

Transformation and Quality Assurance of School-Based Collaborative Learning among Social Justice-Oriented Teachers: A Case Study of a School in Chicago

Research Overview

This study examines how social justice-oriented teachers at a K-8 school in Chicago have maintained the quality of their school-based collaborative learning amid changing conditions. The findings reveal that doing so requires flexibility to sustain teacher agency and reflective dialogue to preserve the core values of collaborative learning.

Purpose of Study

For teachers committed to social justice, collaborative learning with like-minded colleagues is indispensable for sustaining their practice. Much of the existing literature has focused on grassroots social justice movements and professional development trends outside of schools, examining their effects on individual teachers (Ritchie, 2012). However, because these efforts are not school-based, their influence remains limited to individual classrooms rather than school-wide change (Picower, 2011). To fundamentally reform schooling along the lines of social justice, research on school-based collaborative learning is needed. Unlike community-based forms, school-

based collaborative learning is subject to various influences affecting the school itself and thus undergoes transformation over time. This study focuses on a case of school-based collaborative learning among social justice-oriented teachers and examines how they have maintained its quality while adapting to changing conditions.

Research Methods

The school selected for this study has placed social justice at the center of its educational practice and sustained collaborative learning among teachers from its founding to the present. Located in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in southwestern Chicago, Illinois, the school serves many students from economically and racially marginalized backgrounds. Its educational mission is to nurture students' identities through language and culture, and it is the collaborative learning among colleagues that has sustained this social justice-oriented practice. The school was selected because of its social justice orientation and deeply rooted culture of school-based collaborative learning.

This study is a case study employing semi-structured interviews with teachers of varying years of experience at a K-8 school in the United States. From 2022 to the present, interviews have been conducted continuously with teachers of different tenures. Based on transcripts of these interviews, the

author has reconstructed the development of the collaborative learning at this school.

Results and Discussion

The transformation of collaborative learning at this school has been driven by both external and internal factors and can be divided into three periods.

The first period spans from the school's founding to around 2012. According to Teacher A, who joined in 2003, the school had sufficient scheduling autonomy to hold all-staff professional development every Friday afternoon. Around 2012, however, district requirements reduced this autonomy, making the weekly sessions no longer feasible.

The second period runs from approximately 2012 to 2023. The school continued collaborative learning while adapting to the new environment through weekly study sessions during shared preparation time and monthly professional development meetings.

The third period extends from 2023 to the present. Teacher A identifies the COVID-19 pandemic as a major factor, as the school faced urgent demands to support students and the broader community. Teacher B, with nearly ten years of experience, points to school-level decisions and district budget constraints. After the pandemic, the school expanded extracurricular activities, and reduced funding made it difficult to maintain previous

structures. As a result, collaboration has shifted from school-wide to grade-level teams. Professional development now occurs every two months, and preparation-time study sessions have moved from cross-grade to grade-level gatherings.

In adapting to these changes, teachers have shifted toward structures that better sustain their engagement and agency. This reflects not an attachment to previous forms, but a deliberate choice to promote teacher agency. Teacher B has long developed practice grounded in social justice. When collaborative learning on a shared theme such as "restorative justice" begins at an introductory level, it can feel like a waste of limited time for experienced teachers. As time constraints tighten, this dynamic increasingly undermines teacher agency. Consequently, the school has shifted toward grade-level collaboration where shared interests align more naturally, and individual voices are more readily reflected. This institutional flexibility is itself connected to social justice principles. As Freire (1970/2017) argued, dialogue-based learning that attends to power relations among participants is central to protecting learner agency. Imposing fixed structures while disregarding teachers' voices undermines the very purpose of collaborative learning. The shift from school-wide to grade-level collaboration thus represents an effort to sustain quality by safeguarding teacher agency.

At the same time, Teacher A expresses concern about the current situation from the perspective of having experienced earlier forms of collaboration, while also feeling uneasy about placing additional burdens on colleagues. Sustaining the quality of collaborative learning therefore requires both the flexibility to integrate participants' voices and protect their agency, and reflective dialogue grounded in the core values that collaborative learning must not lose sight of.

Keywords

school-based collaborative learning, social justice, teacher agency, professional development

References

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