

# TEACHER COLLABORATION: A NEW DIRECTION FOR QUALITY EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

One of the problems that undermine good quality education in schools in Nigeria and probably elsewhere is the failure of schools to foster substantial collegiality among teachers. This trend particularly deprives teachers of learning from one another across streams and levels or between subjects in schools. One major outcome of this is lack of team care, which results in boredom, increase in born-out rate and professional incompetence, leading to poor quality education, with learners at the receiving end. This paper therefore, considers collaboration as one promising meta-paradigm of the modern age, which can break this insulation to secure consistency in expectation.

## Introduction

Education is a product of many varied resources. Among these resources the teacher remains the most active. For Wokocha (1992), upon their number, their quality, their efficiency and their devotion that the effectiveness of all educational arrangements must chiefly depend. To meet these challenges, the teacher must grapple with many demands, among which is the desire for eternal thirst for knowledge and continued professional growth.

Yet, as is already echoed elsewhere, in a deeper and much more serious sense, teachers are failing today. Ironically, they succeed more and more in achieving the goals for which they are striving, the degree of their failure in terms of proper goals of education, becomes more acute. Many factors, however, account for this. Prominent among these is the traditional insulated egg crate classrooms characteristic of our schools, where teachers work out of sight and sound of one another, plan and prepare their lessons and materials alone and struggle on their own to solve their instruction, curricular and managerial problems. The explanation is as simple as Inger (1993), remarks. Teachers are colleagues only in name.

This sad state of the system is further corroborated by Huberman (1973), when he writes that the different parts of school system are not as closely interlocking as those of industrial firm or other systems that produce and market physical objects. The result of this is low degree of interdependence, which for Miles, (In Huberman), makes a system much more difficult to alter, since changes occurring in one part are not transmitted to another part.

Thus, the failure or success of one teacher has little impact on the teacher in the adjoining room. This low level of co-ordination constricts the flow of information about new thoughts and practice. The result apparently is low quality education.

Teacher collaboration is a departure from this norm. It closes the gap that insulates teachers from sharing with one another. Smyth (1995), sums up the efficiency of the approach when he says that, one of the emergent and most promising metaparadigms of the pose modern age is that of collaboration as an articulating and integrating principle of action, planning, culture, development organization and research.

## Clarifying Concepts

Two concepts that merit clarifications here are teacher collaboration and quality education.

### What is Teacher Collaboration?

First, what is collaboration? Collaboration conjures up different meanings depending upon the extent to which it is used. It transcends so many fields such as science, art, politics, business, war as well as education. It is also as a result of this permeating nature of the concept that it is often used interchangeably with such other terms as coordination, cooperation, teamwork, collegiality, joint practice and so on. These substitutes, however, share some but not all attributes of collaboration.

However, for some uniformity of purpose the etymological consideration of the term may be necessary. Dating from 1871, collaboration is a formation from collaborator (1802), from the French, collaborates, ultimately from the Latin collaborates, past participle of collaborare, meaning work with itself derived from com, meaning with and labore, meaning to work. All this literally means to work together. It is a process in which two or more individuals or organizations collectively address issues that cannot be addressed individually.

As with collaboration, teacher collaboration is an intricate concept with many varying meanings. Sometimes it may refer to working together in a classroom to instruct a group of students that includes students with disabilities. At other times it may mean meetings teachers attend to discuss students who are transferring to the school. It could as well mean reporting on the efforts of the school's staff development committee or any other situation in which teachers work closely with other teachers. At its simplest level, teacher collaboration occurs when two or more teachers achieve results that would be incapable of accomplishing working alone, ignoring the boundaries that subdivide classrooms, departments and subject areas.

It is also important to point out that collaboration is both a process and an outcome. As a process it involves a synthesis of different perspectives to better understand complex problems. Gray (1989), has further explored this process from an inter-agency context to include three phases, to wit, problem setting, direction setting, and structuring. During the problem-setting phase, stakeholders, according to Gray, negotiate their right to participate. Agreement on the problem and what actions and resources are needed to address it are established during the direction setting phase. During the structure phase, those agreements are important by allocating roles, responsibilities, and resources.

On the other hand, as an outcome, collaboration is the development of integrative solutions that go beyond an individual vision to a productive resolution that could not be accomplished by any single person or organization.

### **Quality Education**

Quality is a dynamic term; and quality education doubly so. Both concepts vary with people, space and time. Quality education in particular remains from time, one of the most hotly debated concepts in academic circles. To aim at a single-holistic definition of the term therefore is a task almost impossible.

In this paper the concept of quality education is simply referred to as effective, holistic education as measured by students performance and motivation. It could as well be taken to mean curriculum and teaching methods that promote well-rounded development of the child.

### **Towards Teacher Collaboration in Nigerian Schools**

Collaboration, generally, is not a new phenomenon in developmental process. Quite a pretty number of human activities can only be carried out when we work together. Think of team games, think tanks, organizational decisions, brain storming, curriculum planning. Authors cannot work in isolation from subject matter experts, and users; marketing cannot work in isolation from product documentation and support; product developers and engineers cannot work in isolation from authors. What about music produced by more than one musician. Note also that no one person can prosecute a war. All this and many more, underscore the indispensability of collaboration in most human activities.

Far from undercutting the teacher, collaboration makes her effective in realizing new and realistic goals for education. Research findings show that instruction is most effective in a school environment marked by norms of collegiality and continuous improvement. Peer coaching (Joyce and Showers 1988), and interdisciplinary curriculum development (Brandt 1991), are premised on teachers' collaborative relationships, as are current trends in the design and delivery of professional development programme (Barth, 1990). As is pointed out by Goodlad (1984), many aspects of currently recommended school reforms call for greater *collaboration among teachers*.

All these are emerging properties of collaboration, and indeed pointers to our schools, where the practice still remains rare. The general pressure to reform schools which focuses on the integration of vocational and academic education today, have created the environment for collaboration the more. Here, vocational or technical teachers and academic teachers plan together and share information about their students and what they teach them. They may further assist with one another's instruction, carefully dovetail instruction between courses, and ultimately coordinate instruction. This process of working together improves the quality of students learning by improving the quality of teachers' teaching.

## **Collaboration Programme Steps**

In order to achieve the outlined target above, the following steps are basic:

- \* First is that the partners get known to each other.
- The second step is the compatibility of the aim of the group at least in the segment the project is located.
- " Lastly, the personal preconditions comprise the ability to communicate and the willingness to share ideas and develop them further together in a possibly previously unknown direction.

## **Conditions Necessary for Collaboration**

Teacher collaboration does not operate in a vacuum, and as joint action it cannot occur where it is impossible or prohibitively costly in organizational, political or personal term. As explored by Inger, Schedules, staff assignment and access to resources must be made conducive to shared work. As Inger further points out, if teachers are to work often and fruitfully as colleagues, school policy must solidly support it. The work must be both said and demonstrated. The opportunity for it must be prominent in the schedule. The purpose for it must be compelling and the task sufficiently challenging. One should also not lose sight of adequate human and material resources.

## **Justifying Teacher Collaboration**

The benefits of teacher collaboration are many. Inger (1993) and Smyth (1995) have identified these benefits to include:

- Increased efficiency. Collaboration eliminates duplication and removes redundancy between teachers and subjects as activities are coordinated and responsibilities are shared in complementary ways.
  - For teachers, collegiality breaks the isolation of the classroom and brings career rewards and daily satisfaction. In secondary schools, it can break down subject compartmentalization and secure , consistency in expectations, coordination of materials and in some cases integration of learning across subject themes.
  - As burdens are shared the rate of burn-out is reduced to pave way for stimulated enthusiasm.
  - Collaboration avoids the sink-or-swim trial and error mode that its beginning teachers usually face. Brings experienced and beginning teachers closer together to reinforce the competence and confidence of the beginners.
  - Through formal and informal training sessions study groups and conversations about teaching, teachers and school administrators get the opportunity to get smarter together.
    - Teachers are better prepared to support one another's strengths and accommodate weakness. Working together, they reduce their individual planning time while greatly increasing the available pool of ideas and materials. With this schools become better prepared and organized to examine new ideas, methods, and materials, become adapted and self-reliant.
  - Increased capacity for reflection. Collaboration in dialogue and action provides sources of feedback and comparison that prompt teachers to reflect on their own practice. This, in Smyth's words, become mirrors for one's own practice, leading one to reflect on it and reformulate it more critically.
  - Collaboration encourages teachers to see change not as a task to be completed but as an unending process of continuous improvement in the symptomatic pursuit of ever greater excellence on the other hand, and emergent solution to rapidly changing problems on the other.
    - Collaboration is essential when assisting students with disabilities to make the transition from a more restrictive to a less restrictive environment. For instance, a student who had been receiving services in a self-contained special education class and who is going to receive services in a resource program next year will probably have fewer difficulties in transition if teachers work closely to plan the change.
- A related school wide benefit to collaboration is increased teacher sensitivity to others' roles and responsibilities.
- When teachers work closely together, they gain perspective about student learning and behaviour problems and better understanding of which students need specialized assistance and which might benefit from more intensive interventions within general education.

- A collaborative ethic in schools, if extended to is consistent with the major direction in school programming and human services, as societal trends in business and industry improves educational outcomes and increased professional retention and career satisfaction are certainly appropriate goals.
- Lastly, it is quite likely that the benefits of instruction planned by two or more teachers are likely to be more powerful than any plans that could have been developed by a single teacher. In addition, teachers are modelling collaborative behaviour for students, whether it is through co-teaching in the classroom or by participating as members of a school team.

### **Cost of Collaboration**

Collaboration is not without some barriers. As is observed somewhere, if collaboration had only benefits, everyone would be participating in its efforts. Consider the following:

- 1) **Time:** Time has been highlighted in numerous reports as one of the greatest cost of collaboration. The project is time consuming. In most cases, lack of time leads to hasty problem solving and unsuccessful 'quick fix' ideas. In yet others, the absence of time prevent teachers from employing many of the more sophisticated co-teaching approaches available.
- 2) , For teachers who are most comfortable with an isolated approach to education, collaboration is seen as a threat. The traditional culture of schools has rewarded teachers who are often satisfied with working alone and receiving few benefits and little input from others. As collaboration is considered, teachers who are comfortable with traditional schools may find collaboration frightening. They may fear that they do not have a significant contribution to make.
- 3) The possibility of increased conflict among teachers. This is another cost of collaboration. When one teacher walks in school with another more closely, it is more likely that their differences will emerge, along with their similarities, of course. Many teachers, dread conflict, and often find it awkward and tend to prefer to avoid tackling issues instead of participating in a conflict. (Cook and Friend, 1992).

### **Recommendations**

Throughout this paper, there has been the implication that if the concept of collaboration must formally find enough favour with teachers and the schools; the following recommendations are made:

- Collaboration must find its way into the school curriculum in particular, and be part of the bag of tools of our educational system in general.
- School policy must solidly support it.
- The material and human assistance must be adequate.
- Schools should provide incentives to participating teachers.
- Schools should arrange for substitution so that participating teachers can be realized for planning or evaluation activities.

### **Conclusion**

It has been recognized everywhere that no system of education can be better than the teachers who guide the learning process. One direct consequence of this age long notion is the emphasis placed on professional growth of teachers. More so, as this is increasingly vital to the wave of restructuring, and reforms. Accompanying these diverse restructuring and reform efforts are wide-ranging complex and constantly changing professional development strategies that focus in isolation on specific skills, training without the support of peer coaching which eventually yield little success. As awareness of these limitations grow, other strategies of teacher development are beginning to emerge; ones which seem better suited to the complexity, diversity and uncertainty of contemporary reform efforts, and which address the basic work place cultures of teacher themselves.

Paramount among these emergent and promising strategies of teacher development is the collaboration paradigm and collegiality and peer coaching, which ironically remains rare in our educational system today. This apparently denies our system the much desired quality education ensured by the model. Teacher collaboration is one tool that can break the boundaries between classrooms, departments and/or subject compartmentalization to ensure peer tutoring. If well planned and executed collaboration can be found quite exciting, and indeed as a vehicle to carry out an array of services for learners.

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