

# From Teacher Isolation to Teacher Collaboration: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Findings

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Received: December 24, 2015 Accepted: April 14, 2016 Online Published: April 18, 2016

doi: 10.5539/elt.v9n5p197 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n5p197>

## Abstract

This study aims at: (1) reviewing the underlying causes of teacher isolation; (2) unravelling the negative effects of isolation on teachers' professional and personal life; (3) illustrating different modes of voluntary collaboration among teachers; (4) presenting substantive evidence in support of collaboration as an efficient mode of professional development, and (5) drawing implications for practice. Since collaboration leads to professional development and academic satisfaction, it is suggested that schools: (1) be structured in ways that maximize collaborative discussion among teachers; (2) create conditions that are conducive to growth and development for both teachers and learners; (3) reinforce study groups which aim at making teachers reflect on their current beliefs and practices and change them for the better; (4) move away from the once-popular teacher training courses towards teacher study groups, peer observation of teaching and mentoring, which are conducive to constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving knowledge. The review has many other clear implications for practitioners and other stakeholders.

**Keywords:** teacher isolation, causes, collaboration, professional development

## 1. Theoretical Perspectives

### 1.1 Teacher Isolation

The theoretical perspectives presented here are classified as follows. First, teacher isolation will be defined. Then the causes of isolation will be explained, which will be followed by negative effects of teachers' isolation, and finally different modes of collaboration among teachers will be discussed.

As noted by Flinder (1988) in defining teacher isolation there are two different orientations. The first one views isolation as the conditions in which teachers work i.e., the characteristics of the teacher's workplace and the opportunities, or lack of opportunities, the teacher has for interacting with colleagues. The second orientation defines teacher isolation as a psychological state rather than as a condition of work. This orientation locates the workplace inside the individual as it is created and continually recreated through the filtering and processing of information (Flinder, 1988). Thus, teacher isolation depends more on how teachers perceive and experience collegial interaction than it does on the absolute amount of interaction in which they are involved (Hedberg, 1981).

According to the cognitive approach (Peplau, Miceli, & Morasch, 1982) to isolation, loneliness at work and professional isolation are alike in meaning. Based on this approach, professional isolation is the unfriendly experience one feels when his network of social relations at work does not work properly in some significant way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

Attribution theory (Peplau et al., 1982) divides isolation into two modes: internal and stable and external and unstable. According to this theory, internal and stable professional isolation should have a more negative impact on teachers than external and unstable ones. Furthermore, loneliness, as the result of unvarying features of the self or of the situation, leads to lower expectancies for future social relations and to greater loneliness (Peplau et al., 1982; Weiner, 1986).

Lortie (1975) described three different types of isolation. Egg-crate isolation is the physical separation of classrooms. This state is related to the school structure where teachers lack contact with each other. Teachers enter the classroom and simply shut the doors. Psychological isolation refers to the response of teachers to the

mutual interactions with each other. Adaptive isolation refers to the overwhelming state of mind when struggling to meet new demands.

David Flinders (1988) seeks to critically examine the nature of teacher isolation. He states that the existence of professional isolation presents two paradoxes. First, classrooms are full of students, and there are few opportunities for teachers to discuss their work with their colleagues. The second paradox is that teachers may view their classrooms as both a barrier to interaction and a means of protection from outside interference.

Generally, teaching is characterized by taking place in isolation (Lortie, 1975) which imposes restrictions or limitations on teachers and protect them from being judged (Snow, 2005). Literature has pointed out a number of causes for teacher isolation. Many authors state that the school structure perpetuates professional isolation, restricting the possibilities for teachers to observe and interact with one another (Calabrese, 1986; Flinders, 1988; Gaikwood & Brantley, 1992; Lortie, 1975). Others consider scheduling as a cause of professional isolation (Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Lortie, 1975). Cookson (2005) reports that the “egg crate” structure and the compressed timetables of schools make professional collaboration difficult for teachers. This situation brings teachers to a state that they find themselves alone without any interaction with their colleagues.

The cognitive approach to loneliness applied to professional isolation leads to the identification of two distinct classes or causes of isolation: precipitating events and predisposing factors (Lau & Perlman, 1982). Changes in a person’s achieved social relations or changes in his anticipated social relations can lead to advanced professional isolation. The emergence of conflicts is an example of a change that can precipitate the feeling of isolation in the workplace. Personal characteristics such as shyness and unwillingness to take social risk are consistently linked to the feeling of isolation (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). These feelings can prompt the person to be professionally isolated.

Peplau et al. (1982) state that people usually try to seek explanations and list the possible reasons for their loneliness. They classify personal accounts of loneliness into three distinct elements:

- Isolated people can usually point out a causing event that led to the beginning of their loneliness.
- People explore the maintaining causes of their isolation which typically include characteristic of the self (e.g., being too shy) or of the situation (e.g., being in a place where it is hard to meet new people).
- Isolated people typically have some ideas of the sort of changes in their social relations that would lessen their isolation.

Based on the cognitive approach to loneliness, the consequences of isolation can be weakened by cognitive processes. Weiner (1986) has classified causative attributions of isolation into three areas: locus of causality that refers to the internal or external causes of isolation as are seen by the person. Stability concerns with the duration of the cause of isolation whether it is short-lived or live longer. Controllability refers to the person’s control over his behavior.

There are other causes for teacher isolation. First of all, teachers work alone as adults with discrete student groups in separate classrooms. The very little time to engage in dialogue with colleagues about teaching practice could be the second cause. Within a school only one to two experts are hired for each subject (Trower & Gallagher, 2008) and as such have imperfect chances to discuss student learning and share problems related to work, achievements and puzzles. And lastly, interaction among faculty is often limited to cordial everyday talk instead of issues about student learning, which strengthen the professional isolation among teachers (Hadar & Broder, 2010).

What one teacher considers as isolation may be seen as individual autonomy by others. It means that, isolation within classrooms may be interpreted as protection from outsiders in the class by others. Nonetheless, this state has two negative consequences for both teachers and students. Whenever a teacher is complaining about a feeling of isolation, it is logical to assume a negative impact on his behavior and energy levels. Isolation is likely to result in burnout and feelings of extreme helplessness (Gaikwad & Brantley, 1992) which consequently affects students’ outcomes. As a result of professional isolation, teachers feel that no one cares about what they are going to do (Eisner, 1992); hence, they become frustrated at work and lose their energy. The feeling of burnout that is caused by being isolated will in turn result in disturbing the psychological, mental and physical health of the person (Neveu, 2007). Burnout may lead to negative attitudes associated with the person and thus causing the withdrawal from the job, declined job fulfillment, and quitting the job (Carlson & Thomas, 2006). Moreover, it negatively affects classroom atmosphere, learning and learners.

Having stated the problem of teacher isolation and its negative consequences on teachers’ personal and professional life, we should now review the literatures and synthesize the techniques scholars and educators

have presented to involve teachers in collaborative effort. While professional isolation leads to a state of burnout and a feeling of extreme helplessness, a collaborative atmosphere is conducive to professional growth and job satisfaction.

### *1.2 Teacher Collaboration*

In what follows, the review first defines teacher collaboration. Then it will explain the necessity of creating conditions that are conducive to collaboration. Finally, it will provide stakeholders with useful techniques that move teachers away from isolation towards collaboration.

Nowadays teachers are both subject and object of learning (Avalos, 2010). They need to cooperate with each other to develop themselves professionally. While traditionally they waited for the educator to bombard them with externally imposed methods and techniques through crash teacher training courses, teachers now collaborate and learn from each other's experience. Since the outdated "master" role has changed (Avalos, 2010), teachers can learn from each other reciprocally. Societies of teachers that have gathered together to teach will create a helpful learning atmosphere which will change their practice (Folger, 2005). While it was formerly believed that theory improves practice, within this new paradigm, it is practice that improves practice and as such teachers no longer wait for externally imposed initiatives.

Not only does collaboration improve teachers' professional knowledge and experience, but also it significantly improves student learning and achievement. Studies show that in schools where teachers collaborate on issues related to their teaching (e.g. curriculum, syllabus, teaching methods, etc.), students' achievements is higher. In other words, peers influence instructional practices which consequently influence students' learning (e.g. Goddard & Goddard, 2007; Supovitz, Sirinides, May, 2010).

Despite the positive effect of collaboration on both teachers and learners, it shouldn't be hierarchically imposed on teachers since it is a threat to professional autonomy. Demanding teachers to collaborate disturbs their right as professionals to work in isolation and can result only in "contrived congeniality" rather than a true collaborative culture (Hargreaves 1991). Some critics of systematic collaboration even offer a conspiracy theory. Scholars advocating this theory argue that any effort to embed collaborative processes into the school day represents an administrative ploy to compel teachers to do the bidding of others and demonstrates a lack of commitment to empowering teachers. Thus proponents of volunteerism greet any attempt to ensure that educators work together with the addendum, "but only if they want to" (DuFour, 2011). That is, teacher collaboration is conducive to professional development and growth if it is democratic rather than dictated. But there remains a question: "How can we involve teachers in collaboration without externally imposing it on classroom practice?"

#### *1.2.1 Peer Coaching*

To facilitate teachers' cooperation and allow them to exchange support, feedback, and assistance in a reciprocal and nonthreatening acquaintance (Ackland, 1991), teachers can collaborate through what is called peer coaching. Dalton and Moyer (1991) defined peer coaching as a company between teachers in a nonjudgmental atmosphere built on a collaborative and reflective dialogue. Through peer coaching teachers can share their knowledge and provide each other with feedback, support, and assistance. This could help them constantly learn through learning new teaching strategies, refining old ones, and solving each other problems related to classroom practice. Similarly, Robin (1995) indicates that peer coaching allows teachers to reflect upon existing practices and refine and enlarge their instructional abilities.

Cook and Fine (1997) state that teacher development is not a phenomenon that occurs on a specific day during the school year. As it was mentioned earlier, instead of relying totally on discrete in-service days and pre-service years, professional development must be closely linked to the just-in-time demands of teaching such as lesson planning and assessment of student work and this could be achieved through peer coaching. Folger (2005) stated that peer coaching will provide "communities of practice" where teachers can argue, think, try out, and refine new practices. Peer coaching responds to emergent teacher needs and inspires teachers to work and learn in a mutual community rather than wait for externally imposed ideas presented to them through the once popular applied science model of teacher education.

Some practitioners may believe that coaching is a way of evaluation not collaboration. However, coaching is different from evaluation in that coaching is a process in which education professionals assist each other in negotiating the distance between acquiring new skills or teaching strategies and applying them skillfully and effectively for instruction. The Evaluation of teachers typically implies judgment about the adequacy of the person, whereas coaching implies assistance in a learning process (Showers, 1985). Although coaching takes place in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, peers should plan every aspect of the training process carefully. The

amount of learned skills should be measured and the effectiveness of teaching skill and strategies with their students should be studied. In this sense, everything is evaluated. However, nothing could be farther from the atmosphere of coaching than is the practice of traditional evaluation.

The Norms of coaching and evaluation practice are antithetical and should be separated in our thinking as well as in practice. By definition, evaluation should not be undertaken concurrently with coaching, whereas the analysis of skills and their use is an inherent part of it (Beverly, 1985). Below is a comparison of peer coaching and evaluation excerpted from *Peer Coaching*, National Staff Development Council (1991).

<b>Peer coaching</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
trial and error approach	“best foot forward”
give-and-take; sharing both ways	one way learning
non-threatening (peers)	sometimes threatening (supervisor)
forward-looking: improvement-oriented	looking backward: what has happened
coach is invested in teacher’s success	administrator may or may not gain if teacher is successful
targets specific areas	general review, global
Ongoing	often one-shot
data: given to teacher	data: personnel file
teacher being observed does the evaluation	administrator evaluates
Focus is on “What I saw.”	focus often on “What I didn’t see.”
<b>FORMATIVE</b>	<b>SUMMATIVE</b>

Being deeply rooted in education systems around the world, evaluation can be easily implemented but how can teachers implement peer coaching? Prior to specifying the implementation of peer coaching, it should be noted that individual peers decide when and how often the observations will occur, they also decide for conditions under which the observations will be directed and what specific instructional data to be recorded by the visiting coach (Kinsella, 1995). Although peer coaching can be implemented in different ways, teachers can implement it through a non-judgmental and non-threatening process which includes the following phases: (1) pre-observation planning conference to establish observation criteria; (2) classroom observation to collect data; and (3) post-observation conference to reflect on practice, analyze the data, and form instructional goals and develop subsequent observation criteria.

### 1.2.2 Peer Observation

Freeman (1982) presented three approaches to observation by focusing on the observer’s role: (1) supervisory approach, in which the observer acts as a supervisor and provides prescriptive feedback; (2) alternative approach, in which the observer provides non-judgmental alternatives for what he/she observed; and (3) non-directive approach, in which the observer aims at understanding teachers’ experiences and goals. Literature presents us with three other approaches, one of which overlaps with Freeman’s (1982) classification: (1) collaborative model which requires a sharing of ideas between the teacher and the observer; (2) creative model which focuses on teachers’ initiatives and innovations; and (3) self-help explorative model which aims at developing awareness-raising in the observer in the process of observing someone’s teaching (Gebhard, 1999).

Taking the collaborative model into account, teachers can also collaborate and learn from each other by observing their colleagues classes. Peer observation is the process by which university instructors provide feedback to colleagues on their teaching efforts and practices. The process might include, a review of course

planning and design, review of instructional materials (handouts, exercises, readings, lectures, activities), review of learning assessments (tests, graded assignments), review of in-class interaction with students, and of instructor presentations (Bill Roberson, 2006). Despite its potential for teacher development, some scholars have criticized this mode of collaboration since: (1) it can be judgmental and threatening in nature (Cosh, 1999); (2) it has some drawbacks in terms of both objectivity and psychology (Çakir, 2010); and (3) there is no active self-development through reflection (Çakir, 2010).

Hence, for the purpose of continued learning and exploration, it is essential for the observer to: (1) capture the events of the classroom as accurately and objectively as possible and not only to make a record of impressions (Wajnryb, 1992); (2) collaboratively review the collected data to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome—in terms of a useful dialogue about strategies, and the identification of future foci for lesson preparation/observation (Murdock, 2000, p. 58); (3) collect “valid, objective, and recorded” data (Hunter, 1983, p. 43); (4) discuss specific events instead of his/her impressions (Murdock, 2000, p. 54); (5) be trained since poorly trained observers and inconsistent, brief observations can create biased results (Shannon, 1991); (6) increase the frequency of the observations since when observations occur more frequently, their reliability improves (Denner, Miller, Newsome, & Birdsong, 2002); and (7) increase the length of observations since when observations are longer, their validity improves (Cronin & Capie, 1986).

Rayan (2013) suggested a three stage process for peer observation to be effective: pre POT, during POT, and post POT. During the Pre-POT stage both the observer and the observee agree on that observer is going to observe the observee’s instruction and then s/he will share his/her observation with the observee and if necessary the observee can also observe the observers teaching and share his/her observation with him. During the observation phase, both of the teachers follow assured procedures including to be arrived in time, to be record what had happened during different stages of the teaching session, the interactions of students to be observed, and observation form to be filled, etc. And lastly during the post-POT, both of the teachers will discuss what had happened during the teaching session. Literature has pointed out a number of key principles in exploring peer observation of teaching:

- Confidentiality (Gosling, 2005; Carter & Clark, 2003)
- Departure of POT from other school procedures (Gosling, 2005; Carter & Clark, 2003)
- Making sure all teachers irrespective of grade or status are involved (Gosling, 2005; Carter & Clark, 2003)
- Mutuality with a focus on reciprocated benefit to observer and observed (Gosling, 2005)
- Insuring development rather than judgement (Carter & Clark, 2003)

### 1.2.3 Pair Mentoring

Coaching is different from mentoring relationship. Mentoring is guidance, support and advice offered by the experienced mentor to the less experienced mentee for the purpose of developing his/her academic career. In contrast, coaching is characterized by a collaborative relationship between equal teachers for the purpose of facilitating the development through feedback, reflection and self-directed learning (Greene & Grant, 2003). Mentoring is the process of serving as a teacher who facilitates and assists another teacher’s growth and development. The process of mentoring automatically includes modeling since the mentor should be able to model the techniques he suggests for the novice teacher’s development (Gay, 1995).

For the mentoring process to be effective, the mentor should: (1) be able to articulate the art of teaching; (2) have strong interpersonal communication skills to establish rapport and trust; and (3) act as a patient and active listener. According to Freeman (1993), the most distinctive characteristic of an effective mentor is his or her willingness to nurture another teacher; hence, mentors should be people-oriented, flexible, emphatic and collaborative.

In pair mentoring two teachers observe each other’s lessons, discuss areas of reciprocal interest and design future schemes (Whisker, 1996). This is less threatening; teachers can see their own teaching in the teaching of others, and when teachers observe others to gain self-knowledge, they have the opportunity to recreate their own knowledge (Çakir, 2010).

In some countries students-teachers are required to join for a certain period of time to experienced teachers classes and observe their classes as a Practice Teaching course. After this period, they are asked to start teaching. Their teaching will be observed by the mentor teacher, who will be responsible for providing feedback later. Through this course, they both progress and develop a optimistic attitude towards the teaching profession (Daloglu, 2001). In short, mentors can help beginner teachers : (1) make connections between what is learned

and the teaching context; (2) reflect on practice; (3) develop versatility in his instructional approaches; (4) be responsive to the learners' needs; (5) articulate their implicit assumptions about teaching

#### 1.2.4 Teacher Study Group

A teacher study group (TSG) is defined as a group of teachers who meet on a regular basis to share and discuss professional topics and issues based on their shared interests, beliefs, and practices (Pfaff, 2000). Much research has documented that a TSG can be an effective avenue to support modern teachers who need to emphasize their ongoing lifelong professional development and can have a great impact on teaching effectiveness (Clair, 1998). Freeman (2001) believes that in a TSG "the content can be generated through reflection and discussion, or journal writing, or it may be triggered by a reading or other external input" (p.76). Forming local TSGs that get together to present the teaching problems they sense, stating them, and finally solving them through collaborative reflection and discussion is an efficient alternative to the once popular teacher training courses, where teachers were at the consumer end of the initiatives.

Aiming at professional development and being up-to-date, teachers in a TSG gather together to stimulate trust and honesty, and reduce feeling of isolation that is experienced by most teachers. According to Matlin and Short (1991), "for the teachers, the study group is an opportunity to think through their own beliefs, share ideas, challenge current instructional practices, blend theory and practice, identify professional needs-as well as develop literacy innovation for their classrooms" (p. 68). Similarly as Short (1992) states, participants in teacher study groups are encouraged to reflect on their current beliefs and practices on subjects such as literacy learning, English language acquisition, and teacher education.

When professional development is examined through a constructivist lens, in contrast to participating in scattered traditional teacher training in-service programs, teachers in TSGs are able to construct new knowledge through a process of linking their schemata and valuable experience. In the teacher study group model, knowledge is not meant to be transmitted by experts. Constructivist notions of collaborative construction, context, and conversation (Jonassen et al., 1995) are crucial components in teacher study group communication. TSGs build up a community in which teachers interact with a small group of people (ideally four to six) to share their hopes and concerns.

In study groups, the teachers bring their specific needs and explore their profession together to identify problems and engage in ongoing professional development dialogue. By doing so, teachers can further comprehend their own experiences and the insights of other teachers, which leads the group to a new vision (Freedman et al., 1999). This reflects Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin's (1995) professional development model that entails providing circumstances for teachers to reflect critically on their experience and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about content, teaching, and learners.

TPS has received increasing attention as effective tools for professional development at all educational levels. They provide a crucial format for teachers to gain ownership and autonomy over their learning, serving as a forum in community learning and offering possibilities for self-actualization. Many schools have offered various groups for professional development. However, they are often run by administrators, supervisors or others *outside* the group. Thus, the control lies with outsiders and so the teachers in these groups do not have any autonomy, but are just passively completing a predetermined agenda. In other words, teacher study groups refer to meetings held by teachers for teachers rather than imposed on teachers by people external to the teaching circle. More specifically, teacher-initiated study groups are composed of teachers voluntarily joining a collaborative community to meet individual needs as well as to set collective goals as a group.

## 2. Empirical Findings

Having reviewed theoretical perspectives on different modes of encouraging collaboration, we should now review the effect of these initiatives on actual teaching and learning. Barber and Mourshed (2009) found that schools with the best systems focused on providing the high-quality, collaborative, job-focused professional development representative of professional learning communities. A similar study, Rosenhaltz (1989) found teachers' professional collaboration to be profoundly effective in improving teachers' efficacy and enhancing teachers' effectiveness. A study done by Miller, Harris, and Watanabe (1991) which aimed at determining the effectiveness of using professional coaching to increase positive teacher behaviors and decrease negative teacher behaviors, shows that two coaching sessions in a 5-week period were effective in improving teacher performance.

Some studies present us with empirical evidence supporting the facilitative role of peer coaching. Kohler, MacCullough and Buchan (1995) found that peer coaching leads to procedural change during coaching phase of their program. Kohler, Crilley, Shearer and Good (1997) found that teachers who are in coaching relationships

are more likely to try new skills or techniques compared to other teachers and areas not routinely discussed with a coach showed little or no refinement. In another study participants reported that the feedback they received from peer coaches were meaningful and this: (1) gave them motivation to direct their learning; (2) increased the level of trust and morale amongst them; and (3) led to a justification to do more work (Arнау, Kahrs, & Kruskamp, 2004). Still in another study by Bagheridoust and Jajarmi (2009), the effect of Peer Coaching on teacher Efficacy and professional development was analyzed. All the participants within the study found peer coaching and the collaboration with peers as a non-evaluative and low-stressed means to reflect upon and improve their own teaching. Despite its potential for teacher development and growth, peer coaching can create conflict between teachers because it interrupts norms of autonomy, privacy, and equality in school (Little, 1990).

Other studies have focused on presenting empirical evidence in support of POT. Scholars found that POT makes discussion of teaching – which is often an unseen exercise – a noticeable practice (Blackwell & McClean, 1996), and improves the value of teaching (Gosling, 2005). It also enhances the sharing of good practice and more personally enables staff to receive positive feedback on what they do well (Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004). Moreover, it reassures staff that their teaching is seen positively by their peers, whilst also being useful in helping to reveal hidden behavior that individuals may not be aware of within their own practice (Blackwell & McClean, 1996). Moreover, Bell (2001), reported that observers grew considerably from the chance to observe another teachers teaching. Another study suggests further benefits for the observer including learning about a new strategy, improving their confidence to try this strategy in their own teaching, and receiving feedback from the peers (Hendry & Oliver, 2012). Along similar lines, Ostovar-Namaghi (2011) found that classroom observation can be used for professional development if there is a shift away from: (1) summative observation of teaching towards summative observation of learning; and (2) surveillance judgment towards formative observation of teaching.

### 3. Implications for Practice

This study aimed at reviewing: (1) the causes of teacher isolation; (2) negative effects of isolation on teachers' professional and personal life; (3) different modes of voluntary collaboration among teachers, (4) empirical studies which present substantive evidence in support of collaboration. The review has clear implications for practitioners since they can use the review as a guide to move away from isolation towards collaboration. It is also useful for principals and managers in creating a friendly environment which is conducive to growth and development for teachers and students. Taking the negative effects of isolation on teachers' professional life and the inherent potential of collaboration for teacher development and growth into account, it is suggested that:

- managers structure schools in ways that promote teacher collaboration and schedule classes in a way that maximizes professional interaction;
- teachers collaborate to improve efficacy and hold regular meetings to share their problems and suggested solutions; and
- schools move away from the once-popular teacher training courses towards teacher study groups, peer observation of teaching and mentoring, which are conducive to constructing knowledge; rather than stick to the applied science model of teacher education which encourages teachers to passively wait for externally imposed changes.

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