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# Obstacles to Senior High School Teachers' Collaboration in the Libode Education District, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the obstacles to senior high school teachers' collaboration in the Libode Education District, South Africa. The qualitative research approach was adopted. The design used was a case study. A convenience sampling strategy was used to select twelve (12) teachers and three (3) principals from three (3) different senior high schools. Face-to-face in-depth individual interviews were conducted. Data were collected through the use of field notes. Permissions were sought from education authorities, school heads and teachers. Collected data were analysed using the interpretational analytical strategy. Findings on the obstacles to teacher collaboration included competition among teachers, the practice of teacher individualism and isolation, the inadequacy of knowledge and information sharing, the prevalence of negative attitudes towards classroom observation, the existence of moderate network among teachers from different schools, the inadequacy of teacher professional development activities and the existence of inadequate leadership practices. Recommendations made were that the South African Department of Education in collaboration with school management should organise training sessions for all teachers where they are asked to refrain from the practice of individualism, isolation and competition in carrying out their professional practices. Subject advisors and heads of departments should cultivate the professional habits of motivating teachers under their supervision toward developing positive attitudes toward collegiality and collaboration. Subject advisors, school heads and heads of departments should encourage all teachers to engage with teachers from other schools to share knowledge and information and to enquire into their collective practices for empowerment and improvement.

**Keywords: Collaboration, Knowledge, Information, Collegiality, Teaching, Learning.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher collaboration in the teaching and learning process is a school-wide initiative that involves the creation of an environment that depends on teachers sharing knowledge and information among themselves and thinking about their practices to enhance classroom delivery and learners' academic performance (Lang & Fox, 2003; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011). In Bloomington, the United States of America, DuFour (2005) explained that teacher collaboration is a systematic process of teachers working together to analyse and improve their instructional practices. While in Ghana, Amoah, (2011) opined that teacher collaboration entails designing activities as a foreground for teachers' professional development, empowerment and improvement of their practices.

Teacher collaboration provides collegiality and allows for collective intelligence where teachers add their intelligence and draw from the collective intelligence of the group that is needed by each

teacher to have multiple solutions to complex school problems (Abrahams, 1997; Dufour Eaker & Many, 2006; Woodley, 2016; Waldron & Mcleskey, 2006). Effective teacher collaboration helps to sustain collegial learning among teachers and provides teachers with professional learning that has a profound impact on instructional practice and learners' success (Williams, 2010). While Schmoker (2005) asserts that improving learners' academic performance comes from collaboration and continual learning among all teachers.

Teachers' collaboration in the teaching and learning processes enhances their collective commitment to continuous improvement in the ways they share knowledge and information about their practices, and in the ways, they conduct classroom visits and lesson observation to develop each other professionally (Killion, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The more a school nurtures teacher collaboration, the more there is a collective responsibility toward teachers' growth and capacity building, and the more there is an improvement in students' academic performance (Killion, 2012; Abrahams,1997). Again, school environments that encourage effective collaboration create a base of pedagogical knowledge that is distributed among all teachers to improve their teaching and learners' academic performance (AITSL, 2011). This is why in Nebraska in the United States of America, Williams (2010) mentioned that effective collaboration increases teachers' self-efficacy, instructional practices and learners' academic success.

To enhance teacher professional network and the sharing of best practices, knowledge and information, schools should not be too isolated from other schools and there should be systems support to provide professional assistance and learning to all teachers (Jackson & Temperley, 2007). Also, teachers in their professional network, learn from one another, share ideas and reflect on their practices (Jackson & Temperley, 2007; Steyn, 2014; AITSL, 2011; Fullan, 2007). It is important to highlight here that without a collaborative culture of teaching and learning, school environments will experience teachers practicing individualism, autonomy and isolation which will go a long way to affect the overall teacher effectiveness, school improvements and learners' academic success (Williams, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

Despite the numerous benefits of collaboration to the teacher, the learner and to the school as a whole, there are obstacles within the school environments that make teacher collaboration difficult to realize, for example, in Australia and California, teacher resistance to change is one of the known obstacles to collaboration (Herold & Fedor, 2008; AITSL, 2011). Resistance to collaboration is predominant in school environments where teachers resist sharing knowledge and information with colleagues to improve their practices, and where teachers display little interest, support or enthusiasm to participate in collaborative activities (Woodley, 2016; AITSL, 2011). In Washington and Virginia, Richardson (2003), Richardson and Placier (2001) have opined that many teachers are recalcitrant, resist the implementation of suggested changes in curriculum reform, still work in isolation and always try to protect their individualism, as such, act as obstacles to effective collaboration in schools.

Time-consuming has also been noted to be an obstacle to teacher collaboration. According to Lang and Fox (2003), collaboration among teachers is expensive and also consumes lots of time. Woodley (2016), the AITSL (2011), the National Center on Time and Learning (2015) reiterate the fact that it is difficult to have adequate time for teacher collaboration in schools, though it is an important influencer in implementing quality collaborative activities in schools.

Another obstacle to teacher collaboration is that teachers are viewed as passive recipients of information rather than active decision-makers in traditional forms of professional development activities (Lang & Fox, 2003), and where teachers receive information regarding effective practices for implementation with no support from leaders (Richardson & Placier, 2001; Lang & Fox, 2003).

Based on the above backdrop, studies have been conducted globally on teacher collaboration, teacher collaborative professional development and the benefits that are accrued to teachers and learners when schools nurture effective collaboration among teachers, but there has never been a study on the obstacles to senior high school teachers' collaboration in the Libode Education District, South Africa. Despite the benefits of high-quality teacher collaboration in schools, in

senior high schools of the Libode Education District, there is inadequate teacher collaboration in sharing best practices, knowledge and information concerning classroom practices.

In this paper, section one covers the theoretical framework. Section two presents the research design and method employed, while the findings and discussions are presented in section three. Conclusion and recommendations are discussed in section four.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that underpinned this study is Distributed Cognition Theory. Distributed Cognition Theory emphasizes the fact that an individual teacher does not possess the thinking ability in his or her head alone to effectively teach to the understanding of learners but his or her understanding and abilities to teach effectively are reciprocally shared with and drawn from colleagues teachers and the tools and technologies found in the school environment that support and strengthen each teachers' thinking and learning (Willy, 2023; Karasavvidis, 2002; Pea,1993), Distributed Cognition Theory traditionally regarded an individual teacher as the bearer of cognition and intelligence but recent trends describe a teacher's cognition as being distributed beyond the individual teacher's skin to include other teachers' cognition in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Willy, 2023; Karasavvidis, 2002). Pea (1993), Salomon (1993) and Karasavvidis (2002) are of the view that Distributed Cognitive Theory refers to the involvement of social others (other teachers) to assist as cognitive resources in sharing knowledge, skills and information in the process of teaching and learning.

Also, Cole and Engestrom (1993) claimed that for effective teaching and learning to take place in schools, knowledge of teaching should not be kept by one particular teacher but must be distributed among all other teachers. Pea (1993) argues that improving teachers' classroom delivery and overcoming poor academic performance of learners is not solely the construction of an individual teacher's mind but the outcome of other teachers' minds, cooperation and collaborations in the distribution of knowledge, skills and best practices in the teaching and learning process. The distributive cognition theory also explains how effective collaboration among teachers can take place through teachers drawing experience, advice and assistance from each other to shape their classroom delivery (Karasavvidis, 2002; Moll, Tapia, & Whitmore, 1993)

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research approach was adopted to provide textual explanations of the teachers' verbal and lived experience of the obstacles to senior high school teachers' collaboration in the Libode Education District (Mack, et al., 2011; White, 2005). The design used was a case study to explore the real-life scenarios of the obstacles within a limited time scale for understanding (Baxter & Jac, 2008; Bell, 2004; Yin, 2009).

A convenience sampling strategy was used to select twelve (12) teachers and three (3) principals from three (3) different senior high schools in the Libode Education District. The convenience sampling strategy was used to select participants based on their availability and to get an inexpensive and quick approximation of the obstacles to teacher collaboration (Maree, 2007). An interview schedule was developed to conduct face-to-face in-depth individual interviews on participants' subjective thoughts, reasoning, emotions and experiences of the obstacles (Gajendra & Kanka, 1990; Yin, 1989; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Data were effectively collected by writing field notes (Malcolm, 2010; Malcolm, 2010, Stephen & Shane, 2000). Before the data were collected, permissions were sought from the education authorities, the individual teachers and their school principals. Collected data were analysed using the interpretational analytical strategy which involved the search for patterns to explain the obstacles to teacher collaboration in schools (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; White, 2010).

## 4. KEY FINDINGS

The key obstacles to senior high school teachers' collaboration in the Libode Education District,

are (i) competition among teachers (ii) teacher individualism and isolation (iii) inadequacy of knowledge and information sharing (iv) negative attitudes towards classroom observation (v) moderate network among teachers from different

schools (vi) inadequacy of teacher professional development activities and (vii) inadequate leadership.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

### 5.1 Competition among Teachers

The study revealed competition among teachers as an obstacle to teacher collaboration in the teaching and learning process in senior high schools instead of collaborating to ensure effective teaching and learning processes in the schools. It was found that instead of teachers working together for excellence and high academic performance of the learners, they individually work to finish the syllabus and to ensure learners perform well in their subjects at the end of the academic year rather than collaborating to ensure students achieve well in all subject areas at the end of the academic year. A teacher mentioned that: *It is only the Grade 12 teachers who compete among themselves for results.* A principal claimed that: *These teachers do not work together but compete for excellence in their subject areas*. Another principal mentioned that: *There is high competition only among the Grade 12 teachers because they all want to finish covering their syllabus on time before June instead of collaborating to ensure all syllabi are completed.*

Contrary to these findings, Steyn (2014) claims school managers should put up systems that discourage teachers from competing among themselves and the practice of isolation in the teaching and learning process.

**5.2 Teacher Individualism and Isolation**

The study revealed a prevalence of the practice of individualism among teachers. It was found that teachers practice isolation and individualism without professionally collaborating with fellow teachers. The study found that teachers who practice individualism in schools like to work in isolation, do not like change, hate to collaborate, think they are master teachers and are conservative in the way they teach. A teacher opined that: *Some colleagues are too reluctant to change their ways of working alone and without collaboration.* Another teacher laments that: *I know some of us do not get involve or corroborate with others in the teaching and learning process and social and community activities.* Lamentations from a principal were that: *I think some teachers work in isolation because they think they are master teachers.*

To confirm these findings, Robbinson and Alvy (2003) in the United States of America described the prevalence of teacher individualism based on expressions such as ‘‘got it alone’’, ‘‘teacher of the month’’ and ‘‘teacher of the year’’ which highlight the practice of teacher individualism and isolation in schools. Contrary to the above findings, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) highlights that teacher collaboration in schools can help teachers desist from practicing individualism.

**5.3 Inadequacy of Knowledge and information sharing**

It was revealed that some of the teachers are unwilling to share knowledge and information with colleague teachers either in the same department or from different departments. It was found that there is less collaboration among some teachers in knowledge and information sharing to empower each other to teach difficult subjects and topics. A voice from a teacher was: *Teachers do not want to collaborate in sharing knowledge and information in their departments to help each other teach difficult subject areas but others are willing to share information with us.* To corroborate these findings, Woodley (2016) mentioned effective learning happens in groups, however, many teachers display little interest and enthusiasm to collaborate in sharing knowledge and information with colleagues.

*A Principal said these: Teachers are only concerned with their learning areas; they do not share best practices and do not collaborate with senior teachers.* Another principal laments that: *I think teachers in this school have negative attitudes when it comes to sharing ideas with other teachers; which means more than half of these teachers have negative attitudes towards collaborations.* On the contrary, Killion (2012) states that the more teachers’ learning is shared and supported by others, the more there is continuous improvement in the culture of teaching and learning.

It was also revealed that some of the teachers have negative attitudes towards knowledge and information sharing and are also resistant to the idea of a collaborative teaching culture where they are expected to share ideas and suggestions to improve teaching and learning processes. A teacher mentioned that: *Teachers resist the idea of collaboration with fellow teachers in this school, as such, there is poor academic performance.* A school principal lamented that: *Their resistance prevents them from meeting to share ideas that will*

*help teaching and learning.* According to the AITSL (2011), teachers' reluctance to share knowledge and information with other teachers acts as a barrier to effective collaborations in schools.

**5.4 Negative Attitudes towards classroom observation**

Part of the collaborative activities in schools is teacher classroom observation, however, this study revealed that teachers display negative attitudes, feel uncomfortable and also feel inferior when being observed in class by colleague teachers, superiors, or by school management. It was also found that classroom observation is perceived by teachers to be an act of fault findings and the identification of teachers' weaknesses without interventions and developments. The following words came from a teacher: *Some of us think classroom observation is an exercise meant to witch-hunt people.* Another teacher claims that*: In this school, teachers hate being visited in class or monitored to see how they teach*. A principal said the following: *There is resistance since these teachers dislike our act of observing their lessons in class.*

Contrary to these negative findings, Lang and Fox (2003), AITSL (2011), Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) are of the view that classroom observation is one of the strategies for effective collaboration among teachers as it involves teachers observing and learning from each other's practices to improve and build on their capacities and to improve learners' academic achievement.

**5.5 Moderate network among teachers from different schools**

The study revealed that master teachers in various subject areas from different schools do not always come together as a cluster to share knowledge and information to improve their practices. It was also found schools do not take steps to invite or hire expert teachers from different schools as guest teachers to teach difficult subjects and topics, to share best practices, ideas and experiences and to organize common extra classes to improve learners' academic performances. The study found teacher workload and lack of time to be the reasons for these moderate networks and collaborations among teachers either within the same school or with teachers in other schools. A teacher mentioned that: *It is not always as such not encouraging but we do invite some teachers to come and teach some subjects in this school*. Another teacher said the following: *We sometimes have cluster gatherings where we share information on selected subjects but the truth is that these are inadequate for us as teachers.* Some expressions from a principal were: *Because these teachers have less time and are always busy, they do not collaborate with teachers in other schools.* Another principal's view was that: *To some extent, teachers do visit other schools to teach but this is below expectations.*

Contrary to these findings**,** Jackson and Temperley (2007), Abraham (1997), Katz, Earl and Jafar (2009) opined that schools must encourage network learning among teachers from different schools to ensure a feeling of collegiality and collaboration.

**5.6 Inadequacy of teacher professional development activities**

It was revealed that teacher professional development was inadequate to ensure collaboration since there are fewer capacity-building workshops to strengthen teachers' capacity. What a teacher said was: *There is a lack of teamwork and there are inadequate workshops for us in this school.* Williams (2010) corroborates these findings by claiming that in the United States of America, the professional development available to educators is inadequate and frustrating.

It was revealed that some school managers ignore the professional development aspects of teachers. A school principal claimed that: *Not much is been done to ensure teachers have professional development activities like workshops and seminars in this school.*

Contrary to these findings, Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, and Polovsky, (2005), Steyn (2014) claim the principal is a key participant in ensuring the development of a collaborative culture through the implementation of high-quality professional development and professional learning communities.

**5.7 Inadequate leadership**

The study revealed that leadership in ensuring a culture of collaboration among teachers is inadequate because teacher motivation, teacher empowerment, capacity building and a culture of a shared vision among teachers to embrace collaboration in schools were inadequate. A teacher laments that: *We are not able to collaborate well because the school principals do not have the motivational skills and strategies to inspire us to do so.* A teacher mentioned that: *Leadership in this school does not encourage idea and knowledge*

*sharing among teachers and they do not involve others in activities where we can learn and share ideas.* A school principal said that: *Some of us do not empower the teachers and also do not create environments for collaborations among these teachers to take place.* To confirm these findings, the AITSL (2011) asserts that a lack of school heads' support and leadership in encouraging teachers to network with each other can be a barrier to their collaboration. While Abrahams (1997), Williams (2010) opined that teacher collaborations and interactions are possible if school management empowers all teachers, prepares them to engage in shared decision-making and are accountable to the collective work of that group that reaches the classroom to impact learners' learning.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study indicates a concerning prevalence of competition, isolation and individualism among teachers in secondary schools, which detracts teachers from collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing the teaching and learning process and also limits opportunities for growth and innovation within the educational environment. Findings concerning teachers' reluctance to share knowledge and information do hinder effective teacher collaboration, ultimately resulting in poor academic performance. The perceptions among teachers regarding classroom observation indicating negative attitudes, discomfort, and feelings of inferiority when being observed by colleagues or superiors tend to hamper the effectiveness of collaborative activities, such as peer observation, which are intended to facilitate professional growth and improvement in teaching practices. A lack of opportunities for collaboration to leverage the expertise of guest teachers from other schools to teach difficult subjects, share best practices and organize extra classes aimed at improving students' academic performance do act as obstacles to a collaborative teaching culture in schools.

The significant deficiency in teacher professional development activities within schools which is attributed to a perceived neglect by school managers undermines collaborative efforts and the overall quality of education within schools. The significant deficiency in leadership's role in fostering a culture of collaboration among teachers within schools not only hampers efforts to achieve a collaborative culture of teaching and learning but also undermines instructional practices and overall school effectiveness.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the South African Department of Education in collaboration with school management should organise training sessions for all teachers where they are taught the importance and significance of collaboration in the education system and stop all forms of individualism, isolation and competition in the process of educating the learners. Various subject advisors and heads of departments should cultivate the professional habits of motivating teachers under their supervision toward developing positive attitudes toward collegiality and collaboration in the teaching and learning process.

School management teams and subject experts should be trained by the employer on the skills, and knowledge for classroom observation and how to create a supportive and non-threatening environment. The Department of Education in collaboration with schools should encourage teachers to engage with teachers from other schools to share knowledge and information and to enquire into their collective practices in teaching difficult subjects and topics. School managers, subject advisors and cluster leaders should encourage all teachers to use professional gatherings to support each other in improving their practices. School managers should create conducive school environments where there is a shared vision among teachers for students' achievement and they should empower all teachers to embrace new practices and innovative teaching methods from colleague teachers.

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