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Leading Teacher Learning & Change in the Professional Learning Community: One School's Transformation Towards Implementing Meaningful PLCs

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Written from the perspective of an elementary school principal, this paper supports the notion that teacher professional development occurs when teachers collaborate in professional learning communities. Grounded in the literature, this paper begins with an overview of professional learning communities. Next, an analysis of the expectations involved when teachers collaborate is explored, followed by a scrutiny of the role of school leaders in professional learning communities. Woven throughout the paper are examples from one elementary school's attempts to implement meaningful professional learning communities.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN CONTEXT

Professional learning communities are focused on collaborative learning to enhance teacher effectiveness in order to improve students' learning and achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Southworth, 2011; Stoll, 2011). Such a focus represents a fundamental shift in how teaching and leading are historically perceived (Southworth, 2011). As a school-based instructional leader, my notion of professional learning communities (PLCs) is grounded in two assumptions. First, I assume

knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and is best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). Second, I assume that actively engaging teachers in professional learning communities increases their professional knowledge and enhances student learning (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008).

The school where I am a principal is a kindergarten to grade six elementary school located in a large urban centre. We serve a highly diverse, multicultural and mobile community. Within the school's population of approximately 420 students, over 80% of students receive special programming or additional support. As the school's instructional leader, I have organized professional learning opportunities for the school's teachers with a focus on improving pedagogical practices and learning about learning. Specifically, as a staff, we are working together to create meaningful, genuine tasks for students; this has helped build commitment in our school to incorporate research-based knowledge as well as subject it to discussion and examination. Over the past four years, we have worked to establish a school-wide culture of professional learning. We have organized and re-organized our professional learning communities to reflect the type of collaboration we feel is inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice with a purpose to improve student outcomes.

As professional learners, we have framed our PLCs around five key principles (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). First, our PLCs are structured around a shared vision and purpose. We have created a protocol (Brown Easton, 2009) to use each time we meet. This protocol reflects three documents teachers have used extensively in the school as part of our professional learning conversations: Friesen's (2009) Teaching Effectiveness Framework and Rubric, Alberta Education's (2010) Inspiring Education document, and the Galileo Educational Network's Discipline-Based Rubric for Inquiry Studies (n.d.). Second, each teacher in the PLC takes collective responsibility for the PLC. We have created roles for ourselves to use each time we meet. One person takes a turn presenting; others act as "worriers" for each role, ensuring questions are asked from the perspective of

each role. No one stays in a specific role; a different role is assigned for each meeting. A sample of this protocol is included as Appendix A. Third, there is deep reflective professional inquiry. An important part of the conversation occurs when teachers bring their problem of practice to the group. Through mutual conversation and case analysis, teachers apply new ideas to their own classrooms. As one teacher said, "I find it useful to hear what the other teachers are doing and to work collaboratively to develop projects. It is helpful to have the expertise of peers provide feedback and share experiences". Fourth, group as well as individual learning is promoted. All teachers are learners with their colleagues. As one teacher articulated, "having others share what they are doing in the classroom provides me with new ideas for my class. The feedback and ideas I have received when I have presented has been an opportunity to enhance and improve my lessons". Last, there is a strong element of collaboration. Feelings of interdependence are expressed and the PLCs have evolved with the general understanding that better teaching practice may not have happened without them. It is this element of collaboration that I specifically want to address next.

THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AS COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

In a number of the top systems examined by McKinsey & Company (Barber and Mourshed, 2007), teachers have moved beyond the individuality traditionally associated with teaching and are participating together in authentic professional learning opportunities. The feedback from the teachers at the school support this notion, as one teacher said, "PLCs are an effective format for sharing and discussing the work we are doing in our classrooms. It also provides a format for receiving feedback on our work from our colleagues".

In effective professional learning communities members take collective responsibility for the learning of students (Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Robinson, 2011). Teachers work together to solve problems of practice; "knowledge is "shared, 'big questions' about classroom practices are discussed, and the identification of problems and solutions requires a combination of information from student

assessments and the shared professional knowledge that teachers and administrators bring to the table" (Anderson, Leithwood, & Seashore Louis, 2012, p. 231). Further, professional learning communities appear to support sustainable improvements because they build the capacity that helps schools continually progress (Levine, 2011; Stoll, 2011). Based on the premise that educators can learn from each other, learning communities can create and maintain an environment that fosters collaboration, honest talk, and a commitment to the "growth and development of individual members and to the group as a whole. [Professional learning communities] work from the assumption that teachers are not mere technicians who implement the ideas of others, but are intellectuals who are doing knowledge work" (Lieberman & Miller, 2011, p. 16). As one teacher at the school articulated, "I liked when the members of the PLC were excited to share their strategies in the classroom, and then I would go back and try something new".

A collaboration model for professional development is particularly appropriate because of the importance of shared knowledge and expertise in the development of thinking (Hadar & Brody, 2012). Collaborative practice involves professionals working together to develop "effective instructional practices, studying what actually works in classrooms, and doing so with rigorous attention to detail and with a commitment to not only improving one's own practice but that of others as well" (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010, p. 75). Hattie (2009), in his synthesis of over 50,000 studies and 800 meta-analyses of student achievement, concluded the "remarkable feature of the evidence is that the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching" (p. 22). This is reflected in one teacher's comment, "I really like how there are other ideas out there. It is great when each member of the group has something they are strong at to help me and give suggestions for feedback".

As seen in the evidence above, in the literature on professional learning communities, 'teacher collaboration' is a widely used concept. However, collaboration is also a problematic concept as it has

varying meanings with regard to the quality of collaboration and learning outcomes. Further, too much collaboration can emphasize conformity to group norms at the expense of inventiveness and initiative (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Additionally, high group cohesion may lead to 'groupthink' where group members agree too much with other group members and have lost the ability to be critical (Meirink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2010). Further, group processes are dynamic. As such, individuals in the group will exhibit different levels of openness to change and innovation (Hadar & Brody, 2012). As one teacher has articulated to me recently, "I find that the style that we have started with this year where people are assigned to different tasks is a little distracting, as there is a tendency to get bogged down in minutiae rather then exploring the ideas presented". Furthermore, it is quite possible in some circumstances individuals may benefit from collaboration, whereas for others, possible power structures existing in the group may inhibit learning (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Further, as Opfer, Pedder, and Lavicza (2011) contended, collaboration driven by deep, personal, and enduring interest and motivation is challenging to achieve, as the level of trust and risk-taking required to learn in a collaborative environment is difficult. It must be noted it has taken four years of dialogue, collaborative learning opportunities, feedback, and experimented PLC formats to come to this protocol model of professional learning. Mutual trust, respect and supportive collaborative conversations take time to build. Additionally, each year we reflect on how we've organized PLCs at the school and have a conversation about what is working, what is not, and how PLCs should continue. It is in my opinion; this is where the role of the leader is instrumental.

THE LEADER'S ROLE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Professional learning communities do not seem to develop naturally. School principals' leadership in the area of teacher professional learning is critical to the creation and success of a school learning community (Anderson et al., 2012; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom & Seashore Louis, 2008). The school principal is "often the catalyst in intentionally creating a PLC

since 'this is not the way schools are typically organized'" (Levine, 2011, p. 33). To do this complex work, principals require skills in communication, conflict mediation, and data management (Sackney & Walker, 2006). Furthermore, Speck (1999) suggested in developing learning communities, the principal and staff need to confront questions about expectations for students, responsibility for data, the role of the principal in the PLCs, and how the PLC will know when students have reached the desired outcomes.

Speck (1999) stated the principal "must be the reflective practitioner who is capable of continuous learning and reflecting on practice as opportunities for leadership and modeling throughout the school" (p. 34). Blase and Blase (1999) in their research noticed effective instructional leaders promoted teachers' professional growth in collegial conversations about teaching and learning. These leaders enhanced the collaborative community in their schools by supporting the development of coaching skills and reflective conversations among educators. Further, they worked to provide time and opportunities for peer connections among teachers. Blase and Blase (1999) concluded that teachers appreciated these opportunities as it demonstrated the belief that growth and development are most likely to occur with open, mutual, critical dialogue among professionals.

I have learned that leading the learning community goes beyond the realm of the work of the school principal; rather, success in a professional learning community occurs when leadership is shared, teachers are empowered to examine the data with their colleagues, and are trusted by the leaders in the school to make informed decisions about teaching and learning (Stoll, 2011). Principals need to "ensure that the strategies, structures, processes, and systems are in place so that educators are touched with inspiration and mobilized to form relationships and thereby transform the school into a learning community" (Sackney & Walker, 2006, p. 354). As Speck (1999) observed, the "essence of principalship is creating a collaborative school where learning really matters and the community of learners cares deeply about each student's achievement" (p. 5). Therefore, it is up to principals and

teachers to make certain that professional learning communities remain focused on their original intent: places of collaboration, learning, and community, where professionals strive to ensure their schools and all their students are the best they can be.

CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

As successful as professional learning communities have the potential to be, the evidence of links between professional learning communities and student learning outcomes is somewhat unexceptional (Stoll, 2011; Robinson & Timperley, 2007). The key to increased student achievement seems to be learning communities with a persistent focus on student learning and achievement by the teachers in the learning communities (Hargreaves, 2008; Stoll, 2011). As well, the opportunity to process the meaning and implications of new learning with one's colleagues appears to be fundamental to the change process (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Therefore, if teachers focus on analyzing the impact of teaching on student learning and process new understandings and their implications for teaching, then the professional learning community should positively impact student learning.

At their best, professional learning communities are "powerful organizational strategies to enable and empower teachers and others to learn and work together in improving the quality and results of teaching, learning, and caring for all their students" (Hargreaves, 2008, p. 187). The capacity for reflection, inclusiveness, and collaboration that lead to the attractiveness of models such as this can also be their undoing, especially when followed by compliance, rhetoric, and prescribed normalcy (Hargreaves, 2008). As such, researchers strive to determine which learning opportunities are effective for creating change in teachers' practice (Guskey, 2009; Mesler Parise & Spillane, 2010; Timperley et al., 2007), however the research is broad. This is problematic for practice as it is "unclear whether time and money should be spent on expanding teachers' formal professional development, on working to better enable teachers to learn from their colleagues on the job, or on some combination of the two approaches" (Mesler Parise & Spillane, 2010, p. 324).

Based on my experiences and my reading of the teacher professional learning literature, I recommend effective teacher development activities should to be fluid and responsive to the contextual needs of the school. My advice for leaders would be to focus on the richness and relevance of the variety of opportunities for teachers to learn. When teachers work together to deliberate intelligently about student learning and courageously question assumptions within a context that is meaningful to them, improvement is evident throughout the life and learning of the school (Hargreaves, 2008).

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Appendix A

PLC Protocol Roles and Role Descriptions

Presenter	Facilitator	Assessment	Student Engagement	Connecting with Expertise	Technology	Note-Taker
- brings planning ideas to the group (at various stages) - brings 'burning' questions - brings problems of practice - brings relevant curriculum - hosts the meeting in his/her classroom	- keeps the conversation going (starts meeting, keeps eye on time) - ensures each participant has an opportunity to be involved - brings in the key resource documents when necessary (TEF, Inquiry Rubric, Framework for Student Learning) - establishes roles for next meeting - Possible Questions: Why is this important (so what/who cares)? What do you want to improve? What do you hope to see at the end?	- concerned with assessment aspects of the planning & implementation - Possible Questions: How will you incorporate on-going assessment? Peer Assessment? Self-evaluation? Are the assessment criteria collaboratively designed? Have you used a wide-range of assessments to inform your instructional decisions? How will students take this work and establish learning goals & next steps? How do we incorporate teachers, peers, adults from outside the classroom in the assessment of the work? What will be your assessment artifact?	- ensures the inquiry study leads students to build deep knowledge that leads to deep understanding - Possible Questions: Does this inquiry originate with an issue, problem, question, or exploration that provides opportunities to create or contribute to knowledge? Does this work ask students to engage in collaboration with each other and with the discipline? Is this a 'real' problem (one that is central to the discipline?) Are students asked to engage in thinking requiring strong habits of mind, innovation & creativity? Is this inquiry "hard fun"?	- connects the inquiry to the larger community - Possible Questions: Will this inquiry ask students to think, act, and engage with ideas and core concepts as a historian, chemist, biologist, writer, journalist, etc. would? How does this inquiry require students to address relevant outcomes, but still be grounded in life & work beyond the school? Whom should we talk to about further external expertise in this area?	- reflects on using technology appropriately in the inquiry study - Possible Questions: What technologies do you think are most appropriate to the task? How do we ensure ongoing, online access to the study as it develops? Where should you go for expertise in this area? How will students use technology to demonstrate learning (artifacts, etc.)? What is a good timeline for technology use (start of inquiry, middle, end)?	- ensures the conversation is captured (for both the presenter and the group) - posts the minutes on the school's lite-site in the PLC folder