

# Who is the “Professional” in a Professional Learning Community? An Exploration of Teacher Professionalism in Collaborative Professional Development Settings

*Laura Servage*  
*University of Alberta*

This study is a survey and interpretation of professional development literature related to professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. Current K-12 trade publications focusing on PLCs were analyzed against four different theoretical models of professionalism. Each model encourages and legitimates a different understanding of the knowledge content and practices that make teachers and their schools “professional.” The article concludes that PLC learning presently embraces the technical and managerial dimensions of teachers’ work at the expense of craft knowledge and critical perspectives, resulting in narrow and impoverished understandings of teacher professionalism, and limiting potential contributions of PLCs to teachers’ professional growth and learning.

Key words: PLCs, teacher learning, neo-liberalism, school reform

L’auteure présente un inventaire et une interprétation de la littérature sur le perfectionnement professionnel en lien avec les communautés d’apprentissage professionnelles (CAP) dans les écoles. Des publications spécialisées portant sur les CAP de la maternelle au secondaire ont été analysées à l’aide de quatre modèles théoriques de professionnalisme distincts. Chaque modèle favorise et justifie une compréhension différente du contenu du savoir et des pratiques qui donnent un caractère professionnel aux enseignants et à leurs écoles. L’auteure conclut que l’apprentissage dans les CAP englobe présentement les dimensions techniques et administratives du travail des enseignants au détriment de la connaissance du métier et des perspectives critiques, ce qui entraîne une compréhension étroite et appauvrie du professionnalisme de l’enseignant et limite l’apport potentiel des CAP à la croissance professionnelle et à l’apprentissage des enseignants.

Mots clés : CAP, apprentissage chez l’enseignant, néolibéralisme, réforme scolaire

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are assuming an increasing role in teacher professional development in Canada and the United States. Popularized and perhaps best known through the work of Richard DuFour (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), the basic premise of PLCs is that teachers can and should be working together to plan lessons, develop assessments, study curriculum, and otherwise improve student learning (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Klein, 2004). Specifically, the professional learning community model formalizes these collaborative efforts, and embeds them in the school day as a regular component of teachers' work. Collaborative efforts encourage teachers to become active and conscientious learners, based on the belief that public education must respond to and prepare students for a complex and rapidly evolving world (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Hargreaves, 2003).

The notion of the learning community in and of itself is not new. It has gained popularity alongside growing appreciation of the contextualized and highly social nature of learning in general, and has recognizable manifestations in learning technology, adult learning, and workplace learning (Bandura, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1926/1997; Wenger, 1998). The question – to what extent is a teacher a professional? – is not new either; no shortage of literature puzzles over whether teaching is a profession, a semi-profession, a vocation, or work that “anyone can do.”

What is new is how this discourse about teacher professionalism plays out within the increasing use of embedded – and in some cases mandated – collaborative work and collaborative professional development. The ubiquity of the phrase *professional learning community* in education may be attributed to mere habituated use, but even this begs deeper scrutiny of what common meanings accompany common vernacular. Specifically, what does it mean to say that a learning community in a school is a *professional learning community*? My research, which seeks a tentative answer to this question, considers some implications for teachers' professional development in PLCs.

I problematize the *professional* qualifier not because it is wrong or inappropriate, but because it can imply different, contesting beliefs about the proper content of teachers' collaborative learning, and the proper

ends of teacher collaboration. I argue that when educators use the phrase *professional learning community*, they are, often unconsciously, associating teacher professionalism with a certain set of behaviours, dispositions, and learning priorities as these are made manifest in collaborative professional development initiatives.

It is important to shed light on these associations because the professional learning community model has emerged within public policy contexts that are shaping educators' experiences with public education in some very deliberate ways. First, the promotion of lifelong learning toward obtaining a competitive edge in global markets means that the economic utility of education dominates policy priorities (Bottery, 2000; Codd, 2005). A second policy influence is the devolution of the welfare state. The consequence for public institutions, public education being one of them, is an increased emphasis on efficiency and accountability as business models and business values are applied to the public sector (Bauman, 2005; Bottery, 2000; Codd, 2005).

This policy climate impacts the ultimate aims of education, and the beliefs and values that drive school reform efforts in industrialized Western countries. My own reviews of school improvement literature in the commercial press oriented to collaborative professional development demonstrate that the professional learning community model is advanced not to reinforce existing teaching practices, but to reform them (e.g., DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Lambert, 2003; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004). Popular works like DuFour and Eaker's (1998) *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, or Linda Lambert's (2003) *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*, premise their models for teacher collaboration on explicit statements that schools are in need of radical change.

Yet for the most part, practitioner-oriented trade literature that advocates collaborative professional development, Dufour's work being a prominent example, focuses on implementation for school reform with little or no critique of the educational ends that such reform furthers. Implemented without this critical consideration, I argue, the professional learning community may be used to reinforce a limited vision of what schools can or should be providing.

Close scrutiny of what counts as *professional* teacher learning in PLCs thus contributes to a necessary critique of the ultimate aims of collabora-

tive professional development in schools. Toward this scrutiny, I first propose that a professional learning community has considerable potential to produce both individually and collectively held norms and beliefs about the knowledge and practices that make a teacher a professional. I then delve into how professionalism has been or might be represented in a PLC, showing through four different representations of teacher professionalism how different epistemological and ideological assumptions lead to different priorities for teachers' collaborative learning efforts.

I conclude troubling what I believe to be the too-easy alignment of PLCs with present policies in many countries that emphasize efficiency, accountability, and performativity as guiding values for public education. How teacher professionalism is defined and practised through PLCs may determine whether collaborative professional development efforts will challenge and critique this state of affairs, or simply reinforce it.

#### PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION

If professional learning communities are, as many suggest, to be the new way for schools to implement policy changes, provide for professional development, and otherwise manage educational change (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004), educators can also expect that PLCs will be places where many of the forces that shape teacher professionalism will be played out. The question of professional socialization is thus significant for educators' understandings of professional learning communities.

The socialization of teachers in preservice training is explicit and deliberate. Once teachers begin practice, however, much of their socialization into the profession becomes hidden and haphazard. Despite the professionalizing efforts of teacher unions and professional regulatory bodies (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Kerscher & Kaufman, 1995; McClure, 1999), few teachers seem to embrace a professional identity linked to a larger, explicitly normative professional culture. Rather, teachers' professional identities tend to the local and particular. In schools where the standards and norms of professional behaviour are explicit and effective, this grassroots constructivism toward learning a

professional identity is a positive force. However, in schools where professional identity is either dysfunctional or not actively considered at all, professional culture becomes problematic. Professionalism may be diffuse and implicit, fraught with unexamined assumptions, and offering few opportunities to openly express, test, and refine beliefs and practices.

Some research suggests that professional learning communities have the power to make professional norms more explicit (Hargreaves, 2003; Taylor, Servage, McRae, & Parsons, 2006). If teachers experience a greater sense of professionalism through their engagement with one another in collaborative work (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Little, 1990; Taylor et al., 2006; Wilms, 2003), it may be a consequence of the professional learning community model (and other collaborative models) that explicit professional norms are created. At the local level, the practices, beliefs, and values actively engaged in daily professional practice constitute these norms.

But, as I now hope to show more clearly, the professional learning community model in no way provides a unified or definitive case for teacher professionalism. Collaborative efforts have the potential to create any number of norms of practice. If PLCs are perceived to have the power to create and reinforce teachers' sense of professionalism, it follows that one ought to consider how this professionalism might be constructed. Certainly multiple interpretations are available, and certainly these interpretations will undergo permutations and create different standards of professionalism, given different political, economic, and social climes. What, then, are the possible ways in which a professional learning community might construct professional norms?

To exemplify some of these possibilities, I have provided an exploration of the connotations, associations, and patterns of understanding that different images of professional action might create within the collaborative contexts of a professional learning community. Although these constructions are by no means categorical or exhaustive, I hope that they will serve as an interesting stimulus for conversation: an examination of the nuances educators and educational researchers may be overlooking or taking for granted when they speak of *professional learning communities*. Drawing from a similar approach that Coldron and Smith (1999)

used to examine teacher professional identity, I have chosen four conceptual models to explore: the professional teacher as a *scientist*; the professional teacher as a *caring moral agent*; the professional teacher as an *advocate for social justice*; and the professional teacher as a *learning manager*. None of these ideas is new, but none has been given much consideration with respect to its impact on the workings of professional learning communities.

*Is the Professional Teacher a Scientist?*

In just one of ubiquitous comparisons with the medical profession (see also Hargreaves, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Winch, 2004), Caldwell (2000) describes his vision of teacher professionalism:

One expects doctors . . . to make use of an increasingly sophisticated battery of tests and select a treatment . . . [to] keep up to date with the latest developments in their field through private reading and successful participation in regularly organized programs of professional development. . . . We expect full accountability. . . . It is . . . entirely appropriate to show that teachers can be as fully professional as medical specialists, whose status in this regard is held in society to be unquestionable. (p.194)

Caldwell's (2000) description reflects a romanticism that seems to emerge in reference to the medical field (Eraut, 1994; Evetts, 2003a), and certainly conveys a faith in "tests" and "treatments" to determine right courses of professional action. His vision aligns nicely with policies that privilege scientism, or what Tobias (2003) describes as "technicist and instrumentalist" (p. 450) beliefs that science can be relied upon to solve complex problems. A major tenet of the United States' *No Child Left Behind Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) is the encouragement of "scientifically-based research" (p. iii) and educational interventions based on "scientifically-valid knowledge" (p. iv). Similarly, in Canada, the *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement* (AIS) has encouraged "evidence-based practice" drawn from "solid research" (Alberta Education, 2006). Ontario's professional learning community initiative, *Managing Information for Student Achievement* (MISA), has as its objective "increasing . . . capacity to work with data and information to support improved student outcomes" (Government of Ontario, 2007, ¶1).

Should teachers, then, consider themselves to be professionals if they are performing “sophisticated batteries of tests” and determining appropriate “treatments” in the classroom? Is it a focus on these sorts of activities that makes a learning community into a *professional* learning community? Policy emphases on hard evidence suggest that when teachers are mandated to collaborate in professional learning communities, they may also be mandated to engage only in ways that are perceived to further the science of teaching. If positivism dominates what constitutes knowledge in teachers’ collegial work, professional learning communities may be expected to focus their efforts on the sorts of performativity advocated by DuFour and Eaker (1998) and the U.S. Department of Education (2004): namely an emphasis on “what students should know and be able to do” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 151). What science is – what research is – is deemed that which is observable and measurable.

Where teachers participate willingly in collaborative work that emphasizes performativity, it may be that they are somewhat unconsciously “buying in” to positivist knowledge as the foundation for professionalism. Fournier (1999) proposes that the ideology of professionalism may serve as a disciplinary mechanism, an idea that Evetts (2003b) extends by discussing the positive connotations of being deemed competent and a professional, and the concomitant fear of being dubbed incompetent, or amateurish in the performance of one’s work. Thus ideology can serve as a means to regulate professional behaviour from within by shaping how teachers construct their own professional identity. A “rather unusual emphasis on such occupations as medicine and law” (Evetts, 2003a, p. 396) seems to serve as a benchmark for professionalism, regardless of its appropriateness. Thus constant comparisons to the medical profession – specifically to doctors – may act as a bait-and-switch, wherein the higher status of these professions (Caldwell, 2000; McClure, 1999) leads some teachers to associate professional status with the knowledge claims that are appropriate in the medical sciences, but, I would argue, much less appropriate in the social sciences.

A further unfortunate consequence of positivist constructions of teacher professionalism, emphasized through words like *scientific*, *rigorous*, *solid*, and *evidence*, is the narrowing of educators’ understanding of teacher research. It may be a little over the top to suggest that a profes-

sional learning community is an epistemological battleground because, in practice, it is difficult to isolate the effects of quantitative and qualitative ways of knowing on teaching practices. It is, however, safe to say that present policy contexts discourage the use of qualitative, subjective or craft knowledge in teachers' professional discourses.

Although "scientific" knowledge still rules the day in terms of professional legitimacy, a powerful alternative discourse is created in the fields of teacher research and reflective practice. Authors like Linda Darling-Hammond (1997), Lawrence Stenhouse (1983), and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) have contributed significantly to a counter-paradigm that seeks to solidify the knowledge that teachers use and learn from by unifying it within its own theoretical discourse.

I suspect that most teachers do not consider their daily classroom decisions as falling within a rubric of competing knowledge claims, nor do they necessarily recognize the role of epistemology in their professional status. However, if teachers are able to recognize PLCs as sites of knowledge construction with implications for their professional legitimacy and professional identity, perhaps this awareness will result in stronger advocacy for the inclusion of more participatory and qualitative forms of practitioner research as a much needed counter and complement to the present emphasis on quantitative educational research.

#### *Is the Professional Teacher a Caregiver?*

PLCs conjoin the concepts of *professional* and *community* in such a way that one should ask how the connotation of one word impacts the other. In this section, I closely scrutinize the notion of *care* as it is represented in *professionalism* and *community*, and then use this examination to highlight what I believe to be an important tension inherent in the professional learning community concept.

In the most idealized sense, professionals are thought to care for their clients by placing client interests above their own (Eraut, 1994). For teachers, this caring usually takes the form of commitment to the best interests of students (Stefkovich & O'Brien, 2004), and for many teachers this commitment is passionate and heartfelt. Traditionally, however, professional care has often been understood as a form of duty or obligation, founded on transcendent, Kantian ethics (Carr, 2005). Carr claims that

for some professions, for example in teaching and the ministry, it is far more important that professional care (and its philosophical underpinnings) be understood as something that occurs within the context of relationships. For Carr, teaching and learning shape “the very fabric of human moral and civil association” (p. 262); hence mere duty and prescript is an insufficient moral foundation for teachers’ dispositions and actions.

Carr’s claim is shared by many others who argue that teachers’ professional conduct must be grounded in relationships and contexts rather than only in an abstract justice orientation of contractual rights and obligations (Campbell, 2003; Furman, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 1994; Stefkovich & O’Brien, 2004). The ethical decisions of educators often affect people they care about and people in their care. It is, therefore, difficult for teachers to be dispassionate and transcendent in their reasoning (in the Kantian sense); rather, they are apt to consider feelings, relationships, and contextual factors in their ethical reasoning (Carr, 2005). This reasoning justifies the appropriateness of the ethic of care to teaching.

However, authors who advocate for ethics of care do not restrict their vision to isolated relationships between teachers and individual students (Gregory, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 1994). Noddings (2005) has persistently emphasized the familial aspects of a school community. Beck’s (1999) review of school change literature shows that school communities are widely imagined and portrayed in intimate terms as families or villages, characterized by interdependence, common values, nurturing relationships, and an emergent, organic quality that confounds more rational models of organizational life.

Given these connotations of community, what might a professional learning community, guided by an ethic of care, look like? Because education in this model is conceived holistically, teachers’ collaborative efforts would focus not only on academic achievement, but on cultivating students’ talents, gifts, and characters in the interests of serving others (Noddings, 2005; Starratt, 1994). Many also draw connections between the caring orientation and democracy (Furman, 2004; Gregory, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994; Starratt, 1994), suggesting that PLCs would occupy themselves with work and curriculum that furthers the school community as a democratic forum. The ethic of care also calls for highly personal forms of reflective practice (Campbell, 2003; Elkins, 1985),

wherein active moral reasoning takes place in critical reflections and critical conversations on how to best serve students. Educators might summarize that a PLC founded on an ethic of care would be one that places a high priority on democratic discourse, and on positive, nurturing relationships within the PLC itself and within the wider community of a school's staff and students. The content work of such professional learning communities would likely extend beyond pedagogical considerations for academic achievement because teachers would also value and pursue work that fosters students' gifts and moral characters as well. The processes of such a community would be self-consciously democratic and reflective.

I believe that most teachers relate more readily to an ethics of care than the analytical language and thinking embodied in more abstract moral principles and ethical codes. However, elements of either approach inform the daily moral life of teaching and schools, and tensions between these approaches have a bearing on professional learning communities. To explicate these tensions a little more clearly, I begin with the observation that, ideally speaking, morals or underlying values are aligned with beliefs and actions. I further assume that in cohesive and high-functioning social groups – here for example a school PLC – members share similar values that generate similar norms of practice.

With this in mind, even the most caring and cohesive schools are still very often between a proverbial rock and hard place in their decision making. On the one hand is the orientation to care. On the other, accountability and outcomes-driven policies, which in turn must generate norms of practice in schools, are more philosophically aligned with deontological or contract ethics than an affective and contextualized ethics of care. This understanding is evidenced in the popularity of such slogans as “All children succeed” or “Learning for all,” which appeal to a universal sense of duties and entitlements.

Such standardized goals for student learning, which are exemplified in the work of DuFour and Eaker (1998), are often deemed appropriate activities for professional learning communities and other collaborative work (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000). Thus collaborating participants are asked to determine right courses of action deontologically and analytically within environments – the school community and the professional

learning community itself – that are more likely to elicit decision making based on an ethic of care. These competing moral paradigms, I believe, lie at the source of much cynicism surrounding PLC work. Cynicism may be bred if teachers sense that the inherent *ethic of care* in community relationships is being exploited to further what are perceived to be contradictory, dehumanizing, and technocratic standards-driven outcomes. The opposite is also possible: teachers may focus on positive, affective outcomes of an increased sense of community without giving critical considerations to the ends that are being furthered through this collegial work.

What remains to be seen – and the collaborative context of a PLC sets an interesting new stage for the question – is whether school improvement, especially in current policy contexts driven by standardization and accountability measures, can foster an ethic of care that recognizes the depth of relationship that grounds so much of teaching and learning.

*Is the Professional Teacher a Social Justice Advocate?*

It is possible to create a professional learning community that focuses on measurable outcomes. It is also possible to create a PLC that focuses on relationships. However, neither the *scientific PLC* nor the *caring community PLC* necessarily recognizes the political dimensions of schooling. The scientific model potentially breeds a myopic study of data and a forfeit of most any real knowledge construction or reflective deliberation about the ends of teachers' work. The caring community model, I believe, more closely approximates how teachers think about their work. But, care in and of itself does not necessarily guarantee that power will be shared in equal and just ways within the school community. Beck (1999) cautions that romanticizing schools as communities may cause educators to neglect the political dimensions of schooling.

Starratt's (1994) ethical framework for schools recognizes these political dimensions by balancing an *ethic of critique* with an *ethic of care* and an *ethic of justice* (p. 46). As Starratt describes it, the ethic of critique, drawing from the critical theory tradition, digs beneath what seems normal and natural to challenge unjust social arrangements: "The theme of critique forces educators to confront the moral issues involved when schools disproportionately benefit some groups in society, and fail oth-

ers" (p. 47). Critical pedagogy begins with the assumption that schools should be places where students are taught to pursue social justice through democratic practices (Merrett, 2004).

Coupling critical pedagogy with structural accounts of professionalism draws attention to the special role of the professional as a mediator between the state and citizenry (Bertilsson, 1990; Tobias, 2003), and provides a foundation for constructing a professional teacher as an advocate for social justice within the school and beyond it. If professionalism is thus defined, what are the implications for the processes and outcomes of a professional learning community?

An orientation to critical pedagogy in a professional learning community could offer some significant strengths. First, a PLC creates an embedded and collegial structure within which critical reflective practices can occur. It is possible that one reason why teachers are not more politically engaged is because they do not imagine that they can make a difference, or have any real say in what schools are, or should be. Although some of these interests are represented collectively through unions and professional organizations, I suggest that teachers' thinking tends to the local and immediate. The politics of education, as they are "duked out" by governments and professional bodies, may be too abstract and removed to engage many teachers in ways that are meaningful to them.

If there is a void created here for teachers' sense of their own political efficacy, the professional learning community model, with an appropriate application of critical pedagogy, has some interesting potential as a highly local but structured means to better engage teachers and, by extension, their students and school community, with social justice issues. Justice here is not simply a curricular add-on: In some schools, sidestepping politics is akin to putting heads in the sand. For example, in schools with high First Nations/Métis/Inuit or English as a second language (ESL) student populations, a strict focus of collaborative efforts on improved student learning is unlikely to be successful if participants are unable to have conversations about systemic issues that produce achievement gaps with glaring correlations to race, language barriers, and/or socio-economic status.

Critical pedagogy provides a theoretical tool that teachers can use to name the problems that their students experience in more holistic ways that incorporate academic, social, and systemic barriers to school success. In this way, professionalism is manifested in advocacy on behalf of students and parents who lack the knowledge, resources, or social capital to benefit fully and fairly from public education.

Critical pedagogy could also shape how a professional learning community creates and uses knowledge. Critical pedagogy positions teachers and students to consider the relationships between knowledge and power. Anderson and Herr (1999), for example, believe that teacher research is presently marginalized at least in part because it is a potential threat to the hegemony of traditional, codified forms of knowledge and research. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue that such traditional forms of knowledge disempower teachers by increasing their dependency on outsider expertise, and downplaying the value of more local and particular forms of teacher learning and teacher knowledge. With epistemological assumptions that privilege outsider knowledge, a professional learning community can create a collegial environment while still reinforcing a passive and consumptive approach to learning.

However, the professional learning community model has the potential to shift this balance of power if its activities focus on critical evaluations of outsider expertise, and on the co-creation of new knowledge through teacher research. Using critical-emancipatory (action) research, a PLC could itself, or with a larger school community (by involving students and parents), undertake learning that is qualitatively different from the technique-driven pedagogy that seems to be the dominant focus of current collegial activities (Bottery & Wright, 2000; Codd, 2005). In this way, professionalism might entail teacher advocacy for the legitimacy of teachers' own, situated practitioner knowledge.

If a downside exists to a professional learning community that actively engages in critical pedagogy, it may be that this form of teacher collaboration represents too great a challenge to the norms and values that presently guide most schools for it to be a realistic alternative. Present policies that shape the decisions about how collaborative time will be used are inimical to the active pursuit of social justice as a learning process or objective. Teachers themselves may also have difficulty get-

ting their heads wrapped around this kind of PLC; it requires not only that teachers buy into the premises of critical pedagogy, but also that they make a priority of collaborative activities that have the potential to further social justice. Such a global and long-term objective seems unlikely in the face of other pressing and practical concerns such as assessment practices and curriculum study.

Also, as shown by Herr's (1999) account of how a teacher research project spawned a significant politicization of student race issues to some troubling ends, a focus on social justice that highlights race, class, gender, or other forms of social difference can antagonize a school's staff and students. Herr's work highlights the micro-political complexities of schools, and the extent of the deliberative communication skills required to manage them. Potentially, these dynamics are debilitating to the functioning of a learning community, and to a school's ability to help students learn. Although these concerns are not cause in and of themselves to avoid political issues, they should serve as a cautionary note.

*Is the Professional Teacher a Learning Manager?*

If the medical field has furthered conceptions of professionals as disinterested scientists, the increasingly blurred lines between professionals and managers (Broadbent, Dietrich, & Roberts, 1997) legitimizes a form of professionalism that pragmatically accepts policies and takes their efficient implementation as its fundamental purpose. Bottery (2000) describes managerialism as value placed on economic productivity, a clear and institutionalized mandate to further it, and the rational allocation of material and human resources to achieve it. Managerialism, as explained by Bottery, is more than a collection of techniques; it is a distinct ideology with a profound impact on the daily life and daily activities of organizations.

From Bottery's (2000) description, it is not difficult to see a fairly straightforward application of this ideology in professional learning communities. A managerial focus values maximizing the efficiency of teachers' collaborative time, and providing evidence of that efficiency in the form of meeting minutes, reports, operationalized goals, and projected timelines. Site-based management on tight budgets encourages administrators to adopt this perspective. Where scarce time and money

are invested to create collaborative spaces, it is not surprising when administrators assume a managerial stance and press PLC activities to prove out as a maximally productive use of school resources.

Although this sort of accountability has an appealing degree of common sense, in the end it likely creates more problems than it solves. First, it is entirely disempowering, because it places no faith in collaborating teachers to work together effectively. The consequence for professionalism may be a “low-trust” environment (Codd, 2005, p. 203; see also Campbell, 2003; Frowe, 2005) wherein teachers’ choices and behaviours are the product of control and accountability mechanisms rather than an internalized and reflective sense of professional ethics (Codd, 2005; Noddings, 2003). At its extreme, and sadly something being experienced by many U.S. schools under *No Child Left Behind*, this low-trust environment may extend into a full-blown climate of fear when accountability measures extend to teachers’ positions being dependent on student achievement outcomes (National Education Association, 2006). Low-trust climates generate insularity, defensive postures, and conservatism. A low-trust climate is very unlikely to breed the sort of open dialogue required to develop flourishing and effective conversations about good teaching; yet this criterion is described as an important feature of a professional learning community (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).

A managerial approach also focuses teachers’ efforts on the means rather than the ends of their work. In his study of perceived teacher autonomy, Friedman (1999) makes a distinction between “principle” and “routine” decision making, noting that the latter “do[es] not deal with fundamental aspects of the organization’s work and [is] not intended to alter the organization’s basic rules in any way” (p. 62). He notes that literature around teacher autonomy tends to equate autonomy with pedagogical decision making – a concern echoed by other authors (Ben-Peretz, 2000; Bottery & Wright, 2000). There is a danger that any latitude provided for teachers in how students are taught may result in mistaking autonomy in the area of implementation for the more significant forms of autonomy that teachers do *not* have (Ben-Peretz 2001; Bottery & Wright; 2000; McClure, 1999).

Codd (2005) has further pointed out that a managerial focus lends strongly to standardization of outcomes. In teaching, this focus has taken the form of increasing use of standardized assessments, intervention models, reporting practices, and even teaching methods in the form of best practices.

Summarily, a managerially driven professional learning community can be expected at best to laud efficient implementation as the hallmark of teacher professionalism. I see two possible implications here, depending upon whether teachers accept or reject an ideology of managerialism. The first is that a professional learning community is more aptly characterized as a working group. Here, teachers may embrace – or at least grudgingly accept – that their collaborative mandate is to get things done. I consider this unfortunate. Like the proposed *teacher as scientist* model for the professional learning community, the *teacher as manager* model downplays the critical and moral dimensions of professionalism and the aesthetic, craft dimensions of teaching. The activities of a managerially driven professional learning community may be limited to those that best lend themselves to standardization: assessments, reporting practices, intervention protocols, and pedagogical best practices.

The second possibility, and the more likely one, I believe, is that teachers will reject the managerial focus, and in doing so, reject the professional learning community model. This outcome would also be unfortunate because it is the result of a mistaken conflation of the PLC model itself with a given ideology that shapes its content focus and norms of participation. The latter are choices. Teachers may fail to recognize that, driven by other choices, the professional learning community model has the potential to uplift the professional status of teaching, foster creativity and inquiry in practice, and relieve the isolation that characterizes so much of teachers' practices.

#### TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM AND TEACHER LEARNING: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

From the range of constructs I have just presented, it should be clear that for teachers' collaborative learning activities, the *professional* qualifier is very much subject to interpretation. In relation to this observation, if

learning is to be the primary activity and objective of a professional learning community, one may also conclude that a PLC can embody many varieties of learning, formal and informal, codified and tacit. It would seem, then, that professionalism, as a simple qualitative descriptor of collaborative learning activities, is not very helpful.

However, if one recognizes the extent to which the concept of professionalism can be created or constructed according to the desired ends to be served by a PLC, one opens up for consideration the ideological implications of its use. In other words, the professional qualifier in a PLC may be seen not as describing the learning that is taking place but as *legitimizing* it. I have proposed earlier in this article that the collaborative nature of learning in PLCs makes them important sites of teachers' professional socialization. In a professional learning community, teachers' actions are subject to peer scrutiny and sanctions that professional bodies and organizations have traditionally used to regulate professional conduct and establish professional norms. In this way, learning is legitimized as professional from *within* the structure of a PLC and its local contexts.

Of more pressing concern, however, is how learning in a PLC is legitimized from without or from above. Although practitioner-oriented trade publications like DuFour and Eaker's works (1998, 2005) laud professional learning communities as catalysts for leadership and empowerment among a school's staff, several authors have pointed out that what is *learned* in a professional learning community may very well be determined from on high through government policy, outsider expertise in the form of educational research (Bottery, 2003; Codd, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003), and, as I suggest here, even by the guidance dispensed in popular professional development literature.

As Evetts (2003a) argues, the distinction between professionalism as determined from *within* by a professional group itself, and professionalism imposed or mandated from *without*, is significant. The former case more readily supports the claim that a PLC empowers teacher learning and professional development. The latter case gives weight to the suspicion that, as Codd (2005) and Evetts (2003a) have proposed, collaborative interactions prop up an "ideology of professionalism" (Evetts, 2003a, p. 407), which in turn serves the ends of an organization or entity that

makes use of the professionals' skills and knowledge. In this case, PLCs as sites of learning provide some appearance of professional autonomy, when in fact the learning content is largely pre-determined.

It is thus important that, when educators deem teachers' collaborative learning as a professional activity, they inquire first into who is defining, and thereby legitimizing the learning as professional, and second into whose interests are served by the contents and scope of this learning. Education policies emphasizing standardized, measurable educational outcomes, efficiency, accountability, and the performative value of knowledge have become typical of industrialized Western countries in an era of neo-liberal reforms to the welfare state (Bauman, 2005; Bottery 2003; Codd, 2005). Several popular school professional development works clearly reinforce such policy priorities, DuFour and Eaker's (1998) "take no prisoners" approach to student achievement being a prominent example.

I argue that neo-liberal policies and rhetoric are successfully persuading many teachers, administrators, and school reformers that the learning that takes place in a PLC is professional only to the extent that it reinforces education as managed, measurable, and objective performances on the part of teachers and students alike. However, by scrutinizing and challenging assumptions about what makes a learning community professional, educators and educational researchers open up PLCs to a broader, richer range of possibilities for teacher learning and professional development. PLCs as sites of moral deliberation or education for social justice are two alternatives proposed in this work, but I believe that the most exciting possibilities for teachers' collaborative learning rest in the hands of teachers themselves. Whether a PLC will eventually afford this sort of creative, grassroots professionalism remains to be seen, but it is my hope that my analysis contributes to the critical approach educators require if they are to find and fulfill the true potential of teachers' collaborative learning.

## REFERENCES

- Alberta Education. (2006). *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)*. Retrieved October 31, 2008, from <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/aisi.aspx>
- Anderson, G., & Herr, K. (1999). The new paradigm wars: Is there room for rigorous practitioner knowledge in schools and universities? *Educational Researcher*, 28(5), 12-21, 40.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognition theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Work, consumerism and the new poor* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Beck, L. (1999). Metaphors of educational community: An analysis of the images that reflect and influence scholarship and practice. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35(1), 13-45.
- Ben-Peretz, M. (2001). The impossible role of teacher educators in a changing world. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(1), 48-56.
- Bertilsson, M. (1990). The welfare state, the professions and citizens. In M. Burrage & R. Torstendahl (Eds.), *The formation of professions: Knowledge, state and strategy* (pp. 114-133). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Bottery, M. (2000). *Education, policy and ethics*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Bottery, M. (2003). The leadership of learning communities in a culture of unhappiness. *School Leadership & Management*, 23(2), 187-207.
- Bottery, M., & Wright, N. (2000). *Teachers and the state: Towards a directed profession*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Broadbent, J., Dietrich, M., & Roberts, J. (Eds.). (1997). The end of the professions? In J. Broadbent, M. Dietrich, & J. Roberts (Eds.), *The end of the professions? The restructuring of professional work* (pp. 1-13). London, UK: Routledge.
- Campbell, E. (2003). *The ethical teacher*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: McGraw Hill Education & Open University Press.
- Caldwell, B. (2000). Strategic intentions for professionals in world-class schools. *Prospects* 30(2), 189-200.

- Carr, D. (2005). Personal and interpersonal relationships in education and teaching: A virtue ethical perspective. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(3), 255-271.
- Cibulka, J., & Nakayama, M. (2000). *Practitioner's guide to learning communities. Creation of high-performance schools through organizational and individual learning*. Washington, DC: National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 449141) Retrieved November 2, 2008, from Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Web site: [http://www.eric.ed.gov/RICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/16/ca/ff.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/RICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/ca/ff.pdf)
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Fries, M. K. (2001). Sticks, stones and ideology: The discourse of reform in teacher education. *Educational Researcher*, 30(8), 3-15.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (Eds.). (1993). *Inside/outside: Teacher research & knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Codd, J. (2005). Teachers as 'managed professionals' in the global education industry: The New Zealand experience. *Educational Review*, 57(2), 193-206.
- Coldron, J., & Smith, R. (1999). Active location in teachers' construction of their professional identities. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 31(6), 711-726.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & DuFour, R. (Eds.), (2005). *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Elkins, J. (1985). Ethics, professionalism, craft and failure. *Kentucky Law Journal*, 73(4), 937-965.
- Eraut, M. (1994). *Developing professional knowledge and competence*. Lewes, England: Falmer Press.
- Evetts, J. (2003a). The sociological analysis of professionalism: Occupational change in the modern world. *International Sociology*, 18(2), 395-415.

- Evetts, J. (2003b). The construction of professionalism in new and existing occupational contexts: Promoting and facilitating occupational change. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23(4/5), 22-35.
- Fournier, V. (1999). The appeal to 'professionalism' as a disciplinary mechanism. *Sociological Review*, 47(2), 280-307.
- Friedman, I. (1999). Teacher perceived work autonomy: Its concept and its measurement. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 59(1), 58-76.
- Frowe, I. (2005). Professional trust. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(1) 34-53.
- Furman, G. (2004). The ethic of community [Special issue]. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(2), 215-235.
- Government of Ontario. (2007). *Research in education: MISA professional network centres*. Retrieved November 10, 2009, from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/research/PNC.html>
- Gregory, M. (2000). Care as a goal of democratic education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 29(4), 445-461.
- Hargreaves, A. (2003). *Teaching in the knowledge society: Education in the age of insecurity*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hargreaves, D. (1997). In defence of research for evidence-based teaching: A rejoinder to Martyn Hammersley. *British Educational Research Journal*, 23(4), 405-419.
- Herr, K. (1999). Unearthing the unspeakable: When teacher research and political agendas collide. *Language Arts*, 77(1), 10-15.
- Kerchner, C., & Kaufman, K. (1995). Lurching toward professionalism: The saga of teacher unionism. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96(1), 107-122.
- Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity for lasting school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Little, J. (1990). The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record*, 91(4), 509-536.

- McClure, R. (1999). Unions, teacher development and professionalism. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *The education of teachers* (pp. 63-84). Chicago, IL: National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE); University of Chicago Press.
- McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2006). *Building school-based teacher learning communities: Professional strategies to improve student achievement*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Merrett, C. (2004). Social justice: What is it? Why teach it? *Journal of Geography*, 103(3), 93-101.
- Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2000). *Profound improvement: Building capacity for a learning community*. Lisse, Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- National Education Association. (2006). *NCLB basics: School improvement*. Washington, DC: Author. [NOTE: URL deleted – document no longer available.]
- Noddings, N. (2003). Is teaching a practice? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37(2), 241-251.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Starratt, R. (1994). *Building an ethical school: A practical response to the moral crisis in schools*. London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Stefkovich, J., & O'Brien, G. M. (2004). Best interests of the student: An ethical model. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(2), 197-214.
- Stenhouse, L. (1983). *Authority, education and emancipation: A collection of papers by Lawrence Stenhouse*. London, UK: Heinemann Educational.
- Taylor, L., Servage, L., McRae, P., & Parsons, J. (2006). *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). Collaborative professional development research review: Relationships, leadership and ownership. Research findings from Cycle 1 (2000-2003) and early findings from Cycle 2 (2003-2006)*. Retrieved November 3, 2008, from <http://education.alberta.ca/media/325800/What7.pdf>
- Tobias, R. (2003). Continuing professional education and professionalization: Travelling without a map or compass? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22(5), 445-456.

- U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *Identifying and implementing educational practices supported by rigorous evidence: A user friendly guide*. Retrieved November 3, 2008, from <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/rigorousetid/rigorousetid.pdf>
- Vygotsky, L. (1997). *Educational psychology* (V. V. Davydov, Intro.; R. Silverman, Trans.). Boca Raton, FL: St. Lucie Press. (Original work published 1926)
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilms, W. (2003, April). Altering the structure and culture of American public schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(8), 606-615.
- Winch, C. (2004). What do teachers need to know about teaching? A critical examination of the occupational knowledge of teachers. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52(2), 180-196.
- Zmuda, A., Kuklis, R., & Kline, E. (2004). *Transforming schools: Creating a culture of continuous improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

*Laura Servage* is a doctoral student in the department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. In her Master's degree work, she used critical hermeneutics to study the role of PLCs in school reform and teacher professional development.

Contact: Laura Servage, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta, 7-167A, Education North, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2G5, e-mail: [lservage@ualberta.ca](mailto:lservage@ualberta.ca)