

Collaboration in Education During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Collaboration between and among teachers has become an important aspect of my professional life. In our professional learning communities (PLCs), we, as teachers, help each other to be more effective with our students. Our collective efficacy is more than any of us could attain alone. In our PLCs, people help me, and I help them. We all grow because of our willingness to collaborate for the sake of all our students. When the pandemic hit, we first thought we would have to work remotely for 3 weeks or so. As we all now know, that was not the case, and we struggled to gain the collaborative strength of our PLCs. We met less often, and, when we did meet, it was not the same. Without the level of support we used to give each other, my colleagues and I struggled. I believe we came to understand how special our collaborative efforts were, and I will not take for granted how special our collaborative efforts are for our students and for us, the teachers. In this article, I offer a sense of my experiences during the pandemic, and I share a few lessons I learned along the way. If, or maybe when, we face our next pandemic or other emergency, I am hopeful we will be better prepared to be as collaborative as possible.

Keywords: collaboration, professional learning community (PLC), collective efficacy, student-centered teaching

COLLABORATION IN EDUCATION DURING A PANDEMIC

During Spring 2020, schools closed their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and teaching and learning continued. Teachers had to adapt quickly to remote instruction while paying attention to the social-emotional needs of their students. Although many schools moved to a hybrid model in the fall, developing engaging instruction that met all students' learning needs continued to be challenging. With the need to distance socially, not only was the connection between students and teachers compromised, but that lack of connection impacted teacher collaboration and collective efficacy. When teachers work collaboratively, they develop collective efficacy, which is believing a collaborative group of teachers or faculty can work together on a common goal to improve student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004). However, the pandemic limited opportunities for collaboration and collective efficacy. According to Eells (2011), collective efficacy can be decreased when faced with a “shock to the system” (p. 95). The pandemic was a shock to the system, and developing meaningful content and instruction, which is challenging in a traditional school year, became even more complicated when working in isolation.

In March 2020, the teachers in my district, like many teachers and school districts, had very little time and preparation to move from in-person teaching and learning to a fully remote model. My school district provided teachers and staff 2 professional development days to prepare for a 3-week fully remote model. During those 2 days, teachers culled resources and developed engaging online activities our diverse students could complete independently. As an eighth-grade math and social studies teacher, I had my work cut out for me, as I needed to develop activities for three math levels (cotaught math, pre-algebra, and algebra I) and three social studies sections. Over the 2 days, my content teaching partners and I scrambled to learn new online formats to

create videos, puzzles, and activities to engage students and review previous content, as we believed we would be back in school in less than 1 month. After the 2 days, laden with supplies and my laptop, I left my classroom for what eventually became the rest of the school year.

Need for Collaboration

Due to not being in school, my contact and connection with students and fellow faculty were limited. With the onset of the pandemic and the move to a fully remote model, collaboration and weekly meetings came to a screeching halt. When remote learning needed to continue past the first 3-week period, I needed to connect with my fellow content teachers, but this connection was mainly carried out through email or occasional Zoom meetings. These meetings focused on what content and instruction would best meet students' learning needs; however, development of these lessons was completed independently and in isolation. I felt disconnected and overwhelmed.

Developing lessons for four different classes required me to spend hours in front of the computer creating lessons, assessing completed work, and checking in with students and families, all in isolation. Teaching is too cumbersome for one person to ensure a meaningful and relevant curriculum and meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Unfortunately, the pandemic and the need to socially distance impacted our ability to work collaboratively. Collaboration by email and occasional Zoom or Google Meet was not enough to effectively plan for instruction and meet students' needs.

Before the pandemic, I had common planning time with my content teacher partners. I relied on this collaboration to share ideas to ensure students were engaged and meeting learning targets. Weekly meetings allowed us to discuss and differentiate content, develop assessments, review data, and reflect on what worked and what did not. By working collaboratively, teachers

increase collective knowledge and learning to improve their instruction and strengthen their practice (Learning Forward, 2011). When the pandemic hit, I had fewer opportunities to work collaboratively. I felt less confident in my ability to develop the content to meet learning standards and meet students' diverse learning needs. Collaboration helps to develop collective efficacy, which, according to Hattie (2016), has the most significant impact on student achievement (as cited in Donohoo et al., 2018). Teaching remotely is vastly different from teaching in person, and the need for collaboration and collective discourse was ever so great but rarely occurred.

The district opted for a hybrid model for the 2020–2021 school year and allowed families to decide to have their students be fully remote. Because this was another model for teaching and learning, a week of collaborative professional time was provided for teachers to prepare for the school year. The student day was shortened by 50 minutes to allow teachers more time to plan instruction collaboratively and hold virtual office hours; however, more time does not necessarily ensure developing content and assessing learning collaboratively. Even though I had common planning time with my math teaching partner, this did not include special educator coteachers. Further challenges included teachers at the middle school teaching both hybrid classes and at least one remote class. I had four hybrid courses (Algebra I, two pre-algebra sections, and cotaught math) and two remote courses (Algebra I and cotaught math).

Planning for in-person classes and remote classes is very different. Time was needed to develop instruction for both models and for the independent activities for hybrid students on their remote days. Activities had to be engaging and meet learning standards, but activities also had to be accessible for students. Additionally, teachers needed to address learning gaps from the previous spring. The instructional decisions were overwhelming, and the amount of planning and

instructional decisions increased. The management of collecting and evaluating work, providing feedback, and developing new content was tremendous.

Professional Learning

Reestablishing a weekly professional learning community (PLC), with the district math specialist and my teaching partner, supported instruction development to meet our students' needs and address learning gaps. Quality professional learning is an ongoing process that is a shared responsibility among participating teachers (Learning Forward, 2011). During our weekly meetings, we reviewed progress, determined which content standards to address and to what extent, developed common assessments, and reviewed results. We made strategic decisions about instruction based on the need to close learning gaps and because we only had students in person 2 days a week. Although the struggle to plan for different classes continued, I believe some of the issues were alleviated, because we worked collaboratively and built collective efficacy.

Collective Responsibility

Because professional learning communities create a collaborative and shared action, collective responsibility is established (Donohoo et al., 2015). Collectively, we set goals and determined what steps to take to improve student learning. Learning communities allow teachers to share feedback about their practices and resources, work together to develop formative and summative assessments, and evaluate the results (Learning Forward, 2011). We provided the needed peer support and collective inquiry to drive professional learning, leading to improved outcomes for all students. According to Honigsfeld and Nordmeyer (2020), collaboration is essential for teaching to meet students' diverse needs in our new teaching and learning reality due to the pandemic. By working collaboratively, our teaching group developed the collective action and responsibility to identify and take action to address inequitable practices.

The pandemic made the need for collaboration, collective responsibility, and sustained professional learning more apparent. Here are some lessons I learned from teaching during the pandemic:

1. Collaboration and collective responsibility ensure student learning and achievement.

When teachers worked collaboratively to set goals, collect data, and evaluate data, we could make instructional decisions to improve student achievement.

2. Collaboration and collective responsibility allowed for collegial discourse focused on equitable learning for all students.

3. The PLC must be the shared responsibility of all team members. The collapse of professional learning in the spring of 2019 showed that the PLC had not been embedded fully in the team's shared culture.

4. It takes time and effort to build a culture of professional learning, and common planning time for all members (even in a fully remote system) is necessary to create an environment of collective responsibility.

The pandemic has shown me that teacher collaboration and professional learning are vital for continued teacher and student improvement. The need for social distancing to keep both educators and students safe is necessary, but teachers need to work together to develop the instruction and learning opportunities for all students. The task of teaching is overwhelming, and the pandemic has increased the need for collaboration and collective responsibility. When a culture of professional learning and shared goals is established and sustained, collective teacher efficacy improves, and student learning and educational equity increase.

In a time like the pandemic, efforts to collaborate take even more commitment and effort. From my experiences during the pandemic, I developed the following ideas for teachers to contemplate:

1. Commit to maintaining the schedule for PLC meetings. Common planning time is essential, and I believe we must each commit to PLC meetings, even during remote learning.
2. Continue to communicate with colleagues informally. Invite colleagues for a virtual team meeting to talk about how people are doing and to give each other support.
3. In times like the pandemic, teachers cannot do everything we want to accomplish. I believe it is important to prioritize with colleagues to agree on the most important and doable tasks the group can accomplish.
4. Understand that school will be disrupted (e.g., a pandemic, snow days, emergencies, health issues [influenza], hurricane, floods), and be as prepared as possible to have the tools needed to handle the situation. We cannot cover everything, but we know there will be disruptions, so prepare ahead for disruptions.
5. Develop systems for ensuring students can work remotely with success (e.g., make sure every student has access to technology), have a system in place to make sure students have access to Wi-Fi (e.g., create the ability to disperse hot spots to all students who need them), and ensure all teachers are capable to work remotely with their students (e.g., professional development, technology, access to the Wi-Fi).
6. Develop a system to ensure schools continue to support and develop the social-emotional needs of our students as much as possible.

These are ideas to consider, and although we cannot prepare for everything, we should prepare to help our students and each other as much as possible when an emergency occurs. One thing the pandemic has shown me is that teachers do and will step up when they are needed most. The more we can do so in collaboration with each other, the more effective we all will be.

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