

Collaborative Planning:  
Methods and Challenges for Elementary School Teachers

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	i
I. Introduction	1
Types of Planning	1
Collaborative Planning	1
Statement of the Problem	3
II. Review of the Literature	4
Collaborative Planning	4
Benefits for Educators and Students	7
Challenges and Limitations	11
Summary	13
III. Methods	15
Participants	15
Instruments	16
Procedure	16
IV. and V. Results and Discussion	18
Discussion of the Data	18
Relationship to the Literature	25
Suggestions for Improvement	28
Appendix A	30
Appendix B	32
References	37

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the collaborative planning methods and challenges of elementary school teachers. Interviews with 18 educators from a suburban school were conducted to analyze planning collaboratively from the perspective of classroom teachers. Each grade level was interviewed as a team and asked a series of questions. Following each interview, answers were transcribed and analyzed for themes. Common themes emerged from the interviews and were then identified with the use of a table. Most teams agreed that collaborative planning involved sharing ideas and resources so that standards taught were consistent and student achievement would improve. Teachers from each grade level agreed that this consistency did not impact individual teaching styles. While many teams recognized the benefits of regular team planning, all teams concluded that finding the time to plan was the biggest challenge and impacted their ability to plan together regularly. All teams communicated on a daily basis in a variety of ways, but very few teams actually participated in formal collaborative planning. Further research and interviews are needed in the area of collaborative planning to draw conclusions about the methods and challenges elementary school teachers face.

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Planning is an essential part of effective instruction for teachers. It involves knowledge of state and county standards, awareness of resources, and an understanding of student learning styles and abilities. Preparation for instruction strongly impacts the delivery of a lesson and therefore student success. Teachers not only plan for instruction during their allotted planning period, they also review student assessments, write individualized education plans, collaborate with colleagues, grade student work, meet with students, contact parents, prepare materials, etc. (Flannery, 2014). However, among all the responsibilities teachers undertake, planning is one of the most crucial factors that influence instruction, classroom management, and student success.

### **Types of Planning**

There are two different types of planning: individual and collaborative planning. In a study conducted by Shaw in 1993 (as cited by Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, Caskey, & Micki, 2010) planning time was used successfully in two ways, “[e]ach teacher in the school was allotted one hour of individual planning time and one hour of team planning time each day” (p. 51). Individual planning consists of preparing lessons in isolation, with little to no interaction and collaboration with co-workers. Individual planning allows time to prepare and organize classroom materials, communicate with parents, grade papers, or display work (Caven, Checkoway, & Gamse, 2013).

### **Collaborative Planning**

Collaborative planning consists of a team of teachers planning together during a common planning period during the school day. The National Middle School Association (as cited by Mertens et al., 2010) describes collaborative planning as a time when teachers “can plan ways to

integrate the curriculum, analyze assessment data, examine student work, discuss current research, and reflect on the effectiveness of instructional approaches being used” (p. 50).

Collaborative planning involves an organized period of time in which educators have a purpose for planning, an agenda, a leader or facilitator, appropriate resources that are easily accessible, and support from administration. “Researchers reported that the success of common planning time was related to a clearly defined purpose and expectations for teams regarding how common planning time would be used as well a collegial, supportive climate fostered by the school administration (Cook & Faulkner, 2009 as cited by Mertens et al., 2010, p. 54). With all these elements in place, there is an opportunity for effective collaborative planning to take place so that teachers and students can benefit. Teachers benefit from both individual and collaborative planning.

Collaborative planning can provide consistent support for teachers in their planning and classroom management, according to Caven et al. (2013). Regular team planning provides benefits such as effective instruction which will “maximize student learning” (p. 6).

“Collaborative planning can create a culture of continuous improvement where colleagues brainstorm together and decide on instructional approaches to meet the needs of each child” (Caven et al., 2013, p. 6). While research suggests that collaborative planning benefits both teachers and students, there are still many educators who resist participating in both forms of planning and rely mainly on individual planning despite the benefits of collaborative planning.

Anne Arundel County’s Negotiated Agreement states that:

[t]he board [of education] and TAAAC mutually agree on the importance of the teachers planning collaboratively in our schools. We know that nothing is as important as the classroom teacher in making a difference in student performance. When teachers are collegial, sharing their knowledge and wisdom and problem solving, planning, implementing, and evaluating as a team, great gains for students can be realized (p. 28).

TAAAC works with the Board of Education to strive to ensure that teachers in Anne Arundel County are provided with an appropriate amount of planning time. Both organizations feel strongly that providing teachers with time to plan individually and as a team will have a positive impact on student achievement.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study is to describe how the teachers at a Maryland elementary school plan and identify common themes of successful collaborative planning models. Teachers at each grade level will be interviewed to explore the challenges and barriers that teachers face with planning as a team and describe collaborative planning from the elementary school level.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

One of the most fundamental goals of education is to ensure that all students are provided with effective meaningful instruction regardless of teacher experience and knowledge in each particular subject (Nelson & Landel, 2007). Ideally, the level of instruction is consistent within a school, county, state, and country; equally valuable to ensure success for all students. In order to maintain consistency, educational research provides identification of successful strategies and theories, plus strives to identify contributing factors to quality instruction. Teacher collaboration is a common factor recognized in a great deal of educational literature as a crucial part of teacher effectiveness, quality of instruction, successful teaching strategies, student achievement, and school reform.

This review of the literature, discusses various aspects of collaborative planning. Section one focuses on defining and explaining collaborative planning and the current use of planning time for teachers. Section two discusses the benefits of planning collaboratively for educators and students. Finally, sections three and four present possible challenges teachers face and a description of effective and successful collaborative planning.

#### **Collaborative Planning**

From an educational point of view, collaborative planning is a term that cannot be described with a single, clear definition. The reason for this ambiguity is that this type of planning can vary among schools and grade levels. Implementation of collaborative planning will often differ depending on the teachers involved and the task at hand. Rather than having one definition, collaborative planning involves common themes that are consistent among teachers who practice this form of planning. Belmore (1996) identifies three common themes within her

collection of surveys. The three themes are: “[c]ollaborative planning promotes shared ‘responsibility’ for all student learning and behavior in the class group and beyond... promotes a greater sense of shared purpose for teaching expectations for student learning... [and] results in a greater diversity of teaching strategies, thus provides teachers with ways to reach all students” (p. 5-7). Similarly, Caven et al. (2013) found similar results as they evaluated the expanded learning time project in Massachusetts. In other words, collaborative planning is an effective way for teachers to work and plan together. It provides support for teachers, facilitates a deeper understanding of the required outcomes, and creates a richer learning experience for students. Teacher effectiveness increases as ideas and strategies are shared and implemented.

#### Current Use of Planning Time

Collaborative planning typically occurs during teachers’ common planning time. That is the title given to the period of the day that is not devoted to instruction, may be misleading to outsiders such as administrators, parents, and the public. Teachers currently use planning time for a variety of responsibilities other than planning. These tasks include, but are not limited to: traveling around the school building, preparing materials for the following lesson or day, photocopying, interacting with coworkers/administrators, grading papers, and contacting parents (Decker & Ware, 2001; Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009). In the Decker and Ware (2001) study, teachers reported the activities that they engaged in during a 30-minute planning period. In the study, it was pointed out that team planning occurred less often than many other activities even though teacher interactions with coworkers ranked high in frequency of occurrence during a planning period. From the data, only about 3% of the provided planning time was actually used to plan collaboratively. While this period of time is often referred to as “planning time,” it is not always used for that purpose. With other tasks and responsibilities taking priority, instructional planning



is not always accomplished during “planning time” for many teachers (Decker & Ware, 2001). While many educators are open to collaborative planning and understand its benefits, they feel limited by responsibilities and the lack of time (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Caven et al., 2013).

It is also important to distinguish between collaboration and cooperation or coordination. Teachers may choose to cooperate and coordinate during planning time, but that also does not necessarily mean that they are engaging in collaborative planning. Collaboration is very different from cooperation and coordination (Grover as cited by Kimmel, 2011). He claims that while all three concepts involve some planning, collaboration involves interdependence in which all members of the planning group mutually rely on the other. The Power of Professional Learning Communities research (Hargreaves & Fullen, 2013) indicates that investing in collaboration amongst teachers makes a positive difference on learning and achievement. On the other hand, cooperating and coordinating with other teachers lacks the consistent feeling of community and teamwork. It does not necessarily involve an active exchange of creative ideas and discussion of strategies. It lacks the depth of discussion about curriculum and lessons. Teachers who are solely coordinating and cooperating with their teammates rely less on one another and continue to work in isolation to prepare for lessons.

Planning time may not always be used for collaborative planning, yet experts continue to strongly suggest that it should be made a high priority for all its added benefits for teachers and students. “Through recent revisions to their professional standards and guidelines, various education-based associations and agencies strongly advocate continuous collective reflections and shared work among teachers (e.g. NCATE, INTASC, NBPTS, ISLLC)” (as cited by Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Current research suggests that collaborative planning can have a positive effect on instruction and student success, but it is possible that some teachers in our current

educational system do not exercise this form of planning that could enhance instruction (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009; Caven et al., 2013).

### **Benefits for Educators and Students**

Collaborative planning has many benefits for teachers and students. This form of planning can increase teacher effectiveness allowing them the opportunity to create richer lesson plans directly improving student achievement. Planning together will provide teachers with additional time to help students and communicate with parents because they will be planning more efficiently as well as sharing responsibilities of lesson preparation. Finally, collaboration can help novice teachers learn from experienced teammates as it helps to build mentoring relationships among educators. Teachers mostly benefit from the support of working collaboratively with a team of teachers. “There is a special sense of ‘belongingness’ that comes when a group of people collectively accomplish a goal or task” (Belmore, 1996, p. 1). Teachers build a sense of community through collaboratively planning which positively influences instruction and therefore student achievement.

### **Teacher Effectiveness**

Teacher effectiveness provides a strong foundation for student achievement and relates to the concept of collaborative planning. National standards suggest that when teachers plan together it can significantly influence student achievement (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Teachers who regularly plan together will provide students with authentic and effective instruction that is less likely to occur when teachers work mainly alone. Cochran-Smith (as cited by Moreillon, 2013) encourages educators to participate in this form of planning because, not only will it enhance instruction, it will also improve student performance. He states that “opportunities to work with other educators in professional learning communities rather than in isolation” is more

beneficial to teachers and students (p. 4). Teacher effectiveness improves as educators work as a team. Planning collaboratively allows teachers to thoroughly explore the content and outcomes of each lesson. With more teachers involved in the planning process, lessons can become more creative and thoughtful. Moreillon (2013) describes features of a school that successfully utilizes collaborative planning. Here, a panel of teachers from the school describes their experience to aspiring teachers:

One student teacher said, 'Each teacher and school library media specialist had many stories and examples about how collaborating enabled them not only to come up with more creative lesson plans, but also to better assess themselves and the quality of their lesson. Having another person's perspectives and observations is enormously helpful. (p. 9).

In addition to developing more effective lesson plans that can increase student achievement, teachers also become more reflective as they work with their peers and more experienced teachers. They learn and grow from listening and learning from each other's experiences. All in all, simply sharing ideas among educators also leads to teacher effectiveness.

### Efficient Use of Time

Collaborative planning can save teachers a significant amount of time. Planning for a day's worth of instruction requires a great deal of thought and preparation. Teachers are responsible for instruction for a majority of the day so time is a limited resource. Many teachers at the elementary school level are required to teach the same curriculum and set of standards. Planning collaboratively allows educators time to plan more efficiently and focus on planning effective and appropriate lessons. In addition, in a collaborative model, teachers also may gain time for grading, preparing materials, communicating with parents, and tackling other crucial responsibilities in their own classrooms. Nelson and Landel (2007) conclude that "each teacher will be responsible for many fewer lesson preparations. This shift [in instruction] can improve

teaching... by allowing teachers to focus on their planning” (p. 74). Time gained through efficient planning can be better used to provide students with extra support, communicate with parents, or devote to other responsibilities that may have been neglected due to the lack of time.

### National and School Reforms

Collaborative planning also can have positive effects on school reforms and aid teachers in new changes that are implemented. Many new curriculums and materials are put into place each year. Teachers often struggle to decipher new material or curriculum on their own and may find working with others to be helpful in the process.

Collaborative teams tend to plan strategically, keeping specific target outcomes in mind and planning together a course of instruction that offers the strongest potential for students to attain goals. While teachers who plan in relative isolation work conscientiously, they are less inclined to express in detail the kind of learning they want to result from their instruction (McCann, 2010, p.111).

Working together can provide teachers with the support needed to stay focused and ensure coverage of concepts and standards. “The NCLB Act (2001) as well as various related federal and state education department directives, position papers, and professional development funding allocations reflect the recognition that teacher collective learning is a crucial factor in achieving successful education reforms” (Leonard & Leonard, 2003, p. 9). In other words, it is a national expectation that teachers work and learn together as collaborative teams. While new curriculums, programs, and resources can be beneficial, they require teacher collaboration to be fully effective. Elmore states that “studies have shown that even the best of teaching practices and reform efforts cannot be effective unless the organization of the school allows teachers to have purposeful conversations about change and improvement embedded within the school day” (as cited in Belmore, 1996, p. 3). It is crucial that teachers find the time to work collaboratively to gain the full benefits from additional instructional materials provided to them.

## Mentoring

While collaborative planning may support experienced and veteran teachers, it provides crucial learning for novice teachers who can ‘hear’ the thinking processes of veteran or experienced teachers (McCann, 2010). McCann (2010) notes that beginning teachers can especially benefit from collaborative planning because many teaching programs do not fully prepare teachers for the high standards that teaching demands and do not provide student teachers with a great deal of experience in the classroom. New teachers lack confidence because they have not yet acquired the experience needed in the teaching profession and tend to have self doubt when it comes to making decisions (McCann, 2010). While novice teachers struggle with the decision making process that is involved in planning, many experienced teachers make the same decisions somewhat innately at this point in their career. Instead of planning the way they were taught to plan in college as new teachers do, “experienced teachers... often reflect upon prior lessons and pull successful aspects of those lessons into plans for future lessons” (Warren, 2000, p. 38). McCann (2010) concludes that “collaborative efforts can accelerate the development of a beginning teacher. Collaboration “provides new teachers with many of the advantages that experienced teachers have” (p. 111) and allows them to work more effectively.

## Student Achievement

According to “several [recent] studies... collaboration can help schools meet local, state, and national goals for student achievement”. (Moreillon, 2013, p. 4) All teachers are working toward the same goals set by their county which follows state regulations that are created based on national goals. Students can benefit from lessons that teachers have created together. This is especially true during times of reform when curriculums are changing and asking for more rigor and project based assignments. These types of lessons are significantly more difficult to plan

without the help of other staff members in a school. “For students, academic benefits are found in a more energized, project-oriented, interactive learning environment” (Farwell, 1998, p. 26). Students will benefit from well crafted lessons. As teachers work together, their creative lessons will promote a deeper understanding of concepts and retention of the information.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

While there are many benefits to collaborative planning, a majority of teachers continue to plan in isolation due to various restrictions and limitations (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Research studies show that a lack of collaboration due to several challenges in the school setting affects student success (Merkins, et al., 2010). Leonard and Leonard (2003) conclude that “many teachers continue to depict severe limitations in the capacity to work meaningfully with colleagues in ways that allow them to address the common goal of enhanced student achievement” (p. 9). While there are many limitations, experts still argue that there are essential benefits of teacher collaboration for students and educators.

### **Influences on Instructional Delivery**

There are many influences on instructional delivery which can create differences in our educational system throughout different regions and even among grade levels in the same school. The most influential variable on instruction is teacher experience (Warren, 2000). In addition to teacher experience, Warren (2000) lists many other influences such as educational materials and resources, interests and abilities of students, time and schedule restraints, and daily interruptions to instruction.

### **Responsibilities**

All teachers participate in various activities and have responsibilities outside the classroom. “Frequently, respondents bemoaned that lack of time is a major problem in their

schools and one high school teacher attributed it to there being ‘so many programs, activities, that we are involved in planning and conducting until no time is left for professional collaboration’” (Leonard & Leonard, 2003, p. 6). Many teachers are caring for family members or working on advancing their degrees and lack time and flexibility required to participate in collaborative planning. Some veteran teachers feel that collaborative planning is unnecessary. With teachers at different stages in their lives and with an assortment of daily tasks to manage, many teachers find it difficult to plan together (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). “Wagner and Masden-Copas (as cited by Leonard & Leonard, 2003) warn, the primary goal of continuous school improvement will not be realized ‘unless teams of teachers improve together’” (p. 3). Even though planning collaboratively is a challenge, experts conclude that is a crucial element to improving education.

### Planning Styles

In addition to time, focus and structure can also be a challenge for elementary school teachers. These factors can be influenced by the variety of teaching and planning styles within a team. Teachers with similar styles will often plan with more ease as they will most likely agree on lesson ideas and use of resources. On the other hand, teachers with drastically different styles or “teacher personality conflicts” may find themselves compromising more often and disagreeing with teammates (Leonard & Leonard, 2003, p. 7). This may deter some educators from planning in a collaborative way (Hargreaves & Fullen, 2013).

### New Initiatives

Finally, new curriculums such as the Common Core Standards and additional resources may influence collaborative planning. With the added pressure to teach new curriculums, teachers need to spend more time learning new programs and standards. While instructional

content is changing, the allotted time for each subject, as well as planning time for the teacher, has not changed. Louis and Smith (as cited in Decker & Ware, 2001) have noted that “it is impossible to change learning conditions for students if we do not change the working conditions for teachers” (p. 4). Teachers struggle to learn the new curriculum on their own and would benefit from working together. However, the current structure of the school day does not lend itself to collaborative planning.

### **Summary**

Collaborative planning is a challenging strategy to implement, but it is not impossible. Building a community that implements and supports collaborative planning takes dedication and time to create. Schools that work and plan together must commit to this type of planning, be open to new ideas and different teaching styles, and build a community of teachers who have mutual trust and respect for each other. Teachers need to find an organized planning time and learn to delegate workload. Schools that have successfully implemented a collaborative planning model “build collaborative groups with current faculty and maintain them by recruiting and hiring new teachers to fill content-specific instructional needs” (Nelson & Landel, 2007, p. 74-75). According to Strahan (2003):

A growing number of studies have provided rich descriptions of schools that promote student achievement (Langer, 2000; Louis & Kruse, 1995, Newmann, & Wehlage, 1995; Wolfe et al., 2000)...One characteristic of successful schools is that teachers work collaboratively. As they do so, they develop stronger instructional strategies, and these strategies enhance student achievement. At the same time, teachers develop strong professional community, enabling them to provide even more social support for learning (p. 128).

Farwell (1998) suggests that teachers who choose to work alone are running the risk of wasting time and missing out on utilizing fellow teacher’s strengths because “[m]any opportunities to enrich and enhance student learning [are] lost” (p. 26) when teachers work in



isolation. Strahan's (2003) research shows evidence that "teachers who were most successful in improving instruction engaged in ongoing deliberations with colleagues that helped them translate new ideas into practice" (p. 129).

Collaborative planning enhances instruction and helps students reach their fullest potential (Belmore, 2014). Farwell (1998) concludes, "In an era of educational change and challenge, effective and inventive collaborative planning breaks teacher isolation, energizes the curriculum, and coordinates use of resources, both instructional and human" (p. 27).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to identify common themes among grade levels in relation to the topic of collaborative planning methods and practices that are currently used at a Maryland elementary school. In addition, the researcher searched for common advantages and challenges involving collaborative planning.

#### **Participants**

The subjects of this study were members of the Anne Arundel County Public School system at a local elementary school. The researcher consulted the principal prior to the interviews for additional support and guidance. He offered scheduling assistance and input on interview questions. The participants were classroom teachers at the school and each grade level team was interviewed as a group. Classroom teachers were emailed by the researcher about the purpose of the study and an interview time was scheduled so that all three teachers would be present at the time of the interview.

To gain further information about each team, the researcher asked each classroom teacher to provide the following information: years of teaching experience, number of years employed at the current school, and years of experience at the current grade level. A total of eighteen classroom teachers were interviewed for this study. The teaching experience of educators at this school ranged from seven years to over 40 years of experience. Sixteen teachers out of a total of eighteen had at least eleven years of teaching experience and about half of the staff had ten years of experience or more at the grade level they currently taught. The most experienced team included two teachers who had 23 years and 28 years teaching at their current grade level. There is a wide range of experience at this school, but the majority of the staff has at least ten years of

experience and is very comfortable and knowledgeable about the grade level they currently teach.

### **Instruments**

Two instruments were designed by the researcher for this study: an interview and table of themes. An interview was created to describe collaborative planning from the point of view of classroom teachers and to document common themes. This information was collected by the researcher using a series of questions written with the purpose of engaging teachers in a discussion and description of collaborative planning at their grade level and from various points of view, due to experience and personality (See Appendix A). During each interview, the researcher took notes as well as recorded complete answers on a voice recorder. Following each interview, the researcher reviewed the recordings and transcribed each of the answers verbatim. Next, a table was created to identify themes gathered from each team, which were then examined for common themes across all grade levels. Themes that were alike among three or more grade levels were highlighted with corresponding colors (See Appendix B.)

### **Procedure**

Research was conducted on teacher planning, use of planning time, and collaborative planning. Using the information gathered from the research, questions were developed to capture a description of collaborative planning for classroom teachers. A series of 22 questions were created, with assistance from the principal of the school and other educators. These questions were then posed to classroom teachers over the course of two weeks. The researcher met with each grade level for approximately 30 minutes to ask the planned questions and discuss each grade level's process of planning and any challenges faced. As each grade level talked and shared their thoughts and procedures for planning a recording device was used to document the

complete answers. The researcher also took notes throughout each interview and asked follow up questions based on the answers that were provided.

Following the interviews, the researcher listened to the recordings several times and transcribed complete answers. After writing down responses from each team of teachers, a table was created that included six columns for grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Additionally, 22 rows were created; one for each question or topic. The researcher read through the interview answers focusing on one question in isolation and identified multiple themes from each answer for each grade level. Following the identification of themes for each team, the themes were reviewed and common themes across three or more grade levels were highlighted.

## **CHAPTERS IV and V**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to interview current elementary school teachers and describe their personal experiences with collaborative planning. This chapter will identify and describe common themes among grade levels, compare the themes and individual comments to the research, and offer suggestions for improving collaborative planning practices at a Maryland school.

#### **Discussion of the Data**

Eighteen elementary school classroom teachers at the same school were interviewed for this study. These teachers were asked a series of 22 questions written specifically to engage teachers in a discussion about collaborative planning. Throughout the interviews teachers offered descriptions of their current planning process, described team strengths and challenges, and expressed supportive factors that have been provided to foster collaborative planning in their school. From these interview questions, several themes emerged about collaborative planning at the elementary school level including: sharing and consistency, planning styles, equal status, team strengths, classroom practices, student achievement, challenges and limitations, supports and incentives, technology, and workload.

#### Sharing and Consistency

At the start of each interview, every team of classroom teachers was asked the same question, “What is collaborative planning?” All six teams responded with comments about sharing and brainstorming as a team rather than individually. One teacher described collaborative planning as “coming together on a similar topic [and] bringing ideas individually, but then applying them together and using them as a team.” Elaborating, another explained that

collaborating involved “combining resources, ideas, and experiences to plan activities.” Most teams described this form of planning as a way to maintain consistency throughout the grade level so that outcomes and topics are the identical even if teaching styles vary. In other words, “while we’re on the same page, our teaching styles might be slightly different, but the same information is being given” explained one teacher. Four out of the six teams also described collaborative planning as an endeavor in which they all shared an equal voice. Most grade levels viewed collaborative planning as an opportunity to “work together to create lessons” while focusing on “common goals” and ultimately growing and learning as a team of educators.

### Planning Styles

General descriptions of collaborative planning were similar across all grade levels, but each team had their own unique way of planning. Formal, organized, and consistent collaborative planning seemed to be less frequent at this school. If a formal planning session occurred, it was usually at the beginning of a topic and some teams stated that it was rare for them to meet weekly. All teams at some point in the year planned together formally. However, only two teams seemed to meet weekly while the rest met as needed or very little in a formal way. If a formal planning session was scheduled, all teams mentioned the same materials needed to plan: plan books, curriculum guides, and any successful past materials or ideas. Since informal planning was more likely for most teams, planning together was scheduled as needed and therefore was inconsistent.

Experience and confidence were factors that influenced the formality of collaborative planning sessions. Experienced teachers and teams working together for more than ten years conveyed more confidence in relation to planning as this factor influenced the extent of their planning. A teacher from a highly experienced team explained, “We’ve planned together for

twelve years. If it's old curriculum, that's simple. If it worked, great, we'll plan to do it again. If not, then we may change it. We're always looking for new [materials]." This particular team still met weekly to maintain open communication and confirm outcomes for the week, but the lesson planning was less extensive than in past years. The repeated use of previous materials combined with teaching experience provided this team with confidence that redundant to plan every lesson again each year. However, this same team continued to meet weekly to incorporate fresh ideas to their collection of lessons and to maintain consistency. In comparison, other teams with a similar amount of experience mentioned that regular planning sessions felt unnecessary and they preferred a less formal way of planning. Another experienced teacher from a different team commented on the effect that the level of experience influences how her team plans, "We don't meet weekly because we've all been teaching [the same] grade for so long that we know what we're [teaching] and we know what we need to do to hit that standard, but we certainly do share our ideas of what we find." Besides from these differences, all teams mentioned that they "checked in" daily with their teammates to touch base about lessons, upcoming quizzes and assessments, and to share any materials that they recently found. One team in particular mentioned that a great deal of their sharing and communicating was daily, but instead of meeting in person, it was often through email. While all teams mentioned that they checked in and shared materials on a regular basis, only two of the six grade levels actually mentioned a distribution of tasks in addition to planning within the team that would benefit the entire grade level.

#### Equal Status among Teammates

All teams described themselves as an equal team with no leader. All teams have a designated leader chosen by the principal to report back to the administration, record team minutes and notes, and represent their grade level at team leader meetings. However, teams still

saw all members of the team as equals when it came to planning and sharing ideas as one teacher clarified, “I think we all have an equal voice in making decisions.” Many teams recognized leadership roles varied depending on who initiated an idea or personal interests. One teacher commented, “I think it follows everybody’s interests. I think everybody has taken the lead at various times and I think everybody shares their ideas.” Even with a designated team leader as well as teammates who are more likely to take the lead, every teacher from all grade levels acknowledged the feeling of equality on their team when it came to planning and making decisions that affected the entire grade level.

### Team Strengths

Every team recognized the positive impact their individual and team strengths had on their team. Without hesitation, four out of the six teams identified their team strength as the willingness to share. These teams also described themselves as uncompetitive because they all shared a common goal: to provide their students with an education. In addition to sharing, another common strength mentioned by half of the teams was flexibility. One team remarked, “We have experience. We’re all very flexible and help each other out. We’re team players... all of us. We share.” Teams described the ability and willingness to be flexible as a huge strength for a profession that changes constantly.

### Classroom Practices

When asked about their classroom practices and the influence collaborative planning had on these practices, teams strongly agreed that teachers have their own teaching style and that even when an outcome was planned collaboratively and ideas were shared, classroom practices would still vary due to the wide range of teaching styles. One teacher commented on teacher styles:



I think we all have a certain teaching style that we all just make it our own within our classroom although we're all meeting the same standard. All three of us teach differently.

Student abilities also affected classroom practices, as one teacher explains:

Next week I might start a story on day one and then extend the skill. Whereas, the other might read the story on the second day, instead, or might spend two days on the story. However, we're all using the same story and same standard.

Teams made sure to point out that collaborative planning strengthened lesson plans and provided consistency so that the outcomes being taught are the same across the grade level.

### Student Achievement

Almost all teams felt as though planning together would increase student achievement. These teachers felt that lesson plans created by more than one educator would be stronger, more creative, and would appeal to multiple learning styles. In addition, teachers explained that when lessons did not go well, collaborating with a teammate would help them change their instruction for the next lesson in order to best help their students. As explained by a primary teacher, "You share ideas which ultimately helps you come up with the best plan to help the students."

Additionally, an intermediate teacher explained how collaborative planning could help improve student achievement: "Putting our heads together when we're having trouble teaching a certain skill... You may have a way to teach it and I have a way to teach it and when I put them all together now I have three varieties of how to teach that particular skill." Teachers' interview answers support that student achievement is most likely impacted in a positive way because of the creativity and variety of lessons as well as the support provided when struggling to teach a concept.

### Challenges and Limitations

The most common challenge for all teams was limited time. In fact, teams mentioned lack of time multiple times throughout the interviews even in answers to other questions

unrelated to challenges and limitations. Each team described the workload and planning required on a daily basis was not feasible in the time allotted during the day for planning. Many teams felt with this limited amount of time, it was difficult to prioritize tasks and organize plans so that they were using the time they had together to its fullest potential. “Lack of time is the biggest challenge,” one teacher shared reluctantly, “ There are times when I feel like we could sit and do more, but the time’s not there.” In addition, teams only had common planning time three days or less during the regular work week. Teachers also mentioned that this year in particular, time has been a challenge because of the new initiatives put into place that require additional time to learn, plan, and prepare new materials.

### Supports and Incentives

A comment that was mentioned more than once was the idea that teachers did not really need an incentive to plan. One teacher said, “It’s personal. It’s personality of the teachers. You have to be a team player,” implying that even with support and incentives, team planning may not always occur if the willingness to plan together is not there. Many teams were very willing to plan together, but felt restricted by time constraints. All but one team recognized common planning time as the main support that has been provided to teachers because without the opportunity to plan together, it is less likely that teachers will find the time at another point in the day. Additionally, teams mentioned other initiatives and supports that were typically less frequent, but helpful, such as paid sub days, half and full days without students that are provided to teachers as work days where they can plan and prepare lessons at school as a team or attend professional development. With that said, teams mentioned that the work days were more beneficial because sub plans were not required.

## Technology

All teams described technology as a helpful tool when it came to planning. Five out of the six teams mentioned the shared drive as a common place for them to easily share documents, ideas, and created materials. Teachers defined the shared drive as a tool used by teachers. All staff members have access to the shared drive and can save electronic copies of materials saved on the school's network. It is an electronic way to save and share information with teammates and other coworkers.

When we have plans or a resource we find we drop it in the shared drive so if one finds it we all can use it. In that way, the technology is helpful so you don't have to hand it to everybody. The lessons are all there. In that way it helps.

In addition, about half of the teams mentioned county based websites such as Blackboard and Technology Connections for lesson ideas as well as created materials. One team in particular took technology to the extreme and used it not only in their planning as far as communication with each other mostly through email and the shared drive, but they also included technology in their lesson plans so that students were learning through the use of technology. This team's experience and enthusiasm about technology was evident in their planning and instruction.

## Decreasing and Maintaining the Workload

Overall, the teams who seemed to engage in collaborative planning or had in the past admitted that it significantly helped manage the typical workload. These teams explained that they relied on their teammates and depended on them to handle one task so that their time and energy could be spent on another task that might benefit the team or their individual class. One teacher remarked:

We divide up tasks and then we'd get back together to share. That way we didn't overlap each other's planning. We divided up the tasks so it wasn't too much on any one of us. Planning in this way helps with the workload.

It was explained that sharing the responsibilities allowed additional time and energy to focus on other tasks that were equally important to planning. One team even admitted that they divided up tasks more frequently before, but in the past year or two they had done more individual planning and preparation. A teacher on this team reflected:

In the past, we'd say you take Social Studies, you take Science, you take Math, and then we all come together and share. We would have planned out for like two weeks... This is what we need to do! We haven't done that in awhile and it was kind of nice. That may be a really good thing to get back into.

Discussion of their current planning model resulted in a conclusion that planning together was beneficial to them and their students and felt compelled to begin planning together again.

### **Relationship to the Literature**

In the literature review, descriptions of collaborative planning were related, but varied throughout the literature due to variables that influenced planning (Belmore, 1996; National Middle School Association as cited by Mertens et al., 2010). This was also evident throughout the interviews as each grade level described their team's personal form of planning. For example, many teams were not confident that their team participated in collaborative planning until further discussion of their planning methods. As each interview progressed, many teams altered their original opinion and agreed that the collaboration that occurred on their team was typically informal. While only a couple teams described a formal example of collaborative planning, the other teams recognized that their planning, although informal, still qualified as collaborative planning because they were sharing materials, resources, and ideas as well as maintaining communication on a daily basis. One team explained that "each week is different, maybe that's not the best way to do it. I would say it varies week to week. Sometimes we've got three to four pressing topics and we need to get through [them] and we're all business and other times it's more informal." On the other hand, another grade level offered a more formal example of

collaborative planning: “Even if we don’t have something new we will sit down weekly, even for a few minutes, to go over what needs to be done and where we’re headed.” A third team of teachers did not seem to plan ahead by expressing more of a reactive approach. This team shared, “We’re really inconsistent. We plan in response to curriculum plans, schedules, rescheduling due to school events, weather, testing, and curriculum changes. We respond to all of that.” The differences in planning among grade levels is unclear, but is most likely due to teacher personalities, experience, organization of instruction (self-contained versus departmentalized), and scheduling. Further research would be needed to address these differences. The characteristics of the interviews support the descriptions in the literature.

While collaborative planning varied in formality, all grade levels described collaborative planning in a similar way to the literature. The literature review explained that collaborative planning involves sharing, communication, a common goal, and support from administration (Belmore, 1996, Cook & Faulkner, 2009 as cited by Mertens, et al., 2010). The interview answers demonstrated that the concept of collaborative planning of teachers at this school reflects this description. Every team mentioned sharing ideas and working together. One team described their planning sessions as an intertwined process:

We always have a direction. Once we get there and we have an idea it sort of spreads out as far as contribution. When you get to the end of something we’ve worked on you can’t pin point whose idea it was. You just look at it each other and say, ‘that’s good’.

Another team summed it up simply by describing collaborative planning as a means of “combing resources, ideas, and experiences to plan activities”.

The literature emphasizes that collaborative planning involves reliance on others (Belmore, 1996; Grover as cited by Kimmel, 2011; Nelson & Landel, 2007; Strahan, 2003).

While all teams described planning that involved sharing of materials and ideas, only two teams

mentioned actually sharing the workload and delegating tasks. These two teams were the sole teams that provided any evidence of mutual trust and dependence. One teacher from a team who met weekly and shared the workload shared, “I’ve never worked on a team that didn’t collaborate. If I didn’t, I would panic. I depend on those people to make me better.” Another member of this same team described how their team relies on each other:

The other thing that collaborative planning does is it frees up time. We have to use the time we have to get the basics. That frees up time to spend more time on being prepared for our own kids. Otherwise, I’d be doing my own science, my own social studies, and my own math. I’d be doing it all on my own and then go and teach. This way one of us is getting something together and I don’t have to worry about science or reading materials for example. I know she’s getting that together. That way it does provide us time to individually plan better.

Not all teams described their planning in the same way. It is possible that not all teams shared the same definition of collaborative planning when it came to sharing common responsibilities to help the team work more efficiently.

Teachers’ struggle with collaborative planning and face many challenges when attempting to plan as a team is also referenced by the literature (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Caven et al., 2013). Limited time and a surplus of daily responsibilities hinder frequent collaborative planning. In every interview, each grade level mentioned limited time in more than one question. Many teams expressed motivation to plan together combined with frustration to make it work with such a limited amount of time with too many responsibilities. Additionally, these challenges were not only mentioned in the question specifically concerning challenges, but every team also mentioned lunch and recess duties as unnecessary tasks that could be better served as planning time.

Finally, the literature focused a bit on teaching experience and its influence on collaborative planning and planning in general. Many teams attributed to the lack of formal and

consistent planning to their level of experience. Teams often claimed that all members of the team “already understand” topics or lessons they are about to teach. One teacher even said, “we’ve all been teaching at our grade level for so long that we know what we’re [teaching]. However, this method of planning may work for the current teams because of their level of experience, but may not work if a newer teacher joined the team. This experience with planning may be beneficial to less experienced teachers. These teachers can learn to plan from more experienced colleagues. The literature suggests that “collaborative efforts can accelerate the development of a beginning teacher. Collaboration provides new teachers with many of the advantages that experienced teachers have.” (McCann, 2010, p. 111).

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

#### Comments from the Interviewers

Throughout the interviews many suggestions were made by teachers to improve and support collaborative planning. One main suggestion made by all teams was the elimination of lunch and recess duties. Teachers explained that these extra responsibilities could be better used for planning and would provide teachers with additional common planning time. “We have lunch and recess duty. That makes it challenging because it’s one half an hour we don’t have face to face,” explained one teacher. Other teams mentioned additional workdays provided where a substitute was not required and the focus could be on planning with teammates. These workdays provide an entire work day centered on planning and preparing materials for lessons within the grade level. An intermediate teacher commented:

To have more in-service days where it’s just us planning as opposed to us just sitting and listening. I know that’s good too, but it would be nice if you just had your time. If you spend 3 hours trying to write sub plans to have the day off to plan, you haven’t gained anything. It’s not as appealing. Just to be given that day without students is a gift!

Similarly, one team suggested that being provided with a workday to meet with the same grade level at another school to collaborate would also be beneficial:

I remember years ago. It was something we would do after school. We would meet once a month with different kindergarten teachers at a different school in their room and it was just so nice. It was just something informal that we did as a group. It was great because you got to see what everybody else was doing. It was wonderful!

In conclusion, teachers were willing and motivated to plan and had many suggestions in order to help make collaborative planning more accessible to teachers.

#### Comments from the Researcher

The researcher identified similar suggestions to improve collaborative planning at this school. One of the challenges frequently mentioned throughout the interviews was the lack of time, so the researcher suggests that administration must find some way for all teachers to have additional, uninterrupted planning time. This may involve hiring additional staff to relieve teachers from their lunch and recess duties. Another option could be to end the work day a bit earlier once a week so that teachers could have a block of uninterrupted time at least once a week to prepare for the following week.

In addition, the researcher also recognized that many teams did not fully understand or appreciate the benefits of planning collaboratively. Many teams did not feel that it was necessary to meet weekly and felt very comfortable checking in with each other each day. The researcher believes this daily communication is important, but that weekly meetings are more beneficial and promote the collaboration necessary to fully share ideas, brainstorm, and mutually rely on one another. Others did not mention sharing the workload or a reliance on one another. The researcher believes the teachers would benefit from some vertical discussions among grade levels so that grade levels could discuss their own planning model and be exposed to other variations of how to use their planning time and resources effectively.



## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions:**

1. What is collaborative planning? What does this term mean to you?
2. Describe how your grade level plans. How do you incorporate short and long range planning?
3. How often does your team plan together?
4. When and how long do you plan?
5. Is there an agenda? What topics/subjects are usually addressed in your planning sessions?
6. Is there a leader of your planning session?
7. How often do you include others, such as special education teachers and reading teacher, in your planning session?
8. What do you usually bring with you to your planning sessions?
9. What strengths and weaknesses do you feel your team has?
10. How does planning change classroom practices?
11. How does collaborative planning influence what is taught?
12. How does collaborative planning influence how the material is taught?
13. How does collaborative planning influence student achievement in your grade?
14. What challenges do you face trying to plan as a team?
15. What supports have been provided to you so that you are able to plan?
16. What could be taken off your plate to increase planning time?
17. What incentives do you think teachers might want in relation to planning? (subs, professional planning days, etc.)
18. What support could you use more of so that you can plan more effectively as a team?
19. What technology could help you with your planning?
20. What are your thoughts on vertical planning?

21. How do you incorporate the school improvement plan into your planning? (i.e. rigor)

22. Is there anything else you would like to add about collaborative planning or planning time?

## Appendix B

	Kindergarten	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
What is collaborative planning?	coming together on similar topic, bringing ideas individually but applying <b>together, team, sharing, consistent</b> , communication, some variation but same information	come <b>together, sharing</b> , team (no leader), <b>direction</b> , brainstorm, plan to teach	<b>gather ideas, combining resources, ideas, experiences to plan</b>	planning <b>together</b> , joining ideas, <b>sharing, consistent</b>	<b>consistent, sharing</b> , communication, <b>brainstorming</b>	<b>teamwork, planning</b> , common <b>goals</b> , recognizing students strengths and weaknesses in various subject areas
Describe how your grade level plans.	<b>as needed</b> - each week is different, varies depend on the need to plan together, <b>check in, in the morning</b> , might do something more official in afternoon	<b>as needed</b> - old curriculum = simple (experienced), always looking for new material, something new = we'll sit down weekly and plan, <b>math is common core and is new (constantly editing plans)</b>	<b>as needed</b> - plan in <b>response to curriculum</b> , schedules, and testing – we respond	<b>as needed – at least once a week and more if needed (esp new topic)</b>  <b>check in (AM or lunch)</b>  new teammate (met regularly once a week last year)  wanted to be consistent  divided up tasks and shared the workload  now we're planning our own subject because we're departmentalized	last year – sat down and planned what we were teaching  <b>common core this year – sit down and plan out a topic and make long term goals</b>  general idea of how to plan out topic  consistent with testing dates teach same subjects – plan together  <b>don't meet weekly</b> to plan because we've been teaching 4 <sup>th</sup> grade for so long, but we still share ideas  same skills covered  plans depend on needs of students so it varies  lack of materials so we don't always plan novels together	<b>not a set time</b> , not an hours worth of planning  <b>check in (AM) – long term plans, quizzes</b>  <b>meet all throughout week (AM, lunch, PM)</b>  <b>constant communication</b>

					constant communication via email, shared drive, or mailboxes	
How often does your team plan together?	daily communication	plan weekly for new topics  daily communication and sharing	daily communication and sharing  inconsistent planning	last year – weekly  this year – meet weekly to plan writing (subject shared), shorter time period	daily communication (face to face, email, shared drive)	daily communication
When and how long do you plan?	if structured – 45 minutes to an hour  varies	varies	varies	weekly for 1 hour	varies  last year – Thursdays	varies
Is there an agenda? Topics?	no agenda, bring ideas, informal list to bring to a meeting	informal list to bring to a meeting, have our own jobs within team, volunteer to take on task	sometimes, always a goal, might get distracted, always responding to immediate needs	unstructured, goal is clear,  somewhat structured based on subjects  never enough time to talk about everything	last year – yes  this year – common core – no  start of new topic – we meet  take on different roles or subjects we	informal
Is there a leader?	no leader  we take over things based on our interests  we're a team	no leader  flexible	no leader	a task master – keeps track of minutes, concerns  we all help and contribute  equal voice	no leader	no leader
How often do you include others in your planning?	depends on our class, meet one-on-one  SLO's – reading teacher	reading teacher once a month  SLO's – reading teacher  depends on class, meet with special ed. one-on-one  go to each other first, before using outside resources	constantly, but informally (email)  depends on the needs of our class  reactive vs. proactive  depends on parent need, administration, schedules, etc.	once in awhile, more at the beginning of the year  they approach us more as the year goes on  SLO's – reading teacher	every day  special education teachers are coming to look at my schedule daily  long term plan with student teachers  challenge to students – plan with media specialist (novels and research)	plan with special ed – I have the special ed students in my class  communicate about testing  plan with media specialist (certain projects)



					administrative support and trust to use various materials	
What could be taken off your plate?	lunch or recess duty  professional development days reserved for planning	lunch and recess duty  professional development days reserved for planning  new initiatives	recess duty  extra parent communication (emails, written notes) computer lab – another hour of planning time	recess duty  new initiatives  new materials to learn	new initiatives  SLO's  new materials to learn with little training	recess duty  less professional development  professional development days reserved for planning
Incentives to plan?	sub days for planning and conferences  visits with other K teachers  days to work that don't require a sub	given another full hour during the day to plan  no incentive needed, it's personality	larger amounts of uninterrupted time  no incentive needed, motivation is there because there are consequences if I don't plan	another planning period  more of a plan from the county  uninterrupted planning periods	pay raise  planning is part of the job  untouched planning time	given a day to work without students  model lessons from the talent development office
What support could you use more of?						resources and materials more specific (easier to locate)
What technology could/does help you with your planning?	research Pinterest blackboard shared drive (sometimes)	shared drive	common core website county based websites word processing to create data online to track students (achievement series, DIBELS)	shared drive passwords to websites texting for reminders	shared drive emailing Technology connections TruFlix Discovery Streaming online databases (research) brainpop document camera smart response smartboard laptop cart ipads	shared drive
What are your thoughts on vertical planning?	forced  sharing student information  helpful knowing what the next grade level expects	good to share student information  beginning of yr  doesn't work at end of yr  benefits, but no time  share a lunch	good idea  structured, but not meaningful  specific to students (not subject areas)  doesn't work at end of yr	?	common core has helped and forced us to be aware of what other grade levels are teaching  beneficial at start of school year to get to know students	meet with previous grade level at beginning of yr  productive if general expectations are discussed  not effective when individual

		information vertical planning/sharing			helpful when causal, should not be forced	students are discussed  formal vertical planning not common at our school  communication with middle school
Incorporate school improvement plan?	?	always look at our goals	common core – our goals are imbedded	?	differentiate instruction  ALPS  attend trainings	?
Workload?	past – divided up subjects, planned long-term  should get back into  very helpful	if I didn't work on a team that planned together I would panic  depend on team to make me better		helps with the workload  departmentalization helps share workload	yes  working together helps us figure it out together or we don't have to find everything ourselves or recreate	?
Other					planning model– lots of emails, quick communication could be overwhelming for a new teacher  experience and organization are crucial  we plan two weeks in advance so we're not planning at last minute	

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