

# How to improve teacher teams

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

The notion of distributed leadership has gained increasing attention from education researchers in recent years. Researchers have been interested in how leadership emerges from interactions among teachers and other school staff members who collaborate to make educational decisions. Findings from a recent case study on distributed leadership have practical implications for improving teacher teams.

## Listening to teacher talk

To examine the dynamics of distributed leadership in teacher teams, researchers observed two teams during one semester in a large Midwestern high school. Team 1, comprising seven veteran teachers, had a problem-finding purpose. This team was charged with suggesting policies and interventions to bolster the academic success of students in danger of failure in more than one subject area. To help these students succeed, they needed to figure out why some were persistently failing multiple classes. The team's 10 meetings during the semester averaged 35 minutes each.

Team 2 included six core members, joined periodically by other teachers. This team had a problem-solving purpose: creating interdisciplinary instructional and assessment materials for team-taught English and social studies within a block schedule format. The team met eight times, and meetings lasted an average of 43 minutes.

During each team meeting, an observer took notes and digitally recorded the meeting. The researchers then used a technique called discourse analysis to identify interactional routines—repeating patterns of conversational processes within each team's interactions. Previous research has established that participants who share a culture know how to “play the conversational game” at work in

each routine. As the researchers analyzed the notes and recordings, they looked for internal and external factors influencing the relative success and collaborative disposition of each team.

## Learning from teacher talk

The study revealed that conversational dynamics within the problem-finding team differed from those within the problem-solving team — and that each type of team was prone to interactions that either helped or hindered collaborative work. For instance, the *problem-finding* academic intervention team had an opportunity to brainstorm and discuss possible causes for students' difficulties and to suggest innovative solutions. However, the open-ended nature of their task at times seemed to overwhelm the team. When discussions didn't lead to creative solutions, members seemed stuck and ended up arguing about ground rules.

Meanwhile the *problem-solving* interdisciplinary team started with a well-defined problem (the need for assessment and instructional materials), so there was less uncertainty. However, there was also less innovation. When a team member ventured outside the box to consider the task within a broader context, her comments were ignored. Why? Because team members were focused on finalizing their product.

The researchers concluded that facilitators can help teacher teams be innovative and productive by increasing teachers' awareness of conversational dynamics that can either help or hinder the team's effectiveness. They also say that principals need to be aware of the important role they play in establishing clarity of purpose and appropriate levels of autonomy so that teams can be both innovative and effective. ♦

Carla Thomas McClure is an education writer whose research summaries are featured regularly in *Teachers Teaching Teachers*.



## Reference

Scribner, J.P., Sawyer, R.K., Watson, S.T., & Myers, V.L. (2007). Teacher teams and distributed leadership: A study of group discourse and collaboration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(1), 67-100.