

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract: professional learning communities (PLCs) are a collaborative approach to teacher professional development that has been shown to have a positive impact on student learning. This paper provides an overview of PLCs, including their theoretical framework and research on their effectiveness. It also presents case study narrative responses from three teachers who participated in a four-week PLC institute. The teachers' responses highlight the benefits of PLCs, such as the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, share ideas, and learn from each other. They also discuss the challenges of participating in PLCs, such as finding time to meet and dealing with different personality types.

Keywords: professional learning communities, teacher professional development, student learning, collaboration, case study

Introduction

Administrators, curriculum leaders, and teachers are challenged to figure out ways to develop creative approaches to developing effective leaders and creating effective learning environments. Teacher support services for apprentice and experienced teachers alongside collaboration among teachers and administrators at all levels can have a significant impact on learning environments. Professional learning is the catalyst for on-going teacher support in providing a trajectory for teachers towards developing into reflective experienced master teachers that can impact school effectiveness and overall learning environments. The following paper will provide an 1) overview, theoretical framework, and research on Professional Learning Communities and 2) provide case study narrative responses' of three teachers on their perspectives and engagement in a four week Professional Learning Communities Institute.

Literature Review

Risko and Vogt (2016) use the term professional learning, instead of professional development, as a means to describe a shift in stages in educators' learning moving away from the traditional approaches. Professional learning trajectory begins when educators transition from moving away from being told what to do as educators, towards a trajectory moving towards directing their own learning and problem-solving agendas. Risko and Vogt (2016) claim that this view of educators taking responsibility for their own professional learning through problem solving or inquiry is framed within the social constructivist view and the transformational learning theory. Kragler, Martin, and Sylvester (2014) have identified stages of teacher support over the years: in-service era 1950s-1960s, staff development era 1970s-1980s, professional development era 1990s-2000s, and professional learning era mid-2000 to the present.

This current era for professional learning is about creating professional learning communities that encourage collaborative and reflective learning and engagement and about multiple opportunities for engagement in teachers' own thinking and informed decision making that advance teachers' knowledge and expertise.

Teaching is a craft and a reciprocal process that requires practice, attention to detail, and fine tuning. Teaching is an on-going practice and process oriented journey that requires a growth mindset. Often time teachers find themselves in a fixed-mind set, born with fixed traits that cannot be developed, but a growth mindset is necessary to improve in the craft of teaching. The growth –mind set is necessary for engagement in professional learning as it assumes that intelligence and talents can be developed through gaining knowledge, effort, and commitment to change (Dweck, 2008 and Brock & Hundley, 2016). There are no mistakes in the teaching practice as everything that happens within teachers' daily teaching practice is an opportunity to improve on the craft. According to Darling-Hammond and Nikole Richardson (2009), professional learning communities provide a structure for what matters in teacher learning. Current research has provided a new paradigm for professional development that is contrary to the one-day antiquated workshop models. Current models of high-quality professional development include a variety of factors and involve multiple stakeholders in the process. This includes teacher's content knowledge and how students learn specific content. Opportunities for teachers to acquire new knowledge inclusive of practice and reflection that is aligned with curriculum, standards, and assessment are part of this model. This involves administrative support and sustained collaboration over time for these professional learning communities to be successful and effective (DarlingHammond & Nikole Richardson (2009). Lumpe (2007) suggests that professional learning communities are part of the corporate world, but can be applicable to the field of education. Meaningful collaboration is the focus of professional learning communities and teachers are often isolated within the current school structure systems. Professional learning communities in education include peer coaching and teacher leadership structures designed to foster true and meaningful collaboration focused on meaningful topics and student learning. Professional learning communities as described by Lumpe (2007) are structured around professional development that includes curriculum and instruction and assessment and involves practice, reflection, and collaboration within distributed leadership school communities.

Risko and Vogt (2016) suggest that the best approach to engaging teachers in professional learning is through an inquiry approach process. The process of engaging teachers in problem solving activities (identifying authentic problems), with actions involving learning and doing (application, reflection, dialogue), and responding and transforming are the components of the inquiry process. Professional learning involves situated learning where it is relevant and directly connected and applicable to issues and problems encountered on a daily basis regarding curriculum and instruction and concerns within their own classrooms. Professional learning is personal, dynamic and collaborative in nature with a growth mind-set and a problem solving focus. This approach involves support from school administration and collaboration amongst peers that include multiple organizational structures within a school setting or system. This includes, but is not limited to: coaching, modeling, teachers sharing best practices, co-teaching, mentoring, observations, co-planning, reflection, and continuous dialogue amongst teachers and all stakeholders (Risko & Vogt, 2016).

Professional learning is situated within the transformative learning theoretical framework. Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory utilizes issues or dilemmas to challenge one's own thinking. Mezirow's (1991) theory consists of a developmental process where the learner understands that the process of using prior knowledge and interpretations construct a new or updated version of meaning of one's own experience in order to guide future action. Experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse are the processes where transformative learning occurs. Learning that transforms challenging frames of reference to make them more inclusive, reflective, dialogic, and emotionally able to change is the framework for the professional learning communities suggested here (Mezirow, 1991). This theoretical framework establishes the foundation for the research presented in that teachers must take the lead in directing their own professional learning through critical inquiry and in collaboration with administrators and other teachers. This multifaceted form of teacher support requires guidance and practice to fully understand the dynamics of the trajectory of professional learning communities.

Dunne, Nave, & Lewis (2000) conducted a 2-year study, commissioned by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, on teacher practices within Professional Learning Communities in comparison to teachers not participating in Professional Learning Communities.

Researchers focused on interview and observation data to compare the practices of non-participants to the practices of teachers who participated in the Professional Learning Communities groups. The researchers concluded that the teaching practices of participants in Professional Learning Communities gradually shifted towards more student centered practices and that the use of techniques such as added flexibility of classroom arrangements and modifications for classroom instruction to accommodate students from varying levels became the focus. Thus these shifts in curricular classroom practices produced more conducive and effective classroom learning environment. These changes were not present in the non-participating Professional Learning Communities group.

Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner (2004) conducted a study including 12 teachers in a Professional Learning Communities group that focused on working with low achieving African American students. The study focused on the group meetings inclusive of all 12 teachers where they discussed teaching practices and challenges in communicating with their students. The group of teachers collaborated as they met within their Professional Learning Communities group (10 meetings) and they realigned their focus (teaching approach) towards designing more strategic targeted instruction. They collaborated in developing more visual techniques for instruction and focused on more meaningful project activities that were authentic and appealing to the student population. Overall, the researchers reported that the series of collaborative meetings amongst the 12 teachers resulted in a shift of development in teacher practices overtime and as a result students were responding positively.

Louis and Marks (1998) conducted a multi-site study combining quantitative and qualitative design methods in 24 schools (eight elementary schools, eight middle schools and eight high schools). The purpose of the study was to determine if any impact was present from participating in Professional Learning Communities groups. The schools included in the study were a nationally selected sample group of schools that were undergoing

restructuring at various levels. The researchers focused on the social structure and the pedagogy approaches of each individual campus. Researchers examined teacher practices and collected data through observations and teacher interviews and observed “authentic pedagogy” which refers to higher order thinking skills, depth and application of knowledge, and developing meaning through conversation. Investigators critically examined the connection between pedagogy and the characteristics of Professional Learning Communities. The overall findings reported from all participating schools indicated that the presence of Professional Learning Communities in schools contributed to higher levels of social support for achievement levels and higher levels of authentic pedagogy which demonstrated the impact of Professional Learning Communities. Research on Professional Learning Communities at varying levels focus on teacher practices and student impact and overall studies have demonstrated positive findings from the integration of Professional Learning Communities model approach (Vescio, Ross, & Alyson, 2008). These findings provide a positive outlook, but it is important to provide training and guidance on how to get teachers on the trajectory towards Professional Learning Communities’ pathway.

Methodology

The following provides insights on case study narrative responses’ of three teachers on their perspectives and engagement in a four week literacy institute that guided teachers towards a trajectory of critical reflection tasks involving their classroom bias and experiences, reflection of their teaching practices and struggles, engaged them in meaningful dialogue, and task teachers with defining a context for their learning experiences and expectations and goals as they transitioned into the next school year. With these tasks and goals established and practiced within a four week literacy context, then teachers could transition into and engage in a transformative process that would place them on the trajectory towards transformative lifelong learning within professional learning communities as they develop their teaching craft. Teacher response narratives, which were randomly selected from a group of ten teachers, from the case study are the culminating factor reported.

Results

Teacher #1 is an elementary teacher of 7 years of teaching experience who feels comfortable with her teaching practices, but yet feels she struggles with teaching writing. She spent reflective time early in the institute voicing her opinion on how she felt that her school district had repeatedly failed at providing teachers with meaningful and authentic professional workshops that were beneficial for her school campus and teachers. She felt that her school district was still enveloped in the Professional Development Era of disseminate information to teachers while the workshops did not provide any engagement or follow up and often times were not focused or based on school assessment data.

The other challenge was that when she asked to attend writing workshops she was told that she was a teacher of reading and not writing and that her focus should be on reading instruction. This frustrated the teacher for years and she often found herself looking for her own writing workshops or tools as she knew and understood the importance of teaching reading and writing reciprocally. During the four week institute, she contacted her campus curriculum specialist and asked her to attend the institute. The Specialist attended and was surprised and engaged in the on-going conversations. The elementary teacher asked the specialist to share the recent school data with her and her fellow teachers and if she would be open to recommendations on teacher workshops and starting

up Professional Learning Communities groups at their respective campus. The specialist asked for time to coordinate with administrators and asked the elementary teacher to devise a tentative plan on how to move forward towards starting up Professional Learning Communities in the fall. Meanwhile, the elementary teacher began to go through school data and called on some of her colleagues to review the school campus data collaboratively. The specialist returned to the institute a week later and communicated that administrators were on board and willing to meet with teachers prior to the start of the year on professional workshop recommendations and on tentative plans for leading Professional Learning Communities. The elementary teacher also asked for consideration that workshops should be assessment and teacher driven and that collaboration amongst all school members at all levels was crucial if campus changes were to be authentic and effective. Needless to say, the elementary teacher left the four week institute empowered and with school knowledge and support that change could be possible, but it was the teachers leading the pathway for Professional Learning Communities to develop and try and bring all school stakeholders together. Teacher #2 is a middle school teacher with 10 years of experience in the profession. He describes his school environment as very supportive, but more administrative decision making comes from the top down with limited teacher input. While curricular decisions are top down, things seem to function smoothly, but there are always ways to improve. The male teacher often collaborated with his peers but on his own time and feels that administration could really benefit from more teacher collaboration with administration. During the institute, the middle school teacher reflected on his 10 years of experience and always felt that parent involvement and more teacher input were the missing elements in increasing student academic performance. He devised a tentative plan during his participation in the institute on how to gradually form Professional Learning Communities by building on his previous collaborations with his colleagues and including administration and other campus stakeholders in the process. He focused on meeting dates and a strategic plan for teachers to provide evidence based recommendations to administrators based on student performance on how to increase student productivity. The teacher also devised a plan on how to begin the parent involvement process by starting off the school year with a parent community fair as a means of connecting the parents with the teachers and working progressing together throughout the year. The goal was to include parents in the child's educational goals towards developing well rounded individuals that could compete with this new generation. The middle school teacher was motivated, yet nervous, about presenting his recommendations on forming these Professional Learning Communities focused on teacher and parent involvement based on evidence based recommendations. He was optimistic and hopeful that he would begin his 11th year in education with a new focus on working collaboratively with all campus stakeholders and he was willing to adjust his tentative plans with input from others.

Teacher #3 is a high school teacher with 5 years of teaching experience. She worked as a classroom teacher for 3 years and then transitioned into the role of a literacy campus coach for the past 2 years. Her role is not administrative but rather a support leadership role at her high school. Her primary responsibility is to assist teachers with struggling readers on an individual basis and to provide literacy support and resources for all campus teachers. She reflected throughout the four week institute on how her experiences as a classroom teacher for 3 years prepared her for her role as a literacy coach. As a literacy coach, she felt that she had taken on a role that

required leadership in her area of expertise reading, but at the same time she reflected on the importance of teacher participation in the decision making process regarding curricular issues on literary and input regarding struggling readers. The literacy coach was rethinking her approach process on simply relying on student achievement data for reading intervention activities and was reminded that teacher recommendations should be factored in. Furthermore, she reflected on her approach to providing teachers' the latest trends on tools and resources regarding literacy. She considered that maybe asking teachers what they need would work best, rather than assuming the latest and best resources were what they needed. Upon a great deal of reflection over the duration of the institute, she decided to shift her approach and devise a plan for the coming year that would be more inclusive of teachers and focus on building Professional Learning Communities that involved administrators as well.

The literacy coach had been reflecting on the idea that her teachers had previously requested book studies focused on best teacher practices, she had never considered it. Her tentative plan to start the school year was to ask teachers for recommended books to start up a group book study on best teacher practices. She tentatively decided that meeting twice a month to discuss the book selection would work well and that would also provide an opportunity to get feedback and firsthand account from teachers on what resources would facilitate them in their teaching practices. In addition, after reviewing student data for reading intervention groups the plan was to meet with teachers briefly and ask for their feedback on individual students who were struggling readers. The idea that she was only a resource and support base requires that she take into consideration teachers suggestions and involve them in the process to provide the best possible outcome for all students. Establishing the foundation for forming these Professional Learning Communities was the starting point.

Discussion and Conclusion

The narrative case study responses provided by these three teachers engaged in the four week institute are a testament to the varying challenges that teachers at varying grade levels encounter within their respective campuses. The Institute allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences and their current roles, engage in dialogue with other educators, and create a plan based on the principles of establishing Professional Learning Communities regardless of their varying backgrounds. The participants were provided a platform to reflect and motivate each other in developing a strategic plan of action moving into the new school year. The powerful responses by these educators and their willingness to take leadership of their learning, as part of a growth mindset, is evidence of their determination to establish Professional Learning Communities by including all stakeholders for the improvement of their craft and for the increase achievement and development of their students.

The future of education in this global society rest on the willingness of educators to take ownership and leadership of their teaching and not rely on school systems, legislators, or governments to provide teacher support and what is necessary for increased student achievement. The antiquated view of one size fits all professional development workshops and top down curricular decision making in educational environments are a thing of the past. All stakeholders involved in educating future generations must be motivated and willing to take leadership of their own learning and growth. Vescio, Ross, & Alyson (2008) demonstrated positive findings based on collective research from the integration of Professional Learning Communities model approach. Mezirow's

(1991) methodology of challenging one's own thinking, critical reflection and rational discourse are the processes where transformative learning occurs, this was the premise for the institute and highly encouraged to be the foundation for educators everywhere. Professional Learning Communities trajectory begins when educators transition from being told what to do as educators, towards a trajectory moving towards directing their own learning and problem-solving by taking responsibility for their own professional learning as part of the transformational process and this, is the future of education in this global society (Risko & Vogt, 2016).

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