

Inspiration from daily practice - factors that contribute to successful collaboration in or close to practice

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Introduction

Professionals in the fields of education and youth care, such as teachers, youth care workers, and child and youth workers, are facing significant challenges due to increasingly complex needs among children and high societal demands for quality (Sieckelinck, 2022; Onderwijsraad, 2008). To provide this quality, it is essential to have skilled professionals (CBS, 2024). However, it is characteristic that much of their work is done individually: the teacher teaches alone in the classroom, the youth care worker individually visits parents, and the youth worker visits the young persons on the street alone. This can foster a sense of autonomy, but also lead to feelings of loneliness when facing challenges in practice (Snoek & Cijvat, 2023). To address this issue, the government is committed to fostering teamwork to navigate work complexities better (Onderwijsraad, 2016).

Research indicates that collaborating with colleagues fosters a shared sense of responsibility, strengthens connections, and enhances support. As a result, work challenges and complexities can be better tackled together. Teamwork improves work quality and enhances the profession's appeal (Ipe, 2003; Nokes-Malach et al., 2015). People in various settings are experimenting with collaboration in their work, such as youth care workers collaborating in families, youth workers leading group activities together, and teachers co-teaching a class. Effective collaboration requires effort and does not occur automatically (Goense et al., 2015; Van Middelkoop et al., 2021) but depends on a well-designed structure and a supportive culture (Cijvat & Snoek, 2023; Hackman, 1998).

Method

The project aimed to identify factors for effective collaboration in or close to daily practice across three sectors: education, youth care, and youth work. We invited professionals from these sectors on LinkedIn to participate in semi-structured interviews. In Google Forms, we requested additional information about their collaborative practices. Twenty-one individuals indicated interest in participating. During the individual interviews, we explored themes on team entitativity (Vangrieken et al., 2017). Ultimately, fifteen interviews were coded, at first separately per sector. Two work sessions resulted in significant overlap, leading to a unified code tree. The key insights have been compiled into an inspiration bundle, organized into 16 practical tips that have proven their value in these professionals' work contexts.

Results

The interviews revealed that successful collaboration in practice depends on several structural and cultural factors. A well-defined structure facilitates a way of working while also reinforcing it. In addition, attention to culture is important for engaging in meaningful conversations, valuing diverse talents, and leveraging them appropriately. Creating a culture where collaboration in or close to practice is self-evident requires patience and perseverance.

In practice, structure and culture are deeply interconnected and constantly influence each other. However, it can be helpful to examine them separately to assess what is working well and identify areas for improvement. It is essential to allocate 'slow' time to learn how to interact differently, recognize and appreciate each other's working styles and talents, and share reflections while observing each other's work. Remarkably, related questions play a role in education, youth care, and youth work.