
Preface

[T]he most reliable, useful, proximate, and professional help [for teachers] resides under the roof of the schoolhouse with the teaching staff itself.

—Barth, 2001, p. 445

This book is written for classroom teachers, lead teachers, teachers on special assignment, department chairpersons, principals, assistant principals, professional learning coordinators, and staff developers who want to promote teacher collegiality and school improvement by enabling teachers to collaborate on instructional matters. Uniquely, this book is not about formal professional development opportunities; rather, it is about naturally occurring, informal, spontaneous, timely, and relevant collaboration among teachers, that is, *peer consultation*. Peer consultation refers to two or more teachers engaging in dialogue about the idiosyncratic teaching context and individual teachers' concerns. The focus of peer consultation is usually selected by the teacher who needs help, and peer consultants do not necessarily have expertise specific to a given teacher's work. Thus, peer consultants are nonthreatening partners who facilitate a teacher's reflection on teaching-learning issues, assessment of progress, and instructional improvement. The peer consultant is the unnoticed *other* who helps teachers blend scientific and craft knowledge in the complex, challenging, and often messy world of teaching and learning.

Teachers Bringing Out the Best in Teachers is based on a study of several hundred teachers from public elementary, middle, and high schools located in the southeastern United States. We asked our research participants to describe, in detail, the actions of other teachers that directly or indirectly helped them teach more effectively. We also asked them to discuss the personal and professional effects (i.e., effects on thinking,

teaching, and feelings) of such teacher–teacher interaction. This book presents teachers’ perspectives on peer consultation.

Heretofore, the world of peer consultation has been relatively invisible. It exists outside the formal practice of instructional supervision by a principal (which sadly and all too often disintegrates into control and bureaucratic snooping), outside the formal work of lead teachers and teacher leaders (which also often disintegrates into a *neither-teacher-nor-principal* role for teacher leaders and alienates other teachers), and outside the world of emergent teacher leadership (i.e., career lattices, collaborative leadership, and constructivist leadership). Peer consultation, we found, capitalizes on teacher expertise and is an effective vehicle for strengthening trust and respect among teachers, creating a positive learning environment for teachers as learners, and creating positive impacts on instruction. It results in teacher growth, confidence, and school improvement. Indeed, the peer consultant appears to be the ultimate coach for teachers, and peer consultation may well be the last frontier in teacher learning and development. We found that peer consultation is powerful in the subtle but certain way that it can develop instructional expertise and build a culture of shared effort and critical self-reflection among teachers.

This book illuminates basic elements of effective peer consultation and describes how it supports both teacher and student learning. The centerpiece of this book is the result of our study of teachers’ perspectives of peer consultation, including countless excerpts from our database that illustrate select ideas. Specifically, we present descriptions of what peer consultants actually do that leads to impacts such as improved teacher confidence and motivation, enhanced mutual respect, and reflective instructional behavior. In each chapter we present relevant concepts and strategies from the literature that will help educators think through their approach to peer consultation. We also synthesize and present extant empirical, conceptual, and theoretical literature in detailed figures and tables throughout the book. Finally, we include relevant questions, suggestions, or a discussion of implications for practice in each chapter. Taken together, our database, the literature, and our model of peer consultation provide an approach to peer consultation based on trust, collaboration, reflection, and collaborative inquiry.

What does peer consultation look like in practice? What effects does it have on teachers, teaching, and classroom management? Chapter 1 reviews the three major sources of teacher help: principals as instructional supervisors, lead teachers, and peer consultants. A brief overview of our major findings about peer consultation and a host of figures that summarize relevant literature are also included. Peer consultation skill #1, building healthy relationships by communicating, caring, and building trust is discussed in Chapter 2. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 focus on the critical skills used by peer consultants as they help teachers, including peer consultation skill #2, using the five guiding principles for structuring learning principles;

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peer consultation skill #3, planning for organizing and learning; peer consultation skill #4, showing and sharing; and peer consultation skill #5, guiding for classroom management, respectively. Chapter 7, the final chapter, discusses some of the major conclusions of our study, our expanded model of academic leadership, and the relationship between peer consultation and the development of a professional learning community in schools. Research methods are found in the resource section at the end of the book.

Because of increasing teacher shortages and fiscal challenges, American schools will be increasingly staffed by alternatively certified (and likely less able) teachers at a time when such schools cannot afford more administrators to provide instructional leadership. Fortunately, extra instructional help can be found in those talented and high-performing teachers who are naturally drawn to assist their peers' development in timely and spontaneous ways. Join us now to peer in on our peers to find them doing what comes naturally: lending a hand to colleagues engaged in the vital mission of our schools—educating our youth.