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## Shared Philosophies, Conflict, and Critical Reflection: Developing Productive Teacher Collaboration

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## **Shared Philosophies, Conflict and Critical Reflection: Developing Productive Teacher Collaboration**

### **Abstract:**

*As top-down mandates regarding what collaboration should look like continue to evolve from the policy level, it is critical to engage the knowledge of teachers – the ones experiencing the collaboration – to inform teacher learning as well as the conditions within schools that help productive collaborative partnerships to evolve. This article seeks to examine the foundational aspects that underpin a mutually productive collaborative relationship between myself – a full-time high school English teacher – and another full-time English teacher at the public, regional school in the Northeast where we taught. Utilizing a participant research design, I drew upon audio-recorded dialogue of meetings we had to plan out curriculum and instruction while teaching during the 2020-2021 school year. Findings include that while conflict and disagreement play an important role, agreement around philosophical beliefs that get at common purposes of teaching and learning as well as a commitment to joint work are essential to the facilitation of actions such as suggesting new ideas, considering alternate viewpoints, and embracing conflict that enable progress. Such actions yielded critical reflection on past practice and change to current and/or future practice.*

### **Introduction**

Considering that the teacher is a critical school-level variable impacting student achievement (Rockoff, 2004), teacher learning that continues to improve a teacher's effectiveness is paramount to furthering student success. Productive teacher learning provides opportunities for teacher growth – a goal that many teachers report is crucial to curbing high teacher attrition rates, particularly for teachers with more years of experience (Charner-Laird, 2005). Teacher collaboration poses one authentic means of facilitating teacher learning. Not only does collaboration have the potential to enhance communication, teacher subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, and instructional capacity (Vangrieken et al., 2015), it also offers an antidote to the isolation and individualism that characterizes the profession (Lortie, 1975).

Recent efforts to build more collaboration into professional development have taken the form of professional learning communities, reciprocal peer coaching, collaborative inquiry, and lesson study to enhance school improvement (Vescio et al., 2008; Ermeling, 2010; Fernandez, 2002). However, such efforts to foster collaboration among teachers often fail to take hold at scale. Schools

“struggle to successfully foster such collaborative cultures particularly in light of complex interpersonal relationships and evolving reform priorities” (Lockton, 2019, p. 327). Two main factors that contribute to the failure of teacher collaboration to translate into meaningful change include insufficient time and space necessary for non-superficial collaboration to occur and the top-down application that usually accompanies administrative implementation (Stoll et al., 2006). These factors create contrived collegiality over genuine engagement and demonstrate a need for further investigation into what successful teacher collaboration entails (Weddle, 2019).

In service of this need, this study seeks to examine the foundational aspects that underpin a mutually productive collaborative relationship between myself – a full time high school English teacher – and another English teacher at the public school in the Northeast where we taught. Drawing upon the idea that productive collaboration between teachers involves changes to instructional practice (Little, 1990; Vangrieken et al., 2015; Glazier et al., 2016), I define a collaborative partnership between teachers as one that is generative to all teachers involved and yields positive changes and improvements to practice. To provide an in-depth look at components that enable the collaboration to be productive, I drew upon audio-recorded dialogue of meetings we had to plan out curriculum during the 2020-2021 school year.

As top-down mandates regarding what collaboration should look like continue to evolve from the policy level (Talbert, 2010), it is critical to engage the knowledge of teachers – the ones experiencing the collaboration – to inform teacher learning practices. This paper extends the discussion regarding teacher collaboration in schools by shedding an insider light on the nuances and complexities of the factors that enable it. The study centers on the following research question: What foundational aspects underpinned a productive collaborative relationship between two teachers engaging in discussions centered around instructional practice?

While research addresses the positive aspects of collaboration and the challenges to successful and authentic collaboration within schools respectively, this study adds an in-depth micro-analysis of how certain necessary characteristics enable one teacher dyad to reach instructional change. Only through the examination of teacher collaborative partnerships in action is it possible to construct policy and conditions that address these well-documented challenges.

## **An Overview of Teacher Collaboration**

### **Productive versus Superficial Collaboration**

Despite the benefits, “simply putting teachers together will not necessarily lead to positive change” (Glazier et al., 2016, p. 3). According to Vangrieken et al. (2015), deep collaboration – discussions of problems of practice, observations of one another, critical reflections on practice – is less common than more superficial forms of collaboration. Nguyen et al. (2020) described the “joint activities of two or more parties towards a shared goal and interdependence of the parties involved” (p. 3) as one of the “hallmarks” (p. 3) of collaboration. Deep collaboration includes reflection on one another’s practice that reaches the underlying beliefs of teachers whereas more superficial collaboration never approaches this territory.

### **The Complexity of Teacher Collaboration**

Although the difference between superficial and productive collaboration is clear, literature paints a complex picture regarding the achievement of successful and productive teacher collaboration within schools. In their findings, Glazier et al. (2016) delineate that critical collegiality was “barely apparent” in teachers’ narratives about collaboration and “noncollaboration and contrived collegiality” continued to dominate in schools. Other research corroborates non-superficial levels of collaboration as uncommon due to insufficient time (Datnow, 2018), a lack of collaborative skills, unwillingness to learn about one another’s personal and professional identities, mismatched personalities or pedagogical philosophies, lack of clarity about group goals, strong heterogeneity, ineffective leadership, and non-ideal team size (Vangrieken et al., 2015; Jortveit et al., 2021).

While impediments to successful and productive teacher collaboration range from interpersonal conflicts to organizational issues, perhaps one of the biggest challenges is the forced collaboration that fails to grow into productive collaboration for a variety of reasons (Prain et al., 2021). Sometimes the implemented reform practice does not align with the organization’s underlying structure or beliefs (Argyris, 1976). Indiscriminately mandating collaborative practices fails to consider discrepancies between individual teacher beliefs that inhibit the productivity of collaboration efforts. Teachers’ perceptions of the value and quality of their collaborative experiences vary widely as some teachers feel they gain a great deal professionally and others find the process draining (Datnow et al., 2019).

In a three-year longitudinal study of secondary math teachers' collaboration, Weddle et al. (2019) detail the minutia of what causes negative experiences to occur between teachers during collaborative interaction. Ultimately, this study asserted that "the complex relationships between collaborations and emotions" rendered "teachers' engagement in effort to collectively strengthen instruction" (p. 333) unproductive and even detrimental to some teachers involved. One of the sources of frustration stemmed from "differing expectations for collaboration and teaching" (p. 333).

Furthermore, differing views on teaching itself exacerbated this frustration. For example, one of the participants in Weddle et al.'s (2019) study, Brenda, viewed improving student learning as central to her purpose and approached teaching with a growth mindset. She believed that if she set the bar high, her students would respond. In contrast, another teacher, Don, "discussed approaching his work with students by saying, 'they're not going to get it because they don't try'" (p. 334); as a result, he mentioned that he sticks to teaching "more basic stuff" (p. 334). Such divergent views about the goals of teaching foil any collaborative attempts.

Collaboration efforts between teachers can also appear friendly but end up reaffirming teachers' current practices rather than legitimately challenging them for improvement purposes (Little, 1990). As Little posits, "Do we have in teachers' collaborative work the creative development of well-informed choices, or the mutual reinforcement of poorly informed habit? Does [collaboration] advance... understanding and imagination..., or do teachers merely confirm one another in present practice?" (p. 525). Little even goes so far as to suggest that some collaboration has the potential to "erode teachers' moral commitment and intellectual merit" (p. 525).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study combines Achinstein's (2002) role of conflict in communities and Little's (1990) independent versus interdependent ties between teachers as frameworks to examine the complex nature of teacher collaboration in action.

### **Conflict Stances**

Achinstein (2002) asserts that conflict is an essential part of teacher communities resulting in productive change and learning. I specifically focus on the "conflict stances" of Achinstein's continuum of micropolitical processes that ranges from avoidant to embracing. Absorbing and/or transferring conflict

characterizes the avoidant end of the spectrum. Toward this end, communities have limited means for potentially conflicting discourse. Critical reflection about belief and practice characterizes the other end of the spectrum that embraces conflict as “active dissent and promotion of alternative perspectives are sought” (p. 442).

### **Independence versus Interdependence**

Little (1990) posits that many teacher-to-teacher relationships have the potential to reinforce individualism and isolation versus challenge these norms. According to the provisional continuum of collegial relations, many teacher relationships characterized by storytelling and scanning, sharing, and aid and assistance fall under the independence category while fewer teacher-to-teacher relationships reach the interdependence category – the other end of the continuum that requires “changes in the frequency and intensity of teachers’ interactions, the prospects for conflict, and probability of mutual influence” (p. 512). In fact, relationships of interdependence between teachers are so rare that “asked to specify essential relationships, those without whom they simply could not do their work, teachers identified an average of one person” (p. 520). The more common, weaker forms of teacher interaction such as experience-swapping or storytelling constitute the exchange of reassurance and sympathy between teachers and fortify existing problematic assumptions about teaching and students instead of engaging and dissecting them. These weaker ties between teachers do not result in any beneficial changes to teacher practice.

### **The Combination of Frameworks**

This paper brings the abovementioned frameworks together to capture the delicate, contextual factors necessary to facilitate productive teacher-to-teacher collaborative relationships. Achinstein (2002) asserts the importance of conflict amid relationships to produce change; however, too much or unproductive conflict has the potential to be harmful to the teachers involved. Little’s (1990) continuum of collegial relationships reinforces that conflict is essential to move collaborative work between teachers from the weaker end of independent to the stronger end of interdependence while her idea of joint work creates an understanding of collaborative partnerships that allow conflict to occur, apart from personal friendships between teachers, in a way that leads to a greater commitment. In conjunction with one another, these frameworks depict the delicate balance of appropriate conflict and support of certain, key beliefs about teaching and students that must exist within the context of traditional teacher professional norms for teacher collaborative work to positively influence instructional practice and become an engaging experience for the teachers involved.

## Methods

### Study Design and Rationale

As both a doctoral candidate and a full-time English teacher, this qualitative participant research enabled me to study myself as a participant in collaboration with my colleague to capture an authentic sense of collaboration (Wagner, 1993). This design as a form of teacher research is particularly important as it promotes teacher experience and practice to inform the literature regarding teacher collaboration (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). The doctoral component of my positionality allowed me access to critical friends and colleagues for the research side of this work. The full-time teacher component of my positionality allowed me access to the practical realities, constraints, and day-to-day occurrences that interact with teacher collaboration from an insider perspective. Having experienced the effects of forced collaboration that run the gamut between benign but useless to outright toxic, my identity as a teacher also colored how I approached this work. I am intimately acquainted with the urgent and profound need for authentic teacher collaboration and the positive impact it has on my own learning as a teacher.

To this end, Wagner (1993) highlights one of the many benefits of participant research as the generation of knowledge that emanates from inside contextually sound environments. This knowledge is key to complimenting outside or university generated research, especially regarding teacher collaboration. An insider understanding of the specific, contextual and professional culture of a particular school is necessary to capture the complex nature of teacher collaboration, what challenges it faces, and what enables it to work. As such, the dual components of my positionality allowed me to examine collaboration through the lens of a member of the location, culture, and context (Wagner, 1993). Inherent in this research design, with the benefits that accompany my subjectivity that informed my analysis and understanding in a nuanced way, also came certain limitations regarding generalizability. The subjectivity necessitated an outside lens to triangulate the data analysis, and I used various methods to do so. These are detailed in the data analysis section.

### Setting, Participants and Data Sources

The data in this study included 432 minutes of audio-recorded collaborative dialogue between myself and my colleague, Steve (pseudonym) – another high school English teacher at my school. We both taught one class in common – Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and Composition. This AP class has an exam that accompanies it at the end of the year and focuses specifically on nonfiction reading and writing skills. The exam required students to write three

different essays and answer multiple choice questions. The three essays comprised the curricular focus.

The school, located in a suburb of Northeastern United States, contains roughly 1,200 students in grades 9-12 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020). During the 2020-2021 school year, I was in my eighth year teaching while my colleague was in his 24<sup>th</sup> year. We spontaneously and voluntarily started collaborating on curriculum and instruction approximately four years prior when I was in my first year of teaching the AP class. At the time, I struggled with the nonfiction focus in comparison to the fiction-focused classes I had taught previously; therefore, I requested to observe Steve teaching his section when I had my prep period. It is worth noting that observing other teachers was not a common practice at the school. Prior to the first observation I did of Steve, I only observed one other teacher in the school in my first four years as part of a mandated observation swap in my first year.

During 2020-2021, observations were not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions; therefore, the collaborative dialogue during meetings became the primary source of collaboration. The audio-recorded dialogue captured 16 meetings that occurred between September 2020 and January 2021 as we planned for the pandemic-impacted school year. The meetings occurred during beginning of the year professional development time and a common prep period.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed the meetings within 24-48 hours to review the data during the ongoing data collection process and did a preliminary round of open coding (Miles et al., 2020). After this first round, I did a second round that consisted of reviewing my open codes through framework-based lenses (Merriam et al., 2016). During this round, I grouped my open codes into five major framework-related categories: philosophical agreement, conflict/disagreement, suggestion of new ideas, willingness to consider alternate viewpoints, changes to instructional practice. Having organized my codes into the five categories, I went back through each segment of data included in each category to perform a more specific coding analysis. This third round caused me to split two of the five categories into two subsequent categories. See Table 1 for further explanation.



**Table 1***Code Explanations*

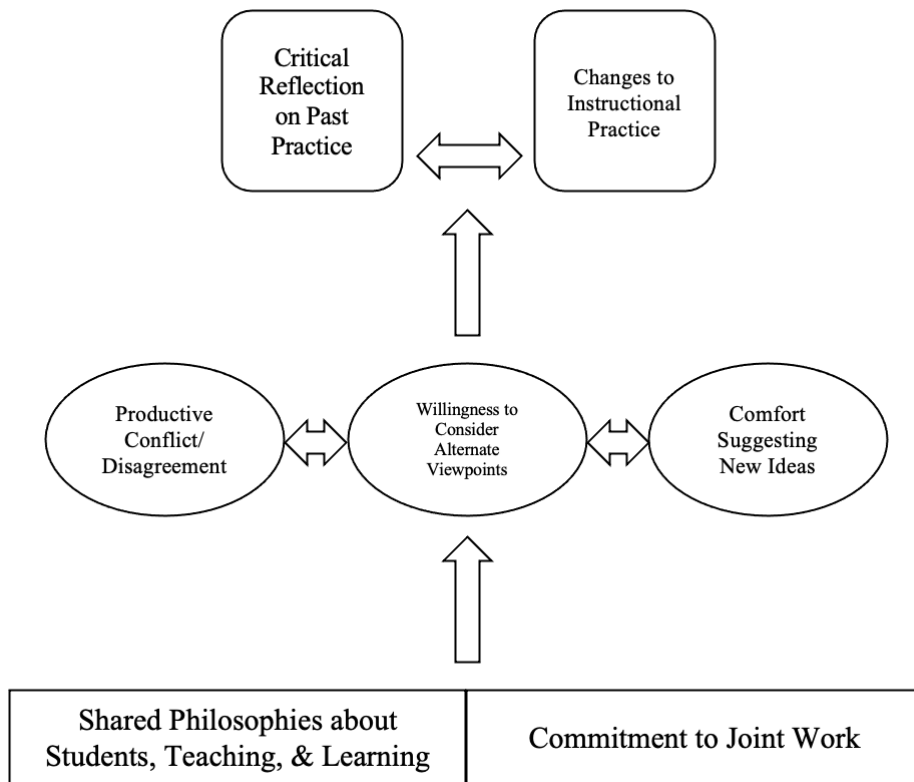
<b>Code</b>	<b>Explanation</b> (Applied to data segments that reveal...)
Common philosophical approaches	Similar purposes of teaching and learning and fundamental beliefs about the capabilities of students
Commitment to joint work	Shared philosophies about the value of collaborating, making decisions together, and working through differences of opinion to get the best possible product
Suggestions of new ideas	The proposal of potential new assessments, learning activities, sequences, etc.
Willingness to consider alternate viewpoints	The consideration of a new idea or viewpoint
Conflict/disagreement	The occurrence of opposing or differing ideas, approaches, or viewpoints
Critical reflection on past practice	The evaluation of curricular and instructional practices we had enacted in the past
Changes to instructional practice	Changes to our curricular and instructional plans based on our discussions

After the third round, I used a coding partner, who went through the data with the codebook separately from myself before we met to work through any inconsistencies (Merriam et al., 2016). Following these meetings, I realized that each time I coded a segment of data as either conflict/disagreement, suggestion of new ideas, or willingness to consider alternate viewpoints, in the same meeting transcript, I also coded a segment of data as either critical reflection on past practice or changes to instructional practice. Therefore, I created a thematic display (see Figure 1) to help visualize these connections (Miles et al., 2020). Creating this display led to two observations. First, I saw how certain categories enabled others. Second, I noticed key similarities between data segments coded under the same category. After refining the categories in the thematic display based on these

observations, I member checked (Merriam et al., 2016) the display and categories with my colleague. Based on his feedback, I edited the display so that the second level of the three key actions that enable progress had bidirectional arrows to indicate that often these actions happened in concert with one another, or one action prompted one of the other two.

**Figure 1**

*Structure for Productive Teacher Collaboration*



**Findings**

This study set out to examine the foundational aspects that underlie a productive collaborative relationship. Findings included that while conflict played an important role, agreement around philosophical beliefs that get at common purposes of teaching and learning as well as a commitment to joint work are essential to facilitating actions such as suggesting new ideas, considering alternate

viewpoints, and embracing conflict that enable progress. Such actions yielded critical reflection on past practice and change to current and/or future practice. Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between these components.

## **The Foundation**

### *Shared Philosophies about Students, Teaching, and Learning*

While the discussion that occurred throughout our meetings revealed a degree of back and forth on several decisions, my colleague and I agreed on key purposes of the class we both taught and shared a common professional approach to planning out curriculum and instruction ahead of time and then following up with how the curriculum units played out as they occurred. Perhaps the most important philosophy we shared was the belief that all students can succeed at an AP level class regardless of past performance in English classes. As an extension of this “AP for all” philosophy, we wanted students to buy into the process of improving their writing throughout the year; and many of the curricular decisions we made were to strengthen their belief that they were able to master and refine writing skills. This common philosophy manifested itself throughout various discussions including determining grading percentages to reward students for effort and measure progress, planning for revision opportunities, and organizing a mock exam in preparation for the AP exam.

As one example, we discussed how to communicate with students during the first few units centering on the first AP essay – rhetorical analysis in an untimed and then timed setting – that while the AP label of the class might be intimidating, everyone is capable of success:

Author: ...I also think they pick up the skills better the more you can piece the larger picture together for them, and it becomes more doable for them, so they buy in more...

Steve: That's why I like talking about the rhetorical analysis unit untimed and timed because now I get the philosophy of our approach that we can share with them, so they can see that they are able to do it despite it being an AP class. It makes it easier to communicate with them that although this is an AP class, if they are putting in the effort, they are going to do well (Discussion, September 2, 2020).

In this exchange, we discussed the first AP essay in our curriculum. This rhetorical analysis essay required students to identify the speaker, occasion, and main argument of the text and analyze the rhetorical choices the author or speaker makes

to effectively convey that main argument. We started by teaching the essay to students in an “untimed” manner, so they mastered the basics before moving to prepare them for writing the essay in a “timed” capacity – 40 minutes per the AP exam regulations.

This exchange demonstrated that we both believed in making our goal of getting students to buy into being able to achieve and write at an AP level. I commented that writing the rhetorical analysis essay “becomes more doable for them so they buy in more.” Steve mentioned making it clear that “they...see they are able to do it despite it being an AP class.” Moreover, we shared the goal of making the larger purpose of the class and how each lesson fit into that purpose explicit to students. I referenced “piec[ing] the larger picture together for them,” and Steve mentioned “get[ing] the philosophy of our approach to share with them.” Inherent in this exchange was our shared moral geography regarding our greater philosophy; and as Figure 1 shows, sharing these fundamental beliefs constitutes one important part of the foundation that supports other levels of action that ultimately lead to change in instructional practice—a key determinant of productive, collaborative partnerships.

#### *Commitment to Joint Work*

Another important shared understanding included that, aside from minor tweaks and differentiation based on the students in our individual classes, together we would create and negotiate the curriculum, assessments and learning activities. Steve exemplified his understanding of the value of committing to joint work in the previous exchange when he stated, “That’s why I like talking about the rhetorical analysis unit...because now I get the philosophy of our approach.” Steve indicated that by engaging in the work of dialoguing, he himself came to a better understanding of why he does what he does. This commitment to engaging in joint work comprised the second half of the foundation of the structure of productive collaborative work delineated in Figure 1.

Little (1990) categorizes joint work as critical for authentic collaboration; and this study reinforces that committing to the same grading percentages, major assessments and schedule forced us to hash out the details of our curriculum and dialogue about different decisions instead of using the easier but less involved approach of just doing something individually when we disagreed. Working through points of disagreement yielded many benefits. While this joint work approach sometimes required more disagreement and time, we ultimately believed that the joint product was better than the product that any one of us individually

could create. Those benefits only resulted from having a shared understanding at the beginning that “agreeing to disagree” was not an option.

### **Actions that Enable Progress**

The shared, fundamental philosophies in addition to the commitment to joint work formed the foundation and facilitated the second level of Figure 1 – actions that enable progress.

#### *Suggestions for New Ideas*

Oftentimes throughout the discussions, my colleague and I made suggestions for new curricular or instructional ideas. For example, Steve proposed changes to the sequence of the unit on rhetorical analysis:

What do you think about this? Just kind of throwing ideas out there. But I'm almost thinking that the traditional body paragraph structure brings us to the end of the term one. What if we stay on the rhetorical analysis unit? (Discussion, September 11, 2020).

Posed as a series of questions that indicate Steve wrestled with a new order for the curriculum, Steve suggested “stay[ing]” on the current unit versus moving to another one. During the same meeting, as the discussion regarding sequencing and pacing continued, Steve proposed changes to the order and content we used to teach the rhetorical analysis process, referencing AP practice prompts that consisted of texts by Alfred Green and Rachel Carson:

Again, I don't know if this will work, right? So, with the Green speech you teach them process...Then you go back and teach them body paragraph structure... just hear me out on this. So far, so good? Then you use Carson to just teach them depth? (Discussion, September 15, 2020).

In this excerpt, Steve dipped a toe into new territory as evidenced by phrases such as “I don't know if this will work, right?” and “just hear me out...” – both indications of a new idea forming. Some of the new ideas came from the planning stage and others evolved as responses to how the execution of curriculum occurred. Both origins compelled us to consider a novel way to enact curriculum and instruction as a potential discussion point.

### *Willingness to Consider Alternate Points of View*

Along with the space and capability to suggest new ideas is the need to consider alternate points of view even on longstanding assignments, instructional methods, and assessments. In fact, some of the most effective changes came out of one of our ideas that the other person considered and then built upon to create an even stronger idea. As one example, we discussed revision criteria for a grammar test as well as the best approach for students to learn from the mistakes they had made. Steve noted, “You talked me into it. You talked me into the 80 as a good cutoff...” (Discussion, October 14, 2020). Steve’s openness to my argument about revision criteria for a grammar test demonstrated his receptiveness to a point of view not originally his.

As another example, I considered Steve’s suggestions about the term one rhetorical analysis essay practice AP prompt involving a speech by Florence Kelley:

Author: I guess my only question, and I’m not opposed to this plan at all, is...first – they are writing an essay on Kelley? And that essay is an assertion and one body paragraph with a double quote? And a second body paragraph? (Discussion, September 15, 2020).

In this excerpt, considering Steve’s suggestion prompted me to think about how the new idea would potentially play out within the unit. After hearing his idea, I posed a number of questions – “...they are writing an essay on Kelley?... And a second body paragraph” – to help us both work through how the new idea would take shape. Being able to run with one another’s new suggestions of varying radicalness not only encouraged more considerations of alternate approaches but helped take fledgling ideas and morph them into ones that worked in the classroom.

### *Engagement in Conflict & Disagreement*

In addition to suggesting new ideas and considering alternate points of view, engaging in conflict and disagreement, supported by the foundation of common philosophical understandings and the commitment to joint work, played an important role in shaping our collaborative work. One example of conflict occurred regarding Steve’s approach to assigning homework:

Steve: You know where I stand on homework – not a fan...

Author: But no homework *ever*?

I bristled at the absoluteness of eliminating homework altogether, and Steve further explained:

Steve: I always try to think like a 16-year-old. If I can just get something done – like a timed write – and check it off, I want to do it that way.”

Author: But we don’t give timed writes for homework.

I corrected Steve about not giving timed practice essays for homework, After Steve articulated his rationale for eliminating homework completely, he challenged me to look at the homework I had prepared to assign on the calendar for my classes:

Steve: But I'm saying sometimes we give stuff for homework. Bring the calendar up.

Author: I dare you to find homework on this calendar, and you can't say it's stuff that they have to do during the period. Find me a homework assignment.

Steve: I'm looking.

When there was very little homework assigned on my calendar, Steve’s point lost some momentum. He moved, with some sarcasm, to look at previous years’ calendars that would have contained more homework:

Steve: Okay. You’re progressive. You want to bring up last year’s calendar?

Thinking that perusing old calendars would lead us down an unproductive road, I shifted the conversation toward hashing out the criteria I used to decide what homework to assign:

Author: We agree in theory; I just don’t like the absoluteness of your statement to get rid of homework because there’s times when you can assign homework in my book. Number one – something like the inquiry where it’s something they’ve chosen. Number two – when it would literally hold up the class like if we needed to discuss *Into the Wild*, and I was like take four days to read and then we’ll discuss...

Steve: Okay, same page with both of those.

Author: I’m just not going to say I’m *never* assigning homework. I agree that I think maybe this hybrid/COVID situation will help us realize what’s not necessary, but I also am not going to not assign homework because I made that rule. Oh, that was number three – if it’s in their best interest even if they don’t like it. You must eat your vegetables sometimes.

Realizing he was on the same page about the three criteria I put forth, Steve refined his original statement to being more thoughtful about what homework we assigned:

Steve: You do, but we just need...

Author: More discretion? I agree...I don't think we should be assigning hours of homework.

With the main part of the conflict about differing views of how much homework to assign simmering down, we moved beyond where we disagreed to find common middle ground.

Steve: I agree. I think what sometimes happen with me when I get to my extreme position on homework is I feel like I'm trying to save the world, and I know they are getting homework in other classes.

Author: I want you to admit that your initial interpretation on my position of homework was...

Steve: I admit it.

Having settled the conflict, we reflected on how much homework we had gotten rid of in comparison to past years and how necessary it is to have pushback from a trusted colleague as a motivating factor for reflection:

Author: It's interesting too that the last time I taught AP I was like – remember that class I had – they told me at the end of the year you can get rid of X, Y and Z. It did make me think for when I taught it the following year... And like here we are sitting a year later, and we're like – we could get rid of so much.

Steve: I think the other thing too is that some people don't look at it year after year, which it is easier to do it with someone. You need that pushback voice. (Discussion, September 2, 2020).

Steve's initial position to eliminate all homework and the back and forth about looking at old calendars and such marked this exchange as one of conflict. However, wrestling with the disagreement and conflict that naturally arose as we talked through issues of curriculum and instruction provided a "pushback voice" for each of us that allowed us to refine our reasoning behind decisions we made and change decisions when necessary. The disagreement about the appropriate amount of homework to assign forced us to determine three formal criteria that we continuously returned to. These criteria acted as a guide for how much homework was effective and appropriate. In essence, we both used the push and pull of the



conversation to re-examine our practice and think reflectively about why we did what we did when it came to homework, pacing, and other major decisions.

### **Key Collaborative Outcomes**

The top level of Figure 1 reveals that the foundation and second level enable critical reflection on past practice and changes to future instructional practice.

#### *Critical Reflection & Changes to Instructional Practice*

New suggestions, the weighing of alternate opinions, and conflict served as the stimuli for critically reflecting on past practice, paving the way for us to see areas for improvement. One instance of critical reflection arose as we considered how to streamline exam practice:

Author: I also wonder, thinking back on past years, if there's probably a point of diminishing return with the amount of practice? I guess we'll see if the exam scores suffer. Maybe we've cut out too much practice. But I just I wonder if we went over that point in prior years? (Discussion, January 25, 2021).

In this excerpt, based on our conversations and subsequent adjustments, I questioned if the amount of practicing writing assignments and activities I did in the past reached “a point of diminishing return.” At the time I gave them, I did not challenge them; however, our collaborative discussions allowed me to look back at aspects of my teaching practice and challenge them in the name of making better adjustments for the future.

These instances of perspective that allowed us to see areas for improvement led to potential changes in instructional practice – one of our main goals and a hallmark of productive collaboration. In fact, some of the most effective curricular changes we made throughout September to January resulted from a willingness to consider approaches and options we had not previously.

One such change involved shortening the length of assignments that went with each of the AP essays. This change allowed for a clearer focus on structure and quality rather than quantity and opened time for other curricula related to student interest. The following exchange reflected this adjustment:

Steve: I mean, we've fell into is breadth versus depth. It gets me excited because I think this [new] approach is going to help them be better writers...

Author: That's the only silver lining of [planning during COVID-19]. I wonder if because it's such an extreme adjustment, it forces us to think in ways we never would have – like we might have just kept that full untimed RA essay forever, you know? I also wonder if we hammer this out...if that becomes the model for other units too (Discussion, September 15, 2020).

In this example, our collaborative dialogue opened our eyes to where we had become unquestioningly enmeshed in assigning full length essays because we thought that is what should be done. Through this collaboration, however, we were able to see the potential pitfalls of indiscriminately assigning a full essay and valuing “breadth over depth.” As such, our collaborative reflections allowed us to make changes to essay units that we had taken for granted as business as usual.

### **Discussion**

This study investigated the foundational aspects that underlie a productive collaborative relationship between two teachers engaging in discussions centered around instructional practice. While teacher collaboration literature touts the benefits of collaboration when done correctly, this finding extends the micro-actions that occur within teacher dialogue to show how the productivity and instructional change comes to be.

As displayed in Figure 1, findings showed that alignment regarding certain philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning facilitated productive conflict and other actions that led to critical reflection on past practice and instructional change. These foundational underpinnings were crucial to ensuring that key actions necessary to promote critical reflection and change occurred and resulted in conflict being a source of productive versus frustrating change.

The bottom level of Figure 1 represents the foundational aspects of productive collaboration including commonality with respect to beliefs about students, teaching, and learning. While conflict is an essential part of collaborative relationships (Achinstein, 2002), it is important that teachers involved in collaboration have aligned views of the greater philosophical purposes of teaching. Without these key ingredients, disagreement over the purpose of teaching and learning leads to the unproductive conflict that Weddle et al. (2019) depict – conflict that does not result in any actionable changes, wastes time, and degrades the professional experiences of teachers. Additionally, a clear, common philosophy about the goals of teaching enables teachers to bypass lower-level disagreements and more routinely discuss higher level changes and ideas. A common

philosophical approach to teaching supports a rhyme, reason and cohesivity to instructional decisions versus a haphazard collection of decisions.

In conjunction with these shared understandings, a commitment to joint work ensured that we as teachers had to work through differences of opinion rather than use the out that we would each do something different. This commitment, however, could only happen because we both knew the other worked from a place of wanting all students to succeed at the AP level. If, for example, we did not share that philosophy, I would not commit to the joint work of honing grading policies together for fear that my collaborative partner might be making decisions from an exclusionary versus inclusionary approach to AP success.

The second level of Figure 1 shows that the foundation facilitates several actions to occur that promote critical reflection and changes to instructional practice. As noted via the bidirectional arrows in Figure 1, these three actions dynamically interact. First, the suggesting of new ideas allows for a stream of new stimuli and considerations that keep the collaborative partnership from falling on the weaker end of Little's (1990) continuum of collegial relations characterized predominantly by the reaffirming of existing practices. In the excerpts, the teacher suggesting the new idea prefaces the statement with some sort of qualification such as "just throwing an idea out there" or "I don't know if this will work but..." Such qualifications reveal the risk inherent in suggesting new ideas; however, the common, philosophical foundation and commitment to joint work provide a safe and stable space to undertake this risk. These prefaces also showed that the person suggesting is open to ways to jointly improve the suggestion.

Second, along with the foundation of key shared philosophies, the willingness of both parties to embrace alternate points of view and/or new ideas allows the collaborative discussions to translate into actions; and at the same time, the collaborative partnership provides a sounding board for experimenting with new ideas, navigating changes, and troubleshooting how a new approach plays out.

Third, in keeping with Achinstein (2002), conflict within the collaborative discussions serves an important role in negotiating decisions and making improvements. As the discussion regarding criteria for determining homework reveals, Steve's more extreme opinion on homework allowed us to examine what we were assigning – a task that became even more important as the 2020-2021 school year unfolded, and it became clear that students were struggling with the new COVID-induced models of schooling and screen time. These actions that promote progress, enabled by the common foundational aspects, ultimately support critical reflection and changes to instructional practice.

## Implications

Conflict is an important piece of productive collaboration; however, it must be the right type of conflict. Conflict over major philosophical differences such as whether all students can learn or whether an AP class should be a challenging but rewarding experience for everyone or an intimidating, gatekept experience for a select few does not lead to beneficial changes to instruction practice; instead, it leads to frustration and loss of time (Johnson, 2019). With the complexity of traditional professional norms that characterize school and teacher cultures (Lortie, 1975), it is not surprising that Little (1990) found that teachers could identify on average only one other teacher with whom they worked closely enough to describe it as joint work. As such, widespread, mandated collaboration in schools often comes and fades, receives mixed reviews at best in terms of efficacy, and does little to change instruction (Lockton, 2019; Talbert, 2010). To this end, future research might examine the efficacy of a grounded approach to collaboration that occurs naturally.

In practice, voluntary mechanisms for collaboration might allow self-selecting teachers to join and begin building the common foundation and commitment to joint work that enable successful collaboration. This approach builds up collaborative structures in schools that slowly change culture versus superimposing an outside structure to a culture that cannot support it. Simply paying lip service to the need for common understandings does not mean that mandating teachers work together causes these commonalities to develop; however, developing policies that provide teachers with the resources, time, and space necessary to build collaborative relationships versus superficial ones holds promise. The structure for productive teacher collaboration that starts with teachers examining their own philosophies toward teaching and joint work and then working toward sharing with others should be informed by the findings of this study. In fact, this structure not only elucidates the ingredients necessary to facilitate productive collaboration, but it also provides a roadmap of how policy might shape the stages of building such relationships among teachers and staff over time. Later stages might include questions, resources, and activities that exemplify and provoke appropriate conflict. Such conflict facilitates the actions that enable progress toward the two key outcomes of critical reflection and changes to instructional practice.

Rich, continuous learning opportunities are critical to keeping effective teachers in the profession. Productive and authentic collaboration has the potential to “affect the retention of these teachers and others who are in the second stage of

their careers,” enabling “them to remain...satisfied in their commitment to teaching” (Charner-Laird, 2007, p. 27). Teachers contributing to what these collaboration implementation efforts look like in their specific school contexts might increase stronger teacher ties, school culture, retention rates and ultimately, student learning.

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