



Review

Teacher collaboration: A systematic review



Katrien Vangrieken*, Filip Dochy, Elisabeth Raes, Eva Kyndt

Centre for Research on Professional Learning & Development, Corporate Training and Lifelong Learning, University of Leuven, Dekenstraat 2 (Box 3772), 3000 Leuven, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a systematic review on teacher collaboration. In total, 82 studies were selected based on predefined selection criteria and reviewed by means of a narrative review method to thematically gather information across the studies. The first aim of this review was to provide an overview of the terminological framework to describe teacher collaboration used in previous research. Collaboration was perceived here as a continuum ranging from mere aggregates of individuals to strong team collaboration. This continuum was conceptualised as the degree of team entitativity. Second, the review investigated the focus and depth of collaboration. These appeared to be important issues and provide different opportunities for (collaborative) learning. Third, although realising teacher collaboration proves to be challenging, this review listed benefits for students, teachers, and the school. Fourth and fifth, various facilitating and hindering factors were explored that may serve as valuable points of action to realise effective collaboration. The latter has vital importance for the future as it is needed to build schools into learning organisations, to anticipate the growing importance of collaboration in society and to use education as a role model for students to properly prepare them for the future.

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* Corresponding author. Tel. +32 (0)16 32 09 67.

E-mail address: katrien.vangrieken@ppw.kuleuven.be (K. Vangrieken).

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1. Introduction

The educational sector is confronted with an increasing pressure towards collaboration: teachers need to be proficient collaborators in order to successfully perform their job. There are different reasons for this evolution and the fact that teamwork is a phenomenon of growing importance in society overall is one of the contributing factors. A collaborative work environment seems to become the norm for every organisation (Decuyper, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2010; Edmondson, 2013). Education is often seen as an important context for students to acquire these collaborative skills before they enter the labour market. Within education, teacher collaboration plays an important role in transforming students into proficient future collaborators as teachers model cooperative learning for students by working together as a team (Coke, 2005). They can only teach collaborative skills when they “practice what they preach” (Coke, 2005). Moreover, in order to successfully implement innovative, student-centred, and collaborative learning methods proficient collaboration among the teaching staff is required (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003; Meirink, 2007; Shipley, 2009; Slavit, Kennedy, Lean, Nelson, & Deuel, 2011). Results from The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013 showed that teachers involved in collaborative learning reported using more innovative pedagogies (e.g., working in small groups), and displayed more job satisfaction and self-efficacy (European Commission, 2013). In countries with high performance in education such as Finland, teachers collaborate to a high extent with excellent results as a consequence. In other countries, this appears to be rather difficult to achieve.

2. Present study

As teacher collaboration is important, this review can form a contribution by investigating different forms of teacher collaboration, the positive and negative consequences, and facilitating and hindering factors of teacher collaboration.

In order to get an overview of the state-of-the-art of research on teacher collaboration, previous reviews on the topic were reviewed (section 2), aiming to provide an overview of what is known and to expose the gaps in current research. This review set five research aims that are deemed relevant for research as well as practice. These focus on terminology used in previous research to describe teacher collaboration, gaining insight in what teacher collaboration is about (the focus and depth thereof, distinguishing between superficial and deep-level collaboration), benefits and negative consequences of collaboration, facilitating and hindering factors for teacher collaboration, and clarifying what effective collaboration includes. The aims were addressed using a systematic literature search and a narrative review method to synthesise the literature that was selected (section 4). In the results section, the five aims described above are elaborated upon based on analyses of the collected studies. This is followed by an overview of conclusions and discussion on the main results (section 6), limitations of the article at hand, and possible areas for future research (section 7).

3. Earlier reviews

In this section an overview of the current state-of-the-art of research on teacher collaboration will be presented based on earlier reviews. To focus on the most recent knowledge on this topic, the overview is deliberately limited to three most relevant reviews written after 2000.

The three reviews investigated different aspects and kinds of teacher collaboration. Kelchtermans (2006) focused on the broad constructs collaboration and collegiality. Both other reviews looked at teacher professional communities. The review of Lomos, Hofman, and Bosker (2011a) specifically focused on the relationship between teacher professional communities and student performances. Similarly, Fulton and Britton (2011) investigated Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) teachers in professional learning communities (PLCs), focusing on what happens when teachers work together in PLCs in order to improve teaching and student achievement.

As the reviews had a different focus, they also used different terminological frameworks. Kelchtermans (2006) conceptualised teacher collaboration and collegiality as working conditions for teachers and as embedded in the organisational context. He used a micropolitical stance, including a focus on individual differences, diversity of goals and conflict, the use of informal power, and the different interests that are at play in interactions in an organisation. Collaboration was used here as a descriptive term, referring to the cooperative actions teachers undertake for job-related purposes (their actual doing things together). Kelchtermans (2006) distinguished collaboration as being a descriptive concept from collegiality. The latter was used to describe the quality of the relationships among staff members in a school and has a normative dimension because it often includes a positive value, referring to good relationships among colleagues, and is part of the organisational culture.

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