The Power of
TEACHER TEAMS

With Cases, Analyses, and Strategies for Success

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What Makes A Good Team, What Makes A Team Good?

It's easy to get the players. It's getting them to play together that's the tough part.

- Casey Stengel

Why Teams (Typically) Fail

Perhaps use of the word "fail" is a bit strong—after all, most teams are able to accomplish *some* of their stated goals, even if those goals are to figure out such low-level tasks as organizing field trips and planning bulletin board displays that represent the work of the team's students. It's easy to be successful if your expectations are low. However, what we mean by failure is the *inability to achieve the higher-level goals of improving teaching and learning.* The work of the team should include building content, pedagogical, and teaming skills such as:

- Increasing teachers' ability to assess student work using protocols for looking at student work and then implementing strategies developed during focused discussion of the student work

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- Providing team members with new teaching strategies that engage students more deeply in the content while giving students the skills to learn critical thinking
- Enlarging these strategies through observation of other teachers and the use of lesson study.

The Complexities of Collaboration Are Untaught

While the concept of teachers collaborating in teams to improve school performance is not new, teams rarely live up to the hype that accompanies them. While teacher teams may get started with energy and enthusiasm, team members most often lack the skills, tools, and support structures that would allow them to orchestrate significant pedagogical and curriculum changes through the collaborative work of the team. Also, principals generally lack the time and preparation to properly guide and supervise teacher teams (they haven't been taught how to do it, either), and the feeling that no one is really in charge is pervasive. Consequently, neither the school nor the teachers themselves see changes in their practice or in the work of their students.

A term from the field of psychology, "groupthink," coined by social psychologist Irving Janis,[1] might aptly be applied to teachers in teams. Groupthink kicks in when all members of a group have been initiated into the status quo culture, when the members are similar in background and training, and when there are no clear rules for decision-making. The group tends to dismiss or ignore alternative ways of doing things and tends to feel that others' opinions are not necessarily valuable. Members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group's views. Members of the group censor themselves so that consensus is achieved, and there is a veneer of unanimity.

Since teachers are a congenial bunch, caring very much about what others think of them and that everyone gets along, they gravitate easily into the culture of groupthink. No one's feelings should be hurt, and conflicts are to be avoided. Of course, this condition can exist whether there is a team leader or not; the key is to have *effective* team leadership.

Effective Teacher Leadership Is Missing

Is there a team leader? Should there be a team leader? Who is the team leader and what are the limits of her/his authority? Which team member, for example, has the authority to make sure teachers arrive on time, or that teachers come prepared to their meetings, or make sure that assigned tasks are carried out in a timely fashion?

The cultural foundation of teaching—teacher autonomy—can prevent teachers from accepting another teacher's authority. And without a clear understanding of the benefits of consistent team leadership and team roles, the team will too often continue to meet unproductively.

"Let's share leadership" is often another way for individual teachers to avoid stepping into leadership roles and attempting to assert authority. Should a teacher be brave enough to do so (such as trying to solve the problem of other team members not fulfilling their commitments) the automatic response is generally "Who are you to tell me what to do?" Usually this is unspoken, since passive-aggressive is the modus operandi of teachers who have been conditioned to reject all forms of school reforms they find onerous or unpalatable. Assuming leadership is a risk most teachers are reluctant to take.

Note: For more on the components of effective team leadership, see Case 5: Can't Follow the Leader.

The Need for Expertise Is Ignored or Misunderstood

When teachers arrive in the classroom right out of college or from whatever teacher preparation program they've attended, the expectation is that they come fully formed—that they know everything they need to know in order to be good teachers. There are, of course, induction initiatives in many schools (the movement is growing), but truly effective mentoring and induction are still the rarity. Add that to the fact that most professional development is generally inadequate to deal with the real-life problems of classroom teachers. So, should a teacher attempt to reach out for help or support, the message that is sent is "she's in trouble," not "how can I help?" Given that, teachers are disinclined to admit in a group of their peers that perhaps there is a problem or condition they can't solve by themselves—one that calls for outside expertise. Even in those instances where a principal insists that visits by a math coach or ELL specialist are included in team meetings, teacher teams are often at a loss as to how best to incorporate their expertise. In most teacher teams, the expertise made available by drop-in coaches is underutilized.

Pitfalls Are Unrecognized or Poorly Addressed

The commonly held belief that teacher teams by themselves should automatically be highly functioning groups simply because

they are "all good teachers" means that teams are rarely if ever trained in the basic skills of team facilitation such as time management, goal setting, development of team norms, and conflict resolution. This allows them to fall into any number of the pitfalls listed here.

- Teachers are given common planning time for team meetings but lack the facilitation skills necessary to use their time effectively.
- Teachers and principals believe that experience equals expertise; so, while teams frequently lack internal expertise they are reluctant to look outside the team for support.
- Teachers are reluctant to exert leadership or assume leadership roles.
- Teachers choose to team around issues that are peripheral rather than central to their daily teaching.
- "Good working relationships" are seen as the key to team success; the content of teaching and learning has less emphasis.
- The team has no clear purpose or goals; team members may speak of issues like increased collegiality or mutual support, but rarely do they engage in instructional talk that would significantly change teaching and learning.
- Putting necessary structures in place is undervalued.
- Most teachers have no vision of what constitutes effective teaming, and they have few models to learn from.

Team Members Give Up When They Don't Get Along

It is a truly unpleasant experience to be given orders such as "you are a team and you *have* to work together," when you deeply dislike one or more of the people in your group. So unpleasant, in fact, that team functionality flies out the window and all energies are expended in just meeting with other people who are impossible to get along with anyhow. This has caused the downfall of many a team and the early grey hairs of many a principal. It's a tough problem, and there are no easy solutions. (However, there are ways to have difficult conversations, and elsewhere in this book we suggest another book, titled just that: *Difficult Conversations*.[2] For further insights, see also Case 1—The Neutral Zone: Handling Interpersonal Dynamics on Teams.)

There Are No Consequences for Poor (Individual or Team) Performance

Now we're at the place where the rubber hits the road, as they say. At the end of the day, in a team where members aren't accountable to

one another for the collective work of the group, you can screw up royally, blow off your assignments and commitments, and only your teammates (and your students) pay the price. And you don't even have to be a bad person. You can even be a great teacher—on your own—encultered to be completely autonomous and beholden to practically no one as you go about your everyday teacher life, unencumbered by any notions of team accountability. Just keep the principal happy (you're mostly unsupervised anyway) and your parents happy (just tell them their kids are doing fine), and you can keep on teaching—working very hard, of course—just the way you always have, and always will.

That's the reality—*nobody can tell you what to do.* And if they do, you don't really have to do it anyway. Because in a typical team, just like in a regular teacher's life, aside from the test scores, there is no real accountability.

To be sure, test scores are extremely important in a teacher's life and they loom large; however, they are a yardstick that belongs to one teacher alone—a measure of *personal* accountability. Team accountability, on the other hand, means that every teacher on the team is accountable for every student's success and in that regard many teams fail to live up.

The Five Conditions of Effective Teacher Teams

Our research has shown that very few teacher teams can truly be called effective in every sense. The reasons for this are many, and vary from school to school, but too often teams are mandated by central office and implemented by school principals whose knowledge of the complexities of team building is minimal, at best. Groups of teachers are put together, generally by grade level or subject matter, and simply told that they are now a team and must work collaboratively. In those situations, most teams lack the tools and resources as well as effective team attributes that are needed in order to make them successful. Anyone who wants to upgrade the performance of teaching teams needs not only to understand these factors but also how to implement strategies necessary to ensure team success.

We've developed a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of teams (Figure 3.1), and we look at each team we investigate using five criteria, or conditions. Within each condition, of course, are several levels of development that determine where a team's overall effectiveness lies along a broad spectrum.

Figure 3.1   Conditions of Effective Teacher Teams
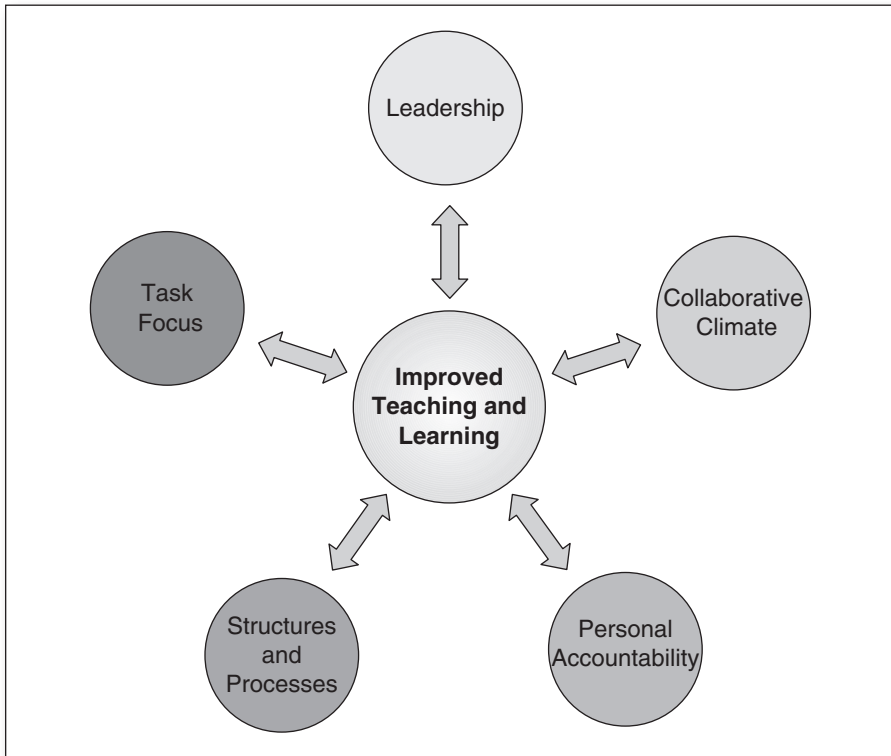
Task Focus

Is the team's task well defined and articulated and does it focus on improving student learning? The lowest level of development would indicate that the team focuses most of its energies and attention on logistics, or that its goals are not well defined. Or, more critically, that its goals do not have student learning at their center, and that their focus is driven by crises or pressing school needs. At the highest level of achievement, the team's focus is proactive and team meetings are directed toward improving the planning and measuring of student progress. Team conversations are dialogs that help team members develop new understandings about teaching and learning. It should also be understood that one of the team's goals must be to *commit* to the idea that teacher learning is an ongoing process in and of itself, and that this learning directly contributes to student achievement.

Leadership

Does the team encourage leadership by all its members? A low level of achievement in the area of leadership occurs when leadership roles are assumed reluctantly, or forced upon a member, or where leadership is assumed by the strongest or most vocal person on the team. A higher level of functioning occurs when potential leadership roles are distributed so that they are available to all team members in one way or another, and at one time or another. In high-functioning teacher teams, both novice and veteran teachers are empowered to take risks, and individual teacher instructional expertise is valued and utilized by all team members.

Collaborative Climate

Does the team promote a working environment that generates trust, communication, and synergy? It's easy to avoid conflicts by never confronting serious issues and achieve harmony by simply allowing only the more dominant members to have a voice in conversations. Yet successful teams do not shy away from conflict; rather, they understand that there are benefits to be gained from conflict resolution. Teams have to find ways to legitimately and strategically make critiques within the team.

Recent research has shown that teams that collaborate successfully have been shown to demonstrate a higher-level of "collective intelligence." A study led by a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management and reported in the journal Science[3] shows that small teams of people display a collective intelligence that has little to do with the intelligence of individual members or even the intelligence of the group's smartest member. This collective intelligence is, however, strongly correlated with "the equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking." In other words, the collective intelligence of a team depends on shared conversations about the team's tasks.

Personal Accountability

Is there an expectation of performance improvement for both the team and the individual? Is there any *articulated* expectation of accountability? Do team members fail to complete tasks, or deliver

unacceptable levels of quality? In a team that is functioning at mid-level, you might expect variable quality, with some assigned tasks completed well. In those teams, individuals may hold themselves accountable but there is no process in place to hold individuals accountable for accomplishing team goals. In the highest-level teams, all members complete tasks effectively; the team holds all members accountable for their performance; all members share responsibility for the team's success and for the success of all students within the purview of the entire team.

Structures and Processes

Does the team determine ways to work together to achieve agreed-upon goals? Can the team articulate its structure and the team processes it uses to accomplish its goals? A team cannot function well if its goals are poorly defined, or if articulated goals are arrived at merely to satisfy low expectations of the team's abilities to affect student learning. Does the team apportion resources effectively to accomplish its goals? Does the team know how to access and enlist outside expertise? Highly effective teams have a process for deciding if certain tasks are best accomplished by individuals or by the group; and, the team *continuously* adapts plans and processes to ensure that the team's focus is on students' learning needs.

A detailed Teacher-Teaming Rubric that can help evaluate the effectiveness of a team can be found in Chapter 5. Team participants investigate the team's work using the above five conditions as an assessment tool. Within each condition are several levels of development that can help a team to assess its overall effectiveness along a broad continuum.

Talking the Talk, Walking the Walk: Connecting Curriculum and Instruction

Combining curriculum—the *what* we teach, and instruction—the *how* we teach, is at the heart of any work in schools. This has been true from the days of the one-room schoolhouse when children brought their own reading materials to school, to the current day where textbook companies blanket the country with an innumerable variety of texts representing a broad spectrum of teaching philosophies, content, methodologies and even political points of view. Since the late 19th century, when textbooks began to be published for specific

grade levels and subject areas, teachers' influence over content and pedagogy has varied greatly, as have the range of schools' and teachers' approaches to curriculum and instruction.

At one end of the spectrum are schools where individual teachers faithfully follow the "teachers guide" that accompanies most textbooks, and use pacing guides to keep on track with the curriculum. In other schools, teachers flip through the pages of the guides, highlighting what they want to emphasize and using their discretion with how they use the rest. Elsewhere, teachers are encouraged to elaborate on curriculum, using the curriculum to support rather than direct instruction. These schools and school districts believe that teachers should be participants in molding and shaping curriculum, encouraging their students to think critically, assessing material and delving more deeply into the curriculum's content.

Increasingly, though, whatever the individual school or district's philosophy on curriculum and instruction, the teacher team is being looked to as a means to deliver curriculum more effectively, increase teachers' productivity, and foster improved instruction. The team is seen to be the place where professional development strategies, learned at the school or district level, can be enacted collaboratively and more efficiently. Teacher teams are now expected to be the solution to our schools' constant quest to dramatically improve the delivery of curriculum and instruction.

Conditions for instructional improvement and students' academic achievement are strengthened when teachers engage in meaningful collaborative professional development activities—the kinds of activities that could be the centerpiece of teacher teams. Such activities include collective questioning and analysis of teaching practices, deep discussion of curriculum, joint work in lesson planning, and observation and discussion of colleagues' teaching. Central to all of these professional development efforts for curricular and instructional improvement is the "instructional talk" of teachers.

With the clear message that the primary work of every teaching team is to improve curriculum and instruction—to affect "the instructional core"—the imperative of teacher team "instructional talk" has taken on additional weight. In addition, as leadership among school players has been *distributed* and new formal and informal teacher leadership roles for teachers have emerged, it has become increasingly likely that instructional talk will be an important part of team work.

The *Instructional Core* consists of the relationship of students and teachers in the presence of content.

Figure 3.2   The Instructional Core
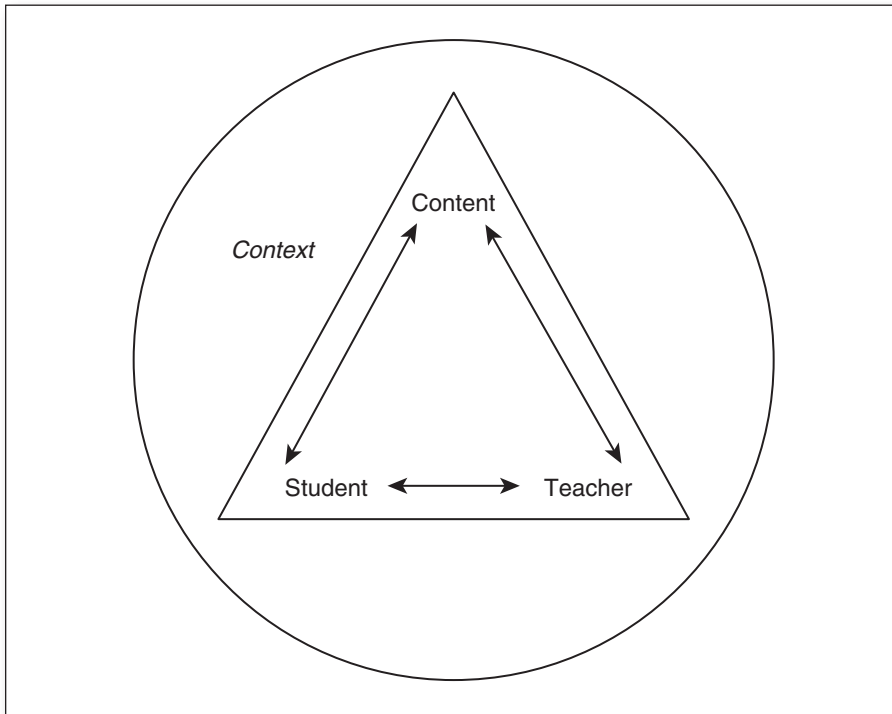
Anything you do that does not result in an observable effect on this relationship is wasted time and resources.[4] In other words, teaming initiatives and activities that do not address improvements in teaching practice, the type of content given to students, or the role that students play in their own learning do not affect the instructional core and are therefore ineffective in helping the team to reach its goals.

The Importance of Instructional Talk

Examined closely, teachers' understanding of what they may call "instructional talk" frequently refers to informal discussions of curriculum implementation, a recounting of a teacher's experiences with delivering particular lessons, informal talk about children's experiences with curriculum, and discussions of children's learning and behavior. This does not meet the criteria of instructional talk because it lacks the critical dimension of an examination of lessons and curriculum and rarely includes the expectation that teachers will

- Observe and critique the work of their peers
- Discuss, assess and revise lessons taught by team members based on student results

- Hold each other accountable for the learning of all the team's children.

Instructional talk demands the use of *records of practice*—tangible artifacts such as teachers' journals, student work, videotapes, lesson plans, and assessments. Only artifacts can produce tangible evidence of changes made in teaching practice and student learning.

How to engage in meaningful instructional talk is almost never taught to teachers and they therefore lack the skills that could enable them to use their team meetings and other team interactions to improve their curriculum and instruction with any form or depth. Thus, despite schools' and school districts' eagerness to stress the importance of teacher teams, the potential positive impact on instruction through effective teamwork has been under-realized.

Yet it has been demonstrated that well-supported, well-structured instructional talk in teacher team meetings can improve curriculum and instruction.[5] Preceded by appropriate training in team development and meeting facilitation, well-prepared teacher teams achieve more efficient and academically focused meetings and utilize other team-building skills. These skills are essential to teachers as they shift team meetings from unfocussed conversations to meetings in which high-level instructional talk and analytical discussions target curriculum and instruction.

Connecting Instructional Talk to Classroom Planning and Practice

Teams support the improvement of classroom instruction and student achievement when they:

- Focus on instruction
- Connect instruction to curriculum
- Connect instructional talk to classroom practice by:
    - Using assessment data
    - Working collaboratively on lesson plans
    - Conducting classroom observations

Instructional talk provides the scaffolding for teachers to assume responsibility for: curriculum analysis, learning a curriculum that extends beyond the curriculum-as-given, supporting each other in intellectual risk-taking, taking on peer observation in a systematic and well-trained fashion, and mentoring novice teachers. These rich professional development opportunities, supported by instructional

talk, can be factored into the team's structure and schedule, and serve to raise the level of the team's work together.

Promoting Accountability Through Instructional Talk

Studies have shown that successful schools are most likely to be schools where teachers are engaged in frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching *practice* . . . building a shared language adequate to the complexity of teaching, capable of distinguishing one practice and its virtues from another, and capable of integrating large bodies of practice into distinct and sensible perspectives on the business of teaching. Teachers and administrators in successful schools observe each other teach; they plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together. [6]

Interviewed by researchers, teachers who have been given the benefit of team training in how to conduct an instructional conversation emphasize what they've learned from watching one another teach. Teachers want to hold themselves accountable for the work they do, but the definition of "accountability" is often based on unclear standards, lack of rigorous curriculum, and the absence of meaningful supervision and evaluation.

The team that focuses on the quality of instructional talk will include and implement more content-specific professional development as part of its agenda leading, often, to a heightened sense of accountability. Creation of a regular schedule of peer/group observations is already seen as a means to improve curriculum and instruction, and the inclusion of special education teachers along with other specialists such as those in language arts and math, provides an essential and rewarding growth experience for both classroom teachers and specialists as well as it promotes accountability.

But achieving accountability in teacher teams is even more complicated than it appears. Mutual accountability within the team varies according to the type of task being undertaken; accountability for logistical and management items and accountability for the team's instructional agenda are two very different beasts. Teams are most successful when it comes to mutual accountability for *non-instructional tasks*. Team members understand the more immediate, concrete, and visible consequences of not completing tasks such as scheduling field trips or setting up bulletin boards. They generally have little experience in, and are more reluctant to perform the more difficult, sustained work on *instructional tasks* at a high and efficient level. Teachers resist assuming responsibility for, and holding each other accountable for, completing instructional tasks.[7]

This underscores the necessity for effective team leadership, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. In "leadership-impaired" teams, teachers charged with holding themselves accountable for instructional tasks are unprepared to do so, unable to implement team decisions on curriculum and pedagogy, and unable to hold others on the team accountable as well.

When teachers, working in teams, recognize the value of teacher leadership, engage in systematic high-level instructional talk, and have the opportunity to improve practices collaboratively and in concrete forms, they develop team loyalty, trust, and new feelings of responsibility and accountability. The collective team is responsible to each other and for all the team's children. The result is improved teaching and learning.

Using Team Meetings to Improve Instructional Practice

Data analysis, currently touted as the best new way to improve instruction (and raise test scores) can be used to excellent effect in the teacher team. When teachers learn how best to analyze their standardized achievement data, they can better understand their students' learning and use their own teaching expertise to develop improvement plans for them. Supplemented by other evidence (student work, behavior analysis) as well as assessments that can be developed and administered collectively by the team, data *can* become the tool it was meant to be—but only if such data leads to strategies for effective teacher-student interventions.

Team meetings that examine student work, or use other protocols to monitor and assure that teachers focus on curriculum and instruction, should be conducted on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The team should engage in implementing longer-term professional development tools as well, such as rounds and lesson-study, as it determines its yearly accountability goals.

Rounds

In a story about collaboration among medical doctors, reported in the New York Times science pages, 23 heart surgeons in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont agreed to observe each other regularly in the operating room and share their knowledge, insights, and approaches. Two years later, the death rate among their patients had fallen an astonishing 25 percent. Merely by emphasizing teamwork and communication instead of functioning as solitary practitioners,

all the doctors had brought about significant changes in their individual and institutional practices.

For teachers who, like heart surgeons, have traditionally worked as isolated professionals, the experience holds a powerful lesson. If our goal is to lower the "death rate" of young minds and see them thrive, it is obvious that we can do it better by collaboration than by working alone.

The practice of rounds promotes collaboration through the sharing of successful practice. Like doctors making hospital rounds, and lawyers collaborating to provide feedback as they build a case, teachers in schools all over the country, public and private alike, have begun to purposefully probe the rich evidence at hand for what it can reveal about how teachers can better teach and students can better learn.

The similarity between medical rounds and teaching rounds is that they are both intended to *make practice public.* While medical practice has been public (within the profession) for some time, teaching practice has not.

During rounds, teachers teach individual lessons while other teachers observe. Through rounds, more experienced practitioners can pass on knowledge and experience to the less experienced. Rounds encourages teachers to observe, discuss, and analyze teaching which, in turn, allows them to create strategies to improve their own teaching.

There are several different models of rounds, but all have these intended goals and benefits: an increased focus on student learning, the sharing of successful practice, the development of strategies for problem-solving, and a platform of support for both novice and veteran teachers.

Disclaimer

What we provide here is merely an overview of rounds and we caution the reader that rounds is not an easy do-it-yourself project for the uninitiated. It's a complex process that does require acquiring skills (possibly by coaching) that must be learned in order to do well and accomplish its intended purposes. For further reading, we suggest a book we use often when coaching teachers and teacher leaders on rounds in schools—Instructional Rounds in Education.[8] It is not written primarily for teachers, but its precepts are adaptable for teachers, and it provides a wealth of informational background on the basic foundations of rounds.

Lesson study

Another pathway for collaboration is lesson study, a professional development process in which teachers systematically examine their practice with the goal of increasing content knowledge and improving pedagogy. This examination centers on teachers working collaboratively on a small number of "study lessons." Working on these study lessons involves planning, teaching, observing, and critiquing the lessons. To provide focus and direction to this work, teachers select an overarching goal and related research question that they want to explore. This research question then serves to guide their work on all the study lessons.

While working on a study lesson,

- Teachers jointly draw up a detailed plan for the lesson, which one of the teachers uses to teach the lesson in a real classroom (as other group members observe the lesson).
- The group then comes together to discuss their observations of the lesson, and based on their observations collaboratively revises the lesson.
- Another teacher implements the revised lesson in a second classroom, while group members again look on.
- The group comes together once more to discuss the observed instruction. Finally, the teachers produce a report of what their study lessons have taught them, particularly with respect to their research question and the lesson can become an anchor lesson for that grade level or department.

It is essential to note that lesson study is professional development, *not lesson development.* Its goal is to develop lifelong learners by supporting teachers as independent thinkers and problem solvers, and by giving them—as does rounds—the opportunity to reflect deeply about their practice.

By examining work together teachers look for variability across classes and discuss what might explain greater-than-expected differences. Discussions of these differences lead to questions and sometimes-difficult conversations about classrooms and teaching.

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