

Title:

Understanding the Value and Impact of Teacher Talk in Professional Learning Communities

Abstract

Existing research shows that teacher beliefs, behaviors, and biases affect student outcomes and that deficit beliefs perpetuate disparate educational outcomes. The talk teachers engage in about student abilities are influenced by teacher beliefs about those students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how a team of middle school teachers express their expectations and beliefs about students and the teaching practice through the way they talk about both in their PLC.

Aim

This study seeks to explore how a team of middle school teachers in a small urban public school express their expectations and beliefs about students and their teaching practice through the way they talk about both in team meetings through the following research questions:

- In what ways do middle school teachers talk about students during team meetings?
- In what ways do middle school teachers talk about their professional practice during team meetings?
- What does teacher talk in the PLC reveal about teacher beliefs and expectations about students and teachers' professional practice?

Problem

Existing research has shown that teacher beliefs, behaviors, and biases affect student outcomes and that negative, or deficit, beliefs perpetuate disparate educational outcomes. Studies have exposed the specific influence of deficit and meritocratic narratives and the role those beliefs play in teacher behavior and student achievement. What teachers say about students and their experiences in education, both through formal stories and casual conversations, communicates the beliefs they hold and is central to how they engage in their work (Generett & Olson, 2020).

The ultimate goal is to improve student outcomes, and that happens through conversations in professional learning communities. Since we cannot catch every word a teacher says in the course of a day, this research will look closely at the type of teacher talk in PLCs that drives the instructional decisions that directly impact student learning. This study is important because it fills in the missing gap in the literature about how teacher talk reveals the biases and expectations the research proves influences student outcomes.

Findings

Through multiple rounds of coding, six themes emerged that best represent the experiences of the participants. The first theme, *Teacher Beliefs*, encompasses the truths these participating teachers hold about education, their students, and the teaching profession. Their beliefs provide

the foundation upon which their sense of responsibility, the second emergent theme, is based. Through a *Sense of Responsibility*, three subthemes emerged: (a) a sense of responsibility to build relationships with students, (b) towards preparing students for the future, and, for the Black and West Indian teachers in the study, (c) a specific sense of responsibility towards Black students. The third emerging theme is *Teacher Talk*. This is supported by the subthemes (a) advice received about students and teaching, (b) combating negative talk, and (c) talk and the PLCs. The theme *Support for Teachers* captures the overarching focus participants have on the need for support from campus administration through the PLC. The fifth emergent theme, *Teacher Autonomy*, represents the absence of trust and value between administration and teachers as evidenced by the expectations placed on teachers. The final theme, *Frustration with the Profession*, reveals the participating teachers' thoughts about the gap between what they believe should be the focus of education (students) and what seems to be the priority (adults).

Discussion

The findings of this study were developed through the lived experiences and reflections of 11 middle school classroom teachers who participate in professional learning communities. An analysis of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews revealed the following findings:

- **Result One:** Students are not at the center of teacher conversation in professional learning communities.
- **Result Two:** Black teachers are intentional about why they choose to work with Black students.
- **Result Three:** Teachers have positive opinions of both students and the profession and hold themselves to a high standard, but do not feel supported nor trusted by administration to operate in the best interest of their students given current job expectations.

Instead of discourse about students, this study revealed an overwhelming concern the teacher participants have with the profession, other teachers, and administrative leadership. This preoccupation with adult issues happens to the point that teachers, in this particular context, do not seem to talk about their students at all. This chapter provides answers to research questions that guide this study, the implications of the findings of this study, and outlines recommendations for professional practice and future research.

Implications for Professional Practice:

- Implement and Maintain Effective Professional Learning Communities
- Build Teacher's Cultural Capacity to support all teachers' capacity to work with and advocate for all students
- Enact Policies and Practices that Support Teachers and Student Outcomes

Implications for Future Research:

- Explore the content of teacher talk in the PLC and informal spaces and its connection with student outcomes through an ethnographic case study.

- Examine current local, state, and national education policies to determine what influence, if any, they have on producing positive student outcomes.
- Research alternative teaching models to mitigate the stress of growing teacher workloads and the subsequent reduction in teacher job satisfaction and rising attrition rates.

References

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