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# The Perceptions of Elementary Principals About Their Role in The Establishment of Collaborative Workplaces in Their School Buildings

Bradley Sullivan

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [bdsullivan@mpsomaha.org](mailto:bdsullivan@mpsomaha.org)

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THE PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN  
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COLLABORATIVE WORKPLACES IN THEIR  
SCHOOL BUILDINGS

By

Bradley D. Sullivan

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professors Larry Dlugosh and Jody Isernhagen

Lincoln, Nebraska

October, 2012

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Bradley D. Sullivan, Ed.D

University of Nebraska, 2012

Advisors: Larry L. Dlugosh and Jody C. Isernhagen

The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment within their school. Collaboration among education professionals, when used effectively, is one strategy that has demonstrated improvement of instruction and student learning. As such, in this context the role of the principal becomes more complex and challenging. This study examined the perception of the elementary principal's role regarding the establishment and perpetuation of a collaborative workplace environment for teachers that is focused on improving student learning within their buildings.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 elementary principals working in a suburban public school district in Nebraska. This study revealed several perceived roles when it came to creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers: creating and sharing of a vision, modeling and using collaboration to make decisions at an administrative level, facilitating vertical team collaboration, creating an environment with a high level of trust, serving as a guide and coach for teachers in the collaborative process, addressing negative and challenging personalities that interfere with the collaborative process, considering the impact of generational differences among teachers,

encouraging open communication amongst staff, systematizing a building specific process for data collection and collaboration meetings, establishing building-wide data teams, evaluating if changes are needed to increase collaboration, hiring only people willing to collaborate, and creating a culture where collaboration is the expectation.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Context of the Study**

Elementary principals have an expansive job description when it comes to defining their responsibilities in a public school system. Although their responsibilities might vary from district to district across the country, providing instructional leadership and ensuring student achievement are two of the most common expectations of elementary principals regardless of geographic location. Never has student achievement been examined so closely at every individual school building across the country as it is today. The No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) requires every child to achieve mastery of the basic skills by 2014 so principals are constantly under pressure to ensure their school's students pass state and local assessments. National and state educational organizations continue to examine the role of the principal and their unique position to influence student achievement and teaching. One commonly agreed upon instructional practice that promotes student achievement is collaborative planning among classroom teachers. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) wrote,

If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. Our experience with schools across the nation bears this out unequivocally. (pg. xii)

The need for principals to nurture and promote an environment conducive to collaborative planning in the workplace is a necessary requirement for 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Collaboration among education professionals, when used effectively, is one strategy that has demonstrated improvement of instruction and student learning. As such, in this context the role of the principal becomes more complex and challenging. Principals' roles have shifted from the traditional managers of schools to leaders that demonstrate the vision, courage, and skill to lead and advocate for effective learning communities in which all students reach their highest potential (NAESP, 2008). This study examined the perception of the elementary principal's role regarding the establishment and perpetuation of a collaborative workplace environment for teachers that is focused on improving student learning within their buildings.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in the collaborative workplace environments within their schools in a suburban public school district in Nebraska. A "collaborative workplace environment" is generally defined as a school where teachers work together in the shared pursuit of improving professional practices that advance student learning.

## **Research Questions**

The focus of this study was to describe the principal's role in creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers that is focused on improving student learning. As such, the central research question focused on a specific demographic of elementary principals; how do elementary principals in a suburban school district in Nebraska describe their role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers? The sub-questions were:

1. How do elementary principals define a collaborative workplace?
2. How do elementary principals describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?
3. How do elementary principals create a collaborative workplace for teachers?
4. How do elementary principals sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers?
5. What outcomes are expected by elementary principals as they create a collaborative workplace for teachers?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Collaboration* - Teachers working together in the shared pursuit of improving professional practices that improve student learning.

*Collaborative workplace environment* - A school environment where teachers work together in the shared pursuit of improving professional practices that improve student learning.

*Professional learning community (PLC)* - A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004).

### **Assumptions**

As a former elementary teacher and current elementary principal, the researcher had several assumptions regarding the elementary principal's role in establishing and maintaining an effective collaborative workplace environment. First, the researcher assumed that collaboration among elementary teachers leads to increased student learning. Second, the researcher assumed elementary principals play a critical role in establishing and sustaining a culture where collaboration is valued.

## **Delimitations**

Delimitations narrow the scope of a study (Creswell, 1994). The number of participants was limited to 12 elementary principals in a single school district where workplace collaboration is part of district policy. Staff development regarding teacher collaboration in the workplace is provided district-wide. District parameters regarding the purpose and functions of collaborative teams were established. Every teacher in an elementary building is assigned to a collaborative time. A “singleton” teacher such as a music teacher is assigned to collaborative teams made up of other music teachers from elementary schools in the district. Elementary principals are not members of collaborative teams; however they are encouraged to attend collaborative team meetings when possible. The district’s parameters for a successful collaborative team include:

Collaborative teams should address the following critical questions:

- What will students know and be able to do?
- How will students learn it?
- How do we know students learned it?
- What happens if students do not learn it or already know it?

Collaborative teams focus:

- Establish, pursue, and evaluate goals.

Collaborative Teams:

- Review the district’s curriculum/course outcomes and select a focus for their team.
- Select or develop at least two new or previously developed common formative assessments per semester (or equivalent).

- Have regular collaboration and discussion based on student performance data.
- Disaggregate and analyze group and sub-group results.
- Identify and implement instructional strategies based on the analysis of student data.
- Evaluate the implemented instructional strategies.

Collaborative teams parameters for district administrators:

- Support the successful implementation of collaborative teams.
- Support data retreats and acquisition and use of data.
- Discuss and support collaborative team goals as needed.
- Discuss grade level team products with collaborative teams and offer support as needed.

The researcher was certain that a sample size of 12 elementary principals provided enough data to achieve the desired research objective (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson 2006).

### **Limitations**

The major limitation of this case study was the relatively small sample size given the fact that there are over 67,000 elementary principals in public schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and 577 elementary principals in public schools in Nebraska (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012). The qualitative research was limited to the data drawn from the sample group. The results of the study cannot be generalized to the larger population of elementary school principals.

## **Significance of Study**

Hundreds, if not thousands of schools across this country are likely to fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as stipulated by No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) in the coming years. School leaders and specifically principals, are in a key position to make sure that their school achieves AYP. This study provides helpful insight into the understanding of the lived experiences of elementary principals. The study examines common themes among principals' perceptions regarding their influence and role in the collaborative workplace environment of their schools. This study needed to be conducted because the self-perceptions of the role of elementary principals is important for universities, school districts, and professional development organizations to better assist principals in fulfilling their role and keeping their school out of "Needs Improvement" AYP status.

## **Summary**

This qualitative case study clarified the perceived role of elementary principals related to establishing and maintaining a collaborative workplace environment. This information will assist professional organizations, district-level support staff, intermediate service agencies, and institutions of higher learning to focus future training. This, in turn, will impact the ability of elementary principals to create and sustain collaboration among teachers and ultimately improve instruction and learning. Current literature regarding collaboration in the workplace is examined in the second chapter of this dissertation. Chapter 3 provides a description of the methodology used in completing this study. Chapter 4 describes the results of the study. Chapter 5 provides a summary, discussion, and recommendations.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace has changed dramatically over the past century. One change that has permeated both the education and business is workplace collaboration. The business and education workplace in America for the past 100 years has been characterized as silos, independence, and “every person for themselves.” The 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace has had to adapt and change in order to remain profitable or viable. These changes have resulted in a new characterization such as problem solving, team playing, information literacy, collaboration, lifelong learning skills, self-managing teams, quality circles, and team-based organizations (Schmoker, 2005; Wang & King, 2009). Fullan (2010) explained the benefit of collaboration to organizations, “The problem that purposeful collaboration solves is how to get focus and coherence in otherwise fragmented systems” (p. 35). Both business and educational organizations continue to change and adapt in order to capitalize on the concept of increasing employees’ capacity to learn and perfect their profession (Gordon & Crabtree, 2006).

The role of the elementary principal has continued to evolve and change (Catano & Stronge, 2006). One of those changes includes the establishing and then sustaining a collaborative workplace environment or professional learning community within individual school buildings. This requires an understanding of the framework upon which a collaborative culture can be established (Cotton, 2003; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008; NAESP, 2008; Schmoker, 2006).



## **Impact of Collaboration**

Much has been written about the positive impact of collaboration among teaching professionals on student learning. There is almost unparalleled consensus in the education world about the necessity for building a collaborative environment (Barth, 2005; Dufour et al., 2005; Eason-Watkins, 2005; Fullan, 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lezotte, 2005; Reeves, 2005; Saphier, 2005; Schmoker, 2006; Sparks, 2005; Stiggins, 2005). In 2005 DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour edited a volume entitled *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities* that included some of the leading thinkers and practitioners in today's educational environment,

Indeed, other factors affect achievement. But continuous, organized opportunities for collaboration and assessment that are part of an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement allow us to make the most of the best factors and strategies. These structures offer us our most practical and affordable opportunity to integrate, generate, and refine practices that influence teaching and learning. (p. xiv)

Sparks (2005) described professional learning communities as a “powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways to produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers” (p. 156).

## **Standards for Principals**

The standards by which elementary principals are evaluated or held accountable reflect the importance of being able to create and sustain a collaborative environment. Reeves (2005) believed that state and local accountability systems must include not only test scores, but also explicit indicators of adult behavior such as teaching practices, curriculum, leadership, and other influences on student achievement. Other organizations seem to agree and are developing standards by which principals may be evaluated in the future.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2008) established the following six standards that characterize effective leaders of learning communities:

(a) leading schools in a way that places students and adult learning at the center; (b) set high expectations for the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of all students; (c) demand content and instruction that ensure students achievement of agreed-upon standards; (d) create a culture of continued learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals; (e) manage data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress of student, adult, and school performance; and (f) actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student performance and development.

In January of 2011, the Nebraska State Board of Education authorized the drafting of performance standards for teachers and principals. The purpose of the Nebraska Teacher and Principal Performance Framework was to define effective practices in order to improve teaching and learning. In drafting the framework for principals, the committee identified an instructional leader as a principal who provides leadership to ensure the implementation of a rigorous curriculum, the use of effective teaching practices, and accountability for results. The committee stated that an example indicator is “the principal promotes teaching practices based on sound instructional theory and professional collaboration to meet the learning needs of all students” (Nebraska Department of Education, 2011).

### **Principal’s Role**

Undoubtedly, one of the principal’s roles in any school is to provide leadership and to build leadership capacity among staff members (Cotton, 2003; Scott, 2009).

Richard DuFour (2002) wrote an article called, “The Learning-Centered Principal”

published in *Educational Leadership* in which he explained how principals need to make the change from the traditional role of instructional leader and become “learning leaders.” The leader’s function is to provide opportunities for teachers to work together in teams to improve their own instruction, always with the goal of improved learning.

Educators are gradually redefining the role of the principal from instructional leader with a focus on teaching, to leader of a professional community with a focus on learning. By concentrating on teaching, the instructional leader of the past emphasized the inputs of the learning process. By concentrating on the learning, today’s school leaders shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results.

Elementary principals who are creating collaborative workplaces or PLCs for the first time are challenged with making a cultural change in their buildings. Fullan (2004) identified five components of change leadership: moral purpose, understanding change, building relationships, creating and sharing knowledge, and making coherence. Although Fullan’s components can be generalized to many different types of leaders and businesses, they align with the responsibilities of elementary principals working to create a positive school culture and collaborative workplace.

Hord and Sommers (2008) created the following seven C’s of leadership which they believe are essential to encouraging, enhancing, and sustaining PLCs: communication, collaboration, coaching, change, conflict, creativity, and courage (p. 32).

In their book, *Getting Started-Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*, Eaker and the DuFours (2002) stated,

In order to build a deep, meaningful collaborative culture in your school, organize your school around collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals. And, remember that virtually all schools set goals, but in professional learning communities collaborative teams set goals that focus on the right things – the key questions related to learning. (p. 111)

Sparks (2005) explained how elementary principals shape conversations by persistently offering their values, intentions, and beliefs to others and by expressing themselves in clear declarative sentences. Leaders also matter because they, along with others, shape a school or school system's structure and culture in ways that promote learning, collaboration, and environments in which all members of the community feel cared for and respected (p.157).

Cosner (2011a) conducted a qualitative study that focused on the role of three principals' communication to teachers regarding collaboration. She found that principal reform communication appeared to shape the design and introduction of tools and processes to support collaborative data practices, and in turn, the ways in which knowledge of student achievement and instructional considerations developed from these practices over time. Her research found that communication from principal to teachers regarding topics and procedure to focus on during collaborative planning had an impact on the productivity and data analysis within each team.

In a second qualitative study by Cosner (2011b), she examined the leadership role that three elementary principals provided in their buildings during the early stages of creating evidence-based grade-level collaboration. Cosner identified the following four leadership roles of the principals: (a) Establishing, communicating, and reinforcing an evidence-based agenda and necessary work tasks; (b) modeling data use and maintaining an organizational routine that made public the practice of evidence-based grade-level collaboration; (c) buffering and filtering the school from the district and area in ways that support evidence-based collaboration; and (d) supporting and shaping shared leadership in service of evidence-based grade-level collaboration.

A study on shared leadership concluded that the role of the principal is to help establish clarity of purpose and appropriate levels of autonomy so that teams may engage in work that leads to effective and innovative problem-finding and problem-solving activities (Paredes-Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007). Collaborative teams whose members work interdependently on common goals are able to learn from each other. This type of collaborative learning also helps to build a school's capacity to learn (Dufour et al., 2004). The number one thing that impacts a student's learning is the ability of the teacher (Schmoker, 2005). Therefore, collaborative teams that result in teachers learning from each other becomes a powerful component in improving student learning. To sustain collaborative change, leaders must refocus their energies beyond the attainment of short-term effectiveness and look toward the long-term impact over time (Reeves, 2009, p. 123).

Researchers in Philadelphia (Blanc, Christman, Liu, Mitchell, Travers, & Bulkley, 2010) conducted a study at 10 elementary schools by examining the use of assessment data with grade level teachers and administrators. They concluded that the principals' role in effective schools included some common characteristics. As learning leaders, principals and teacher leaders need to know how to allocate resources and establish school organizational structures and routines that support the work of instructional communities and assure that the use of interim assessment data is embedded in the feedback systems necessary for organizational learning. School schedules need to accommodate regular meetings of grade groups. Principals and teacher leaders need to be at these meetings and, with teachers, establish meeting routines that include agendas, discussion protocols with guiding questions and documentation of proceedings. Follow-

up to the meetings is crucial. School leaders need to visit classrooms to see if and how teachers are using instructional strategies and to offer resources and coaching so that teachers can deepen their understanding of curriculum content and pedagogy. Assessing the impact of interventions is crucial.

Hord and Sommers (2008) identified critical elements for successful professional learning community operation. The elements included leadership and collegial support, collegial learning (intentional learning, agreed upon by the colleagues and based on a common goal), focus, and communication.

### **District Selected Parameters**

The district selected for this study laid out the following parameters for a successful PLC focus.

Collaborative groups should address the following critical questions:

1. What will students know and be able to do?
2. How will students learn it?
3. How do we know students learned it?
4. What will happen if students do not learn it or already know it?

Eaker et al. (2002) recommended that teachers have deep collaborative discussions with a focus on learning centered on the key questions such as:

1. What exactly do we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know what the students are learning?
3. How can we assist and support students in their learning?
4. Based on a collaborative analysis of the results of our efforts, what can we do to improve student learning?

5. How can we recognize and celebrate improvements in student learning?

In 2004, DuFour et al. narrowed the focus of the critical questions to the following three critical questions:

1. What is it we want all students to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the intended knowledge and skills?
3. How will we respond when students experience initial difficulty so that we can improve upon current levels of learning?

The district created parameters to guide collaborative teams and to focus their efforts on student learning.

Collaborative Teams Focus:

- Establish, pursue and evaluate goals.

Collaborative Teams:

- Review the district's curriculum/course outcomes and select a focus for their team.
- Select or develop at least two new or previously developed common formative assessments per semester (or equivalent).
- Have regular collaboration and discussion based on student performance data.
- Disaggregate and analyze group and sub-group results.
- Identify and implement instructional strategies based on the analysis of student data.
- Evaluate the implemented instructional strategies.

Schmoker (1996) referred to data as the “signposts” on the road to continuous improvement. In order for teachers to improve their instruction based on data they must view the data as valid and reliable. One way to accomplish this is by having the teachers construct the assessments collaboratively (Zmuda, Kuklis, Kline, & ASCD, 2004).

The district selected for the study also created the following parameters for building administrators.

Collaborative Team Parameters for District Administrators:

- Support the successful implementation of collaborative teams.
- Support data retreats and acquisition and use of data.
- Discuss and support collaborative team goals as needed.
- Discuss grade level team products with collaborative teams and offer support as needed.

Schmoker (2006) discussed the need for elementary principals to focus on student learning by taking an active role in supporting collaborative teams. When elementary principals model collaboration or become an active participant in the process, teachers are more likely to also engage in the process (Cotton, 2003). Supporting data retreats and acquisition and use of data was identified as one of the six standards that characterize effective leaders of learning communities by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 2008).

### **Need for Study**

While research studies explaining how a principal should go about promoting or developing a professional learning community or collaborative workplace are abundant, past research has not revealed the complexity of the elementary principal’s role as a



collaborative leader focused on improving student learning. Quantitative studies have been conducted to validate the positive impact of a collaborative environment on student learning using various forms of data. Much has also been written regarding what the teacher's role is in creating and maintaining a collaborative workplace. However, a review of research on the topic of the elementary principal's perceived roles or influences on creating and maintaining a collaborative workplace environment were limited.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Design of the Study**

#### **Methods**

This study was aimed at describing the role of the elementary principal in creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. In so doing, the researcher was seeking to better understand how principals view their work in relation to creating and sustaining a collaborative environment.

Given the complexity of the nature of the work of creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers in schools, the researcher was convinced that a qualitative approach best met the needs for the exploration of this complexity (Hatch, 2002). Further, the researcher decided to use a case study approach to purposefully examine the roles that selected principals perceived for themselves in creating and sustaining collaborative workplace environments for their teachers.

The case study tradition applied in this study was focused on using multiple cases to gather in-depth data in order to provide a rich, thick description of the context of the subjects. The multiple instrumental case study design allowed for an examination of 12 cases of elementary principals to provide insight into the issue of their role in facilitating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. The in-depth nature of the case study tradition allowed the researcher to engage in detailed analysis of the selected principals and hence to gain a clearer picture of their roles in addressing the purpose of this study.

#### **Type and Size of Sample**

Random purposeful sampling was employed to select 12 elementary principals working in the same public school district in Nebraska. The research sites were 12

separate public elementary schools in one school district located in a suburban area in Nebraska.

### **Procedures**

A list of all elementary principals in the district was created. From this list 12 principals were selected using the randomization feature in the Excel program. The principals were contacted via email and an interview time arranged at mutual convenience of the researcher and subject. Subjects were provided a copy of the informed consent form as well as the interview questions via email.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the subjects signed the informed consent form. The researcher then conducted personal interviews with 12 elementary principals. The researcher read the interview protocol to the subjects.

Interviews allowed the researcher to probe subjects for clarity and to gain in-depth perspectives. In this case, an interview protocol was developed by the researcher to guide the interviews. Occasional probing questions were asked to clarify responses of the subjects. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed, verbatim, by the researcher.

Upon completion of the transcription, the researcher read through the transcripts of the interviews to get an overall sense of the content of the interviews. A second reading then focused on identifying appropriate codes to assist in the analysis of the transcripts. Finally, a third reading allowed the researcher to identify themes that emerged from the codes enunciated in the second reading.

## **Verification Procedures**

Consistent with case study design, three verification procedures were used. These included clarifying researcher bias, triangulation, and member checking.

Clarifying researcher bias from the outset of the study was important so the reader understood the researcher's positions and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry (Creswell, 2007). The researcher for this study is an elementary principal and works to create collaborative workplace environments for teachers.

During triangulation, the researcher triangulated the responses of 12 different interviews of elementary principals in differing contexts to see if similar themes or perspectives existed.

To conduct member checking, the interviewees were provided a copy of their transcribed interview to check for accuracy of the transcription.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Subjects were provided with a copy of their signed informed consent and the complete confidentiality of their responses was emphasized by the researcher. Each participant in this study was informed of the purpose and objectives of this study. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to the beginning of the study. Permission from the school district where participants work was also obtained prior to conducting the interviews.

The identity of each participant in the study was kept confidential. After the interviews were completed, the data voice files were transcribed then deleted. The transcriptions of the interviews will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office for three years after the study and then destroyed.

**Summary**

In summation, this study examined how elementary principals view their work in relation to creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 elementary principals; their interviews were transcribed and compared to determine if similar themes or perspectives existed. The themes and perspectives can be used by professional organizations, district-level support staff, intermediate service agencies, and institutions of higher learning interested in further developing the capacity of future and current principals to improve collaboration among elementary teachers and ultimately improve student learning.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in the collaborative workplace environments within their schools in a suburban public school district in Nebraska.

#### **Research Questions**

The focus of this study was to describe the principal's role in creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers that was focused on improving student learning. As such, the central research question focused on a specific demographic of elementary principals: How do 12 elementary principals in a suburban school district in Nebraska describe their role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers? The sub-questions were:

1. How do elementary principals define a collaborative workplace?
2. How do elementary principals describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?
3. How do elementary principals create a collaborative workplace for teachers?
4. How do elementary principals sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers?
5. What outcomes are expected by elementary principals as they create a collaborative workplace for teachers?

#### **Participants**

The 12 elementary principals randomly selected to participate in the study had experience working in education ranging from 14-37 years (see Table 1). Tenure at their

Table 1

*Principals' Years of Experience*

Participant	Total Years in Education	Total Years in Present Position and Site	Total Years as an Elementary Principal
Principal 1	15	2	2
Principal 2	17	1	10
Principal 3	14	4	8
Principal 4	34	9	9
Principal 5	22	7	7
Principal 6	20	2	6
Principal 7	13	4	4
Principal 8	12	1	8
Principal 9	32	10	14
Principal 10	31	5	8
Principal 11	20	5	9
Principal 12	37	10	22

current building serving as the principal ranged from 1-10 years; experience as an elementary principal throughout their career ranged from 2-22 years (see Table 1).

The district in which the principals were employed established an expectation that teachers would collaborate at least weekly. To facilitate this collaboration, elementary students were dismissed 90 minutes early one day a week. Teachers were required to stay 45 minutes longer on that day, giving teachers a total of 2 hours and 45 minutes of collaborative planning time.

## Defining a Collaborative Workplace

When asked to define a collaborative workplace, the principals' responses focused on people working together with striking similarity.

I see it as a group of people working together for a shared goal. (Principal 1)

I think a collaborative workplace is a place where teachers, principals, and parents are working together for a common good of the students. (Principal 3)

A collaborative workplace is people working together. (Principal 5)

Where teachers, specialists and special education teachers work together to talk about learning goals and look at student data and school improvement goals. (Principal 6)

Instantly, what comes to mind, is working together, talking, discussing, communicating with the same end goal. (Principal 7)

Well, the easy answer is where teachers are working together for the benefit of all students. (Principal 9)

Basically working cohesively and having a common purpose. (Principal 10)

I believe a collaborative workplace is where people feel safe and secure to meet and discuss their profession in several different ways. (Principal 11)

Where teachers, parents, students, and administrators all work together toward a common vision. (Principal 12)

Further study revealed three common themes when it comes to defining a collaborative workplace: a shared vision or goal, collaboration on multiple levels, and communication through conversations.

**A shared vision/goal.** The need for teachers to have a shared vision or goal is an important foundational component of a collaborative workplace.

I think it is about teamwork. I think it is believing they all have a common vision and focus together verses doing their own thing. And that no one is bigger than the system itself. So you are willing to work together to do anything you need to for kids. It can be from behavior kids to whatever it might be, that you are working together to solve whatever issues arise in education. (Principal 3)



. . . also to have a common goal or common set of goals and that they create a vision for things they want to achieve together. (Principal 11)

**Communication.** A collaborative workplace is one where communication and conversations take place throughout the building. The principals described communication between themselves and the teachers, but more importantly, communication among the teachers and support staff in the building.

Understanding that it isn't always about that pat on the back conversation. When things aren't going well they aren't going well, you admit it. I also think emotions get in the way of collaboration and sometimes people have their pet issues or pet situations that they emotionally surround themselves with. Giving up that emotionality leads to true collaboration. (Principal 5)

Conversations and communication take place throughout the school day. Principal 8 explained how he uses instructional walk-throughs as an opportunity to have instructional conversations with teachers:

There is a lot of collaboration that should be happening throughout the instructional day. I like to visit with teachers . . . when I do walk-throughs, I like to stop when there is a natural pause. I like to collaborate about the instruction I saw and the good and what we can work on. I think that is the most meaningful collaboration there is. (Principal 8)

**Multiple levels of collaboration.** Collaboration takes place not only among classroom teachers in the same grade level, but also between special education teachers, interventionists, support staff, principals, and classroom teachers at other grade levels. As principals described what collaboration looked like in their buildings, the theme of multiple levels of collaboration reoccurred in many of the interviews.

It looks like a lot of different things: a lot of grade level teams, a lot of teams in general, professional learning communities, grade level teams which are very similar but do different functions in a sense, our data team, leadership team, but even more than that our intervention teacher and our second grade teacher collaborating about her kids she works with. It is all the time. It is even the secretary and I working on a project together that is collaboration. I think it takes many different forms but it is everywhere. (Principal 7)

I think there is some informal collaborating and systematic collaboration. Things that would be present would be professional learning communities, team meeting, and collaborative planning time. I've seen people collaborate in each other's classrooms. We also collaborate among our specialists, interventionists, specialists, speech language teachers, and the people that are singletons. It is important to me that they can collaborate with others in the district. (Principal 1)

### **Essential Elements of a Collaborative Environment for Teachers**

The principals were asked questions regarding the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers that included the impact on instruction, curriculum, and assessment as well as their role in the process. Common themes that emerged from the interviews were modeling collaboration, vertical team collaboration, trust and communication, and principal as guide and coach.

**Modeling collaboration.** Modeling collaboration for an elementary principal involves using collaborative decision making with staff, participating in PLC meetings, and using data to evaluate the impact of instructional strategies.

You have to learn how to be collaborative yourself in order to teach others how to do it. (Principal 7)

I think it starts with the leader. I think that you have to be willing to be collaborative yourself. You have to be willing to believe in democratic and shared decision making... When you allow voices to be heard within a team atmosphere, people respect you because you listened to them, you were honest with them. . . . It also empowers teachers so that when those decisions are made and they are not always going to be 100% . . . but when you are willing to hear those voices of others it is very helpful for them to feel like this is a culture where my opinion is counted. (Principal 3)

In addition to modeling the decision making part of collaboration, teachers also need to see principals model the “soft skills” involved such as relationship building.

I also think it is important for me to model balance, to model caring and nurturing relationships so they know what my expectation is for how they should treat each other. (Principal 8)

**Vertical team collaboration.** Vertical team collaboration involves one grade level of teachers collaborating with the grade level below and above them. This type of collaboration impacts curriculum, instruction, and assessments.

I think also when you think about vertical teams, it's something we don't spend enough time on, we need to talk about where kids are coming from and where do we need to have them ready to go. Every time we take time to have those vertical kind of conversations, people have 'ah has' and I know that refines their instruction as a result of that. I think that is an area that we haven't fully tapped into but I think we have great potential to maximize it. (Principal 1)

I think there needs to be the vertical teaming and cross categorical opportunities so that there can be opportunities to visit with a lot of different people and bring a lot of different ideas to the table. The topics need to be driven on student achievement for the most part so that time is well spent and productive for learning purposes. (Principal 8)

**Trust and communication.** Teachers are no longer working in isolation inside their classrooms; instead they are part of a collaborative team. Teachers must establish trust and learn to communicate in order to work collaboratively. Trust is often related to transparency of student assessment scores in each teacher's classroom. Collaboration involves sharing assessment data and making instructional decisions based on the results.

To have a collaborative school environment, you have to be trusting and open. I think when we first started creating a collaborative environment that trust factor wasn't there. Your scores were only yours. You weren't looking at the whole grade and helping each other get better. So the trust has to be there. To this point we post all of our scores. Everyone in the school can see our child's scores. It is much more open and it has to be. It needs to be that we are working on this together. (Principal 7)

I would say the teams that are more highly collaborative that I see, have a high level of trust and communication. They really work together as a team. Those teams that work really well and you know they are collaborative together they have a higher level of success than those teams that don't as much. (Principal 2)

I think trust has to be present in order for people to feel safe. I think relevant information talking about data rather than people, is an important part of it, too. (Principal 1)

**Principal as guide and coach.** In addition to modeling collaboration for teachers, principals also take on the role of guide or coach. This often involves the principal attending the collaborative meetings of grade level teams. The principal's role at these meetings is to listen, ask questions, and offer advice. The principals who attend collaborative planning meetings reported that it helped them stay informed about individual student progress and it allowed them to gauge the effectiveness of the team's ability to collaborate with each other.

I feel my role is the facilitator. I feel strongly that I need systems in place so there is scheduled collaboration time. If I am a part of that time, I still see myself as the facilitator not in a leadership way, but in a helping it happen sort of way. . . . That is just how we do business. I am establishing that culture. We do business by collaborating. (Principal 11)

Sometimes coaching involves teaching teachers how to be collaborative.

I also think my role is that if there is someone who is not being collaborative in nature, it is not a natural instinct for them, my role is to help guide them and coach them in that process. That can be really hard because collaboration is not a learned knowledge. It is a natural tendency that people have, but I do think there are things that leaders can do to promote it . . . I think you can support it and watch it develop from there. (Principal 1)

As a coach or guide in the collaborative process, principals are responsible for encouraging teachers to learn and grow.

I always think you need to push people in a collaborative manner. I say you need to push them to the edge without pushing them over. How do you get people to push themselves and to see within themselves that they can do it? I also believe you have to give teachers permission to make mistakes. Because you talk about new strategies in the collaborative environment and you are trying new things that you learned. You learn from trying something new. (Principal 3)

### **Sustaining a Collaborative Workplace for Teachers**

All principals reported facing obstacles or challenges while working on sustaining a collaborative working environment in their schools. A continual challenge was to

create and maintain strong teams of teachers that can collaborate together. The grade level teams change from year to year as teachers retire or switch grade levels, or as additional sections of a grade level are added. Principals also discussed things they look for to let them know they are on the right track when it comes to sustaining a collaborative workplace. Common themes that emerged from the interviews were negativity and challenging personalities, generational differences, and open communication.

**Negativity and challenging personalities.** Not all teachers embrace the idea of working collaboratively with their colleagues. In some cases, the principals explained that veteran teachers were reluctant to change their teaching style and routines. They may feel guilty when they learn there was a better way to teach a particular objective or topic and for the past 20 years they have not been very effective.

Many times when a teacher has been teaching for well it could be four years and they think this is the right way and only way of doing it. Even someone who has taught for 20 years and is a great teacher, but how do you get them to look at what they have been doing for that many years. Because what happens sometimes is I think they feel like . . . especially when they see something that works, they begin to feel guilty they question why I didn't do this twenty years ago. You have to say that is okay, it is going to happen sometime. They have to be willing to go through and get past some of those things to make it to a level that you want it to be. I think those are some of the biggest barriers. (Principal 3)

Collaboration can lead to more work for some teachers. When student assessment data is transparent, teachers are often asked to reevaluate their teaching techniques and to make changes from their current practice in order to achieve the types of results that the teacher next to them is getting.

So it is easy for us to tell teachers to do a formative assessment, spend all of your collaboration time talking about that one test that really doesn't matter to you as a teacher and where you are in your classroom. Then talk about how they are going to better your teaching so you are as good as the guy next to you. But don't hate

that guy for making you work. So that is an obstacle. . . . Then there is always the challenge of making a good team personality wise. When you have a weak link you have a weak team. And that goes back to the hiring . . . it is a tight rope.  
(Principal 4)

The personalities on a team can play a big part in the collaborative culture in the building. These teams must be balanced throughout the building. Sometimes teams have too strong of personalities and competition becomes an obstacle.

Another obstacle that gets in the way of collaboration can be personality. Personalities are not good or bad. They are what they are. Some people have more of a personal initiative to collaborate or know how to. And some people seek those opportunities out more than others. Sometimes I think the stronger you make individual teams, the less collaborative you can be as a whole. So while I work very hard to create very strong teams, sometimes those strong teams can band together and kind of go against the whole. So getting those two things together to complement each other has been a huge obstacle for me this year.  
(Principal 1)

The (collaborative) culture when I first came to the building was a huge obstacle. It was very much certain people were in charge of certain things. Certain teams were more powerful than other teams. Those teams were not allowed to be questioned.  
(Principal 5)

Sometimes it is just one individual on a team that is the obstacle.

Every once in a while, I will get a complaint that one (teacher) says they spend way too much time talking. One teacher will dominate the conversations and spend 20 minutes on one kid. When you have only 50 minutes you can't spend 20 minutes on just one kid.  
(Principal 9)

**Generational differences.** Staff members change from year to year due to retirements, increases in student populations, and resignations. Principal 5 had several younger teachers joining teams throughout the building due to a number of retirements. The generational differences in the teachers were getting in the way of collaboration and communication.

It must have been my third or fourth year. I got all excited because I knew I didn't want all those old teachers, well they were my age or older. I went out and hired all these new young teachers. Well, they are just as bad. I basically created

a civil war. I had all these new, young, excited and good teachers. Then I had all these teachers who were also pretty good but were ready to leave. They both just pretty much pissed each other off. And I had tears all the time, you cannot put a box of women together and shake them up. There was very little collaboration that year. That was even before we called it that. So what I did in that case, I haven't mentioned communication, you have to be open all the time. I was really at my wit's end and I was tired of people coming and crying and tattling, so I had a "Come to Jesus" meeting with the whole staff and broke them into focus groups. I told them they were in like groups. Well, they were all ticked off because they were age groups basically. I said, yeah that is one of your likenesses. And we had fierce conversations to find out what the problems were. I had maybe five people max. Every one of them cried. I drew together that information then took it back to the staff afterward and said this is what is going on here. And the interesting thing was all the groups said the same thing; I don't feel respected, I don't feel liked and I don't feel validated . . . I said we are not going to operate this way. The older people are happy you are going to have a baby, that you have a new boyfriend or you're going to buy a house. We did that 20 years ago. It doesn't mean we are not happy for you. We just aren't going to jump up and down any more than you would when you see me with my grandchild. You know buying that lake home or whatever. You need to get over that. If we have a night out and I don't go it is because I have a life you know. If you want to have a little knitting club on Thursday night and you don't garner much support that is okay. So we had all these meetings and finally the engagement increased, initially out of hatred for me and then we all kind of got along after that. I had to tell them we are going to move people if we don't start getting along. We are going to start moving people and I am not the one moving. That was a tough year and they knew if there was back biting, if there was no collaboration or even sabotage like there was in the past, I would show up and put them in my office and make them figure it out. That has worked very well over the years. There is just too much stuff going on for that to be happening. (Principal 5)

**Open communication.** One commonly agreed upon sign of collaboration is the amount of open communication taking place in a school. Communication needs to take place with all the stakeholders in the school community.

I think over the seven years, what has grown is that open communication piece. Where I see a lot of people in different grade levels talking to each other and asking questions. I think it is that openness and it is not just that particular work team, but there are multiple conversations happening. I am always surprised when a student in second grade is struggling, how much that teacher goes back and talks to the first grade teacher. I think that is fantastic but I don't think it always happened before. So I look for that uniqueness of who is talking to whom as one indicator of strong collaboration in a building. (Principal 5)

When I see people doing it (collaborating) on their own by chance and having rich conversations, I dig that. I think that is cool. When I happen to stop into some team planning time and they're not just talking about field trips but are out there making predictor tests with the new clickers that they just learned or the math assessment, that is when I know okay, we are getting where we want to be with collaboration. (Principal 11)

Communication needs to be meaningful and focused on the right things.

I think teachers need to be transparent. I want to see teachers talking about their strengths and weaknesses and taping into other people for ideas. I don't think we are there yet. But that is what I would look for. (Principal 8)

I would just say the other piece is the feeling tone, when you walk in and people are working together. You can tell if the work is purposeful and meaningful to them. And you can tell when it is not a good use of their time. (Principal 2)

### **Strategies that Sustain a Collaborative Workplace**

Sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers takes an ongoing effort.

Principals are charged with the task of ensuring that collaboration continues from year to year. The principals reported using a variety of strategies throughout the school year.

The most common strategies were creating building-wide data teams, systematizing the collaboration process, and recognizing the need for change from year to year. Other strategies used included: creating a school culture where collaboration is the expectation, hiring only people that want to collaborate, protecting collaboration time, increasing leadership capacity among teachers, and conducting annual "team building" activities.

**Building-wide data teams.** A district-wide expectation for this suburban public school district starting in 2011 was to create a building-wide data team. The building data team's role is to review student achievement data from common assessments that are given at each grade level and monitor the progress of all students. This data team meets regularly throughout the school year. The principals in the study mentioned how the creation of building data teams has helped to sustain and improve collaboration by



including teachers from other grade levels and specialty areas in the analysis of data and the problem solving process.

My data team members do keep the schedule of going from grade level to grade level. I have a very small data team. They go with any information they might have or to get any data. It kind of keeps the teams on their toes and the data team knows what is going on. (Principal 4)

**Systematize the process of collaboration.** Several principals discussed creating “systems” or setting expectations, such as collaboration notebooks, monthly collaboration assignments, scheduled meetings with the principal, and documentation logs. The principals reported that in some cases, the teachers requested these types of activities or documents to help guide their collaboration.

We create a schedule for our PLCs (professional learning communities) during the school day. We know twice a month on Wednesday they are going to be there and have the time built in during the day to collaborate. I think our documentation log has begun to help us sustain but we need to do some work on that. I think it is just the expectation. Every year we go over what the expectations are. Go over your norms so we know what we have to do. I also think (me) showing up to meetings helps sustain it. You will meet twice a month, you will talk about kids, you will use data. I think the hardest part is my expectation that it will impact their instruction. I am not sure it always does. We need to continue to push for that. At the end of the meeting, we always set the agenda for the next meeting. So you know that at the end of two weeks you are going to have to bring this data and have it assessed by that time. We look at their assessments, data and sometimes we create a new formative assessment if it didn't work or create reteaching activities. These six kids don't know how to do this skill so create this activity. This time we are looking at the data and next time we are looking at reteaching activities and kind of go back and forth. (Principal 7)

It (systematizing) is just creating the tools for people to be able to do it, creating the organization that will help them through that. Be a resource for them and then stepping out of the way. (Principal 12)

**Recognize the need for change from year to year.** There are many different variables that change from year to year. Some of these changes include the groups of students, new staff members, and teachers switching grade levels. These changes impact

collaboration in buildings from year to year. Several principals spoke about the relationships and trust that must be in place in order for collaboration to take place consequently when a grade level team of teachers changes the relationships also changes.

I would say over the years it was really about meeting the teams where they were at and getting them what they need to be their very best for the kids. I would say the four years I was at an elementary school it changed every single year and I think it was always based on relationships and trust. I am not an expert in communication, but my level of support changed based on what the needs of the teams were. (Principal 2)

I think trust is always difficult. I think trust is one of the most fragile things in the world because while you can have a very strong foundation, it is kind of like a seesaw at the top. One conversation can tip that trust. So trust is always an issue. I think one of my advantages was being the assistant principal for two years. While I wasn't the leader of that building, it also gave me the opportunity to gain trust. But the trust was at a different level. What surprised me when I did step into the leadership role is that I felt like I had a very good foundation and I thought my values were very strongly communicated but when I stepped into the head principal's role it was amazing to me how people would come and not be sure of where I stood on things when it came to what I valued. Because people's trust like I said is so fragile, they think that when you step into that new role you are going to become a new person. So I did have to rebuild those relationships and I think the number one way to build trust is through your actions when you have limited time to build that trust. So action after action helps build trust and show who I am with integrity. (Principal 1)

### **Principals' Expectations Regarding Collaboration**

Each principal was asked to discuss their specific expectations for teachers regarding collaboration in their schools. The top four themes that the principals had in common included the expectation that collaboration is non-negotiable, data will be collected and discussed, expectations need to be communicated, and principals need to model and participate in collaboration.

**Collaboration is non-negotiable.** Choosing not to collaborate with others is not an option. This expectation along with the built-in time to collaborate weekly sets the tone in most buildings.

I think my expectations were that teachers and staff would meet together, would plan together and would be on the same page. (Principal 8)

They have to meet in their PLC. That is a non-negotiable. The time they meet is non-negotiable. They have to pick norms at the beginning of the year. They have to turn in agendas. If I am there, they don't need to turn in an agenda because I was there. But they have to work together as a team. They have to meet whether they want to or not. (Principal 10)

I would hope that all of my staff members would know that working together as a team is a non-negotiable and I have probably never said that as clearly as I needed to. But at some point in the creation of our culture that has been communicated, because although not all teams are at the level that I would like, all teams collaborate. Somebody has told them it is an expectation. Every Wednesday afternoon from 2:00-5:00 p.m. you don't see anyone working as an individual, you see them working as a collaborative team. (Principal 1)

**Collect and discuss data.** Whether it is discussing the progress of special education students or students in need of new interventions, principals expect teachers to use data and to document progress during collaborative planning. Principals stressed the need to monitor all students and the benefits of using data to drive conversations in addition to a teacher's professional judgment.

I think the biggest thing is that some of those expectations is that PLC piece and looking at data every time that they meet. Making decisions in a group verses isolation. Having those conversations constantly with the interventionist and me. We are making decisions and bouncing things off of each other. Looking at how you performed as a whole team. That is an important piece to help teachers realize collaboration is not just individual teachers but the whole group. (Principal 4)

Student data is tied directly to student achievement.

I think they have to talk about student achievement. That is a non-negotiable and something that is different. Believing that they have room to grow and that all kids can get to where they need to be. Believing that they benefit from professional development and then providing it and talking about student achievement specifically. (Principal 6)

**Communicate expectations, modeling, and participating in collaboration.** In addition to listing expectations in handbooks, principals reported that attending

collaborative meetings and modeling collaboration were ways in which they communicated their expectations regarding collaboration to teachers.

Another way I communicate is the time I am with them.” (Principal 2)

Sometimes just listening and asking questions about where we are at with some of those things. (Principal 3)

I think they know because I am sitting in the meeting. They can tell by the questions I ask? For instance, I may ask, what are we going to do next time? And they say, oh yeah we need to set the agenda. And sometimes I ask questions and don't have the answer either but I want them to start pondering it. I just think pushing them along the way of the process. They get the curriculum and assessment part but it is the process we have to work at. (Principal 7)

### **The Three Most Important Things an Elementary Principal Should Do to Create a Collaborative Workplace Environment for Teachers**

The principals were asked their opinion regarding the three most important things an elementary principal can do to create a collaborative environment for teachers. The results are listed in Table 2.

The principals' responses had many similarities. Three actions that were mentioned in several responses included modeling collaboration, setting clear expectations, and creating systems that foster and promote collaboration.

**Model collaboration.** Modeling collaboration by participating in team meetings, seeking input for decisions, and utilizing others expertise are a few of the examples principals explained when it comes to modeling collaboration.

If I sat in my office and never participated in the conversations or never collaborated or they (staff) didn't ever see me sitting here with you or see me ever collaborating with other principals; they wouldn't value collaboration. I think I have to walk the talk too. (Principal 11)

Table 2

*The Three Most Important Things an Elementary Principal Should Do to Create a Collaborative Workplace Environment for Teachers*

Participant			
Principal 1	Model collaboration	Support collaboration with time and money	Hire the right people.
Principal 2	Put relationships first-trust and communication	Develop a shared vision	Make collaboration at priority
Principal 3	Model collaboration	Be willing to take chances	Develop systems that rely on collaboration
Principal 4	Hire the right people	Demand open communication	Create specific expectations
Principal 5	Keep data in front of teachers	Be visible; find time to attend collaboration meetings	Clear expectation that collaboration is not optional
Principal 6	Model collaboration	Set aside time for collaboration	Make data accessible to teachers
Principal 7	You have to model it	Create systems	Set clear expectations and follow through
Principal 8	Provide a block of time	Celebrate collaboration with your parents and staff	Protect collaboration, show that you value it
Principal 9	Set expectations	Provide the needed time	Provide training when needed.
Principal 10	Set the expectations	Keep a positive environment	Emphasize team building
Principal 11	Create a shared vision	Create a structure or system that foster collaboration	Model it
Principal 12	Stay out of the way	Make sure everyone has the philosophy that collaboration is expected	Make sure communication happens and stay informed

I need to model the importance of tapping into everyone's area of expertise. I facilitate staff meetings but usually don't lead them unless I am just giving information. If we are talking about reading, I tap into my reading people; about math, I tap into my math people. (Principal 6)

The number one thing like anything in leadership, you model it. As I am faced with decisions that are not operational, well even operational, I seek input and many decisions I delegate to those most impacted or those that have higher expertise. I think the number one thing is modeling it. (Principal 1)

**Set expectations.** Setting clear expectations regarding how and when teachers will collaborate was a common theme.

Collaboration is not an option. You set that as the expectation, verbalize it on a regular bases and hire to that expectation. (Principal 5)

Set expectations like how often are you going to meet, when are you going to meet and who is going to be there. (Principal 9)

. . . create a specific expectation. You have to follow through on it. I made the mistake of assuming everyone liked me so much they would be perfect. They aren't, they don't, you have to ask for the documentation and their results. (Principal 3)

**Create systems that foster collaboration.** Several principals commented on the value of creating forms, schedules, and other systems that help teachers with the collaborative process.

Develop systems within your school that allow for collaboration, that values collaboration, and that really relies on collaboration as one of the most important pieces. (Principal 3)

I feel like I keep telling you about the structure, but I think it is so important that you look at your structure and systems when you take time to develop collaboration in the workplace. (Principal 11)

This chapter presented the common themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews of 12 elementary principals. The central research question was what do 12 elementary principals in a suburban school district in Nebraska describe their role to be in

creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers? The following sub-questions and themes emerged:

Sub-question 1: How do elementary principals define a collaborative workplace?

Common Themes:

- School staff has a shared vision and purpose. There is meaningful communication among all staff members.
- Collaboration takes place on multiple levels within the school among administration, teachers, and parents.

Sub-question 2: How do elementary principals describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?

Common Themes:

- Principals need to model collaboration.
- Collaboration takes place between teachers at different grade levels.
- Teachers need to have a high level of trust among each other and communicate openly.
- Principals need to guide and coach teachers through best practices in regards to collaboration.

Sub-questions 3 & 4: How do elementary principals create a collaborative workplace for teachers? How do elementary principals sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers?

The principals' responses to sub-questions 3 & 4 were similar and often principals used the words create and sustain interchangeably.

Common Themes:

- Address negativity and challenging personalities among staff members.
- Foster a workplace where open communication takes place throughout the building.
- Create building-wide data teams to monitor student progress and building-wide data.
- Create systems that guide teachers through the collaboration process.
- Recognize the need for changes from year to year. These changes include teacher assignments and changes to collaboration expectations and systems.

Sub-questions 5: What outcomes are expected by elementary principals as they create a collaborative workplace for teachers?

Common Themes:

- Collaboration is non-negotiable. Teachers must be willing to collaborate with others.
- Teachers at each grade level must collect and discuss data from common assessments. Instructional decisions are data-based.
- It is important to communicate expectations clearly.
- Principals need to participate in grade level collaborative meetings as often as possible.

When asked about the three most important things an elementary principal should do to create a collaborative workplace environment for teachers, the principals listed



several different things, however, the themes of modeling collaboration, setting clear expectations for collaboration, and creating systems that foster collaboration were the three most often mentioned themes.

### **Summary**

The interviews of the 12 elementary principals revealed common themes regarding their role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace. These themes included: creating a shared vision of collaboration, modeling and using collaboration to make decisions at an administrative level, facilitating vertical team collaboration, creating an environment with a high level of trust, serving as a guide and coach for teachers in the collaborative process, addressing negative and challenging personalities that interfere with the collaborative process, considering the impact of generational differences among teachers, encouraging open communication amongst staff, systematizing a building specific process for data collection and collaboration meetings, establishing building-wide data teams, evaluating if changes are needed to increase collaboration, hiring only people willing to collaborate, and creating a culture where collaboration is the expectation.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

#### Summary

The primary purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in the establishment and sustainment of collaborative workplaces in their school buildings. As such, the central research question focused on a specific demographic of elementary principals: What do elementary principals in a suburban school district in Nebraska describe their role to be in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers? The sub-questions were:

1. How do elementary principals define a collaborative workplace?
2. How do elementary principals describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?
3. How do elementary principals create a collaborative workplace for teachers?
4. How do elementary principals go about sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers?
5. What outcomes are expected by elementary principals as they create a collaborative workplace for teachers?

Random purposeful sampling was used to select 12 elementary principals working in public schools in Nebraska. The research sites were 12 separate public elementary schools in one school district located in a suburban area in eastern Nebraska. The 12 elementary principals were randomly selected and interviewed by the researcher in their school buildings. The interviews were transcribed and coded to see if common themes existed.

This study provided insight into the understanding of the lived experiences of elementary principals. The study needed to be conducted because the self-perceptions of the role of elementary principals is important for school districts, universities, and professional development organizations to better assist principals in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study highlighted the elementary principals' perceived role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers in their individual school building. While leadership styles vary greatly among elementary principals, there are many commonalities that need to be in place when it comes to creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment.

Past literature identified key elements related to the elementary principal's role in creating a collaborative school (Eaker et al., 2002; Hord & Sommers, 2008). The results of this study confirmed the roles described in past literature, added to their understanding, and revealed additional complexities and roles of elementary principals.

**How do elementary principals define a collaborative workplace?** Principals in the study defined a collaborative workplace as a place where the school staff works together to achieve a shared vision. Staff members communicated not only with classroom teachers at their grade level, but with all the professionals in the school, which included special education teachers, interventionists, support staff, and classroom teachers in other grade levels. Past literature also defined a collaborative workplace using similar descriptions (Dufour et al., 2004; Dufour et al., 2005; Hord & Sommers 2008; Schmoker 2006). Creating a shared vision or mission is a fundamental component

and starting point for creating and sustaining workplace collaboration. Eaker and the Dufours (2002) explained the need for building a foundation for a PLC on a shared mission, vision, values, and goals. These components then become the basis for all of the decisions that drive the school.

Collaboration on multiple levels was also found in the literature. Fullan (2005) described teachers learning from each other as critically important. His research describes the positive impact of teachers within a school, learning from each other on an ongoing basis. NAESP (2008) standards described effective principals as those that ensure teachers learn together by sharing ideas and knowledge, developing and testing new approaches, and analyzing student performance data.

**How do elementary principals describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?** No two elementary schools are exactly alike and neither is the collaborative environment for teachers. However, the study found that principals repeatedly described the modeling of collaboration by the principal, vertical team collaboration, trust, communication, and the principal guiding the process of collaboration as essential elements.

The principals all viewed themselves as role models in the collaboration process. They modeled collaboration by using a shared decision making model for school decisions and by looking to experts on their staff to share knowledge on specific subjects like reading intervention strategies or small group instruction. Many principals attended grade-level planning meetings to be an observer and to offer input when appropriate. When principals modeled collaboration and involved teachers, it empowered teachers to become decision makers and to focus on learning. “Effective principals ‘walk their talk,’

exemplifying the outlook and behavior they expect from the staff and students” stated Cotton (2003, p. 72).

Trust and communication were elements that principals believed were critical to the collaborative environment. Trust is important because teachers must be able to feel comfortable communicating information related to classroom data and in some cases discussing their lack of success when teaching a particular subject or lesson. Fullan (2010) wrote about the power of trust in an organization and how the level of trust impacts the speed at which an organization functions or is able to change.

The principals reported seeing themselves as guides or coaches in the collaborative process. Hord and Sommers (2008) agreed, describing a coach as, someone who is able to model, conduct, and sustain ongoing conversations around learning and teaching to sustain the implementation of PLCs and to increase results for student achievement.

**How do elementary principals create and sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers?** Creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment is an ongoing task for an elementary principal. The principal needs to communicate his/her expectations for how collaboration will look in the building. One important expectation was that collaboration was non-negotiable; teachers must be willing to collaborate with each other. Setting and communicating clear expectations to staff members regarding how collaborative planning meetings will operate was important to sustaining collaboration. The following questions need to be addressed annually: When will the teachers meet? How often will they meet? How long will the meetings last? Who will be required to attend the meetings? What tasks need to be accomplished during the

meeting? Will there be an agenda? Will someone take notes? These are just a few of the questions that need to be answered in order to sustain a collaborative workplace from year to year (Eaker et al., 2002).

Roughly half of the principals reported having specific documentation requirements for teachers. Some required that a weekly documentation log or agenda be completed and turned in. In some cases, the principals reported that teachers requested this type of document to help guide them through their collaborative planning sessions as a way to keep them focused. Developing written protocols for teachers to follow helps to sustain and focus PLCs (Eaker et al., 2002).

Student achievement data continued to play an important role in the collaboration process (Cotton, 2003; Dufour et al., 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Data from common assessments gives teachers from different classrooms a frame of reference to discuss group trends and individual student's needs. Often this data is also used to determine if students need more intensive interventions. The principals in the study all formed "building data teams" during the previous school year as part of a new district requirement. The building data team's primary responsibility was to review data across all grade levels and help monitor the progress of students that receive interventions. The teams were made up of classroom teachers from various grade levels and interventionists, such as resource teachers. The principals all reported that the formation of the building data teams helped to further promote and strengthen a collaborative environment throughout the building. Since each grade level was responsible for collecting data from common assessments throughout the year for the building data team, the focus of the collaborative planning meetings was primarily data-driven.

An additional task of the elementary principal was to create a shared vision and to foster open communication among staff members. Collaboration is difficult when there is no communication taking place. Open communication is built on trust. Teachers must trust each other to be non-judgmental when it comes to analyzing and comparing classroom data (Hord & Sommers, 2008). They must trust that what is discussed in collaborative planning meetings will not be shared in a negative way with other staff members.

**What outcomes are expected by elementary principals as they create a collaborative workplace for teachers?** The principals in this study had several expected outcomes as they created a collaborative workplace for teachers. Foremost they expected everyone to participate in collaboration and be a contributing member of a PLC. Collaboration was non-negotiable. The principals all believed that student learning would increase as a result of collaborative workplace. Data regarding student learning would be collected, analyzed, and used to make instructional decisions. The principal's role was to empower teams by reviewing effective communication strategies, creating group norms, and modeling open communication.

**New themes discovered in this study.** The researcher found that the elementary principals in this study perceived their role to include several areas that past literature has failed to explore in-depth. The first role was being able to recognize when collaborative teams were becoming dysfunctional, and how to evaluate and implement strategies to improve the team's ability to function. Second was establishing the expectation that workplace collaboration in your school is a non-negotiable. This involves hiring only

staff members willing to work on collaborative teams and addressing staff members that refuse to actively participate in collaboration.

### **Recommendations**

Professional organizations, district-level support staff, intermediate service agencies, and institutions of higher learning should focus future training for elementary school principals on creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. Research has shown that collaboration in the workplace has a positive impact on student learning. Based on the results of this qualitative case study the researcher asserts the following three recommendations for future training.

**Recommendation one.** The principals in this study declared that collaboration needed to be modeled by them. Since many current elementary principals did not experience collaborative teams or professional learning communities when they were classroom teachers, they are asking teachers to do something that they themselves had never done. As such, principals would benefit from training in the following areas: how to have and facilitate open and meaningful communication through conversations, how to facilitate collaborative team meetings, how to involve staff in shared decision making, and how to build trust and respect among staff members.

**Recommendation two.** A common obstacle or challenge that elementary principals face in regard to creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers was negativity and challenging personalities on grade level teams. Principals would benefit from learning how to hire people who compliment and balance their staff when it comes to personalities and learning styles. Principals would also benefit from conflict management training and strategies for holding “fierce” conversations (Scott, 2002) to



assist them in helping staff solve internal conflicts as they arise with attention given to generational differences.

**Recommendation three.** Creating a shared vision of a collaborative workplace environment and setting clear expectations regarding the elements of collaboration in a school building are essential. As such, elementary principals would benefit from creating documentation that communicates their vision and expectations. Additionally, elementary principals need to decide how they will communicate their vision and expectations to staff members.

**Recommendation four.** Principals need to collaborate with staff to create systems that are building-specific to guide and hold teachers accountable for workplace collaboration that includes: written procedures, documentation logs, meeting schedules, data collection forms, and student goal forms.

### **Future Research**

The primary purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in the establishment and sustainment of collaborative workplaces in their school buildings. A potential area of future study is the elementary teacher's perspective of the elementary principal's role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment. The elementary teachers may have insights into the most important or effective things that principals are doing to create and sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers.

Another area of future study would be to replicate this study in districts of varying sizes across the country. The researcher has questions about whether elementary principals in large metropolitan districts or small rural districts perceive their roles to be

different than those in this study. Schools in rural Nebraska often have fewer students and teachers; therefore, the researcher questions what additional challenges the principal might encounter as a result of the number of students served by the school.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this case study was to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment within their school. Collaboration among education professionals, when used effectively, is one strategy that has demonstrated improvement of instruction and student learning. This study examined the perception of the elementary principal's role regarding the establishment and perpetuation of a collaborative workplace environment for teachers that is focused on improving student learning within their buildings.

The researcher conducted interviews with 12 elementary principals working in a suburban public school district in Nebraska. This study revealed several perceived roles when it came to creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace for teachers: creating and sharing of a vision, modeling and using collaboration to make decisions at an administrative level, facilitating vertical team collaboration, creating an environment with a high level of trust, serving as a guide and coach for teachers in the collaborative process, addressing negative and challenging personalities that interfere with the collaborative process, considering the impact of generational differences among teachers, encouraging open communication amongst staff, systematizing a building specific process for data collection and collaboration meetings, establishing building-wide data teams, evaluating if changes are needed to increase collaboration, hiring only people willing to collaborate, and creating a culture where collaboration is the expectation. The

elementary principal's role in creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment for teachers is complex and changes from year to year. The continual challenge for elementary principals is to understand their role and to use their positions to enhance the collaborative workplace environment within their school buildings.

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**Appendix A**

**Informed Consent**



## THE LEADER'S ROLE: A CASE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF COLLABORATIVE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENTS WITHIN THEIR SCHOOLS

### Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this case study is to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's perceived role in the collaborative workplace environments within their schools in a suburban public school district in Nebraska. A "collaborative workplace environment" is generally defined as a school where teachers work together in the shared pursuit of improving professional practices that advance student learning.

### Procedures:

12 elementary principals will be identified using purposeful sampling. The principals will be randomly selected to participate. Times will be scheduled, at the convenience of the subjects, to conduct a 30 minute to one-hour interview. The interview will take place at the participant's school in a location selected by the participant. The interview is designed to be a conversation specifically focused on the role the principals see him/herself playing in creating a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed by the researcher.

### Risks:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

### Benefits:

Participants in this study do not receive individual benefit. However, participants do indirectly accrue professional benefit in that participation in this research study will help universities, district and professional development organizations better understand how principals view themselves in relation to creating a collaborative environment. These organizations, then, will be better able to respond to the needs of principals to assist them in doing this work. Ultimately, this focus will improve teacher practice and student learning.

### Confidentiality:

Your participation and responses to our questions and all notes are confidential. Data used in reports will be presented in a manner that prevents identification of individuals and schools.

### Compensation:

No monetary compensation will be provided to participants of this study.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You are encouraged to ask questions concerning this research before or after agreeing to participate in this research study. Please contact us at (402) 715-8328 or bdsullivan@mpsomaha.org, or my advisor, Dr. Larry Dlugosh at (402) 472-0975 with any questions you have regarding the study. Questions concerning your rights as a research participant or your concerns about the study should be addressed to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw from this study at any time without adversely impacting your relationship with your district, the researchers, or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Please accept our sincere thanks for your help with this important project.

I agree to have my interview audio taped.

Signature of Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Brad Sullivan  
5010 S. 144th St  
Omaha, NE 68137  
(402) 715-8328  
bdsullivan@mpsomaha.org

Larry Dlugosh Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
(402) 472-0975

**Appendix B**

**Interview Protocol**

**THE PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS ABOUT THEIR ROLE  
IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COLLABORATIVE WORKPLACES IN THEIR  
SCHOOL BUILDINGS**

**Qualitative Research Purpose:** *The purpose of this case study will be to develop an understanding of the elementary principal's role in creating a collaborative workplace environment.*

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Profile**

Participant Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Years at present position and site:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Total Years in Education: \_\_\_\_\_ Total Years as an elementary principal \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction:**

1. Thank you for taking the time to visit with me today.
2. This research is being conducted so that I can better understanding the role of elementary principals in establishing and maintaining collaborative workplace environments. I will be reporting my finds in a dissertation that I am writing for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
3. First, I want to assure you that this interview is strictly confidential. Information provided by you will be reported or released in aggregated form only. The district, school and individuals will not be identified.
4. I have an Informed Consent form outlining your rights as a research participant. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw from the study at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators, or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Contact persons for the project and the Institutional Review Board are provided on the Informed Consent Form in case you have questions or concerns. I have a copy for you to sign and one for you to keep for your use.
5. It is important that educators participating in this research be willing participants. You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw from the interview at any time without harming your relationship with your district, this project, or University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Should you decide not to participate you may either return to your normal activities or sit with me for the interview period. Are you willing to participate in this interview?
6. I am going to record this interview so that the interview can be transcribed (a typed copy of the interview will be made) and we have an accurate rendering of your responses.

7. It is important that I maintain the integrity of your words and intentions; therefore, I may ask you to review the transcription if I have any difficulties with the interpretation.
8. I am interested in finding out about the perceptions that you hold regarding your work in relation to creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment.
9. Please feel free to discuss your views openly. From time to time, I may have additional questions to further understand a concept that you have shared.
10. Let's begin. Please state your name, school, district and give verbal permission to record this interview by repeating this statement, "I (your name) at (school/district name) willingly give my permission to record this interview."

### **Interview Questions**

*DIRECTIONS: Place a check when the participant mentions each probe so that you do not repeat the probe.*

1. How do you define a collaborative workplace?

Probes

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. What comes to mind when you think of the word, "collaboration?"
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. What does collaboration look like in your building?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. Describe what you believe would be an effective collaborative school environment for teachers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. What research or authors/books have you read about building a collaborative environment?

Descriptive Notes:

Reflective Notes:

2. How do you describe the essential elements of a collaborative environment for teachers?

Probes

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. What impact does collaboration have on curriculum in your building?
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. What impact does collaboration have on instruction in your building?
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. What impact does collaboration have on assessments in your building?
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. As you reflect on the impact, what do you see as your role in this process?
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. What training have you participated in that helps you building a collaborative environment for teachers?

Descriptive Notes:

Reflective Notes:

3. How do you create a collaborative workplace for teachers?

Probes

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- a. What do you look for to let you know you are on the right track?
- b. Describe any obstacles or challenges that you have encountered while establishing or maintaining a collaborative workplace environment.

Descriptive Notes:

Reflective Notes:

4. What strategies do you use or have you used to sustain a collaborative workplace for teachers?

Probes

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- a. How do you ensure that collaboration continues from year to year?
- b. What training or staff development do you facilitate for new staff members in regards to collaboration?
- c. Does collaboration look different from year to year in your building? What is the basis for any changes? What is your role?

Descriptive Notes:

Reflective Notes:

5. What were/are your expectations when you began to create a collaborative workplace for teachers?

Probes

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- a. Were your expectations realized? Why or why not?
- b. What specific expectations do you have for teachers in regards to the types of activities they will complete during collaborative planning?
- c. How do you communicate your expectations to your teachers? What techniques do you use?

Descriptive Notes:

Reflective Notes:



6. In your opinion, what are the three most important things an elementary principal should do to create a collaborative workplace environment for teachers?

Probe

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. How do or would you go about making these happen and what specific strategies or processes would you use.

Descriptive Notes:

Reflective Notes:

Final Remarks: Is there anything else you'd like to say about your role in creating a collaborative environment for teachers?

## **Appendix C**

### **Invitation Email to Elementary Principals**

**Invitation Email to Elementary Principals:**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

What is your role in the creating and maintaining a collaborative workplace for teachers? I am asking for your help in telling me what you know about this subject.

As a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I am investigating the elementary principal's role in the creating and sustaining a collaborative workplace environment for teachers. As a fellow elementary principal, your views on this important subject are extremely valuable. If you are willing to participate in my research I will make arrangements to conduct a 30-60 minute interview at your convenience. This study has been approved by the district's Assessment/Research/Evaluation office. Your decision to participate or not participate will be kept confidential.

Attached to this email in an informed consent letter that explains my research, your rights as a research participant and the interview questions. Please read the informed consent thoroughly before deciding if you would like to participate. If you have questions concerning this research, please feel free to contact me at (402) 715-8328 or [bd Sullivan@mpsomaha.org](mailto:bd Sullivan@mpsomaha.org), or my advisor, Dr. Larry Dlugosh at (402) 472-0975.

Please reply to this email once you have made a decision regarding participating or not.

Sincerely,

Brad Sullivan

## **Appendix D**

### **Follow-up Reminder Email**

**Follow-up Reminder Email**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am following up on the email I sent earlier this week inviting you to participate in my research study. If you have any additional questions regarding the study please don't hesitate to contact me. If you would like to participate please contact me by replying to this email or calling me at 402-715-8328.

Sincerely,

Brad Sullivan