The Effective Implementation of Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

During recent decades, professional learning communities (PLCs) have enhanced education from lower grade levels through college years, with many resulting benefits. PLCs provide an environment that encourages professional development, collaboration and innovation among teachers. Research suggests positive school reform occurs when teachers participate in authentic PLCs, with improved student achievement as a by-product (Wilson, 2016). The authors' review will explore the role of the school leader in creating successful professional learning communities and will explain how PLCs have improved K-12 education for both teachers and students.

Keywords: professional learning communities, STEM research, professional development, collaboration, student learning

When discussing professional learning communities, it is important to understand there have been several major contributors to this innovative concept reshaping the field of education and reforming the way educational services are provided to children. Richard DuFour and Mike Schmoker are authors, former educators and administrators who have defined professional learning communities and pioneered this change in the educational arena.

According to DuFour (2004), the term professional learning community has often been used to describe every conceivable alliance of individuals with a common interest in education, such as a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, or even a national professional organization. However, DuFour noted in the creation of an authentic professional learning community, the concentrated focus is more on learning than on teaching, and he emphasized collaboration and accountability are the keys to successful PLCs (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld, & Box, 2014).

Professional learning communities were further defined (Hoaglund et al., 2014) as a group of committed educators working collaboratively in an ongoing process resulting in better student achievement. Mike Schmoker (as cited in Hoaglund et al., 2014) claimed in order to create and maintain a genuine PLC, teachers must meet regularly to improve already established goals and to assess their progress using formative data. He expressed his belief on how the structure for improved results already exists within what has been identified as professional learning communities (Hoaglund et al., 2014). Overall, the most consistent themes emerged from these attempts to define PLCs are leadership and collaboration.

According to Wilson (2016), real professional learning communities involve a shared governance among members that will ultimately result in school improvement. Boyd & Hord (1994) pointed out schools exist in order to provide a space for children to be valued, respected and cared for. Therefore, fostering an atmosphere of community, where teachers and paraprofessionals work together, is important to student achievement and success. Similarly, the essence of Schmoker's concept of professional learning communities was collaboration among teachers by working in groups, borrowing and generating ideas, would ensure improved student learning (Joyce, 2004).

The significant difference between collaboration in professional learning communities and collaboration in other cooperative teams is the fact PLCs are created for a specific purpose (Hoaglund et al., 2014). Professional learning communities are designed not only to determine what students will learn, but also to develop a space for teachers to determine how to respond when students do not learn (Hoaglund et al., 2014). The purpose not only places a focus on student outcomes, but shines a light on teacher outcomes as well, with an implicit belief PLCs can lead to significant changes in teaching cultures and practices (Ning, Lee, & Lee, 2015). According to Ning et al. (2015), individual professional development courses do not result in the continuous collaborative efforts generated in PLCs. This collaboration, is in fact, the rudimentary principle of professional learning communities; it refers to the cooperative practices and activities in which teachers engage in order to achieve shared-determined goals (Ning et al., 2015).

Ning et al. (2015) noted that Hord conceptualized teacher collaboration in PLCs into two main dimensions: collective learning and shared personal practice. According to their research, collective learning requires a prioritization of professional advancement by teachers as well as an effort for them to develop the best strategies to provide effective student learning and outcomes (Ning et al., 2015). The second dimension, the sharing of personal practice, requires teachers to participate in activities such as peer coaching, classroom observations, and discussions in order to enhance their professional development (Ning et al., 2015).

Enhancing Student Learning Through Professional Learning Communities

DuFour & Reeves (2016) observed there are schools which purportedly have created professional learning communities, but do not fully implement the strategies real professional learning communities put into practice. These PLCs are referred to by DuFour & Reeves (2016) as "PLC Lite." They point out genuine PLCs must follow five established tenets (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). First, educators work together as teams and not in isolation, and they take responsibility as a group for student learning (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Second, they work together to establish a curriculum that meets the needs of learners step by step, taking into account the attitudes, skills, and knowledge the students bring to the unit (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Third, educators develop relevant assessments, created as a group, and based on a practical curriculum (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Fourth, they use the results of a common formative assessment to recognize students who need more time and more help for learning, to identify students who benefit from enhanced or expanded learning, to pinpoint areas of individual strength and weakness in teaching based on the proof of student learning, and to address areas where teachers are not able to help learners (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). Fifth, they create a system in which students who need additional support can receive the support without losing class time (DuFour & Reeves, 2016).

According to DuFour & Reeves (2016), teachers need to consider four questions if they are to work as a true professional learning community. First, in what areas do students need to be knowledgeable? Second, how will we know what they have learned? Third, what do we do about what they have not learned? Fourth, what can we do for learners who have already mastered the necessary content? By asking and answering these types of questions, teachers can create a genuine professional learning community (DuFour & Reeves, 2016).

DuFour & Reeves (2016) thus established conducting relevant assessment and knowing how to use the resulting data are key tenets for creating authentic PLCs. They noted intervention also plays a large role in guiding students back toward their learning goals, with the most effective interventions eliminating the type of teaching repeatedly implemented without success, replacing it with methodical, intense, clear, and swift individual or small-group instruction. They pointed out intervention is a much better option than retention, one that leads to increased student promotion (DuFour & Reeves, 2016).

Professional Learning Communities in STEM Research

Professional learning communities have also been studied in the context of STEM research. In one such study, PLCs, project-based learning, sustained professional development, and K-12 partnership were implemented to fidelity by a team of researchers from Texas A&M University (Capraro et al., 2016) as a part of a theoretical framework. The goals of their research were to improve student achievement and teacher perception over the course of three years (Capraro et al., 2016). Their theoretical framework was implemented over three years at three urban high schools in Texas, with a total of six science and math focus groups being interviewed (Capraro et al., 2016). There were several subthemes for each theme from the qualitative interview focused on positive outcomes (Capraro et al., 2016). For example, project based learning increased student engagement a subtheme for theme one, which is general experiences from using project based learning in the class room (Capraro et al., 2016). Student achievement on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills showed significant improvement for students who received the greatest fidelity of implementation (Capraro et al., 2016). In addition, the resulting qualitative data showed

teachers' perceptions were positive in many PLC areas such as project-based learning (Capraro et al., 2016). One teacher perceived using PLCs in his/her classroom promoted individual student accountability and ownership (Capraro et al., 2016).

Additional STEM research was conducted by Rick Hodges, a retired Army veteran who used professional learning communities and hands-on learning to successfully implement CASE (Curriculum for Agricultural Science Education), which puts a high emphasis on incorporating STEM education (Fritsch, 2017). It was found professional learning communities allow for more hands-on training within the CASE program (Fritsch, 2017). Hodges, who hated the lack of hands-on activities in his own childhood schooling, became an instructor in an effort to implement hands-on training programs in the context of professional learning communities (Fritsch, 2017).

Professional Learning Communities as Highly Reliable Organizations

Professional learning communities utilizing the established practices of highly reliable organizations (HROs) have been found to orient their school leaders toward positive cultural change (Kruse & Gates, 2016). The HRO process traditionally involves five tenets (Kruse & Gates, 2016). First, HROs are not afraid of failure and look to learn from it (Kruse & Gates, 2016). Second, HROs do not take their failures lightly, but have a healthy understanding of them (Kruse & Gates, 2016). Third, HROs are results-driven; they look at how failure affects the data and results of the organization (Kruse & Gates, 2016). Fourth, HROs are marked by a high resilience in the face of failure and a tenacity when learning from failure (Kruse & Gates, 2016). Fifth, HROs utilize experts when it comes to problem solving instead of just counting on formal organization (Kruse & Gates, 2016). These five practices, implemented in a mindful process, can, according to Kruse & Gates (2016), enable professional learning communities to focus more on the goals and objectives of the organization so they may reach a higher level of cultural change.

Professional Learning Communities in School Reform Initiatives

Ariel Sacks is a 13-year veteran teacher who has found success in several different types of schools, most of all in the Renaissance Charter School in New York, New York (Sacks, 2017). One of the keys to her success has been the implementation of professional learning communities (Sacks, 2017). Sacks (2017) stated her school was better able to implement a professional learning community by following five protocols which have emerged from the School Reform Initiative non-profit organization. First, in order to ensure everyone is heard, everyone is given a voice and an opportunity to participate (Sacks, 2017). All teachers are given an opportunity to speak at certain intervals in the session (Sacks, 2017). Second, to ensure everyone has the time to think clearly about their concerns, the pace is slowed down (Sacks, 2017). Many teachers need time to write or think about their ideas (Sacks, 2017). Third, reflection is required, so time is given for personal reflection before each person responds (Sacks, 2017). This assists teachers to think more deeply about the question at hand and process more fully what their colleagues are saying (Sacks, 2017). Fourth, structure is provided, since structure facilitates time management and organization to keep everyone on track (Sacks, 2017). The correct protocol ensures teachers manage their time well and arrive at a meaningful conclusion (Sacks, 2017). Fifth, hierarchies are flattened. For example, the role of the facilitator is rotated throughout the process, giving everyone the chance for leadership (Sacks, 2017). In this way, professional learning communities can be enhanced and

focused through the use of protocols devised by the School Reform Initiatives non-profit organization (Sacks, 2017).

Role of a School Leader in a Professional Learning Community

Just as leadership is important to shaping organizational culture, school culture likewise requires the attention of leaders as well as the presence of what Boyd and Hord (1994) referred to as primary and secondary mechanisms to initiate change. One study conducted on an urban school in the United States revealed 17 indicators conducive to change. These indicators emerged from interviews and observations of principal by researchers and resulted in the school moving from the closure list and becoming a magnet school (Boyd & Hord, 1994). Based on those results, Boyd & Hord (1994) proposed a learning community is comprised of and enacts four functions that are fundamental to positive change. They identified those four functions as reducing isolation, increasing staff capacity, providing a caring, productive environment, and promoting increased quality. They also noted principals who first seek to understand existing school culture tend to be successful in the change occurring within their school (Boyd & Hord, 1994).

Brown (2016) proposed school leaders can achieve great success in implementing their professional learning communities by using a system based on a theoretical framework. In a qualitative study conducted on a 15-year veteran principal leading a high-performing, diverse elementary school, Brown (2016) attempted to gain information to be shared with other principals to replicate the success of the school, which had maintained high math and reading scores on state assessments. The researcher interviewed the principal, teachers, and district employees, and the data from those interviews was triangulated using a conceptual framework (Brown, 2016).

One of the five types of support that the exemplary principal provided was found to be the creation of professional learning communities (Brown, 2016). In order to implement PLCs, this principal used a system called TRIBES, a process which allows for a shared philosophy of how all teachers teach and promote learning in their classrooms (Brown, 2016). TRIBES operates on four agreements: mutual respect, no put-downs, attentive listening, and the right to pass (Brown, 2016). The principal's use of such a system in the creation of a PLC greatly facilitated its successful implementation (Brown, 2016).

Principals have been found to play a central role in communicating key reform initiatives because most teachers do not have direct access to such initiatives (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). The research of Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) used a sequential mixed-methods approach in which interviews, observations, and document analysis influenced survey design. This study was conducted in the State of Delaware, where the state department of education has placed a strong emphasis on professional learning communities (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). The study was restricted to a small sample of only four schools in two districts and relied primarily on principal and teacher self-reports (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Teachers in the four elementary schools were surveyed about the implementation of grade-level professional learning communities and about the assistance they received (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Qualitative and survey data revealed an impact from principals on what teachers in PLCs will take on and also on how well they shoulder those undertakings (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) thus helped to establish the importance of the role of principals in taking on reform initiatives such as professional learning communities and implementing them successfully in their schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, professional learning communities, when successfully instituted by school leaders and embraced by participants, have been shown to improve student achievement as well as teacher perception. A clear understanding from literature or practice of exactly what PLCs are and what factors have thus far facilitated their creation will enable more educators to smoothly implement their productive use.

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