ILE and Collaborative Teaching

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The transition to collaborative teaching is often promoted in line with the redesign of teaching spaces away from private, individual teacher classrooms to flexible and shared learning spaces. Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) that promote collaborative teaching are more likely to lead to improved outcomes for students. Collaboration has been shown to lead to improvements in teacher competencies and student learning, as well as to increase the retention of beginning teachers. Overall, collaborative schools outperform schools that employ more individualistic approaches. However, collaborative team teaching is often not well implemented or understood, and, when this is the case, may not differ significantly from solitary teaching approaches. Surveys show that teachers and principals in New Zealand feel they lack knowledge about collaborative teaching practices and specific co-teaching strategies and skills.

What is collaboration?

Collaboration is a complex activity. It involves collegiality, but it is much more than this. It is more than coordination, which involves aligning separate activities, and extends beyond cooperation, which involves separating a task amongst different people and then combining this work for a final outcome. Collaboration involves two or more parties who see different aspects of a problem working together to explore differences and solutions that go beyond their own limited perspective on what is possible. In education, collaboration involves two or more teachers sharing responsibility for a group of students, sharing approaches and resources and accepting joint accountability for students' learning, usually in a shared space. Collaborations may be short or long-term, and some may take several years to achieve changes. Collaboration is not easy to enact, and in itself does not necessarily lead to improved and effective pedagogical practices, as it may be focused around issues other than learning, such as resource sharing or school improvement.

What are the benefits?

Collaborative teaching can:

- Lead to better quality teaching, more opportunities for student learning, and higher student achievement

- Support increased interdisciplinarity and cross-curricular projects and programmes

- Strengthen opportunities for students to make choices about and take ownership of their learning, for example, by opting into workshops

- Offer students multiple perspectives on the curriculum

- Offer teachers the ability to respond to students' needs with greater flexibility and spontaneity

- Better support students with disabilities, language difficulties, and students who are at emotional risk, as well as students for whom English is a second language, by offering differentiated, more personalised teaching

- Support strengths-based teaching, for example, drawing on one teacher to support a scientific inquiry and another to assist students in graphic design in the publication of scientific findings

- Enable the collation of different perspectives and insights about students' learning

- Offer early-career teachers opportunities to receive greater support and learn from more experienced colleagues, at the same time offering experienced teachers opportunities to learn about new and innovative practices from newly-qualified teachers

- Offer opportunities for teachers to share experience, ideas, issues, successes, frustrations and failures, and to model teaching practices to expand each other's pedagogical repertoires

- Provide a non-threatening, supportive environment in which teachers can observe and explore each other's strengths and areas for development, supporting individual teachers to develop effective practice to a greater extent than when they teach in private, isolated spaces, and reducing variabilities between teachers' competencies to increase the effectiveness of all teachers

- Enable collaborative reflections on best teaching practices and impacts on student learning, which, while possible in single teacher settings, are more common and ongoing in team teaching

- Foster inquiry into issues of practice, which can support the development of new cultures of practice and increase the likelihood of research-informed practice

- Reduce students' disruptive behaviour and referrals for support

- Increases teachers' sense of well-being, agency and efficacy

However, research in this area is limited and often survey-based and anecdotal, because most teachers that are using collaborative approaches have not evaluated the effectiveness of these approaches in terms of their impact on student achievement.

What does collaboration look like?

Team teaching can be organised in different ways: it may be under the direction of a team leader, or involve mentoring relationships between a master teacher and a beginning teacher or coordinated teams. Co-teaching strategies might include alternate teaching, parallel teaching, station teaching, one teaches while one observes, one teaches while one assists, complementary teaching and supportive teaching. These strategies can be determined in teachers' planning, but can also evolve organically depending on the needs of the students during a lesson. There might also be plans to offer different types of teaching and learning in different spaces: for example, four spaces might separately involve small group learning with the teacher, shared groups, working with a partner, and quiet individual work.

Team teaching relationships need to be carefully managed because placing beginning teachers with an experienced teacher, or struggling teachers with excellent teachers, may risk burning out the school's best teachers. Some studies also suggest that collaboration may be most successful when it is voluntary and spontaneous, rather than determined and regulated by school administration.

What is required for teacher collaboration to be effective?

Collaborative teaching should be focused on building the collaborative expertise of teachers in order to maximize student learning. This means that effective collaborative teams need to be committed to improving their teaching and monitoring the impact of teaching on student learning and well-being. There needs to be a focus on student outcomes and teachers need to be equipped with tools to think evaluatively and measure the effectiveness of their collaborative teaching in regard to students' learning. Tools might include progress towards achievement goals and levels, attitude and engagement surveys, and measures of student self-regulation and well-being. Collaboration can also support teachers to plan programmes and interventions, diagnose what to do next, and utilise research to ensure practice is based upon reliable evidence.

A focus on the nature of relationships enables and improves collegiality, but actual collaboration is a further step. As there is a delicate balance between collective responsibility and individual teacher autonomy in collaborative teaching situations, teachers need theoretical frameworks and common visions for student learning and desired outcomes. They need to collaboratively develop and agree what progress looks like and identify challenging goals. A common conceptualisation of progress and sharing high expectations of students are key to improving outcomes, whereas different conceptions or expectations of challenge and progess can have a negative impact on learning. Shared meanings, understandings, agreements, goals and processes in particular create collective accountability and facilitate collaborative work. Collaboration is enabled when time is taken to develop a climate of trust and there are strong connections between collaborative processes, particularly shared understandings of purpose, and teachers' willingness to innovate and take risks.

Teachers need to share a belief in collaborative teaching and the principle of distributed leadership for a collaborative and student-centred pedagogical approach. Smart systems to support teaching and learning can also help, as well as knowledge about how to put flexible spaces to best use. Systems can, for example, support teachers in the grouping and re-grouping of students according to their needs, interests and passions, and shared processes for the daily functioning of the class can minimise stress and maximise time spent on teaching and learning.

Common spaces

Teacher collaboration is supported by common spaces shared by teachers, such as those of an ILE, and even common office spaces. These common workspaces make collegial interactions possible. With the addition of common planning time, teachers can collaborate in planning, assessment and moderation. Common spaces might include a learning commons that is shared by several classes, or collaboration might be enabled by the use of glass or flexible partitions between classes. Either way, the use of common spaces gives teachers daily opportunities to observe other teachers and be observed, and to work collaboratively and offer their particular curricular strengths to support a wider range of students.

Teacher skills and competencies

Having opportunities to observe one another may not necessarily lead to shared learning or reflection on practice. There are, therefore, some crucial skills required of teachers to enable the development of effective collaborative practices. The relational dimensions of ILE require development in the same way that temporal, organisational and pedagogical dimensions do. Both students and teachers require skills in working as part of a team, and must develop skills of empathy for and appreciation of others that share their space. These include negotiating use of rooms and spaces, as well as the use of wall display space, keeping voices to a working level so as not to disturb other users of the space, and caring for communal equipment and leaving areas tidy. Teachers in particular also need to be skilled in identifying and respecting different perspectives, strengths and weaknesses, initiating 'difficult conversations' and managing potential conflict, accepting and being open to critique, and role-modelling positive relationships.

Collaborative work also requires the creative organisation of time for teachers to meet, plan, review, reflect and problem-solve together. The greater time required for collaborative planning and reviewing can be provided through after-school meetings, shared schedules for playground duty enabling the same team to be off duty at the same time, and shared classroom release time. Finding sufficient time for these important and lengthy conversational activities can be a barrier to collaborative teaching. Teaching teams without adequate time or processes for collaborative activities may rely on strategies such as divisions of workload (where individual teachers become solely responsible for the planning and implementation of certain subjects or for the planning for particular groups) or turn-teaching (in which one teacher teaches two classes), which undermine the principles of collaboration and shared responsibility.

What are some of the issues or problems associated with developing collaborative practices?

Most teachers agree that the advantages of collaborative teaching, when effectively implemented, outweigh the issues associated with this model, it is worth being aware of some of the most common concerns. Teachers may experience a loss of autonomy over instruction and a loss of freedom – for example to plan by themselves, tension around how work is allocated, greater demands on their time due to the increased time required for communication, and longer planning, preparation and evaluation sessions, and vulnerability, insecurity and stress from the enhanced visibility of their teaching.

Students may experience issues from a lack of connection with one teacher as a result of being taught by several. This is especially the case for more vulnerable learners, who have particular needs for the provision of a primary attachment teacher. They may also experience unequal opportunities to display their work or see their work displayed, if teachers are fearful of encroaching on other teachers' spaces or existing displays.

Some schools have developed innovative practices to address these problems, such as giving each student a 'buddy' teacher who provides a point of contact for family and whānau and takes primary responsibility for tracking and reporting on that student's progress. It is thought that the variety of teachers in an ILE offers more opportunity for students to find a teacher to connect with. Where there are multi-level groupings, students can maintain attachments to teachers over two or more years. Other schools use the concepts of whānau, hapū and iwi to explain nesting groups of students, and ensure that students have time with an individual dedicated teacher. However, this strategy has not been successful for all, with some schools commenting that this grouping practice led teachers to revert to traditional practices associated with assigned classes. Other schools have found a home group strategy to be useful in the beginning of working in larger shared spaces, but over time and with the building of trust and confidence with larger groups, have been able to let go of such approaches.

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