"Professional Learning Communities: What Are They And Why Are They Important?"

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Introduction

In education circles, the term learning community has become commonplace. It is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students, teachers, and administrators simultaneously in learning - to suggest just a few.

This paper focuses on what Astuto and colleagues (1993) label the professional community of learners, in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals so that students benefit. This arrangement has also been termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.

As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement. Thus, persons at all levels of the educational system concerned about school improvement - state department personnel, intermediate service agency staff, district and campus administrators, teacher leaders, key parents and local school community members - should find this paper of interest.

This paper represents an abbreviation of Hord's review of the literature (1997), which explored the concept and operationalization of professional learning communities and their outcomes for staff and students.

The Beginnings of Professional Learning Community

During the eighties, Rosenholtz (1989) brought teachers' workplace factors into the discussion of teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who felt supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation. Support by means of teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles increased teacher efficacy in meeting students' needs. Further, Rosenholtz found that teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviors and also more likely to stay in the profession.

McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings, suggesting that when teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and the learning related to it, they were able to develop and share a body of wisdom gleaned from their experience. Adding to the discussion, Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision making as a factor in curriculum reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools. In such schools, structured time is provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback. These and other attributes characterize professional learning communities.

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Attributes of Professional Learning

supportive leadership of principals as one of the necessary human resources for restructuring staff into school- based professional communities. The authors refer to these principals as "post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness" (p. 234). Prestine (1993) also defines characteristics of principals in schools that undertake school restructuring: a willingness to share authority, the capacity to facilitate the work of staff, and the ability to participate without dominating.

Sergiovanni explains that "the sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas" (1994b, p. 214), not in the power of position. Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, and Snyder (1996) assert that it is also important that the principal believe that teachers have the capacity to respond to the needs of students, that this belief "provides moral strength for principals to meet difficult political and educational challenges along the way" (p. 19). Senge (quoted by O'Neil, 1995) adds that the principal's job is to create an environment in which the staff can learn continuously; "[t]hen in turn, . . . the job of the superintendent is to find principals and support [such] principals" (p. 21) who create this environment.

An additional dimension, then, is a chief executive of the school district who supports and encourages continuous learning of its professionals. This observation suggests that no longer can leaders be thought of as top-down agents of change or seen as the visionaries of the corporation; leaders must be regarded as democratic teachers.

Collective Creativity

In 1990, Peter Senge's book The Fifth Discipline arrived in bookstores and began popping up in the boardrooms of corporate America. Over the next year or so, the book and its description of learning organizations, which might serve to increase organizational capacity and creativity, moved into the educational environment. The idea of a learning organization "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3) caught the attention of educators who were struggling to plan and implement reform in the nation's schools. As Senge's paradigm shift was explored by educators and shared in educational journals, the label became learning communities.

In schools, the learning community is demonstrated by people from multiple constituencies, at all levels, collaboratively and continually working together (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Such collaborative work is grounded in what Newmann (reported by Brandt, 1995) and Louis and Kruse label reflective dialogue, in which staff conduct conversations about students and teaching and learning, identifying related issues and problems. Griffin (cited by Sergiovanni, 1994a, p. 154) refers to these activities as inquiry, andbelieves that as principals and teachers inquire together they create community. Inquiry helps them to overcome chasms caused by various specializations of grade level and subject matter. Inquiry forces debate among teachers about what is important. Inquiry promotes understanding and appreciation for the work of others. . . . And inquiry helps principals and teachers create the ties that bond them together as a special group and that bind them to a shared set of ideas. Inquiry, in other words, helps principals and teachers become a community of learners.Participants in such conversations learn to apply new ideas and information to problem solving and therefore are able to create new conditions for students. Key tools in this process are shared values and vision; supportive physical, temporal, and social conditions; and a shared personal practice. We will look at each of these in turn.

Shared Values and Vision

"Vision is a trite term these days, and at various times it refers to mission, purpose, goals, objectives, or a sheet of paper posted near the principal's office" (Isaacson & Bamburg, 1992, p. 42). Sharing vision is not just agreeing with a good idea; it is a particular mental image of what is important to an individual and to an organization. Staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing a shared

administrators for the school, and even encouraging staff who are not in tune with the program to find work elsewhere.

Boyd presents a similar list of physical factors that result in an environment conducive to school change and improvement: the availability of resources; schedules and structures that reduce isolation; policies that encourage greater autonomy, foster collaboration, enhance effective communication,and provide for staff development. Time is clearly a resource: "Time, or more properly lack of it, is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts." (Watts & Castle, 1993, p. 306). Time is a significant issue for faculties who wish to work together collegially, and it has been cited as both a barrier (when it i not available) and a supportive factor (when it is available) by staffs engaging in school improvement.

People capacities. One of the first characteristics cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) of individuals in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and to work toward improvement. In addition, the following qualities are needed: respect and trust among colleagues at the school and district level, possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective teaching and learning, supportive leadership from administrators and others in key roles, and relatively intensive socialization processes.

Note the strong parallel with the people or human factors identified by Boyd (1992): positive teacher attitudes toward schooling, students, and change; students' heightened interest and engagement with learning (which could be construed as both an outcome and an input, it seems); norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement; a widely shared vision or sense of purpose; a norm of involvement in decision making; collegial relationships among teachers; positive, caring student-teacher-administrator relationships; a sense of community in the school; and two factors beyond the school staff - supportive community attitudes and parents and community members as partners and allies.

Boyd (1992) points out that the physical and people factors are highly interactive, many of them influencing the others. Boyd and Hord (1994) clustered the factors into four overarching functions that help build a context conducive to change and improvement: reducing staff isolation, increasing staff capacity, providing a caring and productive environment, and improving the quality of the school's programs for students.

Shared Personal Practice

Review of a teacher's behavior by colleagues is the norm in the professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). This practice is not evaluative but is part of the "peers helping peers" process. Such review is conducted regularly by teachers, who visit each other's classrooms to observe, script notes, and discuss their observations with the visited peer. The process is based on the desire for individual and community improvement and is enabled by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members.

Wignall (1992) describes a high school in which teachers share their practice and enjoy a high level of collaboration in their daily work life. Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements for this kind of workplace culture. Teachers find help, support, and trust as a result of developing warm relationships with each other. "Teachers tolerate (even encourage) debate, discussion and disagreement. They are comfortable sharing both their successes and their failures. They praise and recognize one another's triumphs, and offer empathy and support for each other's troubles" (p. 18). One of the conditions that supports such a culture is the involvement of the teachers in interviewing, selecting, and hiring new teachers. They feel a commitment to their selections and to ensuring the effectiveness of the entire staff.

One goal of reform is to provide appropriate learning environments for students. Teachers, too, need "an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and

strengthen the mission;

shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success;

powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners;

increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations;

higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students;

more satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism;

significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than in traditional schools;

commitment to making significant and lasting changes and;

higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change (p. 27).

r students, the results include:

- decreased dropout rate and fewer classes "skipped";
- lower rates of absenteeism; increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools;
- greater academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools and;
- smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds (p. 28).

r more information about these important professional learning mmunity outcomes, please refer to the literature review (Hord, 97).

Conclusion

strong results such as the above are linked to teachers and ministrators working in professional learning communities, how