



# **Collaboration: an Essential Ingredient for Teachers' Professional Development**

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## **Abstract**

*Reforms in European education systems have led to the proliferation of constructivist learning designs. Collaboration among teachers has been increasingly explored over the past decade as it relates to the different actors' representations within the school community. Teamwork and collaboration among teachers have become essential ingredients for professional development (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992) which help enhance school effectiveness. This paper explores the dynamics of teamwork within and among three schools French-speaking schools in Lebanon. Despite the teachers' perception of its importance, teamwork culture does not seem to be established as a tool which enhances school effectiveness and growth. The measurement tools used to address this issue are considered in two methodological quantitative and qualitative approaches. The studied sample was composed of three principals as well as 111 teachers. To some extent, the findings of the study reflect a contribution in the professional development of high school teachers in the three establishments. However, they enable to highlight some restrictions of this contribution namely in terms of working with the school community as well as several partners of the school system and school network. The recommendations help underline the necessity to explore various means which help establish teamwork and community culture.*

## **1. Introduction**

Researchers as well as education agencies (OECD, 2005; UNESCO, 2012, Day, 1999; Howden and Kopiec, 2002; Stoll and Louis, 2007) consider teacher collaboration as one of the most effective practices which fosters professional learning and growth. Professional development models show that collaboration among teachers enables them to critically reflect on their teaching practices (Henry *et al.*, 1999) and helps them self-regulate their own learning and teaching (Huberman, 1989). Similarly, scholars consider that through teachers' collaborative practices and networking, benefits are accrued in the collective apprehension of emerging problems and challenges (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992, 2012). Moreover, it is a well-known fact that organizational factors affect collaboration among teachers (Huberman, 1989, Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992, 2012). This paper explores the dynamics of teamwork within and among three schools French-speaking schools in Lebanon. Despite the teachers' perception of its importance, collaborative culture does not seem to be established as a tool which enhances school effectiveness and growth. Collaboration is compulsory in the three schools which were involved in our research focus but it is restricted to the teachers of the same subject. Teachers meet on weekly basis to prepare lesson plans and to discuss issues related to their professional work. However, these meetings do not help teachers work as a community of practice and as a school network. This paper comprises two parts: 1) The first one presents the teachers' perception of the usefulness of collaborative work and networking. 2) The second focuses on the easiness and frequency of this collaborative work.

## **2. Context of the study**

We conducted the survey in three schools of the AEFÉ network in Lebanon. The Agency for French Teaching Abroad is a national public agency administered by the French Ministry of Foreign affairs. It assures a follow up as regards the quality of teaching the French curriculum in French schools outside France. The AEFÉ has a got a 470 schools in its worldwide network.

### 3. Brief Theoretical Framework

According to Kutner et al. (1997), professional development is a “change process” (p. 5) which affects not only teachers but school effectiveness as well. In order to achieve professional development, school administrations need to design collaborative norms and establish a collaborative culture which would gradually foster change. Organizational structure can be defined as the architecture or the pattern which characterize the school design (Johnson, 1998). Such structure which could be exemplified in peer groups of teachers or school networks, support dialogue, enable instructors to share pedagogical expertise, seek solutions and cope with emerging the various challenges they encounter in their practices. Collaboration and collegiality are often said foster to change. Many scholars, however, emphasize the fact that change depends on the forms of collegiality which may prevail in schools. As a matter of fact, weak forms of collegiality have become an intrinsic characteristic of schools (Little, 1990). Little (1990), for instance, argues that there are four different types of collegial relations among school teachers: 1) storytelling; 2) help and assistance; 3) sharing. Such forms of collegiality are said to be weak forms of collegiality and may, therefore, hamper school improvement (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992). “Joint work”, however, is the strongest form of collaboration since it is based on shared responsibility and interdependence (Little, 1990).

### 4. Data collection

The purpose of the study was to collect teachers’ opinions/perceptions as regards collaboration and teamwork namely, their content, their usefulness, ease and frequency. The survey was distributed to 166 secondary school teachers. Of the 166 surveys distributed 111 (66.8%) were completed and returned to the researcher. Percentages reflecting teachers’ responses were calculated.

*Table .1 Provides a visual representation of the results - Average percentage of teachers’ views as regards the usefulness, ease and frequency of teacher collaboration in their schools*

Statement	% reflecting teachers’ perception as regards :		
	Usefulness	Ease	Frequency
1. Sharing pedagogical experiences with colleagues who teach other subjects	91	77	84.5
2. Working with colleagues who teach the same subject	91	83	94.5
3. Working in consultation with all colleagues to integrate change in the school	88	74	85.5
4. Working in consultation with colleagues who teach other subjects	84.5	50	53.5
5. Working with colleagues from schools of the same network	79.5	47	44
6. Sharing non pedagogical experiences with other colleagues	74.5	68.5	66
7. Working together on school improvement project (PE)	72.5	55	67
8. Working with different partners from outside the school	72	28.5	29

After exploring the data presented in the table above, teachers consider collaboration as an essential ingredient for change. The findings of the collected survey presented in the table above reflect the percentage of teachers’ perspectives based on how strongly they agree to eight statements pertaining to teacher collaboration. Overwhelmingly, teachers agree that teacher collaboration is very useful. In contrast, a drop in agreement seems to exist when teachers were asked to evaluate the easiness of implementing collaborative practices.



More significant is the drop in agreement of teachers who were asked to evaluate the frequency of their collaboration with other colleagues on various levels. An overwhelming 91 % show agreement as regards the usefulness of collaborative work on different scales. The results are : a) 91% of teachers agree that collaborative work enables them to share pedagogical experiences with colleagues who teach the same subject and those who teach other subjects, b) Similarly, 88% of teachers agree that collaboration enables them to work together so as to integrate change in their school. C) 84.5% of teachers agree that collaboration enables them to work with colleagues who teach other subjects; d) 79.5% of teachers agree on the importance of working with colleagues from other schools of the same school network; e) 74.5% agree that collaborative work enables them to share non pedagogical experiences with other colleagues f) 72.5% agree that collaborative work enables them to work together on school improvement project g) 72% agree that collaboration enables them to work with different partners from outside the school. However, the drop in agreement that exists when teachers are asked to evaluate the frequency of their work with partners outside their school (29%) as well as with schools from the same network, clearly shows that collaborative culture is not established as a norm involving the whole school network.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that even though collaborative practices within schools seem to be established as a norm which may exist (to a greater or lesser extent) within schools, they do not, however, seem to involve the whole school network. What is needed, as Fullan and Hargreaves put it (1992) is the establishment of “interactive professionalism” (p.3) which fosters professional development and brings about change.

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