



Professional learning communities create sustainable change through collaboration

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The term *professional learning community*, or PLC, has been widely used in education to represent various groups assembled to work together for a variety of reasons. These groups often include grade level groups, interdisciplinary teams, and subject area departments. Growing numbers of schools have implemented professional learning communities as a method for bringing about sustainable change. DuFour (2007) noted that schools use professional learning communities to increase the capacity to transform and improve. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) defined professional learning communities as “[organizational structures in which] teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (pp. 3–4).

Studies from the world of business have helped educators to examine schools and to understand why traditional methods and structures are ineffective in improving student learning and teacher performance (Cowan, 2003; Senge, 1990; Wenger, 2000; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The ideas of shared vision, shared purpose, and trust that are embedded in Senge’s learning communities and in Wenger’s communities of practice have laid the groundwork for developing professional learning communities in educational settings to bring about sustainable reform.

At the core of the professional community concept lies the belief that simply providing instruction is not enough; educators must also ensure students are learning (DuFour, 2004). The work of educators in professional learning communities has been found to increase the

capacity of all members to assist students to achieve academically (Bezzina, 2008; Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994; Cawalti, 2003; Hord, 1997, 2008; Huffman, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, 2010; Olivier & Hipp, 2010).

We must not forget that developing and sustaining professional learning communities in schools requires leadership and direction. School administrators have the opportunity to perform a vital role in developing these structures. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) noted, “As visionary leaders, administrators can incorporate the professional learning community model in their schools to increase understanding and communication, improve problem-solving capacities, and develop an organized change process for collectively building ‘community’ in the organizational structure of the school” (p. 248).

In this column, the focus will be on our understanding of professional learning communities: early research findings, the essential elements of these structures, and potential barriers to their implementation. By examining the essential elements, we can be better prepared to evaluate the functionality and effectiveness of professional learning communities; and by being cognizant of the barriers to implementation, we can avoid possible problem areas.

The roots of professional learning communities

To understand the concept of professional learning communities, one must look at the research both inside and outside the field of education. The concept of professional learning communities has roots that

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can be traced to the work of Judith Little (1982), Peter Senge (1990), Susan Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), and Etienne Wenger (1998). Little (1982, 2006) examined the connection between school improvement efforts and relationships among teachers to add to the foundational aspects of professional learning communities. In a focused ethnographic study of six urban, desegregated schools, Little examined school as a workplace. She found that professional development that is continuous in nature is more likely achieved when: (a) teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete talk about their practice; (b) teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching; (c) teachers plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together; and (d) teachers teach others the practice of teaching. In schools that are more successful, Little (1982) found that “interaction about teaching is consciously and steadily focused on practice, on what teachers do, with what aims, in what situations, with what materials, and with what apparent results” (p. 334). One of the contributions of Little’s research was the idea that teacher isolation is not conducive to school improvement. Schmoker (2005) described this research as beginning to make a case for learning communities.

Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b) provided additional foundational research for professional learning communities. Rosenholtz’s research demonstrated that achieving high levels of collaboration among teachers benefits schools. From a study of 78 elementary schools in Tennessee, Rosenholtz (1989a) identified schools as high-consensus schools or low-consensus schools. In high-consensus schools, there was evidence of shared purposes and goals as well as collaboration in the development of policies and criteria for teacher and student performance. Collaboration in problem solving was a key element in establishing what Rosenholtz called a “common technical culture.” Low-consensus schools lacked the elements of collaborative practice that developed a common technical culture. The result in low-consensus schools was the isolation of teachers in their classrooms, which led to “insulating barriers around their working lives” (1989b, p. 430). Rosenholtz’s research (1989b) also identified principals as playing a significant role in shaping the organization of the school and, therefore, the professional learning community. In most academically successful schools, principals demonstrated a belief in the relationship between teacher learning and student learning.

An examination of the roots of professional learning communities also leads to the work of Etienne Wenger (1998). Wenger and associates (2002) defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). While such groups occur naturally in organizations, “leading knowledge organizations are increasingly likely to view communities of practice not merely as useful auxiliary structures but as foundational structures on which to build organizations” (p. 21). Wenger and associates observed in their work that participants have ideas, experiences, and knowledge that lead to new approaches to solving problems. Other elements of communities of practice that are also foundational to professional learning communities include shared practice and purpose, trust, and mutual respect.



Professional learning communities may reduce or eliminate the sense of isolation teachers experience in many schools. photo by John Lounsbury

In short, Little (1982, 2006), Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), and Wenger (1998, 2000) discovered the following common characteristics of successful schools: supportive working conditions, shared values and goals, collaboration among teachers and administrators, and a focus on student learning. Groups of educators possessing these attributes would eventually be known as professional learning communities.

Early research on professional learning communities

In addition to the foundational work of Little (1982), Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), and Wenger (1998, 2000), studies were conducted in the 1990s that provided insight into professional learning communities in schools. In one of the studies conducted by Newmann (1991), 24 public schools that had been involved in restructuring were selected to “develop new knowledge on how organizational features of schools can be changed to improve the education of students” (p. 1). Newmann (1991, 1994, 1996) and Kruse and Louis (1995) identified learning communities as an essential component of schools most successful at restructuring. Newmann (1996) identified the conditions that fostered the development of learning communities as: (a) shared governance that increases teachers’ influences over school policy and practice; (b) interdependent work structures, such as teacher teams, that encourage collaboration; (c) staff development that enhances technical skills consistent with the school’s mission; (d) deregulation that provides autonomy for the school to pursue a vision of high academic standards; and (e) parent involvement in a broad range of school affairs (excerpted from p. 8). Kruse and Louis (1995) identified reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, a collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared values and norms as the elements necessary for professional learning communities.

Dimensions of professional learning communities

In summary, the attributes of professional learning communities gleaned from the research include: (a) shared values and vision (e.g., focus on student learning, high expectations for teachers and students, shared vision for teaching and learning); (b) shared and supportive leadership (e.g., nurturing school administrators, shared power and authority, broad based decision-making); (c) collective learning and application to practice (e.g., sharing information, seeking new knowledge and skills, working collaboratively); (d) shared personal practice, (e.g., peer observations, coaching, and mentoring); and (e) supportive conditions that encompass both relationships (e.g., trust and respect, risk taking) and structures (e.g., resources of time, money, people, and materials and communication) (Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008).

Shared values and vision

Senge (1990) asserted, “You cannot have a learning organization without a shared vision” (p. 209). Shared vision, beliefs, and values imply more than a mission statement that is handed down to a group of teachers. A vision statement that is imposed on the group does not provide the impetus to move the group forward in achieving its goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Senge, 1990). Developing a vision that is “characterized by an undeviating focus on student learning” (Pankake & Moller, 2003, p. 8) has been identified as a hallmark of a true professional learning community.

Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have used shared leadership and decision making to bring about school improvement.

From Senge’s (1990) work, a vision leads to the collective courage for risk taking and new thinking and serves as a rudder for direction. Shared values and vision impact the ways in which teachers work individually and collectively toward common goals. Printy and Marks (2006) found that when teachers and principals share a belief in providing an excellent education for their students, the “schools do not undertake innovation purely for the sake of change” (p. 131). Eaker and Keating (2008) stated, “When schools passionately and sincerely adopt the mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students, they are driven to pursue fundamentally different questions and work in significantly different ways” (p. 15) that, according to the research, help improve student achievement (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hord & Sommers, 2008) and increase the efficacy of teachers and administrators (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). This goes a long way toward motivating teachers and administrators to maintain confidence and high expectations for increasing student academic performance.

Shared and supportive leadership

Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have used shared leadership and decision making to bring about school improvement. According to research (Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003), administrators in schools with effective professional learning communities participated in a nurturing relationship with the school that allowed for shared leadership, shared power, shared authority, and shared responsibility. Administrators have the critical opportunity to build the capacity of teachers and direct the focus of that capacity toward improving student learning (Sergiovanni, 1990). To do this, a principal must clearly communicate the expectations that exist for teachers, build capacity, and monitor and review the process.

Collective learning and application to practice

Hord (2009) described the learning within professional learning communities as “a habitual activity [in which] the group learns how to learn together continually” (p. 40). Collective learning and application to practice has been found to promote seeking answers to questions about what students need to learn, how we will know it has been learned, and how we will act when students struggle (Cohen & Hill, 2001; DuFour, 2004).

To incorporate collective learning, the capacity for dialogue among the members must be fostered. A professional learning community must function as a democratic environment that “allows dissent and debate among its members, and this can result in increased understanding and learning of the members” (Hord, 1997, p. 37). When educators learn together, new skills and strategies evolve as they question the status quo in search of the best knowledge and practice (Hord, 1997).

Shared personal practice

Shared personal practice requires respect and the development of trust (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Conducting peer observations, sharing feedback, and coaching or mentoring all assume a major position in the professional learning community. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) noted that shared practice enables teachers to assume roles such as mentor, mentee, coach, specialist, advisor, and facilitator. DuFour (2004) posited that shared practice requires “team members to make public what has traditionally been private—goals, strategies,

materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results” (p. 4). In discussing shared practice, Sergiovanni (2000) noted, “Within communities of practice, individual practices of teachers are not abandoned but are connected to each other in such a way that a single shared practice of teachers emerges” (p. 140).

Supportive conditions

From their research, Huffman and Hipp (2003) concluded that supportive conditions are the “glue that is critical to hold the other dimensions together” (p. 146). Supportive conditions include both supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Hord, 1997, 2008). Relational conditions are characterized by trust, respect, caring relationships, recognition, celebration, risk taking, and reflective dialogue (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997). Structural conditions include time and space for collaboration (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Teachers often report that time and the pressure to meet other demands of the job were stumbling blocks to professional learning community development. Proximity of people, consideration of the schedule, and common planning times were reported to be structural considerations that impacted the success of developing learning communities.

Barriers to developing and sustaining effective professional learning communities

While the positive effects of professional learning communities are found throughout the literature, drawbacks that inhibit their implementation do exist. The development of professional learning communities requires significant change for a traditional school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Oper and Pedder (2011) stated, “Creating systems, supports, and norms that encourage both individual and organizational learning and getting the balance between internal and external resources of learning are difficult for most schools” (p. 392). Building professional learning communities that will bring about change in the classroom and thus student achievement is challenging due to the amount of work and time involved and the cultural changes that are necessary (Fullan, 2006; Wells & Feun, 2007).

Beyond the potential difficulties associated with developing a professional learning community are the tremendous challenges involved in sustaining this

innovation (Olivier & Hipp, 2010). Fullan (2006) noted that a change will not be sustained if the district or other system levels do not actively support and foster it. In one study, Maloney and Konza (2011) found that the sense of shared vision that was initially perceived for the community waned as the group faced challenges with the passage of time. They observed, “When differences in philosophical perspectives arose, some teachers did not appear to have the confidence to voice their opinions or challenge the more dominant views” (p. 83). Outside assistance may also be needed to sustain a professional learning community, especially due to gaps in pedagogical and content knowledge in the group (Huggins, Scheurich, & Morgan, 2011).

In the current version of *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010), attention is paid to a shared vision of courage and collaboration. Emphasis is placed on creating organizational structures that foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships (p. 31). The emphasis is on creating a “team,” characterized by a sense of family. “Students and teachers on the team become well acquainted, feel safe, respected, and supported, and are encouraged to take individual risks” (p. 31). There is note of the positive impact the team has on the “professional lives of teachers, expanding a collegial focus” (p. 31). In essence, the 16 characteristics and the four essential attributes of successful schools for young adolescents work interdependently to set the stage for professional learning communities in middle grades schools. If the middle school concept as described in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010) is implemented, the barriers to implementing professional learning communities may be avoided.

Concluding thoughts

The literature on professional learning communities has three implications for practice: the significance of professional and personal relationships in schools, the importance of principal support, and the necessity of supportive structures. Researchers have documented the importance of relationships in developing successful professional learning communities. Teachers expressed the belief that for teachers to develop caring and trusting relationships in schools, principals must serve as models. Principals need to understand that they set the tone for professional and personal interactions that occur within their schools. Price (2012) noted, “Principals’

relationships with their teachers affect principals’ and teachers’ satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment levels” (p. 40). This implication for practice is in sharp contrast to the negative impact of favoritism, principal isolation, and creating the school as a competitive environment.

The role of leadership is to create conditions that support continuous professional learning that results in improved classroom practice.

The second implication for practice that emerges from the research deals with the principal’s support in developing and sustaining professional learning communities. As Hord (1997) concluded, a professional learning community can only be implemented successfully with “the leader’s sanction and active nurturing of the entire staff’s development as a community” (p. 6). This sanction and nurturing can come in the form of providing time in the daily schedule for staff to meet and setting expectations for what happens when members of the learning community come together.

The third implication for practice from the research is the necessity to create structures that support the work of professional learning communities. While structures can vary according to school context, the role of leadership is to create conditions that support continuous professional learning that results in improved classroom practice.

As Hargreaves (2008) summarized in the foreword to *Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices from Research and Practice* (Hord & Sommers, 2008):

Professional learning communities are now ubiquitous. Few educational leaders and decreasing numbers of teachers remain unaware of what professional learning communities are meant to be—communities of professionals caring for and working to improve student learning together, by engaging in continuous collective learning of their own. (p. ii)

Conversation Starters for Professional Learning Communities

The following questions correspond to the five dimensions of professional learning communities discussed in this column. Use these questions to begin conversations about professional learning communities among your faculty and staff.

1. What evidence in your school points to a shared vision and values that are focused on students?
2. What evidence in your school exists for shared and supportive leadership?
3. In what ways are teachers at your school sharing their practice with colleagues?
4. What structures are in place at your school to support collaboration among teachers, administration, and other staff?
5. How would you describe the relationships that exist in your school among teachers, administrators, and other staff?

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