

BREAKING THE WALLS OF CLASSROOMS THROUGH TEACHER COLLABORATION: How do top-performing schools turn a teacher's best practice into a school-wide best practice?

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SUMMARY: Teachers in the top-performing schools recognise that teacher collaboration is key to ensuring that change is promoted beyond individual classrooms and that all teachers, working together, are responsible for learners' academic success.

As part of a series of policy briefs to outline the best practices from the *Schools that Work II* study, this policy brief outlines how—through teacher collaborative practices summarised below—top-performing schools have shifted their focus from individual teacher expertise to building a stronger learning and knowledge base of all teachers at the school:

Joint planning

Teachers meet at least once a week to plan together

Teacher peer-observation

Teachers de-privatise their practice by opening their classroom doors to allow other teachers to observe

Team-teaching

Teachers work together to share the work load instead of doubling their efforts

Interdisciplinary collaboration

Teacher collaboration is not limited to teachers teaching the same subject in the same grade

Sharing ideas and good practices

Teachers are open to sharing what works or does not work during curriculum delivery reflection sessions

people like it this way, but an effective teacher is someone who wants to grow in the profession. An effective teacher wants collaboration¹."

While this statement is true in many of our schools, schools that work, on the other hand, provide opportunities that are translated to improvements in classroom practice so that learning is maximised. In these schools, this is best achieved not by keeping teachers isolated from one another, but rather by structuring opportunities for teachers to convene, think and re-energize—working on instructional improvements collaboratively.

DuFour and others², leading experts on collaboration, define *collaboration* as teams of teachers who work interdependently to achieve common goals—goals linked to the purpose of learning for all—for which members are held mutually accountable.

What is your school currently doing to facilitate teacher collaboration?

The schools that work³ share their insights about how they build their professional support network.

INTRODUCTION

"Isolation can be a side effect of becoming a teacher. It is very easy to get caught in the trap of walking into a classroom, shutting the door, and tending to your own students. This is how many schools function, with educators sharing nothing more than a parking lot. Some

¹ Perez, J (2015): Taking the doors off the classroom through collaboration [<http://www.hotchalkeducationnetwork.com/collaboration-with-purpose/>]

² DuFour, R, Dufour, R, & Eaker, R. "Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work," Solution Tree Inc. [<http://www.allthingsplc.info/files/uploads/teachercollaboration.pdf>]

³ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za.



HOW TEACHERS WORK COLLABORATIVELY

Five types of collaboration were identified in the top-performing schools (the schools that work). Each of these is described below:

JOINT PLANNING

- Schools that work make sure that each teacher belongs to a team that focuses on learning. Each team has time to meet at least once a week throughout the school year to plan together.

In other words, for teachers in schools that work, collaborative planning has both an individual and collective benefit.

A

• Typical planning sessions

A typical planning session among teachers starts with:

- ✱ Preparing their lessons for the following day or the week ahead,
- ✱ Strategizing how they would present a lesson in class, and
- ✱ Asking each other how they think their learners would respond to a lesson.

We meet every Friday morning and then we plan for the week ahead. (Teacher, School MK-Quintile 1)

Because teachers plan together, their lessons are often very similar. As collaborative teams, teachers bounce ideas off each other and multiple solutions to problems are generated.

B

• Joint planning is well-organised

Joint planning does not happen by default or by chance, the following practices are prevalent in top-performing schools:

- ✱ All planning sessions are included in the school timetable. Meeting times for joint planning vary in different schools.



Making time for teachers to collaborate is the responsibility of the SMT. The HODs in particular, play a large role in scheduling time for teachers in their departments to meet and plan together.

We plan what we are going to teach, decide what activities we are going to give to all our learners for classwork and homework. We have to have a common vision, a common goal that we must work towards. (HOD, School LK-Quintile 2)

C

• Reflection after joint planning

After presenting lessons in class that have been jointly planned, teachers have follow-up meetings to talk about what worked and what did not.

We always regroup each day after presenting lessons in our different classes and say 'How did it go in your class?' We talk about what worked or did not work. (Teacher, School KN-Quintile 2)

TEAM-TEACHING

- There is a strong teamwork among teachers teaching the same subject. Every teacher is involved and connected to each other. Teachers work together to share the work load instead of doubling their efforts.


Different schools use different approaches to team-teaching. These include subject-splitting, inter-phase teaching and joint planning but separate teaching. Each approach is briefly discussed below.


A

• Subject-splitting



One common team-teaching strategy that teachers teaching the same subject use is *subject-splitting*. Schools that work use two types of subject-splitting method, i.e., splitting by topic or chapter and, in Grade 12, splitting by the SC examination paper:

 **Splitting by concept, topic or chapter:** Teachers teaching the same subject assign one another chapters or topics to teach, to match their strengths. Instead of teaching the whole subject, they specialise in specific chapters or topics.


 **Splitting by the NSC examination papers:** In other schools, teachers split each subject according to how it is structured in the NSC examination. For example, in English and other languages, one teacher is responsible for Paper 1, while others teach Papers 2 and 3.


Our approach is that it is better to do one thing that you are good at because you prepare well for one topic, rather than doing all the topics. (Teacher, School KH-Quintile 4)


B


• Inter-phase teaching

Team-teaching is not limited to teachers teaching the same grade. Instead:

 All teachers teaching the same subject in different grades form part of the team.

 They plan together so that all teachers are aware of curriculum expectations in different grades and phases.

 Teachers teaching in the lower grades are often asked to teach a topic or a concept in the higher grades because of the expertise they have.


 Similarly, the higher grade teachers are sometimes called upon to teach a topic in a lower grade.


“It’s not about the grade that you have been assigned to but it’s all about the skill or expertise that you bring to the table,” (Teacher, School KZ-Quintile 1)


TEACHER PEER-OBSERVATION


• A unique feature in schools that work, which deviates from the norm, is that teachers de-privatise their practice by opening their classroom doors and sharing, observing and discussing their teaching.


It is an accepted norm and culture in the top-performing schools that teachers observe and support their colleagues teach in class:

 The doors of the classrooms have been ‘taken off’ through teachers’ collaborative efforts.

 There is an open-door policy where teachers go in and out of each other’s classrooms without offending anyone and without making teachers feel as though they are being violated.

 Peer observation involves teachers observing each other’s practice, learning from each other and providing feedback.

 Teachers have the opportunity to give and receive feedback about teaching practice and develop awareness about their own teaching.

 Teacher collaboration, through teacher peer-observation, is directed towards building a professional, collegial staff that examines best practices.

We have long moved away from a notion that says ‘it’s okay for a teacher to enter his classroom, close the door behind him and no one knows what happens in there because no one can dare go in.’ (Deputy Principal, School MJ-Quintile 1)

SHARING IDEAS & GOOD PRACTICES

• Teachers are open to sharing what works or does not work during the departmental curriculum implementation reflection sessions, and they also collaborate informally.

A professional culture where teachers are willing to share ideas, support one another, and explore together exists in many top-



performing schools. Such culture also enables teachers to:

- Engage in a professional dialogue, evaluate and modify teaching strategies and programmes.
- Shift the focus from individual teacher expertise to building a stronger learning and knowledge base of all teachers at the school.
- Focus on an examination of learners' and teachers' work rather than the teachers' personalities.
- Have a sounding board for ideas and best practices without feeling pressured to hide their failures or vulnerabilities.
- Confess their inadequacies knowing that they have the support system within their school to help address those inadequacies.

We have regular and scheduled conversations or reflections about learner performance and curriculum coverage. In our departmental meetings, we are always reflecting and looking for the best strategies to address what the assessment data is telling us. (Teacher, School FE-Quintile 2)

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

- There is a strong teamwork among teachers across different grades and subject areas, i.e. interdisciplinary collaboration. In a striking example of collaboration in some schools, the teachers in Mathematics, Physical Science and Economics collaborate to teach certain topics.

There is an expectation within top-performing schools that they are going to do whatever is necessary for the learners to master the curriculum. The trademark of schools that work includes a culture where teacher collaboration is not limited to teachers teaching the same subject in the same grade. Instead:

- There is an internal drive among the teachers in different subject areas that they want learners to do well.

- Teachers offering different subjects are all feeding off one another and are all collaborating to share best practices. See example below from **School KF-Quintile 4**:



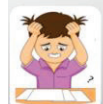
We always look for integration among different subjects. Learners must not see subjects as separate entities but must see interconnections between different subjects.



If a concept appears in different subjects, we agreed that teachers in one specific subject would introduce that concept.



Immediately after a concept has been introduced, i.e. a day after it was introduced, teachers in other subjects then re-inforce it in their subject areas.



During that week, teachers in all subjects are re-enforcing the same concepts. Do you know how powerful that is?



No learner will ever forget that concept because teachers in different subjects are talking about it at the same time from different perspectives.



But for this to happen, it requires careful, thorough joint planning across different departments and subjects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Darling-Hammond, a leading expert in teacher education, argues that change will occur as teachers learn to describe, discuss, and adjust their practices according to a collectively held standard of teaching quality. Thus, it is recommended that schools must foster a collaborative culture among teachers that puts the students' learning first, and turns individual teachers' best practices into school-wide best practices.

