2007

Middle school teacher teams

David Brandau
California State University, Monterey Bay

Recommended Citation

Middle School Teacher Teams

By David Brandau

Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

California State University at Monterey Bay

December 2007
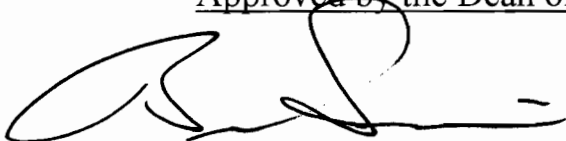
<u>Signature Page</u>

Middle School Teacher Teams

By

David Brandau

<u>Approved by the Dean of the College of Professional Studies</u>

Dr. Brian Simmons   12/20/07

                                                                              Date

<u>Approved by the MAE Graduate Advisory Committee</u>

Dr. Terry Arambula-Greenfield   19 Dec 2007

                                                                              Date

Dr. Nicholas S. Meier   12/19/07

                                                                              Date

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

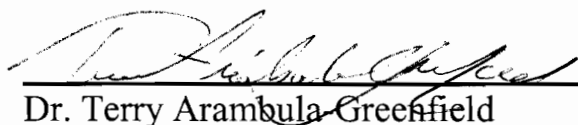I could not have completed this action thesis project without the help of several people. Firstly, my middle school teaching colleagues, who were also my fellow participants in this study, very graciously gave of their time being interviewed, answering the questionnaire, listening to my preliminary findings, and engaging in discussions with me about my ongoing project. I wish to thank my teaching colleagues for giving of their time to support my efforts on this action thesis project.

I would also like to thank Dr. Terry Arambula-Greenfield and Dr. Nicholas S. Meier for their continuous encouragement and insightful feedback on my action thesis project from its inception to its culmination. I could never thank you both enough for all the help that you have given me on my action thesis project.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, who tolerated my countless hours reading, writing, and transcribing. She continually supported me throughout the writing process by giving me the time and space necessary for my successful completion of this project. Thanks so much for your endless patience. We can now spend time together!

<u>Abstract</u>

In my current job as a middle school teacher, the question of how to organize our middle school became an essential one in need of an answer. The organizational model chosen for our middle school was the team teaching model. The team teaching model was chosen to allow teachers to work more efficiently with one another to serve the needs of the students. For the purposes of this study, the team teaching model was defined as two or more teachers sharing common students and teaching different subjects to those shared students.

Are middle school teachers able to effectively collaborate with one another to yield meaningful positive results in teaching and learning? This was the essential question that this action research project sought to answer. This study aimed to explore the ways in which a middle school team of teachers spoke with, treated, and met with each other, and how the treatment of one another affected the work that these teachers aimed to accomplish.

The research pertaining to this study and the findings identified for this study both support the teacher team organizational model for middle schools. The main finding that was identified in this research study is that while this team generally benefited from the middle school team organization in the areas of job satisfaction and general collaboration, the team members have found it quite challenging to engage in meaningful collaboration on curriculum planning.

Table of Contents

Ch.1: Problem Statement

Introduction

Are middle school teachers able to effectively collaborate with one another to yield meaningful positive results in teaching and learning? This was the essential question that this action research project sought to answer. In searching for the elusive answer to the aforementioned question, this research study explored communication styles, conflict, and compromise among the team of middle school teachers of which I am a part. This study aimed to explore the ways in which a middle school team of teachers spoke with, treated, and met with each other, and how the treatment of one another affected the work that these teachers aimed to accomplish.

Personal Experience

In my 10 years as a teacher, 4 years as a financial analyst, and 2 years as a business owner, I have always been interested in effective ways to organize an institution. Most recently, in my current job as a middle school teacher at Alternative Charter School (ACS)[1] in central California, the question of how to organize our middle school became an essential one in need of an answer. The organizational model chosen for our middle school was the team teaching model. The team teaching model was chosen to allow teachers to work more efficiently with one another to serve the needs of the students. For the purposes of this study, the team teaching model was defined as two or more teachers sharing common students and teaching different subjects to those shared students.

---

[1] Alternative Charter School (ACS) is the pseudonym used for the school site where this research study took place.

Statement of Problem

The problem of middle school organization has been around for a long time. Traditionally, middle schools were a part of the elementary school, which spanned grades K-8. It was then decided in the late 1800s that a junior high school model was more appropriate for grades 7-9. Later, in the 1960s the middle school was established for grades 6-8 as an additional model to serve this age group. Still, the problem persisted as to how to serve the learning needs of the 10-13 year old student (George, 1992; Rettig, 2000).

Middle school teachers sharing common students must learn how to effectively collaborate with one another because it is in their own best interest and in the best interest of their students. In order to work effectively with one another, teachers need to effectively communicate with one another. Effective communication requires speaking respectfully but forthrightly with one another, treating each other with professional respect, and meeting with each other regularly. Naturally, conflicts will arise from time to time. It is in these times of conflict that teams need to exert the effort required to maintain their civility, yet also be comfortable being in the conflict. Truly successful teams will be able to negotiate through times of crisis, reach effective compromise, and grow from the resolved conflict.

Background

Currently, as many as 30 different middle school configurations exist. The two most common types of configurations are the 6-8 middle schools and the 7-9 junior high schools (Wells, 1989). Wells asserts the following: "Much of the research on improving middle and junior high schools is aimed at making them look less like large, impersonal high schools, and more like caring, nurturing elementary schools, while still offering students a challenging, subject-specific curriculum" (p.2).

In grades K-5, students become accustomed to working with one classroom teacher. The idea of suddenly having to work with many different teachers as a 6th grader can be an overwhelming prospect for most 6th graders, and even a good number of 8th graders. "For several years…the team has been extolled as the best way to bridge the gap for students between self-contained arrangements of elementary schools and the departmentalized classroom of secondary schools" (Russell, 1997, p.32).

Recently, middle schools have led the way in establishing teacher teams as an effective way to address the learning needs of the middle school student. Erb (1997) tells us the following: "teaming has moved beyond the status of being an interesting, but untested, innovation, and toward being an established practice that has been shown to make a positive difference in young adolescents' lives" (p.3). Organizing students and teachers into teams, with 4-5 teachers working with 100-150 students has been identified as an effective middle school organizational model (Erb, 1997). However, we can even do better than this for our middle school students.

Middle schools can be easily designed to have smaller teams of teachers responsible for smaller numbers of students. The middle school included in this study used an intimate teaming model. This middle school had 2-3 core teachers teamed with 50 students. It is clear that the smaller the team, the more advantage to the teacher and the student. Teams made up of 2 or 3 teachers and 50 to 75 students have advantages over larger teams, including more time to plan together which leads to more team activities (Erb, 1999; Flowers, 2000).

Regardless of the size of the team, several factors influence the success of teacher teams. These factors include the amount of common planning time and the longevity of the team. It makes sense that teacher teams with more common planning time would coordinate the instructional program for their shared students more often and in more ways (Erb, 1999). In fact,

Erb lays out five key factors that lead to the success of teacher teams. They are sufficient team planning time, small teams, students scheduled on teams for a majority of the school day, spaces designated in the building as team areas, and teams of teachers which stay together for at least three years.

Often teachers will avoid meetings and collaboration with other teachers due to their past experiences with teacher meetings being unproductive and an inefficient use of their time. However, this study aimed to differentiate among inefficient and ineffective uses of meeting time and efficient and effective uses of meeting time. While some teachers do benefit from random chatter with other teachers about the daily routine of the school and specific student issues, the greatest benefit that teachers will gain from common planning time is if that time is used largely to work collaboratively on curriculum planning. Of course, organizational issues and students should be discussed by the team during joint planning time. During meetings teams may discuss procedures, students, curriculum, and team building activities (Arnold, 1991).

Statement of Purpose

It may be that different models will fit different schools. In other words, one size may not fit all for middle school organizational structure. Still, this study explored the team teaching model used at the middle school involved in this study to determine what successes this particular teaming model achieved in the general area of teacher collaboration.

This research project studied the effectiveness of a team of middle school teachers at Alternative Charter School (ACS) in their efforts to collaborate with each other. Their general collaboration was studied, as well as their specific collaboration on curriculum planning. Their overall job satisfaction was also studied as a member of the middle school teaching team at ACS.

The hope was that the team would be able to use the findings of this study to make meaningful improvements in its communication and collaboration. Specifically, the hope was that the team would be able to improve the overall job satisfaction of its members through improved communication and collaboration amongst its members. Additionally, another hope was that the team would be able to use the findings of this study to improve its effectiveness in collaborative curriculum planning.

<u>**Formal Statement of Research Questions**</u>

Below are the three essential research questions that this study sought to answer. The first question sought to address what effect working on a middle school teacher team would have on job satisfaction. The second question went further into the workings of the team in an attempt to determine what effect the teacher team had on general collaboration among the teachers. The third question attempted to explore even further into the collaboration of the team members to decipher what effect the teacher team had on specific collaboration about planning instruction. The research questions are formally stated below.

1) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model provide for the communication and collaboration among colleagues that might lead to improved job satisfaction?

2) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model lead to improved general teacher collaboration?

3) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model provide the structure necessary for specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning?

<u>Summary</u>

In this chapter I have presented my research questions for this action research project. I have also provided the context for my research questions, as well as providing a history on my research topic and an overview of its importance in the field of education. In the next chapter I will present an overview of important research in the field of middle schools in general, middle school teacher teams, and teacher collaboration.

Ch.2: Literature Review

<u>History of Middle Schools</u>

Middle schools have never been a natural or an established part of the American educational system. The elementary school and the high school have always been the pillars of American education. Even now, elementary schools and high schools receive more funding per pupil than middle schools (Erb, 1998). For the last 100 years or so, the 11 to 14 year old student has been bounced about among the elementary school, the junior high school, the secondary school, the high school, and the middle school. This section of the literature review will examine the historical context of the middle school with the aim of shedding some light on the attention and care, or lack there of, that has been devoted to the middle school.

In the late 1800s, the junior high school was established as grades 7 thru 9 in an attempt to better prepare students for senior high school (George, 1992). This system was maintained until the 1960s when it was determined that a distinct middle school was needed for grades 6 thru 8, with grade 9 being returned to the high school. Over the past 40 years, many parts of America have established the 3-tier schooling system of a K-5 elementary, a 6-8 middle school, and a 9-12 high school (Arnold, 1991; Rettig, 2000). Still, many places in America have many different arrangements of the middle grades (Mertens, 2001), sometimes changing middle grade configurations multiple times in the same decade. America's large cities have been the most fickle in their attempt to establish the best grade configuration for their middle years' students (Bowie, 2007; Gootman, 2007; Yecke, 2006).

It is exactly this lack of consistency and financial commitment to the middle school arrangement of grades 6-8 that has led to the mixed reviews and research that the middle school has received (Erb, 1998; Rettig, 2000). Currently, large cities like Baltimore, Milwaukee, New

York, and Philadelphia are moving many of their middle schools back to their original place as part of a K-8 school (Bowie, 2007; Gootman, 2007; Yecke, 2006). In addition to the movement of some school districts back to the K-8 model, a powerful momentum is moving other school districts away from the middle years interdisciplinary teaming model known to be successful to the more cost-effective departmentalized arrangements (Erb, 1998, 2001a). It is unfortunate that these school districts will not simply commit the required resources and time to the success of the middle school, instead of wiping the middle school out completely.

Middle School Organization

This section will explore the various middle school organizational models that have been employed over the years. Instead of viewing the middle school as a unique entity, which requires its own organization, most schools have traditionally organized their middle schools like the departmentalized high school or like the self-contained elementary school (Wells, 1989). Only recently have middle schools begun to establish their own organization, such as semi-departmentalized (Wells) or interdisciplinary teacher teams (Arnold, 1991; Kasten, 1989).

The middle school years are clearly transition years in the lives of young adolescents; therefore, these schools require an organization that reflects this period of transition (George, 1992; Rettig, 2000; Wells, 1989). The self-contained classroom may work well for elementary schools, and the departmentalized and semi-departmentalized models may work well for high school. However, the middle school requires its own organization that suits its own needs (Erb, 2001a; George, 1992). If the middle school is to stand on its own, it needs its own organizational model: the interdisciplinary teacher team (Arnold, 1991; George, 1992; Rettig, 2000). The interdisciplinary teacher team provides the middle school with its own identity: an identity that suits the needs of its student population (George, 1992; Rettig, 2000). The middle years student

wants to be released from the nest of the one nurturing teacher, yet still feel that there is a nest to fall back on if needed. The teacher team can provide room for exploration, while at the same time providing the comfortable and safe space that will be needed from time to time (Arnold, 1991; Rettig, 2000).

Middle School Teacher Teams

This section will provide a review of the relevant literature on team teaching in middle schools. Specifically, this section will explore the work of the teacher in isolation, the recent attempts to reform middle schools with the interdisciplinary teacher team at the heart of the reform, and the necessary components of an effective middle school teacher team. Three components that will be discussed in detail in this section are collaboration, communication, and conflict.

Teachers are isolated from their colleagues in most of their daily work (Kasten, 1989). Working on teams provides teachers with the opportunity to interact with their colleagues and feel a sense of belonging. "Common planning time supports a more interactive work life for teachers in transformed middle schools" (Erb, 2001b, p.53). "Teaching, when carried out in isolation in bureaucratically organized institutions, shortchanges professionals because it denies teachers the ability to use the full range of skills and knowledge which they possess" (Husband, 1994, p.58). The concept of empowerment in contemporary school reform is one that offers promise in increasing teacher effectiveness while making the profession more satisfying and fulfilling (Husband). The "team concept eradicates teacher isolation and fosters interdependence" (Husband, p.58).

"In recent years the self-directed or self-managed work team has increasingly been employed in business and industry to empower workers" (Husband, p.58). Working on a team

toward a collective goal empowers professionals to invest in their work, their team, and their goals. "It would appear that the interdisciplinary team approach is not only more instructionally effective for young adolescent learners, but it is also a more enlightened, progressive, and empowering type of work organization for middle level educators" (Husband, p.60).

"The work of schools is coordinated by the mutual adaptation of team members" (Erb, 2001b, p.49). "The work of teachers is interdependent, reciprocal, collaborative, & discursive" (Erb, p.50). Teachers need to work together as a practical means of the everyday operations of a school. Therefore, why not formalize teacher collaboration by organizing teachers into meaningful work groups or teams? Specifically, middle school students need collaborative, dynamic teachers who are willing to transform and change as they are transforming and changing. "The complex, uncertain work of middle schools demands that teachers work together to exchange information and develop original responses to the learning needs that they encounter" (Erb, p.50).

"Common planning time is a non-negotiable for transformation" (Erb, p.51). In order for a middle school to form a teaming structure, the teachers on a team must have common planning time to meet. "Typically new teams spend most of their time discussing students and policy matters" (Erb, p.52). Successful teaming absolutely depends on setting aside meeting times (Erb, 1997). When teachers are able to meet and discuss issues on a regular basis, they will inevitably find solutions and successful interventions for problems that arise. "When teamed teachers regularly use common planning time, and share students, teaching schedules and team space, a positive difference does result" (Erb, p.310).

"Teachers with more planning time together coordinated the instructional program of their shared students more often and in more ways" (Erb, 1999, p.48). Intuitively, given more

time together, teachers on teams will eventually grow beyond the discussions of procedure and student issues to the more complex task of collaborative curriculum planning (Flowers, 2000). "As middle level educators develop an integrated curriculum specifically for young adolescents, it will be helpful for practitioners and researchers to understand how interdisciplinary teams of teachers are redefining their teaching assignments to incorporate integrated curriculum concepts in their classrooms" (Schumacher, 1992, p.5). Clearly, teachers who wish to engage in serious discussions and implementations of integrated curriculum must have the collaborative will and time investment in regular meetings with their colleagues. Ideally, the formalization of a teaching team with common students will greatly aid the complex process of developing integrated curriculum units (Arnold, 1991; Crow, 2000).

One possible stumbling block to creating effective teacher teams is the resistance of some teachers to invest the time and energy required to work with their colleagues on a regular basis. Another potential roadblock to the development of teacher teams is the reluctance of school administrators to allow teacher teams to become self-managing and self-empowering (Crow, 2000). Both of these possible hindrances to the formation of teacher teams can be overcome through the collective will and effort of a critical mass of teachers within in a school (Crow, 2000; Dufour, 2004).

Teacher teams must be fully implemented at the middle school level in order for successful teaching and learning to occur in middle schools. Middle grades' students need their teachers to collaborate about their daily instructional activities. Young adolescents need to know that their teachers are conversing about what is best for them. Middle school teachers need to collaborate with their colleagues in order for them to enjoy long-term success. Middle school

administrators need to organize their programs so that teacher teams are the foundational structures upon which the middle school is designed (Kruse, 1995; Shumacher, 1992).

Middle grades' students are searching for connections in their world. They are seeking out their place in society. The middle school teacher team can best support these aforementioned student needs through integrated curriculum units and regular discussion of student issues (Arnold, 1991). While effective communication and collaboration is needed at all levels of education, the middle school level requires the formalized structure of teacher teams to execute its complicated task of guiding dependent children to becoming semi-independent teenagers (Kruse, 1995).

Collaboration

The discussions among teachers are the most important events that take place among a school staff. It is the teacher that is the most knowledgeable of her/his craft, and it is the teacher with whom a fellow teacher needs to collaborate to further the art of teaching in her/his classroom. Often, unfortunately, teachers do not collaborate. Instead, they stumble along day to day not knowing how the teaching and learning in their classroom could be improved. Yet, just next door, or down the hall, or across town there is a fellow teacher who could greatly improve the teaching and learning in their classroom (Dufour, 2004; Pounder, 1999).

Professional learning communities need to be fostered in all schools. Time needs to be set aside by school administrators for teachers to collaborate on the teaching and learning that takes place in their classrooms. This collaboration should be more than just polite and self-congratulating. Positive support is needed, trust is essential, but thoughtful critique is required (Dufour, 2004).

The establishment of teacher teams is essential for the success of middle schools. The interdisciplinary teacher team provides the foundation for a middle school to be built. Still, the critical collaboration of the teachers who comprise the team is required for the construction of a middle school learning community that will become a long-term success (Shumacher, 1992).

The creation of a critical group of middle school teaching colleagues is no easy task. This is because teachers are accustomed to going it alone. They are comfortable engaging in safe and superficial conversations with their colleagues. They avoid criticism of their own work. Time is needed for trust to build among a team of teachers. Still, more time is needed for the team to reach the level of collegial respect that allows for serious and helpful criticism to occur (Dufour, 2004; Gunn, 2003; King, 2007; Russell, 1997).

Teachers are professionals who practice a most challenging and intricate art. Yet, in most schools teachers are made to feel that they should be master practitioners of their art from the first day they step into their classroom. Therefore, new teachers develop the habit of not seeking out assistance as this may reflect ineptitude on their part. A better system would be one where regular collaboration among teaching colleagues is the norm (Gunn 2003; Pounder, 1999).

Collaboration does take time, and often teachers don't have the time to invest in collaboration. New teachers, especially, may feel like they do not have the time available for collaboration with teaching colleagues. Schools designed specifically to allow for regular time periods for teacher collaboration will yield positive results (Dufour, 2004; Gunn, 2003; King, 2007; Russell, 1997).

Organizing teachers into teams is the first step toward a successful school model. Scheduling regular time periods for teacher collaboration is the second step toward a successful school model. The third and most difficult step toward a successful school model is the steering

of teacher teams toward collaborative dialogue that leads to meaningful improvements in the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom (Pounder, 1999; Russell, 1997).

It is the type of collaboration that takes place on teacher teams that is the predictor of team success and school improvement. The task of creating the environment for meaningful, critical assessment of teaching and learning by one teacher of another teacher is a difficult task to achieve. This level of teacher collaboration requires time, commitment, and a critical mass of teachers that desire professional growth (Supovitz, 2005).

Communication

The way people talk to each other is an important aspect of any successful team, of any successful foray into meaningful professional collaboration (Wheatley, 2002). Some people like confrontation. Some people avoid confrontation. Some realize that while confrontation need not be sought out unnecessarily, it may sometimes be required. Some people talk over other's words. Some people never get a word in because they wait for a clear opening that never presents itself. Some people recognize the balance required in productive conversation between talking and listening (Wheatley).

To listen is to engage in conversation. To listen is to care about the topic being discussed. The good listener opens the door for true communication and collaboration among colleagues to take place. Listening comes more easily to some than others, but listening is required by every member of the team (Wheatley).

It is most important that the dominant talkers on a team remember to listen, and if they don't, that the other team members remind them to listen. It is equally important that the dominant listeners on a team remember to talk, and if they don't, that the other team members remind them to talk (Wheatley).

The closer each team member comes to achieving balance between talking and listening, the better the overall communication will be for the team as a whole. Effective communication is a challenging task to accomplish, yet a rewarding goal to achieve for both an individual and a team (Wheatley).

Conflict

Inevitably well-intentioned colleagues discussing an important topic will sometimes, if not often, lead to conflict. Opposing sides will form, and lines will be drawn. It is during these times of conflict that a team of colleagues has the chance for steep growth, and also for steep decline.

Conflict is an important part of teamwork and collaboration. It should neither be shunned nor exacerbated. Rather, conflict should be embraced by a team of colleagues as an opportunity for important discussion about an important problem. Oftentimes, it is not whether a conflict gets resolved but the process which occurs during the conflict which determines the growth or decay of a team (Meier, 2005).

While it is important to resolve as many conflicts as possible in a timely manner, some conflicts may never be resolved, and the team members need to be okay with working amidst unresolved conflicts. Conflicts are indeed a natural part of collaboration, and should be viewed by team members as opportunities for personal and team growth, rather than as uncomfortable periods that need to be quickly ended (Meier).

Summary

No one person can always get her/his way completely, unless he/she is a dictator. The existence of a team implies that there is no dictatorship; therefore, compromise is required of a team on a regular basis to resolve conflicts. Yes, the conflicts are important for several reasons,

as explained in the previous section. Even an unresolved conflict can be a healthy part of a team's daily existence. However, eventually the resolution of conflicts through compromise needs to happen more often than not. To overcome one's ego and innate stubbornness for the betterment of the team is a personal sacrifice that is required for the evolution of a team toward achievement of a sustained level of excellence. Each member of the team must often give up her/his own personal wishes for the team's best interest. Trusting one's team colleagues to not take advantage of one's willingness to sacrifice for the good of the team is a trust that is difficult and time-consuming to earn.

This chapter has provided an overview of some of the relevant literature on the history of middle schools, middle school organization, middle school teacher teams, and teaming dynamics in general. The next chapter will present the methods used in collecting and analyzing the data for this research study.

Ch.3: Research Methods

<u>Introduction</u>

This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of middle school teacher teams in three areas: teacher job satisfaction, general teacher collaboration, and specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning. My specific research questions included the following.

1) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model provide for the communication and collaboration among colleagues that might lead to improved job satisfaction?

2) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model lead to improved general teacher collaboration?

3) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model provide the structure necessary for specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning?

Since the problem studied involved the experiences of the participants, a teacher action research qualitative methods approach was employed to collect the data for this study. I used a qualitative approach because this type of research asks questions about the process by which this team works and it also calls for descriptions about this process. These types of questions are best answered using a qualitative approach. (Mills, 2007).

In addition to being the researcher that conducted this study, I was also one of the participants of this study. During the study, I presented preliminary findings to my colleagues and fellow study participants at our regular team meetings. Consequently, I hoped that my colleagues and I would be able to use the data from this study to make improvements in our collaborative teaming practices while the research study was in progress.

Mills (2007) defines action research as being participatory, socially responsive, reflective, and liberating for students, teachers, and administrators. This research study involved the researcher as a participant, it aimed to impact the social context in which middle school teachers work, it required reflection on the part of the participant researcher as well as the other participants in the study, and it was certainly liberating for the participant researcher. Therefore, this research study could be classified as action research.

Setting

The study took place at Alternative Charter School (ACS), which is located in the central coast area of California. The study occurred during the end of the 2006-2007 school year and the beginning of the 2007-2008 school year. This charter school originated as a K-3 school in September 2001, adding on one grade each successive year after its inaugural year. During the time of the study, ACS was in its sixth and seventh years of existence, having graduated its second 8th grade class in June 2007. At the conclusion of the study, there were 360 students in 16 classes across grades K-8. Future plans called for continued expansion to 410 students in 18 classes across grades K-8. The original charter of the school called for eventual growth to a K-12 school, but the planned expansion to include a high school had been put on hold as this study concluded.

At the time of this study at ACS there were 40 students in two classes of 20 each in grades K-3. In addition, there were 50 students in two classes of 25 each in grades 4-6. Grades 7 and 8 had 25 students in one class each. As stated in the previous paragraph, over the next two school years (2008-2010) grades 7 and 8 will also have 50 students in two classes of 25 each. The ethnic percentages of the student population of the 360 students were as follows: 45% White, 25% Asian, 15% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 5% Declined to State. Students were split

about 50/50 between males and females. There were about 10% English language learners, 10% eligible for free or reduced lunch, and about 10% with special needs. Almost all the students who attended ACS were residents of the local school district, which was located in a suburban residential area.

There were 42 staff members at ACS, with 31 teaching staff. Of the teachers at ACS, 25 were white, 4 were Hispanic, 1 was Asian, and 1 was African-American. Of the 31 teachers on staff, 24 were female and 7 were male. There were 16 classroom teachers, 6 resource aides, 3 Spanish teachers, 3 fine arts teachers, 1 physical education teacher, 1 part-time mathematics teacher, and 1 part-time resource specialist. The resource specialist handled special needs testing and some instructional support, while most special needs assistance services like speech therapy, occupational therapy, and psychological evaluations were contracted with the local school district.

It was only after the school grew to encompass grades K-8 that the staff realized it was necessary for the school to divide into teams. The school then divided into 3 grade level teams: K-2, 3-5, and 6-8. The grade 6-8 team was commonly referred to as the middle school team. This study focused on the middle school team and its effectiveness in providing for an organizational structure which allowed for meaningful teacher collaboration on curriculum planning. The study also attempted to gain insight into whether working on a teacher team led to effective teacher communication and collaboration, and whether this communication and collaboration had any effect on teacher job satisfaction.

Participants

The participants in this study were the five teachers who formed the middle school teaching team at ACS. Four of the five teachers had worked together as a team for two and a half

school years (2005-2007). This study took place during the last few months of their second school year (2006-2007) working together and the first few months of their third school year (2007-2008) working together as a middle school teaching team. The fifth member of the team had just joined the team as the study commenced at the end of the team's second year working together. Finally, in addition to having been the researcher for this study, I was also one of the members of the middle school teacher team studied and therefore am included in the participant descriptions below.

Three of the teachers on the team were females, while two were males. At the conclusion of the study, the years of experience for each of the five individual teachers were as follows: 25 years, 18 years, 10 years, 9 years, and 1 year. The years of experience of the five teachers at ACS at the conclusion of the study were 6, 5, 3, 3, and 1. Four of the teachers were European American, and one was African American. Two of the teachers specialized in mathematics and science, one of the teachers specialized only in mathematics, while the other two teachers specialized in language arts and social studies.

One of the two male teachers on the team had been at ACS for the longest, having started in the school's 2nd year of existence. He began teaching at ACS in the lower grades (2nd and 3rd), before moving up to the middle school two years ago to teach 5th and 6th grade science and mathematics. He was teaching 6th grade science and 6th and 7th grade mathematics as the study concluded. He had previously taught overseas in Amsterdam and Israel, as well as in Greenfield, CA before arriving at ACS. He was famous for his philosophical discussions of inquiry, understanding, and internationalism, as well as his passion for underwater remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), which he had fashioned into an ACS middle school underwater ROV club at the time this study concluded.

One of the three female teachers on the team had been at ACS for 5 years as this study ended. She started as an Art teacher at ACS, before moving into teaching 6th and 7th grade language arts and social studies. She was teaching 7th and 8th grade language arts and social studies as this study concluded. She taught for many years in Idaho in gifted and talented education. She was known to spend countless after school hours on various school committees, while at the same time devoting countless other hours to her passion for acting.

The second male teacher on the team was in his third year at ACS as this research study concluded. He had been teaching science to the 7th and 8th grades and mathematics to the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades for each of his three years at ACS. He was known for his organizational and scheduling abilities at ACS, as well as having been instrumental in the improvement of the school's computer lab and student information system. He also found time for camping, hiking, and following his favorite sports teams.

Another of the three female teachers on the team joined ACS three years ago as a part-time mathematics teacher for the 5th and 7th grades. She continued as a part-time mathematics teacher throughout her three years at ACS. She was teaching mathematics to the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades as this study concluded. She was also a parent of an ACS student during the time of this study. She was also an active member of the ACS parent association and strategic planning committee. She was famous at ACS for her prowess on the volleyball court, having played both in college and as a professional in Belgium.

The third of the three female teachers on the team was in her first full year as a teacher at ACS when this study ended. She had started at the end of the previous school year (2006-2007) as the middle school teaching assistant, which was also during the time this study commenced.

She was teaching 6th grade language arts and social studies at the time of this study's conclusion. She was known for having endless amounts of energy, and for having worked in Antarctica.

<div align="center">**<u>History</u>**</div>

The organization of the middle school teaching team had changed each of the past three school years (2005-2008), and will continue to change for each of the next two school years (2008-2010). These changes have been and will continue to be necessary as the lower grades with two classes per grade move up into the middle school grades, which have only had one grade per class. Thus, an additional class will be added to the middle school each school year until there are two classes per grade in all the grades in the K-8 school.

During the 2005-2006 school year, the middle school spanned grades 5-8 with five teachers teaching the core subjects. Each middle school grade had only one class per grade, while grades K-4 had two classes per grade. The middle school teacher team consisted of two language arts and social studies teachers, two mathematics and science teachers, and one additional part-time mathematics teacher. The additional mathematics teacher was added to the staff to reduce class size and academically level the mathematics classes.

During the 2006-2007 school year, when the study commenced, the middle school changed from grades 5-8 to grades 6-8, still with one class per grade. Grades K-5 each had two classes per grade. The middle school had four core teachers. One core teacher taught sixth grade, except for mathematics, while the other three core teachers handled the 7th and 8th grades.

During the 2007-2008 school year, when the study concluded, the middle school team again spanned grades 6-8. However, there were two sixth grade classes that school year (2007-2008), as the lower school grades with two classes per grade began to move into the middle school grades. There were two language arts and social studies teachers, two mathematics and

science teachers, and one part-time mathematics teacher. One of the language arts and social

studies teachers was handling grade 6, while the other humanities teacher was handling grades 7

and 8. In the mathematics and science classes, the three teachers were teaching across all three of

the grades 6, 7, and 8.

Data Collection

The literature on action research supports qualitative methods of data collection (Mills,

2007). As I was a genuine participant in the study, I was a participant observer in the study

(Mills). Multiple sources of data were used in this study to allow for subsequent triangulation of

data. Specifically, meeting agendas and notes, interviews, questionnaires & informal discussions,

and journal notes were used as data sources for this study. All the aforementioned data sources

are considered valid for a qualitative study (Mills), and each is described briefly below.

Meeting Agendas and Notes

One major data source was the weekly team meetings. Meeting agendas and meeting

notes were collected for the two and half school years (2005-2007) preceding and including the

time of this study. In addition, three weekly team meetings were audio-taped at the end of the

school year (2006-2007) in which the study began. The transcripts of the team meetings were

studied for the amount of time and effort devoted toward collaboration in general as well as

specific collaboration on curriculum planning. In other words, were the team meetings used by

teachers on the team for collaborative purposes? In addition, did the teachers communicate with

each other in a way that demonstrated effective collaboration? Team meeting agendas and

meeting notes were evaluated for time devoted to procedural and student issues versus time spent

on curriculum planning items. Also, the meeting transcripts were evaluated for equity and

effectiveness in communication by the five team members.

Interviews, Questionnaires, and Informal Discussions

The second major data source was the team members themselves. Each team member was formally interviewed at the beginning of the study. Then, each team member completed a questionnaire during the latter part of the study. In addition, informal conversations were held with each team member to gather additional anecdotal and background data. Each formal interview was audio-taped and transcribed. The types of questions that were asked in the interviews were aimed at seeking the team members' opinions on whether they felt the teacher team organization provided a structure which enabled effective teacher collaboration in general as well as specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning. For example, a typical question included: How do you feel collaborating with your team members at this school about curriculum planning has affected your overall work as a teacher at this school? In addition, questions about overall job satisfaction as a member of the teacher team were explored. An example of this type of question was: How do you feel working on a team has affected your overall job satisfaction at this school? A copy of the interview protocol and questionnaire are both included in the Appendix.

Journal Notes

Finally, since I was a participant in this study, an additional data source consisted of my journal notes from the two and a half years that I had taught at ACS. I looked for observations in my journal notes regarding the amount of time spent at team meetings on procedural and student issues versus time spent on curriculum planning. Also, I looked for any comments in my journal notes regarding how much input each team member gave in team meetings and how effective team members were in communicating their ideas to one another.

Data Analysis

"One of the most frequent data analysis methods undertaken by action researchers is coding, the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected through the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires" (Mills, 2007, p.124). Therefore, the data collected in this action research study was analyzed by coding the interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, meeting transcripts, meeting agendas, meeting notes, and journal notes for several different themes. Some themes were predetermined, and some others were identified during or after the data collection phase of the study.

The meeting agendas, meeting notes, and meeting transcripts were analyzed for the following themes:

- meeting time spent discussing general organizational matters;
- meeting time spent discussing curriculum planning.

The two themes listed above were derived directly from the two research questions regarding general collaboration and collaboration on curriculum planning. The team meetings data were coded for both of the themes listed above. Other themes that arose from the team meetings data were conflict and communication styles. These two themes of conflict and communication styles were subsumed by the larger themes of job satisfaction and general collaboration.

The interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were analyzed for references to the following three themes:

- the effect of teacher collaboration on overall job satisfaction;
- teacher collaboration in general; and
- teacher collaboration on curriculum planning.

The three themes listed above all correlated directly to the three research questions. The interview and questionnaire data were coded for each of the three themes listed above. Conflict and communication styles also were identified as themes from the interviews and questionnaires, and these additional themes were also subsumed here under the larger themes of job satisfaction and general collaboration.

My two and a half years' worth of journal notes were also analyzed for the following three themes:

- job satisfaction among team members;

- collaboration and communication among team members; and

- time spent collaborating on curriculum planning.

The three themes listed above all correlated directly with the three research questions. My journal notes were coded for each of the three themes listed above. Again, conflict and communication styles also were identified as themes from my journal notes, and these additional themes were again subsumed here under the larger themes of job satisfaction and general collaboration.

As the data were being analyzed, the preliminary findings were shared with the middle school teaching team. Team members' advice and interpretation were sought during the data analysis stage. Once the findings were finalized, they were shared with all members of the middle school teacher team. At a minimum the team had the benefit of a systematic analysis of its collaborative practices.

Subjectivity and Limitations

In addition to being the research investigator for this study, I was also a member of the teacher team under study. Therefore, the interpretations and analyses of the participants'

responses included the subjectivity of the research investigator. However, this study was designed to be action research, so my participation in the study did serve this purpose. In addition, as a member of the teacher team under study, I had intimate access to the members of the team. As my own personal biases were present during my interpretation of the data, I constantly sought feedback on data interpretation from fellow team members as well as other parties who were not members of the middle school teacher team.

A limitation of this study was that the team under study had been working together for two and half school years (2005-2007), so the initial growth process of the team had to be ascertained from a reflective and historical perspective. One interesting aspect of this team, however, was that one member of the five-member team was new to the team. Therefore, the opinions and experiences of this newest team member added unique insight into the success of the team at incorporating new members. Furthermore, the addition of a new team member undoubtedly brought new ideas and new dynamics to the collaborative nature of the team.

In general, the above-described subjectivity and limitations inherent in this study were greatly offset by the advantages gained from those same characteristics. Namely, the loss of my objectivity as the research investigator due to my also having been a member of the team under study also served to provide me with otherwise unattainable access to the study setting and participants. Additionally, the possible limitations ascribed to the team for its already having been established for two and half years might also have served to provide a richer source of data, as this team had already reached the stage of advanced team cohesiveness and serious team engagement in collaboration.

<u>Summary</u>

In this chapter I have provided the details of the methods I used to collect the data for my action research project, including descriptions of the project setting and participants, and the methods and tools used for data collection and analysis. In the next chapter, I will provide the results of my data analysis.

Ch.4: Research Findings

Introduction

This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of middle school teacher teams in three areas: teacher job satisfaction, general teacher collaboration, and specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning. To review briefly, my research questions included the following.

1) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model provide for the communication and collaboration among colleagues that might lead to improved job satisfaction?

2) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model lead to improved general teacher collaboration?

3) In what ways might the middle school team teaching organizational model provide the structure necessary for specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning?

The findings for each of the three research questions listed above are presented in this chapter. Each research question is presented in its own section. While the details and intricacies of the findings are detailed in the following sections in this chapter, I would like to state the main finding in this introduction section.

The main finding that was identified in this research study is that while this team generally benefited from the middle school team organization in the areas of job satisfaction and general collaboration, the team members have found it quite challenging to engage in meaningful collaboration on curriculum planning. The data to support this main finding are detailed in the following sections of this chapter.

<u>Middle School Team Teaching Model and Job Satisfaction</u>

Two and a half years ago, when I started teaching at Alternative Charter School (ACS), I was very excited to have found a school that seemed to be committed to community and collaboration. My journal notes from that time period reflect great optimism on my starting a new teaching position at ACS. For reasons that I will detail below, feelings of community and the spirit of collaboration were not what I experienced in my first few months at ACS.

I recently recounted with a former ACS colleague the large increase in student enrollment and staff size that occurred at ACS at the same time that I started teaching there. My journal notes also document a conversation that I had in my first months with this same former colleague about my feelings that "the middle school at ACS was fractured, disjointed, and disorganized." In short, I was frustrated by the lack of communication I felt among my middle school colleagues. This former colleague responded to my previous statement with the following question: "What do you think we should do about it?" My answer to his query was that the middle school staff needed to meet regularly and often—probably weekly.

Soon after our conversation, the middle school staff at ACS began to meet on a weekly basis after school hours. When a weekly middle school meeting schedule was first suggested, all the middle school teachers and even a few administrators agreed to this idea. The original group that met weekly consisted of the five teachers who taught grades 5-8 and 3 administrators, including the executive director, the curriculum coordinator, and the school counselor. Three of the eight members were new staff (including myself), while five of the eight members had formed the committee which originally designed the middle school. In addition, two of the eight members were original founders of the school. This core group of middle school teachers and

administrators continued to meet weekly until later in that school year (2005-2006) when the school was formally reorganized into grade level teams.

I give this historical backdrop from my journal notes, informal discussions, and observations to set the stage for a significant turnaround that occurred midway through my first year (2005-2006) of teaching at ACS. This turning point for me was a decision that the entire ACS staff made at the annual retreat in January 2006 to divide the school into three grade level teams, with each team having a leader and meeting on a regular basis. One of my middle school teaching colleagues described this reorganization of the school into grade level teams as "such a great idea." To my surprise, the overwhelming majority of the school staff embraced this new organizational structure, with teacher teams at the heart of the design.

This move away from a K-8 whole school community to a collection of three distinct smaller communities representing grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8 signaled a realization that the school had significantly grown in size from its original 5 staff members and 50 students to a school of 40 staff members and more than 300 students. My journal notes chronicle several conversations with both new staff and old staff who were feeling a sense of isolation and loss of community that hopefully the teams could provide.

I certainly have been much happier at ACS since the establishment of our middle school team. The regular communication and collaboration, which we have engaged in as a team, has given me clarity about my job. The collegiality also has provided me with positive energy, which I have used everyday to support my teaching. In short, I have been professionally satisfied due to our team's easy and regular communication.

The other three original members of the middle school teacher team also expressed their happiness with our team structure supporting their daily work. One teacher summed up his

satisfaction in the following manner: "Part of my job satisfaction is connected to collegiality…I enjoy that. I get food from that. I get fed from that." Another teacher said: "If we didn't have those [teams], I think we'd have seen a lot more people go. At least I think so. Thank God for the teams!" In fact, all four original members of the middle school teacher team have remained in their current positions at ACS, with all of them having taken on leadership roles in the school in some capacity. Furthermore, both resource aides that have worked on the middle school team have moved on to become teachers at ACS, with the most recent joining the middle school team as a teacher.

In this section I have chronicled the story of the development of the teaming structure at ACS over the past two and half years, with the current middle school teacher team being one of the products in this shift at ACS from a whole community model to a collection of grade level teacher teams within the whole school. All middle school teacher team members expressed a clear relationship between the creation and development of the middle school team and their own improved satisfaction with their work as a teacher at ACS.

In the next section I will delve into more of the intricacies of the communication and collaboration that has taken place among the middle school team members who participated in this research study. The next section will highlight some of the successes that have been accomplished and challenges that have been faced by the middle school teachers at ACS in their attempts to communicate and collaborate with each other.

Middle School Team Teaching Model and General Collaboration

With respect to how the middle school team teaching organizational model might lead to improved general teacher collaboration, the middle school team at Alternative Charter School generally felt that their collaboration has been "clear, crisp, and candid." The five middle school

team members under study all expressed the opinion that they have gained from the collaboration among their team colleagues.

During most of the first two years of working together, the team met weekly. Now, in the third year of working together, team meetings have been reduced to once every three weeks. One team member commented: "We talk a lot, much more than anywhere else I've been." But another team member said: "It seems we do not meet very often. Meeting once every two weeks for 30 minutes might be beneficial." Most team members agreed that the weekly meeting schedule was beneficial to fostering effective team communication, but the team members had varying opinions on whether the team needed to continue to meet more than once every three weeks in order to maintain this already established effective team communication.

There was disagreement among the team members as to whether social interaction outside of work among team members would serve to improve the level of collaboration among the team members. One teacher said: "It improves the team dynamic because you know each other better. You know if they are in a good place or not. You can talk to them easier in my opinion. You know them on a different level." However, another teacher said: "I don't think there is any difference, in my experience. In some ways there are other complications that come up."

All of the team members reflected in some way on the different personalities of all the team members. One teacher offered this about the differing personalities: "We are very different people. Clearly, we are not going to take one another out to dinner or get together socially. But, we work well together, I think. Clearly, [we] are quite different in how we look at things, how we manage things, and how we make decisions. But, that's okay with me. Whatever differences we have add to the whole." Still, another teacher asserted: "I think that the way I design a middle

school would be different than [any of you], but we've come together and created something that I think we're all pretty happy and proud of."

All team members felt that the team's communication was at an acceptable level. Some team members would like the team's communication to reach an even higher level. One team member said: "Communication is open and we realize when to not overdo it." Another team member added: "We usually communicate well–we're mostly effective." Still, another team member stated: "We are doing a pretty good job communicating in our team, especially when we are face to face." One team member suggested that the team could be "focusing on process" at a higher level. Another team member added: "Group norms need to be more firmly established and adhered to on a more consistent basis."

While some team members said that they would like the level of collaboration to reach an even higher level, even those team members noted that this higher level of collaboration would take time to develop. One team member even stated: "There is no ideal team." This same team member continued on to say: "I think that intimacy in a group takes time. If we work together in a group for another year, then we would know each other better … You could have groups that are more or less intimate, but we get business done."

In general, the team members felt that communication among team members had been good, though some improvements were still needed. Debate about the frequency of team meetings was ongoing, with meetings occurring once every three weeks at the time of this writing. In the previous two school years (2005-2007), team meetings were held once every week. Some team members were more satisfied with the level of communication, while others desired more reflection on the team's communication process and a stricter adherence to group norms.

In the next three sections to follow, the major dimensions of the nature of the collaboration of this middle school teacher team will be explored. Specifically, communication styles, conflict, and compromise will be covered in greater detail in the following three sections.

Communication Styles

Within this middle school team of five teachers, each had their own unique style of communication. However, it was clear to me that they fell into two distinct categories: talkers and listeners. Two of the team members talked almost throughout the entirety of each team meeting. They had something lengthy to say about each and every topic. They often interrupted others and made comments while others were speaking. The other three team members mostly listened throughout each team meeting. They responded clearly and succinctly to questions, but they rarely expanded on their answers.

One team member offered the following about communication styles: "The most important part of this communication is to state opinions/ideas without attacking others and to strive to see other's point of view." The same teacher continued by adding: "We don't have to agree, but we do have to respect one another's ideas."

One teacher asserted the following about the team's communication style: "We [are] comfortable with cutting each other off or being short with each other." Another teacher said: "two things always have to happen in any kind of collaboration. The quiet ones have to speak out and the noisy ones have to keep quiet and listen." Sometimes some team members did have to remind others that they were talking too much, but there was openness to this kind of criticism. One team member commented: "That [one] can even mention that is great."

There seemed to be general agreement amongst the team members that, while the communication styles of the various team members were quite different, they were open enough

and accepting enough of those differences to be able to communicate well enough with one another. One team member described the team communication dynamic in the following manner: "I have not had better than I have right now. I think there is an exchange. Sometimes it's clear, and sometimes it's frustrating … But that's okay. We communicate quickly, and candidly, or candidly enough to get by."

The dominant talkers on this team also happened to be the current co-leaders of this middle school teacher team. In addition, they have also been the leaders of this team as long as the team has had an official leader, which has been almost two school years. Furthermore, both of these leaders have expressed an interest in working in school administration. Both talkers realized that they talked a lot, and that they often interrupted others. They both realized that they talked too much, and that they needed to listen more. However, they have also both struggled to accomplish their stated goals of talking less and listening more.

The three team members who listened much more than they talked during team meetings were not necessarily quiet by nature. One of the listeners was a new member of the team, a new teacher on staff, and a new member of the teaching profession. Therefore, this teacher had mostly listened at meetings because it was often unclear to this new team member as to the exact nature of the discussion. Another one of the team members was a part-time staff member, so this teacher had often missed out on impromptu conversations that happened among the other team colleagues during times when this part-time teacher was not in school. This same teacher also expressed concern with the two talkers dominating the meetings and not allowing others to speak as much. The third listener spoke in a low and calm tone of voice during meetings. This teacher also offered concise responses to queries during meetings. At the same time, this teacher expressed comfort with being oneself in the group. In other words, this teacher felt such a

comfort level with the group that this teacher could speak and act freely without inefficient formalities.

Conflict

There was some conflict between team members on this middle school teacher team from time to time. Most times the conflict was discussed at a team meeting. Usually, the conflict was diffused by the mere fact of discussing the conflict at the team meeting. Sometimes, compromise was reached, and other times team members had agreed to disagree.

One teacher talked about the group conflict resolution process in the following way: "Homework and projects have been issues, but talking these through as a group has helped. I am not sure that the issues have been resolved to everyone's satisfaction, but at least people have had their say." Another teacher described moments of conflict in the group in the following manner: "Those were awkward moments, but we were/are professional within our team to deal with these types of [situations]."

Still other members of the team felt that conflict could be managed better on this middle school team of teachers. One teacher described team conflicts this way: "This is still a very tricky-wicket (*sic*) and it may always be because there are such a variety of personalities on our team. We have grown and improved, we can agree to disagree, but there is still much room for improvement." Another team member responded regarding team conflict management: "There is clear room for improvement."

While all members of the team recognized that there had been some effort to manage conflict on the team, there was disagreement as to the degree that conflict had been managed on this team. Some team members felt that there was "clear room for improvement," while other team members saw conflict as inevitable and that at least everyone had "had their say."

The next section will chronicle the team's management of a two-year long conflict between two teachers on the middle school team over the organization of and the assignment of students in the mathematics courses in the middle school. While this conflict tested the relationship between these two teachers, a workable compromise was eventually reached. Both of the teachers did "[have] there say." However, there was certainly "clear room for improvement" in the conflict management procedure of the team as the same dispute resurfaced for a second time after there was a supposed resolution the previous school year.

Compromise

There has been a fair bit of compromise among the teachers of this middle school team. For example, one area of contention has been the determination of levels for mathematics classes. Each of the past two years has seen disagreement over this issue. Fortunately, compromise was reached both years, with mathematics classes established to which all parties were agreeable.

The disagreement over the student groupings in mathematics originated between two of the three mathematics teachers in the middle school. Two school years ago (2005-2006) during the planning of the following school year's (2006-2007) mathematics classes, one of the teachers wanted some of the 8th graders to take an Algebra course and the other 8th graders to take a Pre-Algebra course. The other mathematics teacher involved in the dispute felt that all 8th graders should be taking Algebra, as it is the California State standard for 8th grade mathematics.

The middle school teacher team spent several meetings discussing this dispute over student mathematics placements on the agenda. Finally, the executive director of the school was called into a meeting in an attempt to break the deadlock on what had now become a contentious issue. The solution was to have one group of 8th grade students take a traditional 1st year Algebra

course, while the other group of 8th graders would take an Algebra course designed to cover half of the 1st year Algebra course curriculum over the entire 8th grade school year. All parties were happy with the compromise, which took several weeks to materialize with external mediation required to reach the final negotiation.

The same disagreement resurfaced at the end of the next school year (2006-2007) when planning the mathematics groupings for the current school year (2007-2008) for the 7th and 8th grade students. The dispute was also between the same two teachers as the year before. The same dynamic played out, with the dispute taking time at several consecutive team meetings before the executive director was asked to attend one of the meetings in an attempt to resolve the dispute. It was finally decided that all 8th graders would be in an Algebra class, with the potential that one of the Algebra classes may not complete the entire 1st year Algebra course curriculum.

The debates on this topic were often contentious, with one of the teachers even walking out in frustration from an informal discussion on the disputed topic. However, it appears now that this issue of mathematics placements in the middle school grades has been resolved. In fact, a three-year mathematics course plan has been developed that clearly charts a course for all 8th graders to take an Algebra course in 8th grade, but which also ensures that the Algebra course should meet the needs of the students in the class, including covering less than the entire 1st year Algebra course if necessary. Thus, while there were moments of conflict that clearly challenged the relationship between the two team members at the center of the dispute, the often contentious debate produced a more clear and more effective middle school mathematics course curriculum framework.

This team has shown the willingness to discuss contentious issues and communicate disagreements with one another within the structure of the team meetings. Often, the members of

the team were not able to manage their conflict on their own. Hence, the team has assumed the responsibility of managing conflicts involving any of its members. Thus, the team structure has been successful in providing the safe space for disagreements to be voiced. Furthermore, all team members have generally trusted the decision of the team as final. The team has proven itself to be an effective arbitrator of conflicts.

Middle School Team Teaching Model and Specific Collaboration on Curriculum Planning

With respect to the question of how the middle school team teaching organizational model might provide the structure necessary for specific teacher collaboration on curriculum planning, all team members stated that they would like to collaborate on curriculum planning at some level. However, this type of collaboration had not yet occurred to any significant degree among all the team members. The reasons given for collaborative curriculum planning not having taken place as of yet on the team were lack of leadership, lack of facilitation, lack of time, and the presence of other, more pressing, issues. All team members asserted that this type of collaboration needed to take place to become a successful team, and all team members wanted this type of collaboration to take place in some form.

While some collaboration on curriculum planning had been occurring this school year (2007-2008) on the 6th grade team, this was an isolated instance on the middle school team. One team member asserted: "The sixth grade team is working at a relatively high level." This same team member also observed that the middle school team was "working at a relatively low collaborative level, especially regarding planning, and talking at depth regarding curriculum." Another team member commented: "The 7th and 8th grade core teachers need to be collaborating more on curriculum planning."

There has been some resistance to collaboration on curriculum planning on this middle school team. One teacher stated: "Collaborating may be the wrong word. Maybe 'sharing' what we are covering and not covering within our curriculum will be helpful." This teacher continued on to say: "Collaborating would get frustrating because the styles of teaching are so different within the middle school. Working together to share curriculum is good, but working together to create curriculum may get complicated." Another teacher commented: "We could all effectively teach our subjects without collaborating with anyone."

One teacher flatly stated: "I wish we could do more of it." The "it" referred to collaborative curriculum planning. This teacher continued on to wonder about why the team had not done much collaborative curriculum planning by saying: "Sometimes I wonder about that because we talk about it. We want to do it, and then we don't." Another teacher offered a possible explanation for the lack of collaborative curriculum planning by commenting: "Most teams like ours stop at the level of where I think we are now, where we meet and talk well, and get stuff done, and we are organized … but then most teams can never make it to the level of … presenting our work to one another for evaluation and assessment and improvement."

While there has been some reluctance to openly and regularly collaborating to "create curriculum," there seemed to be much more agreement to at least regularly and openly "share curriculum." The teacher who said: "We could all be effective teachers [without collaborating]" also queried if this practice would lead to "an effective 'middle school teacher team?' " Still another teacher asserted: "Smart teams plan together, exchange ideas regarding the details of teaching for understanding." This teacher continued by saying: "While [the sixth grade team] collaborates intensively, we have not collectively, though the potential is there."

This middle school teacher team was in the midst of their third school year working together. Collaboration on curriculum planning had begun on the sixth grade team during this third school year (2007-2008), but it had not yet begun at any depth among the entire team. One team member offered a possible explanation for the lack of attention given to curriculum planning on this middle school team. This teacher said: "Our team is growing. Until this year there has only been one class per grade level." This same teacher also added: "There needs to be a schedule developed and a reporting system in place to help [collaborative curriculum planning] happen in a formal way."

Overall, then, the middle school teacher team organizational model has not yet provided the structure necessary to facilitate specific collaboration on curriculum planning for this teacher team. While some sharing of curriculum has taken place and some isolated collaborative curriculum planning has taken place, the middle school teacher team as a whole has not yet made a commitment to regular, meaningful collaboration on curriculum planning. Perhaps, as this teacher team continues to grow and mature, collaborative curriculum planning will take place, but to date this level of collaboration has not yet begun to any significant degree among this team of middle school teachers.

<u>Summary</u>

This middle school teacher team under study generally agreed that their collaboration has been effective. They felt that the collaborative nature of this team has contributed to improved job satisfaction. They also felt that the team, while not being active socially with one another, "gets business done."

There has been some concern that after meeting weekly for two school years (2005-2007), the team has only been meeting once every three weeks during the current school year

(2007-2008). Some team members wished for a return to a more frequent meeting schedule. In addition, some team members would like to engage in more in-depth collaboration on curriculum planning. Conversely, some team members do not feel that collaborative curriculum planning is needed or even desirable, but that sharing of curriculum would be more appropriate.

In conclusion, the findings obtained through studying this particular middle school teacher team indicate that collaboration in general has proved to be a positive factor in their work, and has led to improved job satisfaction. Still, in this team's third year, they have not yet progressed to regular engagement in collaborative curriculum planning. There was not even consensus that this type of collaboration would be productive. Therefore, while the findings indicate that this team will continue to benefit from general collaboration on process and procedure, it is unclear whether this team will ever engage in or benefit from collaboration on curriculum planning. Perhaps more time working with one another as a team to develop more trust with one another will lead to more in-depth collaboration on curriculum planning. One teacher summed up the need for collaboration this way: "I think that the more a team collaborates, the closer they are, the more seamless they are. I think it's better for the kids."

Ch.5: Discussion and Implications

Discussion

The research on middle school teacher teams and the findings from this action research project on the middle school teacher team at Alternative Charter School (ACS) generally agree as to the evolutionary timeline of a middle school teacher team. The research shows that middle school teacher teams generally discuss procedural matters and student issues during their first two or three years of operation. Research demonstrates that it is in their third or fourth year of operation when successful teacher teams extend their discussions to a more critical and analytical level, with a focus on curriculum and instruction (Erb, 1999; Flowers, 2000; Schumacher, 1992). The middle school teacher team that participated in this action research project has so far followed the evolutionary process that the research illustrates.

During the first year of its operation, this middle school teacher team exclusively discussed procedural matters and student issues, with an emphasis on student issues. In its second year of operation, this teacher team discussed procedural matters, student issues, and curriculum frameworks, with an emphasis on procedural matters. In its third year together, this team spent most of its time discussing procedural matters. Some sharing of curriculum was happening in small groups, but not as a whole group. It is unclear if this team is headed in the direction of more critical and analytical discussions of curriculum. The findings do not show any clear direction for this team toward the type of critical and analytical discussions that the research describes successful middle school teacher teams engaging in from their third year together onward.

The research is mixed on whether middle school teacher teams can continue to be successful beyond their third or fourth year if discussions remain at the level of procedural

matters and student issues. The middle school teacher team at ACS appears to be quite comfortable in its present state of general collaboration on procedural matters and student issues. The team members' job satisfaction is at a comfortable level due to the clear and regular communication that occurs among its members. Given the current state of affairs, there does not seem to be any sense of urgency or necessity for the team to invest time and energy in collaborating on curriculum planning. It would seem that this team of middle school teachers might remain in its current state of comfortable collaboration about procedural matters and students issues for at least the current school year (2007-2008) and next school year (2008-2009). Some of the research indicates that this team risks rendering itself obsolete if it remains static in its level of collaboration. Further action would appear necessary to propel this team forward into more critical and analytical discussions of its curriculum planning and instructional practices.

Overall, this research study has illuminated for me several important considerations to reflect upon regarding the formation of middle school teacher teams. Firstly, teachers who collaborate will more often than not appreciate and enjoy their jobs more than teachers who do not collaborate. Furthermore, it is important, if not necessary, to form teacher teams at the middle school level in order to provide the structure required to allow communication and collaboration to thrive among middle school teaching colleagues. The communication and collaboration may or may not develop to a level of critical analysis of one another's work as teachers, but it will almost certainly lead to improved job satisfaction and more effective communication and collaboration in general. The next section will outline teacher actions that can be taken to help facilitate the critical analysis of one another's work that has not yet taken

place on this teacher team. The next section will also explore areas of further study that could help this teacher team and other teams in their efforts toward improved collaboration.

<u>Teacher Actions/Implications for Further Study</u>

Several implications can be drawn from this action research project, including the type of actions to be taken based on its findings, and implications for future research. Both the teacher actions to be taken and the implications for further study will be outlined in the following two sections.

Teacher Action

The actions to be taken for me based on the findings of this study are clear. I will continue to pursue avenues of communication with my middle school teaching colleagues. In addition, I will continue the current discussion with my colleagues as to what should be the nature and level of our collaboration on curriculum planning. The research on middle school teacher teams clearly illuminates that the third year of working together is when teams normally delve into more critical analysis of one another's teaching practices in an attempt to improve the teaching and learning that takes place in one another's classrooms. In addition, some of the research on middle school teacher teams indicates that if team members do not raise the level of communication and collaboration to the critical analysis stage, the team actually diffuses into a more fractured state with team members feeling they have reached the pinnacle of their collaborative efforts and that no more collaboration is needed (Schumacher, 1992).

My immediate action therefore will be to present my findings to my colleagues in the hopes of sparking critical reflection as to what should be our level of collaboration. Are we happy with our current level of collaboration? Can we benefit from higher levels of collaboration and communication? Can our students benefit from our increased emphasis on collaboration,

specifically on curriculum planning? Furthermore, can we and our students benefit from more critical collaboration and analysis of our curriculum and its delivery to our students?

My hope is that my fellow middle school teacher team members will join me in answering the above questions in a way that leads us to further our communication and collaboration, especially in the area of curriculum planning. I also hope that we can use the findings of this study to more clearly understand our successes in achieving a workable level of general collaboration. At the same time, my hope is that our team will move forward into more analytical and critical discussions of our curriculum and instruction, with the perpetual aim of improving the teaching and learning that takes place on a daily basis in our classrooms.

In closing this section on my actions to be taken based on the findings from this research study, I would like to propose a specific plan for my middle school teaching colleagues and me. I propose that we meet once a month in the evening at one of our houses to critically analyze one of our curriculum units. I propose that the meetings include dinner, so that a social aspect is also incorporated with the professional aspect. In short, I propose that we form a Critical Friends Group. Critical Friends Groups will also be discussed in the next section as an area needing further study.

In addition to forming a Critical Friends Group, I would like to see our middle school teacher team make a conscious effort to integrate our curriculum units across subject disciplines to create interdisciplinary curriculum units. I propose that to accomplish this task we agree to use our spring planning half-day to meet as a team by grade levels, with the goal of choosing one unit topic per grade level that we'd like to work on together to integrate across subject disciplines. Teachers should also agree on a draft of the central idea and essential questions for the selected interdisciplinary unit topics. Then, all teachers should work throughout the spring

and summer to incorporate their specific subject discipline into the interdisciplinary unit plans. Next, all teachers should commit to using one of the three full planning days just before the first instructional day of next school year (2008-2009) to finalize these interdisciplinary units (one per grade level). In the long term, we should commit as a middle school team to discussing the integration possibilities for all of our curriculum units across all of the subject disciplines, including fine arts, physical education, and world languages.

In summary, what I am proposing is a three-step plan. Firstly, I would like to present and discuss the findings for this study with my middle school teaching colleagues. Secondly, I would like to see us delve into the formal critical analysis of one another's curriculum units, as the findings in this area show that this type of collaboration has thus far been largely absent. Thirdly, I would like to see us focus our collaborative curriculum planning efforts in the direction of developing interdisciplinary curriculum units. Furthermore, I would like to see all three actions initiated by the end of this school year (2007-2008). Finally, I would like to see an annual self-assessment by this middle school teacher team of its collaborative practices, with a specific emphasis on the area of critical analysis of curriculum units, with the expectation that all units should be interdisciplinary in nature.

Implications for Further Study

Two important areas were identified from this research project as requiring further study: the development of critical friends groups, and the inclusion of non-core teachers in regular collaboration and communication with core teachers. Both of these areas requiring further study are detailed in the following two sections.

<u>Critical Friends Groups</u>

Arguably the most important aspect that needs to be studied further is how teacher teams progress from having generally effective communication and collaboration to becoming a professional group of critical friends that regularly and routinely evaluates, analyzes, and critiques one another's work as teachers, with the shared aim of improving the teaching and learning that takes place in one another's classrooms.

The middle school teacher team that participated in this research study appeared to be "stuck" at the level of collaboration on policies, procedures, and student issues. This teacher team as a whole appeared in some ways reluctant to delve into more analytical discussions about their work as teachers, and in other ways unsure as to how to proceed with these type of critical discussions of one another's curriculum and teaching practices.

The research on teacher teams and critical friends groups demonstrates that reaching the level of critical discussion and analysis of one another's work is not easy for a team of teachers to do. There are issues of ego, competitiveness, and trust that are often difficult, if not insurmountable, for many teacher teams to overcome. How can these aforementioned obstacles be overcome to achieve the level of a successful critical friends group? This is the question that further research needs to answer, and that the middle school teacher team, which participated in this study, will hopefully answer as well.

<u>Inclusion of Non-Core Teachers</u>

Another aspect of collaboration that was identified in this study, but that was not specifically asked about in the research questions for this study, was how to regularly and meaningfully include non-core teachers and other staff members in the communication and collaboration that takes place about policies, procedures, students, and curriculum. Some

educators say that it is not possible to include everyone on staff in regular collaborative efforts. However, our students do regularly attend classes and interact with specialist teachers, resource teachers, resource aides, administrators, etc. And, if students are regularly interacting with staff members, then these staff members need to regularly communicate and collaborate about the interactions that take place with their shared students. Therefore, I feel that further research in this area is needed. Specifically, I would like to see our middle school teacher team enter into discussions with the non-core teachers in our school as to how we can work together to communicate and collaborate regarding policies and procedures, our shared students, and integration of curriculum.

Summary

The research pertaining to this study and the findings identified for this study both support the teacher team organizational model for middle schools. Both the research and the findings also agree on the progression of middle school teacher teams in the team members' level of communication and collaboration. This progression begins with discussions of policies, procedures, and students. Curriculum discussions come later, with critique and analysis of team members' curriculum and teaching practices coming much later, if at all. Thus, what final conclusions can we draw from this study? Well, two simple mantras that I have found sprinkled throughout my journal writing over the past two and half year at ACS, and even further back throughout my ten years of teaching, are: *participate by actively listening,* and *never stop communicating*.

Works Cited

Arnold, J. (1991). The Revolution in Middle School Organization. *Momentum,* 22, 20-25.

Bowie, L. (2007). Study Raises Doubts on K-8: JHU Research Finds No Academic Benefit Over Middle Schools, Undercuts City's Push. *Baltimore Sun,* 1-3.

Crow, G. M. & Pounder, D. G. (2000). Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams: Context, Design, and Process. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 36(2), 216-254.

Dufour, R. (2004). What is a "Professional Learning Community"? *Educational Leadership,* 6-11.

Erb, T. (1997). Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescents on Interdisciplinary Teams: The Growing Research Base. *Childhood Education,* 73(5), 309-311.

Erb, T. (1998). "Last Best Chance" on the Cheap. *Middle School Journal,* 29, 2.

Erb, T. (2001a). Beware of the Pendulum. *Middle School Journal,* 32, 4.

Erb, T. (2001b). Transformative Organizations for Youth and Adult Learning. *Middle School Journal,* 33, 48-55.

Erb, T. & Stevenson, C. (1999). What Difference Does Teaming Make? *Middle School Journal,* 30, 47-50

Flowers, N., Mertens, S. B., & Mulhall, P. F. (2000). What Makes Interdisciplinary Teams Effective? *Middle School Journal,* 31, 53-56.

George, P. S., Stevenson, C., Thomason, J., & Beane, J. (1992). *The Middle School-And Beyond.* Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Gootman, E. (2007). Taking Middle Schoolers Out of the Middle. *The New York Times,* 1-4.

Gunn, J. H. & King, M. B. (2003). Trouble in Paradise: Power, Conflict, and Community in an Interdisciplinary Teaching Team. *Urban Education,* 38(2), 173-195.

Husband, R. E. & Short, P. M. (1994). Interdisciplinary Teams Lead to Greater Teacher Empowerment. *Middle School Journal,* 26, 58-61.

Kasten, K. L., Short, P. M., & Jarmin, H. (1989). Self-Managing Groups and the Professional Lives of Teachers: A Case Study. *The Urban Review,* 21, 63-80.

King, B. (2007). Growth of an Interdisciplinary Teacher Team. *Wisconsin Center for Education Research,* 1-2.

Kruse, S. & Louis, K. S. (1995). Teacher Teaming-Opportunities and Dilemmas. *Brief to Principals,* 1-6.

Meier, N. S. (2005). Decision Making in School Wide Professional Communities. Stanford University, 1-244.

Mertens S. B., Flowers N., & Mulhall P. F. (2001). School Size Matters in Interesting Ways. *Middle School Journal,* 32, 51-55.

Mills, G. E. (2007). *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher.* New Jersey: Pearson.

Pounder, D. G. (1999). Teacher Teams: Exploring Job Characteristics and Work-Related Outcomes of Work Group Enhancement. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 35(3), 317-348.

Rettig, M. D. & Canady, R. L. (2000). *Scheduling Strategies for Middle Schools.* New York: Eye On Education.

Russell J. F., Jarmin, H. R., & Reiser, M. L. (1997). Interdisciplinary Teaming in the Middle School: The Relationship of Implementation to Teachers' Attitudes over Time. *ERS Spectrum,* 15, 32-38.

Schumacher D. H. (1992). A Multiple Case Study of Curriculum Integration by Selected Middle School Interdisciplinary Teams of Teachers. Florida State University, 1-35.

Supovitz, J. A. & Christman, J. B. (2005). Small Learning Communities That Actually Learn: Lessons for School Leaders. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 649-651.

Wells, A. S. (1989). Middle School Education-The Critical Link in Dropout Prevention. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education,* 56, 1-6.

Wheatley, M. J. (2002). *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Yecke, C. P. (2006). Mayhem in the Middle: Why We Should Shift to K-8. *Educational Leadership,* 63(7), 20-25.

<u>Appendix A: Interview Protocol</u>

1) How has your experience been working on the middle school team at this school?

2) How has your overall job satisfaction been at this school?

3) How do you feel working on a team has affected your overall job satisfaction at this school?

4) How has your experience been collaborating with teachers on your team at this school?

5) How do you feel collaborating with middle school team members at this school has affected your overall work as a teacher at this school?

6) How has your experience been collaborating with teachers on the middle school team about instructional planning at this school?

7) How do you feel collaborating with your team members at this school about instructional planning has affected your overall work as a teacher at this school?

8) Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences at this school?

9) Is there anything else that you would like to add that you feel is relevant to this study

10) What is your age?

11) How many years have you been teaching?

12) How many years have you been teaching at this school?

13) How many years have you worked on the middle school team at this school?

Appendix B: Questionnaire

1) How is our middle school team doing in general? Are we communicating well with one another?

2) How have we managed conflict/differing opinions within our team? Have we grown up enough as a team where we can resolve conflicts through compromise or agreeing to disagree?

3) Does our team need to collaborate on instructional planning of curriculum units in order to be an effective middle school teacher team? Why? Why not?