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A Phenomenological Exploration of High School Teachers' Perspectives on Collaboration and Implementation of Practice in the Context of College and Career Readiness Framework

By
Kelly DiPietro- Edwards
Drexel University
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' lived experiences with peer collaboration to understand how a context of accountability and data-driven decision-making may influence teachers' collaborative experiences on the integration of non-assessed skills into existing curriculum. This study utilized interviews, artifact review, field notes, and researcher's journal to develop rich descriptions of teachers' experiences. Conclusions indicate teachers cognitively recognize the importance of employability skills as a college and career readiness indicator; however, their implementation of practice still demonstrates a focus on student academic achievement. Administrators should be cognizant of teachers' experiences when implementing organizational structures to support collaboration.

Problem

Teacher collaboration has been shown to increase student academic achievement on standardized tests and other traditional forms of classroom assessment (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Benerjee, 2016). In addition to content knowledge, employability skills that are generalizable across academic disciplines, industries, and job sectors are necessary for students to be college and career ready (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). A national emphasis on teacher accountability that is measured through student academic achievement through standardized testing may affect teachers' ability to peer collaborate on initiatives not directly linked to student achievement data.

Research Aim

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' lived experiences with peer collaboration to understand how a context of accountability and data-driven decision-making may influence teachers' collaborative experiences. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do teachers understand college and career readiness indicators and the implementation of these practices within the classroom?

- 2) How do teachers describe their beliefs about peer collaboration on the integration of employability skills into existing curriculum in an era of accountability?
- 3) How do teachers describe their experience with peer collaboration on the integration of employability skills into existing curriculum in an era of accountability?

Method

Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify potential research participants who were teachers and collaborated on the integration of employability skills into their existing curriculum as part of the district’s blended learning cohort. In-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom with five research participants and the data was triangulated with artifacts of teacher collaboration that were provided by the participants, the researcher’s field notes, and the researcher’s journal. Each interview lasted between 30 and 55 minutes and was recorded. The interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions and the semi-structured design allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions as appropriate. First cycle of coding included In Vivo and Concept coding. The second cycle of coding included Pattern coding to identify emergent themes from the data (Saldaña, 2016).

Findings

The findings of this study are organized by five themes that are supported by multiple sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes are identified in Figure 1.

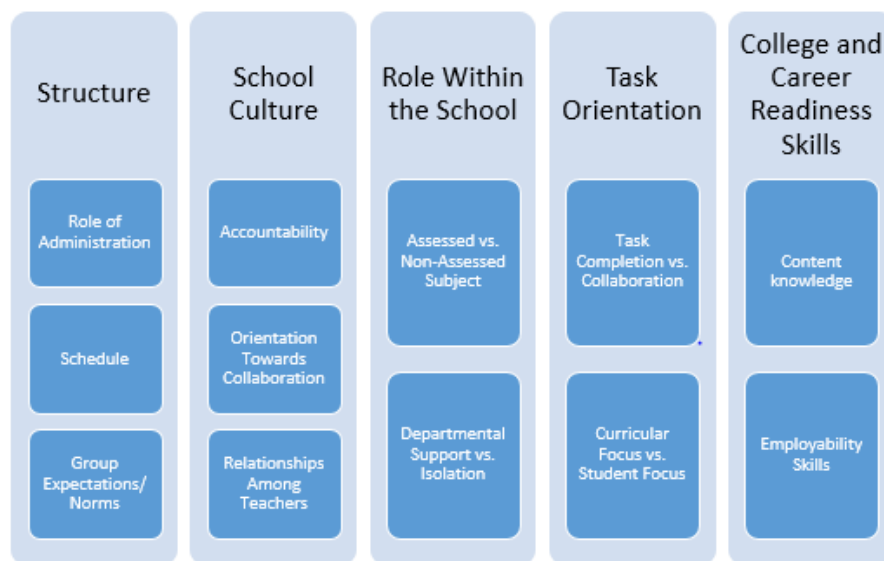


Figure 1. Findings and themes that emerged from the research

Conclusion and Discussion

Three conclusions emerged from the research. First, participants consistently identified employability skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration as being equally

or more important to demonstrate college and career readiness than content knowledge. Teachers who taught assessed courses described collaborative experiences with an emphasis on content knowledge and student academic achievement, while teachers who taught non-assessed courses described collaborative experiences that were focused on student skill development, such as critical thinking and communication. This may illustrate the impact that an era of accountability has on teacher collaborative practice. Second, all participants described positive beliefs towards peer-collaboration on the integration of non-assessed skills into the existing curriculum, and expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with the results of the collaborative process. Third, participants described both positive and negative experiences with teacher collaboration. Negative experiences were attributed to group dynamics and the willingness of others within the group to collaborate, lack of dedicated time for collaboration with a clearly articulated purpose, and the evolving vision of the blended cohort. Positive experiences were attributed to positive emotions related to group relationships, group accountability that was moderated by the technology coach, and regularly scheduled time with clearly defined expectations for the collaboration to occur.

Research Implications

This phenomenological study explored teachers' experiences with collaboration on the integration of non-assessed skills into existing curriculum within the context of an era of accountability. Recommended action steps for administrators include integrating organizational structures that support teacher collaborative practice such as: regularly scheduled time for collaboration to occur, clear articulated objectives for the collaboration sessions, and administrative support for a culture of collaboration. The limitations of this study provide opportunities for future research. The limited sample size provides an opportunity for future research to study the impact of teaching an assessed course may have on the ability and willingness to collaborate on initiatives not directly related to student achievement and the long-term impact that the COVID-19 school closures have on teachers' beliefs about the role of collaboration in their professional practice.

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Author Information and Biography

Kelly Di Pietro-Edwards is a doctoral candidate pursuing her EdD in Educational Leadership and Management with a concentration in Educational Administration. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish from The Pennsylvania State University (2005), followed by a Master of Arts in Hispanic Studies from Villanova (2010) and Master of Science in Educational Leadership from Wilkes University (2017). Kelly has 15 years of experience in education serving as a middle school Spanish teacher, high school assistant principal, middle school assistant principal, and secondary curriculum liaison. She served on the Berks County Career Pathways Education Advisory Committee. Her professional interests include college and career readiness skills, developing K-12 curriculum to meet the needs of a diverse workforce, and teacher collaboration. Kelly anticipates completing her dissertation defense in Spring 2021.