teacher collaboration at DPSS is significantly affected by leadership and planning. Sixty-seven percent of code occurrences that fell under the Success theme came from Leadership and Planning codes. Based on these results, it is evident that teachers feel that effective leadership and proper planning will contribute to the success of collaboration. Structured collaboration with an agenda is vital to the success of collaboration and the development of the PLC and administration is key to keeping teachers on task during meetings (Chance & Segura, 2009). However, teachers themselves play a vital role within each collaboration group at DPSS. Teacher leaders can be informal participants that naturally migrate into a leadership position and help keep the group on task and focused on the, which may be a
more important role than the school’s administration at DPSS. The principal and the administration team at DPSS set broad expectations but do not police the teachers. It would be logistically impossible for the administration in a high school to be in all collaboration groups at once. I would further argue that having administrators pop in and out of meetings would cause more harm than good: It would disrupt the dynamic of each group and could even create a sense of mistrust. As a teacher and active participant in collaboration meetings I know first-hand that it takes time to build trust within each group. A once in a while addition of an administrator would cause stress for softer spoken members of the team.

It is difficult to ascertain if the highest scoring barriers (Individuals, Focus, and Leadership) are true barriers to collaboration in this case, or merely a symptom of the more significant issue of teachers at DPSS not knowing how to effectively collaborate. The Individuals code, within the Barrier theme, was spoken of the most out of any other code in the study. I would argue, that with proper training all individuals who are professionally-trained teachers could effectively work together on improving their practice. Furthermore, collaboration meetings would see the most gain in productivity if administration or PLC champions would take aside one or two individuals from each group to act as teacher-leaders. These teacher-leaders must be responsible for ensuring: (1) That a an agenda is prepared ahead of each collaboration session such that teachers could have time to prepare for their meetings, and that it has shared value for all members; and, (2) That he/she acts in a way that does not take away from the equality of voice in the group, but remains vigilant in maintaining the group’s focus on the agenda and mission set forth by the collaboration team.
Chapter Summary

The results and discussion in Chapter 4 have presented commonalities, deviations, and other interpretations that were generated from the interviews and questionnaire process at DPSS. The information was used to help understand what variables prevented or improved successful teacher collaboration at DPSS. Ultimately, successful collaboration was inhibited by personality differences among individuals, lack of focus within collaborative groups, and ineffective planning and leadership. These factors in turn created negative teacher emotions such as dissatisfaction, frustration and uncertainty. Collaborative success was evident among groups that were able to produce: Effective leadership, maintain focus with an agenda, and had positive feelings towards the individuals in the group. Barriers and issues still surrounding the PLC at DPSS will be alleviated over time through the establishment of roles and responsibilities in collaboration sessions, planned agendas, and the construction of trusting relationships among individuals and groups.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The focus of this action research was to better understand the barriers to teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary School (DPSS). Chapter 1 discussed the limited growth in the teaching profession and the need to improve teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary. Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature and demonstrated a reasoning to conduct this study on Professional Learning Communities. Chapter 3 outlined the methods and procedures used in this study. The results from the case study at DPSS were compared with concepts from existing literature and discussed, in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will elucidate the main conclusions that were drawn from the study of DPSS, outline the limitations of this project, summarize my personal accounts, and make recommendations for more productive collaborative teams at DPSS.

Main Findings

The main barriers to collaboration that were identified in this study were Individuals, Planning, Focus, Leadership, and Teacher Work Load. These were seen to be connected to feelings of Dissatisfaction, Frustration, and Uncertainty. Clearly, physical or mental barriers present within collaboration are creating further emotional barriers. It was found that the majority of teachers are in support of collaboration within the DPSS PLC, and they felt that successful collaboration could be reached if proper Leadership and Planning were in place.

Limitations

Potential weaknesses of this project include sample size, participant variability, and the teacher-as-researcher dilemma. Furthermore, during the 2012/13 school year teachers were on job action while I was collecting data for this project.
This study was relatively small and focused exclusively on DPSS, thus the sample size was comparatively small. Only 10 major participants were selected for in-depth interviews. Of the ten, two teachers from each major department were required to participate and only one from smaller departments (Fine Arts, Special Education, and Home Economics). With more than 60 very diverse teachers and support staff at the school there were discrepancies in individual teacher's perspectives of collaboration efforts within the same department.

Participants had varying opinions and descriptions of their collaboration teams based on work load, the productivity of the last collaboration session, and emotional state. I relied heavily on teacher professionalism to offer facts about their collaboration teams. Work related stress and issues with team members in collaboration did not seem to create a noticeable bias in results.

The teacher-as-researcher dilemma has created a strong personal bias in the way I look at collaboration and its purpose. My support for the collaborative aspect of the PLC movement was very strong as I have experienced first-hand how working with others can greatly impact the effectiveness of teaching and problem-solving efforts. A select few teachers on staff did not support the collaboration block within the timetable. These teachers advocated for dropping the block and reverting back to regular hours. I felt that there was no question that our collaboration time is extremely important to the professional development of teachers and therefore continued to focus on how to improve our practice.

The British Columbia Teacher's Federation started job action (strike) in September of the 2011/12 school year. Minor issues such as the spreading of information and communication were interrupted between teachers and administration. This block in communication did not impact my study as I was not relying on administration to deliver information to teachers. However, it is possible that the emotional state of teachers could be affected by job action in specific cases.
Personal Accounts

From my personal experience I would argue that an effective teacher leader with PLC experience is the single most important aspect to progressive teacher collaboration. Originally, the department I belong to at DPSS had regular successful collaboration meetings. We had a clear purpose and worked towards improving our teaching practices and transparent assessment of our students. Most of this was headed up by our informal department leader. As DPSS does not have department heads, this teacher had no official title nor was he appointed or elected as our leader. Unfortunately last school year this informal leader moved to a new school. Our collaboration meetings immediately became unsuccessful and remained unproductive for the rest of the year. Dufour et al. (2006), Fullan (2008), and Jessie (2007) insisted that the PLC needed to create a culture of collaboration. Our informal leader kept our department on track by focusing collaboration sessions and stimulating professional discourse. In order to create the culture of which Dufour et al. (2006) speaks, PLC leaders need to be in place in all departments. The concept of a leadership role within collaboration groups is supported by statements from the interviews such as:

When I was in [redacted] last year, working with a colleague - she was fabulous, she was the one in the [redacted] department who had a written out plan and said we’re going to do this this and this, whereas in [redacted] we don’t have that. So we kind of just go in there and it’s undetermined as to what we’re going to do.

PLC team leaders are needed throughout the school to promote successful collaboration. The teacher described first-hand the stark difference between departments that have strong collaboration leaders and ones that do not. The presence of a team leader allowed individuals
within the group to focus and created positive feelings that promoted success. Success in collaboration leads to promising practice and improvements in student learning (Little, 1990).

**Recommendations**

There are a host of factors that inhibit the effectiveness of teacher collaboration. As each school and each collaboration team is different from one another, there is no single strategy that works best for all groups. Fortunately, there are a few strategies that have helped the effectiveness of teams at DPSS, based on the barriers that have been found in this study, that can be used to guide future practice: Effective leadership, concentrated focus on goals, and proper training.

I believe that improved collaboration training for teachers would be most beneficial. It is assumed that teachers can effectively collaborate with each other and understand the value and benefits of the PLC. I would argue that it is in fact the complete opposite. If teachers truly knew how to collaborate and fully understood the benefits of working in teams to achieve common goals while improving their pedagogical technique there would be much less resistance to the PLC. Most teachers in our building and district were trained in a much different way from what is now accepted as promising practice. Their schooling had educators teach in isolated environments and did not incorporate a team approach to pedagogy. Therefore it would seem obvious that significant retraining would be needed to help all faculty members understand the benefits of working as a collective, and more importantly how to work in a team.

Having effective leadership may be the single most important factor for successful teacher collaboration. A leader may be formal or informal but must be able to guide the members of the team and maintain a collective effort. Leadership has to be localized within each teacher
collaboration group. Our administration team also leads teachers in our collaboration efforts and outlines broad overarching goals but it is up to the people on the ground to make things work. Leadership from within the group will encourage group focus, productivity, and simply allow for smooth function of meetings. It is imperative for each leader to understand the group dynamics and encourage collective synthesis of group goals. Once the goals are created the leader can encourage accountability by making sure all are involved and focused.

The most ineffective collaborative efforts are due to lack of focus. The inability for a group to be productive is related to a lack of meeting structure and teachers truly not knowing what to do during collaboration times. Many groups are still focusing on their day to day issues without focusing on their teaching processes. Having an effective leader that has deep understanding of the PLC and collaboration should be able to focus a group and produce beneficial changes to teaching. Being focused on issues that do not relate to the groups goals can be as detrimental as doing nothing at all.

Chapter Summary

Breaking barriers and providing support to teacher collaboration comes in many forms. The PLC framework is of utmost importance to collaboration as it requires school communities to put learning at the forefront. Collaboration is the perfect avenue to work together as educational teams and tackle tough issues in education while producing lessons, techniques and processes that will encourage learning and promote student achievement. Clearly there are no definitive answers as to what is exactly slowing teacher collaboration. More research in school specific settings is needed to understand issues surrounding collaborative efforts.

Limitations of this project were directly related to sample size and the narrow focus on DPSS. This was an action research project aimed at improving the collaborative efforts of a
single school, thus wide sweeping generalizations may not be applicable. My personal accounts started as one of the driving factors behind the idea for my project. These accounts cannot be quantified for research but paint a picture of the importance of strong leadership within the group. Effective collaboration training for teacher leaders and general participants make the biggest impact with regards to improving productivity during teacher collaboration. Collaborative training should educate collaboration leaders with tools that can keep their groups on task with thoughtful discourse and clear goals for pedagogical improvement.
References


Appendices

Interview Protocol

Project: Duchess Park Secondary Teacher Collaboration: Barriers and Successes

Time of interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position and experience of Interviewee:

Describe the project before starting interview.

- The purpose of this study is to find what barriers are preventing successful teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary. Also to better understand the collaboration efforts of staff while finding out what works and what has not in the past.
- What kind of data will be collected and who is involved.
- Data usage and confidentially of information.
- Interview will take approximately 45 minutes depending on the length of questions. It is important to answer with as much detail as possible.

Make sure interviewee signs the consent form.

Turn on tape recorder and test it.

Questions:

7. What is the purpose of teacher collaboration at Duchess Park Secondary?
8. What is your group doing during collaboration time?
9. What is working well in your collaboration group?
10. What are barriers to your collaboration group?
    a. Does it have to do with infrastructure? (timetable or scheduling)
    b. Does it have to do with individuals?
11. What can be done to improve teacher collaboration in your situation?
12. Do you have any ideas on how to improve “buy-in”?
Teacher Questionnaire: DPSS Teacher Collaboration

Please do NOT record your name.

1. My teacher collaboration group at Duchess Park Secondary is very effective.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

2. I value my teacher collaboration time.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

3. My teacher collaboration sessions are organized.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

4. My group sets goals for each collaboration period.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

5. There is a “leader” in my collaboration group.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

6. Individuals with differing views are unable to collaborate together.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

7. Teaching practice is modified based on collaboration meetings.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

8. Less experienced teachers are more likely to change teaching practice than experienced teachers.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

9. The current collaboration period is too short to accomplish any significant goals.
   1 2 3 4
   Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree

10. I feel that I have a respected voice in my collaboration group.
    1 2 3 4
    Disagree Somewhat Disagree Somewhat Agree Agree