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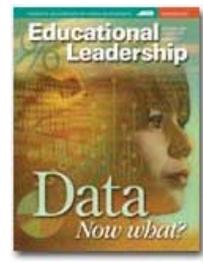
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## What Research Says About / Collaborative Inquiry

*Jane L. David*

Teachers can make better use of data when they work together than when they go it alone. But creating the conditions for such collaboration is a tall order.



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### What's the Idea?

In collaborative inquiry, teachers work together to identify common challenges, analyze relevant data, and test out instructional approaches. The idea behind this approach is that such systematic, collaborative work will increase student learning.

### What's the Reality?

Teacher collaboration does not occur naturally; it runs against prevailing norms of teacher isolation and individualistic approaches to teaching. Without specific training, teachers often lack the necessary collaboration skills as well as skills in collecting data, making sense of the information, and figuring out its implications for action. With little time and competing agendas, schools often hold unreasonable expectations for what teachers can accomplish.

Another common mistake is to make raising test scores the primary goal, displacing the more important goal of gathering rich data that suggest what adjustments are likely to increase student understanding.

### What's the Research?

A growing body of evidence suggests that when teachers collaborate to pose and answer questions informed by data from their own students, their knowledge grows and their practice changes. Borko (2004) describes teachers who met regularly to review student work in response to a common assignment. From their joint study of students' strategies, the teachers gained greater understanding of their students' reasoning and adapted their classroom practices to this new knowledge. Gearheart and Osmundson (2008) report similar findings. They studied grade-level teams of teachers who created student assessment portfolios. As a consequence of sharing and discussing their students' portfolios, teachers not only deepened their knowledge about how to assess student understanding but also used the assessment results to guide their instruction.

Teachers could conduct cycles of inquiry individually in their classrooms, but they rarely do so on their own. Collaboration seems to add both motivation and value. In their study of nine high schools, Ingram, Louis, and Schroeder (2004) report that teachers are more likely to collect and use data systematically when working as a group. When working by themselves, teachers tend to rely on anecdotes and intuition.

The kinds of data available to inquiry teams matter. If teachers do not view assessment data as timely, or if they feel that it does not accurately measure student learning, efforts to get them to use the data fall flat (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006). In addition, data sources must be rich enough to provide a basis for considering alternative instructional approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Student work products or individual teachers'

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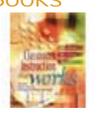
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formative assessments are more relevant to instructional practices than standardized test scores are. Yet, district and even school initiatives to conduct inquiry often prescribe use of local or state standardized test data (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006; Young, 2006). These data can point to problem areas, but they provide little guidance for improvement.

Several studies identify factors associated with effective inquiry teams. Two such factors are leadership and norms that support collaboration and data use (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006; Young, 2006). Other factors that keep inquiry teams on track are sufficient chunks of time to meet, training in inquiry skills, protocols to guide data collection and discussion, and a skilled facilitator to keep the agenda focused on implications for instruction instead of "war stories" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Gearheart & Osmundson, 2008; Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008).

## What's One to Do?

Collaborative inquiry is among the most promising strategies for strengthening teaching and learning. At the same time, it may be one of the most difficult to implement.

The biggest risk in moving to establish collaborative inquiry is to do so without providing the necessary leadership and support. To start, schools and districts need to create a shared understanding of the purpose and value of collaborative inquiry among teachers and administrators. Other essential conditions include time for teachers to meet regularly and adequate investment in training and facilitation. Common lessons and student tasks that are meaty enough to merit collective investigation can serve as a structure for discussion.

Becoming an effective inquiry team takes patience and persistence. Collaborative inquiry is not for the faint of heart, but it can be well worth the effort.

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