

Understanding obstacles for teacher collaboration - a system perspective using Causal Loop Diagrams

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Rationale

Team-teaching and co-teaching can strengthen a culture of collaborative responsibility in schools by making effective use of the social capital in schools. However, in many schools implementing team-teaching or co-teaching is problematic. The obstacles in implementing team and co-teaching are not only related to financial challenges but also to challenges relating to existing professional cultures. In this contribution, we aim to explore these cultural challenges.

Theoretical framework

Teachers are widely seen as one of the most important influencing factors on student learning. This means that there is ample attention for the quality of the teacher in discussions about education. In these discussions the existing educational structure is often taken as a starting point: a structure in which the teacher in most cases acts in isolation in the classroom. In this context, the structure of education and the teaching profession provides a specific perspective on teacher quality as this is determined by the quality of the individual teacher which must be guaranteed at the front end of the profession. As a result, this structure evokes an image of an isolated and static profession. This image has a major influence on how teachers in schools (don't) collaborate and professionalize together and thus on how direction, autonomy and leadership in schools take shape. This involves persistent and often implicit underlying organizational patterns that are ingrained in the systems and structures in education and the profession.

Method

Making these patterns visible and explicit can help to identify and understand bottlenecks in professional collaboration in school teams and obstacles for team- and co-teaching. This understanding can help to identify levers for strengthening collaborative cultures in school teams. As organizational patterns result from a complex interaction between different actors and organizational factors, we adopted a system perspective (Forrester, 1968). One of the key tools in system dynamics are causal loop diagrams (CLDs), that can help to visualize self-reinforcing feedback loops between organizational and cultural elements. Such visualization tools serve to identify critical leverage points for systemic interventions in existing organizational patterns (Sterman, 2001; Roxas et al., 2019).

Results

By combining insight in theories on social capital, team dynamics, school structures and professional learning of teachers and our experiences with teachers and school teams we developed a number of typical causal loop diagrams that exist in many schools. These CLDs have been tested with teachers and school leaders regarding the extent in which the CLDs can be recognized in schools. Additionally we used the CLDs with teacher leaders to explore how these CLDs do not only help to understanding existing implicit patterns, but also can provide levels for discussing these patterns within school teams in a non-threatening way to strengthen awareness and willingness for change. Additionally, the patterns can provide insight in school structures that underly these patterns and in organizational changes that are needed to facilitate and stimulate school cultures for team teaching and co-teaching.

In our presentation we will present the Causal Loop Diagrams that we developed and how we used CLDs to help teacher leaders in changing existing isolated cultures in their schools.