

# Schools as Professional Communities: Addressing the Collaborative Challenge, 6(17)

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## Abstract

Increasingly, attention is being given to the need to establish and sustain schools as professional learning communities. No aspect of that objective is more critical than that of fostering the collective capacity of teachers to work together toward continuous school improvement, and by extension, toward enhanced student outcomes. Beyond this recognition and the appended rhetoric, however, remain very real practical concerns—not the least of which is the professional perspectives of teachers themselves. The study reported here used survey data collected from 238 Louisiana teachers in ten districts and eighty-eight schools to reveal additional understandings about what is at once a cogent yet complex and highly contextual aspiration. Although there appears to be a general sense among teachers as to what is desirable in terms of sustaining schools as collaborative communities, conditions in their own schools continue to impede such realization, and some schools, by their very structure and size, may be more or less predisposed to collaborative orientations.

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## The Call for Collaboration

Teacher collaborative practice is commonly considered to a desirable cultural characteristic of schools as they face what are now the new norms of high-stakes testing and the attendant accountability for learning outcomes. Practitioners, administrators and policy makers at all levels of public education are continually challenged to devise more effective ways to optimize teacher performance, and thereby, student achievement. Numerous education organizations and teacher training agencies have formally adopted standards explicating the critical importance of professional collaborative relationships (e.g., the National Board for Teaching Standards, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, and the National Staff Development Council). The preference for such collegial environments is reflected in the growing recognition of so-called 'professional learning communities'—schools which are considered to exemplify typical attributes of teacher shared work that are incompatible with traditional notions of teacher individualism and isolation (Hord, 1997; Rosenholtz, 1989). In spite of the widely held acknowledgement of just what those desirable school elements are, there has been limited success in transferring them to or re-creating them in schools struggling to foster collaborative norms. This may, at least in part, be due to circumstances and attitudes in the schools themselves which may abrogate attempts at creating authentically collaborative environments (Leonard, 1999; Welch, 1998). This paper addresses recent data collected from 238 classroom teachers in Louisiana to further examine a phenomenon that is at once considered to be highly desirable yet, for those in many schools, remains largely without tangible manifestation.

## Organization Theory and Collaboration Research

As it has with other evolutionary aspects of organizational theory, the field of education has been influenced by and has borrowed much of its newer models of professional relationships from theorists and practitioners in the corporate sector (e.g., Argyris, 1978; Covey, 1991; Drucker, 1985, 1995; Lawler, 1986; Senge, 1990). Dissatisfaction with the restraints placed upon creative interaction by the traditional forms of bureaucratic organization has resulted in conceptualizations that have limited tolerance for the principles of supervisor control and hierarchical management. Outmoded structural arrangements were replaced by alternative and more inclusive views of how organizational problems should be identified and addressed. The more effective leaders of the postmodern era are considered to be those who do not rely upon the legitimacy of their position but rather utilized mechanisms of high participant involvement (Lawler, 1986; Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). The literature in educational administration has become replete with such evolving leadership conceptions and always emphasize the need for the school leader to invite and actively promote high-density involvement not only in administrative or school-wide decisions but also to consistently engage in professional interaction that addresses the everyday worklife of teachers (see for examples: Greenfield, 1980; Hodgkinson, 1991; Leonard, 1997; Noddings, 1992; Starratt, 1993). For some, the empowerment of

teachers through collaborative practice may be the only way that schools can hope to realize the challenges currently placed before them

### **Collaborative Cultures in Schools**

The past decade has contributed numerous studies and ruminations about the nature of school culture and its potential to manipulate school improvement initiatives (e.g., Cruz & Zaragoza, 1998; DiPardo, 1997; Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001). Typically, the school culture research addresses aspects of shared decision making, teacher accountability, the impact of the trust factor, democratic principles, the moral dimension, and the ability to bring about organizational change. As well, numerous professional development opportunities are considered to accrue from teacher collaborative involvement, among them the benefits derived from mentoring arrangements, critical reflection upon current practices, and the generation of novel ideas.

Notwithstanding its ever-rising recognition as an important facet of effective school culture, there is less agreement on just what constitutes professional collaboration in schools. For some, it may include any time or occasion that teachers come together to work on any school or class purpose or activity; for others, true collaboration occurs only when teachers are working together on what transpires in the classroom, that is, the so-called core technology of schooling—the teaching and learning processes (Speck, 1999). This latter classification would include such activities as common lesson planning and peer observation but would eliminate such things as hall supervision and after-school athletics coaching. Regardless of which basic definition of collaborative practice is ascribed, it is commonly accepted that group members must: have a clear purpose, value diversity, be trusting and trustworthy, and be selfless. Keeping these points in mind—and for the purposes of this work—collaboration is defined broadly and similarly to that of Cavanagh and Dellar (1996): Professional collaboration is evidenced when teachers and administrators work together, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for the purpose of achieving educational and organizational goals. In effect, collaborative practice is exemplified when school staff members come together on a regular basis in their continuing attempts to be more effective teachers so that their students can become more successful learners. Essentially, teacher collaboration is a requisite of the 'professional learning community' in which teachers "constantly search for new ways of making improvements" (Fullan, 2001, p. 60). Embedded in this definition is the recognition that the hierarchical leadership styles typically evidenced at schools of the past have given way to newer notions of teacher empowerment and common commitment to shared goals. Teachers in highly collaborative schools are co-leaders in the enterprise of organizational change.

### **Probing Basic Assumptions About Collaborative Practices**

There is substantial support for the potential of collaborative cultures to improve teacher work and, consequently, student achievement (e.g., Hall & Hord, 2001; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996). There is also ready recognition that creating and sustaining such teaching and learning environments is at best difficult and at worst doubtful. The challenges continuously deflect benefits that may, at times, appear quite elusive.

Central to addressing the challenges of creating contextual conditions favorable to teacher joint work is the necessity of commonly held beliefs and objectives (Hord, 1997; Mitchell, 1995; Odden & Wohlstetter, 1995; O'Neill, 1995). In effect, if teachers do not share the same essential perspectives on what constitutes desirable educational practice and do not maintain a common commitment to shared goals, they are unlikely to consistently work toward collective purposes. As Senge's (1990) seminal discourse about so-called 'learning organizations' in the corporate sector so forcefully pointed out, there is a marked distinction between persons who are truly committed to a goal and those who are merely compliant because they wish to avoid incurring negative feedback from those in authority positions. The result for those in the field of education may, as Fullan (1992) posited, have important implications in terms of teacher fidelity to collaborative processes. In effect, teachers who are truly committed to collaboration—as opposed to mere compliance—are more likely to be contributory to its realization.

Teacher beliefs and attitudes about the inherent worth of collaborative practice may have a significant impact upon any attempts to successfully establish professional learning environments. Stated another way, possible latent conflict may be exposed when the basic and strongly held assumptions behind collaborative value orientations are examined. Begley (1996, p. 8) noted that one's assumptions, or underlying beliefs, about life and work are relatively fixed and unnegotiable core values while Schein (1984) considered them to be taken for granted, invisible, and preconscious. Indeed, it is Schein's (1985, 1990, 1992) discussions of the underlying dimensions of an organization's culture that appear to be quite useful for understanding the basic assumptions associated with a collaborative value orientation and also for guiding researchers in uncovering those basic suppositions. Using Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) classification of dominant and variant value orientations, Schein identified seven underlying dimensions of organizational culture. Four of these orientations are helpful in understanding the basic teacher assumptions about collaborative practices in schools and may be considered in the following contexts:

1. The nature of human activity: To what extent and under what circumstances might teachers engage in collaborative practices? To what extent are these activities desirable?
2. The nature of human relationships: To what extent are teachers involved in making decisions about the nature of their work? Is teacher work characterized by teamwork or competition? How important are caring and trusting relationships in achieving schooling goals?
3. Homogeneity vs. diversity: To what extent are commonly held values and beliefs important for achieving schools goals? Are diverse opinions encouraged and individual needs addressed? Is consensus preferable to majority rule?
4. The nature of time: In terms of teacher work: Is collaboration appropriate usage of teacher time and, if so, is there sufficient opportunity to undertake it? Are there sufficiently high expectations for collaborative practice?

Fundamental to this discussion is the premise that values figure highly in the lives and interactions of educational stakeholders (Beck, 1996; Begley, 1996; Campbell-Evans, 1993; Greenfield, 1986; Hodgkinson, 1996) and that such basic principles may be manifested in both tangible and intangible ways (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992; Schein, 1990). This supposition suggests that beliefs and values of teachers and administrators pertaining to the four above-identified dimensions of organizational culture may differ. Additionally, and perhaps more important in the context of this study and with work undertaken earlier by the researchers (see Leonard, 1997; Leonard & Leonard, 2001), is that these beliefs may be incompatible with attempts to create and sustain professionally collaborative cultures. Furthermore, teachers who espouse commitment to collaboration may merely, in Senge's (1990) and Fullan's (1992) terms, be compliant. Additional clarification is needed as to whether teachers, collectively, value the collaborative process and in what specific ways collaborative practices are manifested in the worklife of the school; in effect, to what extent are teacher beliefs and perspectives reflected in actual, common practice? Consequently, two principal questions provided direction to the Leonard and Leonard (2001) and to the one reported here: 1. To what extent do teachers value collaborative practices in schools? and, 2. To what extent do teachers perceive collaborative processes are actually occurring in their schools? In an extension of the earlier study, a third question gave guidance to the current report: 3. What precise forms of joint work activities do teachers undertake and is such joint work actually collaborative in the professional sense of the term (i.e., Are teachers sufficiently engaged in shared activities that address teaching and learning processes in the classroom)?

## **Method**

Inasmuch as the intent of this study was to further explore the nature of teacher collaborative beliefs and practices, appropriate revisions were made to an earlier survey instrument developed by the authors (Leonard & Leonard, 2001) and which had been based upon Schein's (1985, 1990, 1992) underlying dimensions of organizational culture. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed to five hundred systematic randomly selected teachers in eighty-eight schools in ten public school districts parishes or counties in Northern Louisiana. The instrument was comprised of fifty-two items, twenty-four of which were of Likert-type response format (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with the remaining items addressing descriptive aspects of the teachers' schools, demographic information, as well as a selection checklist of various common forms of teacher shared work. These forms of shared activities included team planning, peer observation, joint inservice (i.e., participating in workshops with school colleagues), extracurricular activities, and other forms of joint, or common, activities. Since teachers often oversee group efforts designed to secure the acquisition of monies for special purposes not normally allocated by school budgets, fundraising was also placed on the checklist. In open-ended format, and given the sustained and widespread emphasis on standardized testing, the respondents were also asked to indicate whether they "believe that students do better on standardized tests if their teachers are regularly involved in professional collaboration."

Permission to ask the teachers to participate in the study was obtained from each of ten school district superintendents during the summer of 2001 following which the five hundred surveys were mailed directly to the selected teachers at their school sites in early October. The questionnaire packets contained a covering letter outlining the purpose of the study, a postage-paid return envelope, and the survey instrument with completion instructions. Each copy of the instrument was coded for identification purposes and a reminder letter was mailed to those who had not returned the survey within a period of three weeks. A total of 238 completed questionnaires were returned to the researchers for a return rate of 47.6%. The scale and demographic data were aggregated using the SPSS statistical software program, whereas the open-ended responses were categorized within the identified theme of the impact of professional collaboration upon standardized test achievement.

The Likert-type scale items were presented in paired sets with each couple addressing a relevant aspect of Schein's (1992) articulation of the dimensions of organizational culture (i.e., the nature of shared activity, working relationships,

diversity, and time). The teachers were asked to respond to the first paired-item "in terms of your personal beliefs about collaborative teacher practice" and the second paired-item "in terms of how you perceive actual conditions or circumstances at your school." The researchers had achieved common interpretations of the conceptualizations based upon Schein's published explication of the framework, our personal schooling insights attained through our years in public school teaching and administration, as well as our previous studies of professional collaborative environments.

## **Results**

As noted, the survey data were analyzed using Schein's (1992) underlying dimensions of organizational culture as lenses through which to examine collaborative value orientations of the respondents as well as their perceptions of actual collaborative practices and conditions in their schools. Comparisons were made by applying paired sample tests (t-tests) to each duo of items to determine whether their means were statistically different—in effect, to ascertain if teacher beliefs about collaborative practices were at variance with the actual circumstances they perceived to be prevalent in their schools. Scale internal reliability (alpha) was determined to be .82.

First of all, and given the emphasis currently being given to high-stakes testing and mechanisms of school accountability, it is noteworthy that there was strong respondent support for the statement which suggested that students do better on standardized test when their teachers "are regularly involved in professional collaboration" (i.e., 89.1%, affirmative; 8.6%, uncertain or depends, and 2.3%, negative). With that in mind, then, Table 1 summarizes the survey results addressing the nature of teacher collaboration and their collaborative relationships (Schein's 1992 notion of "human activity"). The data are presented in terms of both 'teacher beliefs' and the perceived 'actual circumstances' in the respondents' schools. Significantly mean differences were found in all paired sets ( $p < .001$ ). In every case, teachers scored their personal beliefs about the nature of teacher shared work and working relationships higher than what they considered to be reflected in actual circumstances in their schools. For example, although they indicated that professional collaboration is "highly desirable," they rated actual collaborative work in their own schools significantly lower. This perception was reaffirmed in a related survey response in which almost one-half (48.7%) of the teachers reported that they considered themselves to be more regularly involved in collaborative activities than most of their fellow teachers. Collaborative environments are typically characterized by high levels of involvement in decision making (Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). However, while there was strong indication that although the respondents believed schools should be so characterized, they did not consider that state of affairs to be sufficiently evident in their schools.

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**Table 1: A comparison of teachers' beliefs and perceived actual circumstances about the nature of professional collaboration and collaborative relationships (N=238).**

Survey Item	Teacher Beliefs		Actual Circumstances		t	df	Sig 2-tailed
	M	SD	M	SD			
Professional collaboration among teachers is highly desirable.	4.57	0.65	3.62	1.00	14.12	232	.001
Schools should be characterized by high levels of participation in decision making.	4.19	0.78	3.21	0.99	13.53	230	.001
Teaching should be more about co-operation and teamwork than about competition and individualism.	4.68	0.55	3.77	0.97	13.60	232	.001
Maintaining a trusting and caring relationship is essential to collaborative practice.	4.65	0.50	3.76	0.91	13.77	233	.001
Teachers collaborate better when they genuinely like each other.	4.51	0.69	3.82	0.89	10.81	233	.001
Schools function better when teachers have highly similar values and beliefs.	4.10	0.86	3.80	0.87	5.34	233	.001
Diversity of opinion and practice promotes the maintenance of a healthy school organization.	4.04	0.80	3.47	0.95	8.61	232	.001

Further evidence of actual collaborative circumstances being less than desirable was provided in the paired items addressing the nature of professional relationships. While they strongly believed that teaching should be “more about co-operation and teamwork than about competition and individualism,” they reported that it was not as apparent in their school. Furthermore, whereas there was comparable support for the notion of the importance of “maintaining trusting and caring relationships” the teachers did not consider such a circumstance to be adequately present. There was also the indication of a collective belief that teachers actually “collaborate better when they genuinely like each” yet there was the accompanying perception that faculty in their schools did not have as high an affinity for each other as may be required to promote optimal collaborative practices.

Table 1 also summarizes those paired items analogous to Schein's (1992) ‘nature of organizational diversity’ items. The compelling conclusion based on significant differences in the paired means is that teachers do not embrace sufficiently congruent beliefs and values and, yet, also do not reflect sufficiently variant opinions and practices to sustain optimal organizational conditions. Although the disparities in ratings were not as substantial as the other paired items, there were significant differences ( $p < .001$ ) in comparisons of the respondents beliefs and perceptions actual circumstances that “schools function better when teachers have highly similar values and beliefs” and that “diversity of opinion and practice promotes the maintenance of a healthy school organization.”

The ubiquitous issue of time is almost always a prevalent issue when consideration is given to how and when teachers attempt to come together to share work and ideas (Dipardo, 1997; Knop, LeMaster, Norris, Raudensky & Tannehill, 1997; Leonard & Leonard, 2001). As Table 2 establishes, the data collected from the 238 participants in this study also clearly revealed it as being problematic. There was strong agreement with the survey items suggesting that “teachers need sufficient time to work together professionally” and that “frequent professional collaboration is an appropriate use of teachers’ time.” However, perceptions of actual conditions were much less supportive and, again,

were significantly different from the teacher belief portion of the paired items. The mean rating given to the statement regarding “enough time” actually being available received a survey low mean of 2.65 (SD=1.07) while considerations that “In my school, professional collaboration is considered an appropriate use of teacher’s time” was scored a mean rating of 3.65 (SD=0.99). As with all differences between the survey’s pairs, they were significant to the .001 level. A third set of paired items also pointed to disparities between what teachers indicated they believed about the appropriate relationship between time and professional collaboration and what was actually extant in their schools. They indicated that “expectations” of collaborative time expenditure were not as strong as they should be.

(Click on image below to view in a larger format.)

**Table 2: Comparison of teachers’ beliefs about opportunities and support for professional collaboration and the extent to which such conditions were considered to be prevalent in their schools (N= 238).**

Survey Item	Teacher Beliefs		Actual Circumstances		t	df	Sig 2-tailed
	M	SD	M	SD			
Teachers need sufficient time to effectively work together professionally.	4.67	0.49	2.65	1.07	25.95	234	.001
Frequent professional collaboration is an appropriate use of teachers’ time.	4.35	0.68	3.65	0.99	10.17	232	.001
Expectations of collaborative practice strongly influence teachers’ use of their time.	3.83	0.84	3.11	1.01	9.39	231	.001
Effective teacher collaboration requires sufficient administrative support.	4.47	0.64	3.61	0.99	11.96	233	.001
Teachers need to possess special skills to be effective professional collaborators.	3.75	0.92	3.37	0.97	5.16	233	.001

The apparent view that expectations for professional collaboration were lacking was corroborated in the paired statements directly addressing administrative support. The respondents strongly indicated that teacher collaboration “requires sufficient administrative support” yet were significantly less emphatic that it was apparent in their own schools. A final set of Likert-scale paired items asked teachers to consider the skills that teachers may need to possess to be effective collaborators. Again, there were significant differences in mean scores allocated to the need for teachers “to possess special skills” and to the notion that teachers in their own schools needed to “learn more about how to be more effective professional collaborators.”

In an effort to determine the precise nature of shared work-related experiences in which teachers typically engaged, the survey respondents were asked to indicate the types of collaborative practices that regularly occurred in their schools. It has long been maintained that the professional and social cultures of schools have varied by type and size. Consequently, for purposes of presentation and discussion, the aggregate data presented in Table 3 summarize the forms of collaboration reported occurring by school type and student enrollment. Since the grades ‘7–12’ category of school might include high schools with middle schools or junior high schools four categories were combined in the tabular summary form and labeled high school/middle school (HS/MS).

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**Table 3: Percentage of teachers reporting forms of collaboration occurring by school type and enrollment size.**

Percent (%) of Teachers Reporting By:									
Form of Collaboration	School Type				Enrollment Size				All Schools
	Pri/EI (n=123)	HS/JH (n=87)	A/G (n=26)	<300 (n=32)	301-600 (n=100)	601-900 (n=60)	901-1200 (n=30)	>1200 (n=13)	Total (N=236)
Joint inservicing	69.9	70.1	73.1	84.3	69.0	58.3	80.0	76.9	70.6
Fundraising	70.7	62.1	41.7	53.1	66.0	73.3	63.3	61.5	66.0
Extracurricular	50.4	81.6	61.5	56.3	58.0	63.3	83.3	69.2	63.0
Team planning	69.9	39.5	38.5	37.5	54.0	65.0	60.0	41.7	54.6
Mentoring	52.0	42.5	40.3	46.9	48.0	56.7	46.7	23.1	47.9
Team teaching	53.7	21.8	42.3	25.0	45.0	51.7	26.7	23.1	40.3
Peer Observation	31.0	19.2	26.9	31.3	26.0	30.0	26.7	15.4	27.3
Other	10.6	11.5	11.5	3.2	15.0	6.6	10.0	15.4	10.9

Much of the recent literature addressing professional collaborative practices is not disposed to consider such activities as fundraising and extracurricular activities to be professional collaboration in its purest sense (e.g., Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Maehr & Midgley, 1996). In fact, for some, teachers are considered to be collaborating, in the professional sense, only when they are directly involved in planning, sharing ideas, and making preparations for what transpires in the classroom—that is, the teaching and learning processes or ‘core technology’ of schooling. Accepting that supposition, then, would remove both fundraising and most common forms of extracurricular activities from consideration as appropriate forms of collaborative practice. The researchers had included these options in the checklist provided because, notwithstanding what the literature tends to assert, it has been the researchers experience that many practising teachers are prone to refer to them as forms of collaborative involvement. Nonetheless, only one form of collaborative activity (i.e., joint inservicing) was actually reported more frequently than those two. The claim may be made that teachers actually collaborative less in the purest sense of the term than they consider to be the case.

The data contained in Table 3 offer additional compelling information in that there are other notable variations among, arguably, the more “authentic” forms of collaborative practices reported. For instance, the largest schools tended to be less characterized by highly reported levels of peer observation, team teaching, and mentoring. Also, high schools and middle schools, combined and all-grade schools were less characterized by team planning, mentoring, team teaching, and peer observation than were the primary and elementary schools. This would seem to affirm common claims that lower grade schools tend to exhibit more caring and collaborative cultures (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). A final point worthy of note is that, generally speaking, mid-sized schools were most likely to be characterized as collaborative in nature, in the authentic sense noted above, than either the largest of the smallest schools. This may at least in part be attributed to both small school faculties

preventing teachers from taking advantage of common planning periods and of many high schools and middle schools which are typically the largest schools continuing to be characterized by traditional modes of teacher isolation and individualism. These factors will be given further consideration later.

## Conclusions and Implications

The data collected from the 238 Louisiana school teacher respondents will be discussed initially in terms of the noted compatibility of values to actual practice and in terms of the common reported forms of teacher collaborative practices. These findings are not unexpected and are, in general terms, largely reflective of the findings of a similar study conducted in a Canadian jurisdiction (see Leonard & Leonard, 2001). Perhaps most poignant about the research reported here is not so much in terms of the discrepancies in teachers' reported beliefs about the nature of professional collaboration and the perceived actual circumstances in their schools, but rather the forms of teacher joint work and how the extent of collaborative engagement varied across school types and sizes.

## The Nature of Professional Collaboration and Collaborative Relationships

As Table 1 reflects, the teachers provided strong support for the basic precepts of collaborative practice. In terms of the nature of their professional work, the teachers indicated that they believed that collaborative practice was indeed highly desirable, that it should be characterized by high levels of participation in decision making, and that teaching should be about co-operation and teamwork rather than competition and individualism. In each of these items, however, they rated actual circumstances evident in their schools to be lacking. Additionally, in terms of collaborative relationships—and in spite of strong support for them—they felt, that to the extent desirable, prevailing conditions in their schools did not reflect trusting and caring environments, that teachers did not seem to sufficiently like each other, that levels of shared values and beliefs were not adequate, and that diversity of opinion was not promoted to a desirable extent. Taken together, it may be succinctly stated that these teachers were dissatisfied with the conditions commonly considered to promote collaborative environments.

## Opportunities and Support for Collaborative Practice

Teachers are less likely to engage in professional interaction if there are insufficient opportunities and if they perceive that there are limited expectations that they do so. The data summarized in Table 2 suggest both conditions to be prevalent in the survey of Louisiana schools. Overall, the 238 teachers were quite emphatic that there is insufficient time to effectively collaborate. In any case, they perceived circumstances at their schools did not suggest that collaboration was a priority use of teacher time nor that administrative support for collaboration was adequate. They also indicated that teachers in their schools could benefit from additional training in collaborative skills.

## Teacher Joint Work and School Types

Notwithstanding the above-noted conclusions about teachers' perceptions about prevailing collaborative conditions in their schools, the data revealed that the form and extent of professional interaction varied greatly across school types (see Table 3). In effect, shared work activities that were reported common in certain types of schools were not necessarily those reported in other types. Also, there was considerable variation when respondents were grouped according to the enrollment sizes of the schools. This may provide additional important evidence that structural factors have critical effects on the capacity of schools to create professional learning communities. Aside from the two activities which are questionably authentic collaboration (i.e., fundraising and extracurricular activities) and which will be further noted below, 'team planning' was reported as regularly occurring by almost 70% of primary/elementary teachers but only by 41.7% of those in large schools and less than 40 % of teachers in the smallest of schools as well as in all-grade schools and the combined high school/junior high school/middle school combination. This circumstance appears to substantiate small school research undertaken by Leonard, Leonard, and Sackney (2001) which determined that faculty members in rural schools, due to their low numbers, generally may not have the flexibility of scheduling to engage in common planning periods. It also suggests that—perhaps due to organizational structures (i.e., departmentalization) and cultural norms (i.e., individuality and isolationism)—teachers above the elementary level are less likely to work with colleagues in preparing programs and class lessons.

The research described here has reaffirmed that professional collaboration, for the most part, is a highly desirable enterprise that, despite its highly touted potential for making teachers better educators, remains mired in contextual aberrations. Policy makers, administrators, and teachers are prompt, seemingly in a more reflexive than reflective manner, to extol its intrinsic and obvious merits. The 238 randomly selected participants in this study were employed in eighty-eight schools in ten school districts, or parishes, scattered throughout the northern sector of the state. Their aggregated data markedly suggested that, while they themselves purported to be strong advocates of collaborative practice, they were, nonetheless, stymied by prevailing school conditions which were not sufficiently supportive of



professional sharing opportunities. In many respects, the data support earlier research undertaken by the author and colleague (Leonard & Leonard, 2001) and which reinforces many of the conclusions reached. From the teachers' reported perspectives, and generally speaking, they may be summarized in the following five statements:

1. Teachers do not consider their schools to sufficiently exhibit expectations of or support for regular, high levels of collaborative involvement.
2. Teacher work continues to be characterized by competition and individualism and lacks the type of trusting, caring environment that is more conducive to collaborative practice.
3. There needs to be greater articulation of underlying values and beliefs about educational practice that is tempered with respect for diverse professional opinions and practices.
4. Teachers are dissatisfied with scheduling and appropriations of time which often serve to deter collaboration practice.
5. Teachers need professional development directed at improving their collaborative skills.

As the preponderance of relevant literature suggests, schools must be characterized by attributes of professional learning communities if teachers are to have optimal impact upon student learning suggests (e.g., Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001; Speck, 1999). Addressing the above indices of concerns which seemingly continue to trouble teachers disposed to work in collaborative environments should become an imperative of those in positions to ameliorate school-level circumstances. Changing the culture of a school so that it better reflects norms of professional involvement, as with any other attempt at cultural change, can be an ambitious and difficult task (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Stoll & Fink, 1996). Nonetheless, the compelling argument is that sustained student improvement may only be approached when teachers themselves are heavily engaged in learning—particularly the localized and practice-oriented learning that emanates when colleagues engage in regular and meaningful discourse about their work. Information generation and idea sharing are the cornerstones of teacher collaborative practice with the greatest potential for impacting what transpires in the teaching and learning processes or 'core technology' of the classroom. That point brings us to the second major consideration of what this study has revealed.

The discussion and implications section above noted that 'fundraising' and 'extracurricular activities' placed second and third in terms of the proportion of respondent teachers who reported them as being regular forms of teacher collaboration in their schools (see Table 3). Those who advocate professional collaboration in its purest form do not consider these activities, even though they require substantial time and effort on behalf of teachers, to further the maintenance of professional learning communities nor to have a direct impact upon student academic learning. The author's own research and professional experiences as a school teacher and administrator, however, has led to the recognition that many teachers do not differentiate between shared work that applies directly to teaching and learning and that which pertains more to collegial involvement outside the domain of the pedagogy; to them, joint work, on any level, is collaborative practice and tends to influence how they respond to queries about such professional involvement. As a consequence, rather than incurring the risk of drawing inaccurate inferences, it was determined that providing these selections would not only allow teachers to respond in terms of their own definitions and reference points but also to help in the identification of the specific types of joint work which—whether purely professionally collaborative or otherwise—engaged the efforts of teachers.

Having clarified that distinction, then, and before consideration is given to the nature and extent of the more acknowledged forms of true collaboration, singular attention must be given to the widespread identification of fundraising and extracurricular activities. With recognition running as high as 83% for extracurricular activities (in the second-to-largest school size category) and 73% for fundraising (in the second-to-smallest category size) and substantial involvement in all other school types and sizes, it is clear that these outside-of-class activities weigh heavily upon the added responsibilities of teachers. Whether alternative means may be found for schools to raise additional funds or if other accommodations can be made to provide students with opportunities for personal and social growth (whether it be in the most common athletic or other forms) is beyond the parameters of this paper. What is immediately apparent, however, is that, if teachers are truly expected to commit considerable time beyond their regular teaching responsibilities to engage in professional collaborative involvement, they should approach it from a position of priority and not one of secondary consideration. Placing inordinate emphasis on after-school activities which tax teachers' time and energy cannot assist in the development of professional learning communities. This may be a circumstance that needs to be addressed not only by school policy makers and administrators but by teachers themselves as they reflect upon their professional orientations. The conclusions reached regarding the type of collaborative practices which teachers reported as being regularly undertaken in their schools Louisiana schools may be summarized in the following generalized statements:

1. Joint or shared inservicing is the most common form of teacher collaborative practice.
2. Teachers in primary and elementary grade level schools tend to collaborate more by way of team planning and teaching, mentoring, and peer observation than do their counterparts in middle schools, junior high schools, and high schools.
3. With the possible exception of joint inservicing, teachers in larger schools tend to collaborate less than their counterparts in smaller schools.
4. In terms of non-professionally-based collaboration (i.e., that which is not directly linked to teaching and learning processes in the classroom), lower grade school teachers are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and more likely to be involved in fundraising ventures than their higher grade counterparts.

As research into the beliefs and practices of those involved in schools often does, the investigation reported here provides some additional insights and understandings about the nature of a specific aspect of teacher worklife: professional collaboration. While additional details need yet to be uncovered, some questions have at least been partially answered. Most notably, there is information about the nature and extent of teacher collaborative activity in several north Louisiana schools systems from the perspectives of a representative sample of the teachers themselves. As well, we have affirmation that such an expenditure of teacher time and effort is clearly valued by the teachers; yet contextual and practical problems persist. These impressions help confirm those gathered by others elsewhere and serve to add to a growing cache of information about how teachers can better set about doing their work in environments that best promote their own growth, and, by extension, that of their students. Still, further inquiry and clarification is needed, particularly in terms of creating and sustaining schools as professional learning communities and the crucial role teachers and the perspectives that they hold play in their realization.

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## Appendix A

### Teacher Survey: Collaborative Practices

PART ONE: Please answer the first of each of the following pairs of statements in terms of your personal opinions and the second in terms of the perceived actual circumstances at your school.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Professional collaboration among teachers is highly desirable. Teacher work in my school is highly collaborative.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
2. Schools should be characterized by high levels of participation in decision-making. My school is characterized by high levels of participation in decision-making.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
3. Teaching should be more about co-operation and teamwork than about competition and individualism. Teaching in my school is more about co-operation and teamwork than it is about competition and individualism.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
4. Maintaining a trusting and caring relationship is essential to collaborative practice. Collaborative practice in my school is characterized by trusting and caring relationships among the professional staff.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
5. Teachers collaborate better when they genuinely like each other. Teachers in my school collaborate well because they genuinely like each other.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
6. Schools function better when teachers have highly similar values and beliefs. Teachers in my school hold similar values and beliefs about schooling.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
7. Diversity of opinion and practice promotes the maintenance of a healthy school organization. Different opinions and practices are encouraged in my school.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
8. Teachers need sufficient time to effectively work together professionally. Teachers in my school have enough time to work together professionally.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
9. Frequent professional collaboration is an appropriate use of teachers' time. In my school, professional collaboration is considered to be an appropriate use of teachers' time.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
10. Expectations of collaborative practice strongly influence teachers' use of their time. Teachers in my school practice collaboration because it is expected of them.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
11. Effective teacher collaboration requires sufficient administrative support. There is sufficient administrative support in my school for effective teacher collaboration.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5
12. Teachers need to possess special skills to be effective professional collaborators. The teachers in my school need to learn more about how to be effective professional collaborators.	1 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5