Introduction

Richard DuFour

When I began my teaching career 40 years ago, I had the good fortune to be 1 of 10 first-year teachers assigned to my high school. We neophytes bonded as we shared the experience of entering the profession. We became a de facto support group, turning to each other to express frustrations, to commiserate, or to decompress after a difficult day. Our relationships extended beyond the school. We socialized on a regular basis and even entered a team into an adult basketball league. We shared perceptions, emotions, and experiences.

Our sharing stopped, however, at our respective classroom doors, because within our classrooms, each of us reigned supreme. I never had to concern myself with what content others were teaching, because each of us was free to determine his or her own curriculum. There was no process, expectation, or even encouragement for me to discuss with colleagues my curriculum pacing, my instructional strategies, the methods and rigor of my assessments, my homework policy, my grading practices, my response to students who struggled, or any of the other vital issues essential to effective teaching. The only thing my sections of our U.S. history course had in common with the sections taught by others in my department was the title. Thus, the experience of students enrolled in the same course varied greatly because it was solely dependent upon the individual teacher to whom they had been randomly assigned.

Since each of us had complete authority to determine what occurred in our individual classrooms, we did not intrude upon one another's practice. We understood that to question a colleague's curricular or instructional decisions would represent a serious breach of teacher etiquette, an affront to his or her professional autonomy. To put it succinctly, we were *congenial* coworkers who worked in close proximity to one another, but we were never *colaborers*. None of us was a collaborative teacher.

Much has happened in education since then, but regrettably, even today many teachers continue to work in the same buffered isolation I experienced 4 decades ago. The good news, however, is that more and more teachers are working in schools in which collaborative cultures prevail. In these schools, teachers engage in collective inquiry on the questions most vital to student learning. They learn together, build shared knowledge, apply that knowledge to their classrooms, and then reflect on their experience to refine and improve their implementation. They clarify what their students must learn, systematically gather evidence of that learning through common formative assessments, and study the evidence together to inform and improve their individual and collective practice.

There are enormous differences between my experience and the workings of contemporary teachers working in powerful collaborative cultures. Whereas I defined my job as *teaching* (that is, presenting clear lessons), collaborative teachers accept responsibility for student *learning.* Not once in my entire teaching career was I ever called upon to present evidence of student learning beyond the grades I assigned. To this day I have no way of knowing whether I taught a skill or concept better or worse than my colleague across the hall. Collaborative teachers, on the other hand, are hungry for evidence of student learning.

They create common formative assessments, analyze results together, and then use those results to help each other become more effective in their respective classrooms and to respond to the needs of individual students.

Whereas I worked in isolation, they work collaboratively. Whereas I worked independently to achieve my own goals, they work interdependently to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable. Whereas my colleagues and I understood, "These are *my* kids, and those are *your* kids," these teachers regard the success of every student as a collective responsibility: "These are all *our* students."

Researchers consistently report that the collaborative cultures created by these educators have helped students achieve at higher levels, fostered a powerful sense of professional efficacy among teachers, and made the teaching experience more rewarding and fulfilling. Almost all of the organizations representing educators have recognized the benefits of collaboration and have explicitly stated goals to support and advance the effort to make collaboration the norm in our schools and districts. That goal, however, remains elusive. In far too many schools, educators have been unable to overcome the tradition of isolation that, for over 40 years, has been cited as a major barrier to improving school effectiveness. In many other schools and districts, educators have settled for "collaboration lite." They don't build shared knowledge or collectively examine evidence of student learning; they share personal preferences ("This is how I like to teach this unit"). They don't concentrate on issues that can inform and improve their classroom practice; they discuss peripheral matters that have no direct impact on the classroom ("Who will distribute the field trip forms?").

The power of this book is not only that it calls upon teachers to collaborate, but that it also insists that they collaborate about the right things—the critical questions that lead to students learning at higher levels. These authors recognize the complexity of transforming school cultures to support professional collaboration, but they have faith in the ability of educators to make that transformation. They are highly successful school practitioners who offer the wisdom and insight that can only come with "learning by doing" in the real world of schools. They provide a treasure trove of specific, practical, and proven strategies that can transform schools into places where every professional becomes the collaborative teacher.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1, Cassandra Erkens asserts that teacher leaders play a key role in improving schools, and she calls upon all teachers to embrace the mantle of leadership. She defines the role of a teacher leader as collaborator, action researcher, reflective practitioner, and learner advocate. She offers brief vignettes that describe each role and then provides specific strategies to help educators build their capacity to assume each role.

In chapter 2, Susan Sparks tackles the issue of how teachers can begin to work together as members of a collaborative team when they have spent their careers working in isolation. She recognizes teachers will need support to make that transition, and she presents a rich array of structures and protocols to address both the "hardware" of a collaborative team (goals, products, strategies, and structures) as well as the "software" (beliefs, behaviors, relationships, and interpersonal effectiveness). She offers sound advice as to how educators can make their collaborative meetings positive and productive.

Tom Many devotes chapter 3 to examining the impact of a collaborative culture on professional practice in schools. More importantly, he identifies the specific high-leverage changes in practice that

The New Teacher Leader:
Transforming Education From Inside the Classroom

Cassandra Erkens

In the past, the term *teacher leader* has been reserved for those of us who either have been advocates for our profession and our colleagues or have stepped out of the classroom to accept significant responsibilities for improving the system at large. Many of us, while teaching full time, have served as local union president, curriculum committee member, site leadership team chair, department chair, or grade-level team leader. Some of us have taken a temporary leave from our classrooms to serve as a teacher on special assignment: curriculum coordinator, instructional coach, literacy or math support team member, and other such system support roles. But unless we were willing to step *out* of our classrooms for these "extra" activities, we were seldom viewed as leaders in our field.

Thankfully, the work of professional learning communities (PLCs) is changing all that. As PLC architects DuFour and Eaker state, "Schools are effective because of their teachers, not in spite of them. . . . Situated in the classroom—the critical focal point of the learning community—teachers are essential to any meaningful reform effort and are in the best position to have a positive impact on the lives of children" (1998, p. 206). Today, teacher leaders must adopt a new frame of mind and a collaborative way of working to lead from *within* the classroom—the heart of change in education. To lead from the classroom in a manner that impacts student learning in significant ways, teacher leaders across North America are assuming four critical roles in their classrooms and with their learning communities: collaborator, action researcher, reflective practitioner, and learner advocate. Each role is unique, requiring its own set of skills.

The Collaborator

Jamie worked in a traditional high school that had not yet opted to operate as a professional learning community. Jamie's review of multiple research studies highlighted an overwhelmingly compelling argument that students and teachers alike would benefit if her math department created a collaborative culture. So, at the beginning of the school year, Jamie invited her department to consider operating as a PLC. Jamie had established a great rapport with her peers; they viewed her as a knowledgeable educator and outstanding teacher. Her colleagues were curious and intrigued by her findings, and because they trusted her, they readily agreed to follow her lead. They began by making the following commitments to each other:

- Make time to collaborate weekly, and commit to those established times.

- Bring best practice to their classrooms by researching and deciding as a team what to include and how.

- Identify the essential outcomes or power standards for each of their courses, put them in student-friendly language, and post them at the front of their classrooms.

- Co-create and implement common assessments to be used biweekly in the form of Monday quizzes and Friday tests tied directly to their posters of power standards.

- Codesign interventions and instructional strategies to address learner needs as determined by their common assessments.

- Commit to do whatever it takes to help all of their math learners.

The journey on which they embarked had its share of challenges, and the team truly had to work through some structural complications and philosophical differences. During difficult debates that drilled down to the core of their differing educational belief systems, Jamie was often certain everything would fold. When the team became tense and somewhat stuck, Jamie worked one on one with team members to identify their hurdles and discover how she could best help them overcome barriers and trust the ideas of their peers long enough to try new things.

By the end of the first semester, the math department had dramatically reduced the failure rate in courses that used common assessments, moving from the traditional bell curve 30% failure rate to a low 5% failure rate. Surprisingly, even team members who had not yet used common assessments experienced some of this success in their courses. During the team's discussion of the results, these teachers noted that while they hadn't used common assessment data to inform their instructional planning, they had, in fact, altered their responses, adopting a "whatever it takes" approach to require student learning in their classrooms.

The math department's overall success was cause for celebration. Jamie celebrated the work of the team internally and externally. As a result, the team renewed their commitments to collaborate as a way of continuously improving their student achievement results.

What We Know About Collaboration

Teacher leaders understand that the work of teaching is far too complex and the work of learning is far too important for us to confine student achievement within the limitations of our personal expertise. Hence, we choose to lead our peers in meaningful and even challenging collaboration in order to address the needs of our learners. Teacher leaders like Jamie can elicit collaboration from colleagues because they are able to establish a high level of trust and rapport with the team.

Collaboration is founded on trust. In their long-term work with schools, sociologists and authors Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified four critical pillars to support trust in schools: respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard for others. These characteristics are not new, but they can seem rare and appear to be intuitive to the leaders we respect and willingly follow. These four critical pillars require intentionality and commitment—even tenacity. They must be collectively defined and collaboratively practiced in community. Trust in a team is jeopardized when members hold fast to autonomy and self-select the responsibilities, conversations, or values to which they will commit. We *require* the participation and expertise of the *entire team* when working collaboratively. So, in a professional learning community *all* staff must understand and develop these leadership characteristics.

paper on the meeting room wall and label the first sheet *Keep,* the second *Drop,* and the third *Create.* Each teacher is given sticky notes in three colors—yellow for Keep, pink for Drop, and green for Create. Meeting by grade level or in departmental teams, they begin the process of analyzing and reflecting on their teaching together.

Using their plan books as the record of what was taught (the implemented curriculum) and copies of their school's essential curriculum (the prescribed curriculum), the teachers compare one subject at a time and begin categorizing the topics they taught during the previous grading period into one of the Keep, Drop, or Create categories.

Topics reflected as part of the essential curriculum *and* included in the teachers' lesson plan books are written on the yellow sticky notes and placed in the Keep column. Topics reflected as part of the essential curriculum but *not* included in the teachers' lesson plan books—because they haven't been taught yet or were skipped—are captured on green sticky notes and then placed in the Create column. Finally, those topics included in a teacher's lesson plan book but *not* reflected as part of the essential curriculum are noted on pink sticky notes and posted in the Drop column.

As each topic is identified, noted on a sticky note, and captured on the butcher paper, a list of topics for the grading period emerges. Teachers check the topics captured within the Keep and Create categories and then match those topics with four to five corresponding questions on the most recent common assessment. Regular use of this activity helps them identify nonessential curriculum—those topics listed on the Drop page—and helps create a "Stop Doing" list.

In addition to creating a framework for the development of common assessments, the feedback generated by the Keep, Drop, Create activity helps teachers focus their planning, pace their instruction, and align the essential curriculum with the intended curriculum. An elementary principal in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, proudly noted, "Our teachers know that we do not have to be on the exact same page as we present our instruction, but we do know we have to be similar in our expectations and pacing of materials."

Using Data to Drive Instructional Decisions

Another change highlighted by teachers in the email survey was the increased use of data. According to an elementary teacher in Littleton, Colorado, "We use data to support our goals, to direct our teaching, and to determine when we have reached those goals." Teachers in these schools use results of formative assessments to provide information on student progress; their conversations shift from process to outcomes and from a focus on instruction to a focus on what students actually learn: "The 'teacherspeak' [in our school] has changed from 'I think' to 'I know' that's how he performed on the test" (special education teacher, Colorado Springs, Colorado).

In order to use collaboration time efficiently, teachers are adopting protocols for analyzing data. One strategy that teams have found helpful is to apply the Here's What, So What? Now What? protocol during the course of a 30-minute team meeting.

By looking at the data and making factual statements about what the data says, the teachers define "Here's What" in the first 5 minutes of a meeting. For example, they determine the Here's What by using the results of an assessment to look for patterns of strengths and weaknesses, paying attention to the topic