Common Planning Time: Barriers and Benefits

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Abstract

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) increased the rigor of education across the United States in language arts and mathematics. This increased rigor requires students to show more than simply demonstrating procedural knowledge in their work. As a result, educators found it necessary to change the way they teach in the classroom. Additionally, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Assessment and Smarter Balanced Assessment are coming soon. These assessments will require students to construct answers instead of simply choosing an answer on multiple-choice tests as they are now doing. To accommodate the changes in rigor, student performance in the classroom and testing approaches, common planning time emerged as a means to help teachers meet these new demands. This study evaluated common planning time to identify barriers to its use and implementation as well as its benefits. We concluded that there are both barriers and benefits for educators in their attempt to implement and use common planning time in their attempt to meet the new standards.

Keywords: common planning time, middle school, benefits and barriers, Common Core
Common Planning Time: Barriers and Benefits

In recent years, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) increased the rigor of education across the United States in the areas of English/language arts and mathematics. Increased rigor in science also changed teaching approaches in this area of study. This increased rigor, regardless of the subject matter, forced students to show more than just procedural knowledge in their work. As a result, educators found it necessary to change the way they teach in the classroom. Also influencing the need to change teaching approaches is the upcoming Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Assessment and Smarter Balanced Assessment. These assessments will require students to construct answers instead of simply choosing an answer on multiple-choice tests as was common in decades past.

To accommodate the changes in rigor, and the increased demands on student performance in the classroom as well as the new testing approaches, common planning time emerged as a means to help teachers plan for and prepare to meet these new challenges. Common planning time is “a regularly scheduled time during the school day when teachers who teach the same students meet for joint planning, parent conferences, materials preparation, and student evaluation” (Kellough & Kellough (2008, p. 394).

Although indicated by groups such as the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE), the use of common planning time may be at risk due to its requirement that interdisciplinary groups of teachers be available to meet at a common, regularly scheduled time during the school’s daily schedule. Growing pressure to increase the number of teaching periods in a school day and to compartmentalize subject areas is not only reducing the length of teacher planning time, but also refocusing planning times away from interdisciplinary teams (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000).

To investigate barriers and benefits of common planning time, this research study used data gained in 2012 from one large suburban school district and one smaller rural school district. Analysis of the data identified both barriers to and benefits of common planning time in middle schools. The results led researchers to identify additional research areas that would likely provide further insight into enhancing the benefits and diminishing the barriers of common planning time for middle school teachers.

Theoretical Framework/Review of the Literature

The research study relied on a social cognitive theory focus. Proffered by Albert Bandura in the late 1970s and applied to such diverse areas as athletics, organizational behavior and mental health, the theory emphasized that learning occurs in social contexts and occurs primarily through observation (Bandura, 2001). Other theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, initially did not include the construct of self-efficacy, but added it over time. Self-efficacy, as a construct of social cognitive theory, occurs when a person’s confidence to perform a behavior successfully reflects the individual’s specific capabilities as well as environmental factors that serve as barriers or facilitators of behavior (Pajares, 2000). In some middle school
research studies, teacher self-efficacy appeared to be a prominent factor underlying their ability to perform successfully in the classroom (Silverman & Davis, 2009).

Based on the work of Anfara and Mertz (2006), the theoretical framework of this research study focused on teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and barriers of common planning time. Against the background of social cognitive theory, integrating interdisciplinary teams in middle schools can be an effective way to enhance the quality of teaching and teacher performance (Cook & Faulkner, 2010).

According to ‘This We Believe: Educating Young Adolescents’ (National Middle School Association, 2010), educators should integrate interdisciplinary studies and learning to ensure that collaborative decisions affecting instruction are research-based and pedagogically sound. The notion of collaborative decision making effort supports the use of the two- or four-teacher middle school model of team planning, as well as subject-specific planning designed to enhance the learning opportunities afforded middle school students. This supports the team model approach where each teacher has strong content knowledge in a single subject area (the Four-teacher Model) while in the Two-teacher team model one teacher has primary responsibility for two core subjects and the other teacher teaches the other two. This, in turn, allows the teachers to teach the areas they feel they are strongest (Wallace, 2007). “Interdisciplinary teams, an organizational component of the middle school concept, help teachers meet the needs of students effectively” (Cook & Faulkner, 2010, p. 2).

This research study was part of a research effort supported by the National Middle Grades Research Project (NMGRP). The research design for that project consisted of two phases. The first phase (Phase I), completed in 2007, utilized a qualitative methodology. Observations of common planning time meetings and interviews with participants of those meetings provided the data for Phase I. Phase II is currently in place. It relies on a quantitative methodology and gathers data through an online teacher survey. This research study is part of Phase II.

The Phase I study results, as reviewed by Mertens (2013), suggested that while teachers valued common planning time, they felt that they lacked knowledge on how to implement it effectively when provided little training in how to do so. In addition, the teachers who participated in the study felt that they did not have enough time to engage in common planning activities. Yet, like the Phase II results the current study reflects, the results indicated that either teachers did not have enough time or they had very little training and thus lacked knowledge of how to implement common planning time in an effective manner (Mertens, 2013).

Based on the results of the NMGRP’s Phase I results, this research study investigated three research questions:

1. What are the benefits and barriers to the implementation of common planning time?
2. Is there any correlation between or among the identified barriers?
Methods

Participants

The participants for this research study were identified by their principal as middle school classroom teachers who planned on their common planning periods and volunteered to complete the survey sent to them using Survey Monkey. The selected participants were classified into two groups. Group 1 included 28 participants from a public middle school in a large suburban district with a population of over 48,000 students. Group 2 included 24 participants from two public middle schools in a rural school district that consisted of 10 schools.

The demographics of the three schools included in Group 1 consisted of 57% Caucasian, 27% African–American and 16% other. In the rural school district, the demographics of one school consisted of 49% Caucasian, 45% African-American and 6% other. The demographics of the second school included 26% Caucasian, 70% African-American, and 4% other (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Procedure

Each participant completed an online survey using Survey Monkey. Teachers indicated consent by completing and returning the surveys. The survey results passed through the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois to the researchers.

Instrument

The Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois (https://www.cprd.illinois.edu/) designed the online survey instrument used in this research study. The survey included nine measures of study or “themes”. The themes curriculum and instruction, planned supports and assessments, professional development, teacher preparation, school scheduling, and benefits and barriers of common planning time. This research study focused on the theme #6 as noted above, Benefits and Barriers of Common Planning Time.

Respondents evaluated each item of the survey using a five-point Likert Scale that ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The following guidance preceded the list of items:

Each school received a unique link to the survey. The school, in turn, provided guidance for accessing the survey to each potential participant. The groups selected for this study noted the implementation of common planning time in their school in their request to participate. Once selected, the participants responded to survey items by indicating their agreement to the statement or question. The responses reflected the participants’ personal experiences with common planning time. The survey did not provide an opportunity for written comments. Each participant completed the survey individually. The Center for Prevention Research and Development received and processed the surveys, providing the researchers with outcomes in the form of raw data.
Results

Overall, the results acquired and analyzed showed no significant difference between the two groups across all 26 “Benefits and Barriers” items.

Table 1

*Group 1 v. Group 2 Means across All Items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On three individual items, differences did exist:

1. Our team has enough time during regular team meetings to achieve our goals.
2. Are we sufficiently trained in teaming and/or working in groups?
3. Do we understand the purpose of common planning time?

Group 1 responded to the first item with 79% disagreeing, while 100% of Group 2 agreed with the statement “Our team has enough time during regular team meetings to achieve our goals.” On the second item, 92% of Group 1 agreed while 62% of Group 2 disagreed to the question, “Are we sufficiently trained in teaming and/or working in groups?” On the third item, “Do we understand the purpose of common planning time?” 25% of Group 1 said they disagreed, but 75% of Group 2 agreed. Table 2 below shows the statistical results of these findings.

Table 2

*Group 1 versus Group 2: Significant Responses on 3 Individual Items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>$\chi^2$ (1)</th>
<th>$\phi$</th>
<th>g</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>21.40%</td>
<td>78.60%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.10%</td>
<td>92.00%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>62.50%</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>75.00%</td>
<td>12.94</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table 2 ($n = 52$) showed that out of the three test items that showed significance. Based on the Chi-square test of independence, what the results show that the respondents’ answers are not independent but related to their specific group. For item one, the phi coefficient indicates that higher levels of agreement have a slight to moderate association with the higher coded group phi = .33. For item two, the phi coefficient indicates that higher levels of agreement have a slight to moderate association with the lower coded group (hence, the negative sign) phi = -.37. For item three, the phi coefficient indicates that higher levels of agreement have a moderate to strong association with the higher coded group phi = .50. That symbol $\phi$ is the phi coefficient. The phi coefficient is also an effect size, but it is correlational in nature, interpreted as a correlation coefficient, and is unique to analyzing 2 X 2 contingency tables. For consistency’s sake, the g for item 2 can also be negatively signed.
Discussion

The results demonstrated that there were commonalities between the items that reflected a common theme, the need for training in collaborative teaching. When teachers fully understand the purpose of common planning time and receive training in team-working skills, it is likely that the time allocated to common planning time would be adequate.

The first barrier to common planning time noted in this research study was the lack of common planning time in some schools. The teachers indicated that they did not have a full understanding of exactly what to do with a common planning time (Item 3 above). Providing teachers with supervised experience and practice in how to use common planning time may provide such understanding. The results of this study suggest that more thorough common planning time training would be beneficial.

Participants perceived one of the benefits of common planning time to be a reduction in the feeling of teacher isolation occurs when working with teachers in other subject areas. Common planning time afford the opportunity for teachers to interact with each other, make consistent decisions about their students and provides time for them to discuss common goals and instructional methods such as behavior and grading policies, strategies that support young adolescent development, and academic concerns amongst students. Another benefit was the ability to collaborate about students that they all taught throughout the school day. The strongest positive response about common planning time in this study was an increased positive attitude toward teaching young adolescents resulting from a better understanding of their students’ needs and interactions with other teachers during common planning times.

While both benefits and barriers to common planning time emerged from the participants’ responses to the questions asked in this study, they raise additional questions that could serve as a basis for future research:

1. What training would prepare teachers appropriately to take full advantage of common planning time? How much training is necessary? Does it, for example, vary by teacher age, teacher years of experience or by the age brackets of the students?
2. What would remedy identified barriers of common planning time? Would each remedy identify work equally well for all teachers regardless of their teaching experience, school demographics, or training in the effective use of common planning time?
3. In what ways did students benefit from teachers planning together during common planning times?
4. What factors of common planning time, if any, contribute to increased confidence in first and second year teachers? Do those same factors contribute to increased confidence in more experienced teachers assigned to a new common planning time team?

As lifelong learners, teacher researchers can contribute to the on-going development of theories and approaches that might better explain 21st century education.
Conclusion

This research study indicated the need for further study on teachers’ understanding of the purpose and usefulness of common planning time. The rigor brought on by the latest expectations of the federal and state standards of education demands that teachers engage in common planning time. Providing common planning time for teachers to integrate curricula and standards to both present and to reinforce information would be beneficial to teachers and students alike. The results of this study suggest that preparing teachers to use common planning time appropriately and offering more training on how to plan across interdisciplinary lines would enhance the teachers’ ability to meet the new and increased expectations in rigor and knowledge. Both the preparation of teachers to use common planning times effectively and the results from additional teacher training in effective use of common planning time require further investigation to understand fully the barriers and benefits that common planning time offers to teachers.

References


