

## SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

### Professional Learning Communities as a Model for Effective English Language Arts Curriculum Implementation

Tanya Polasek

#### **Abstract**

*Successful implementation of the current English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum invites a new approach to teacher professional learning (PL). A focus on establishing and renewing relationships must play a role in developing the collaboration necessary for curriculum implementation. This article presents a research-based argument that effective and sustainable teacher professional development, structured to build teachers' capacity and improve student learning outcomes, would support the implementation of the Manitoba ELA curriculum.*

A shift in the direction of the Manitoba ELA curriculum document (2020) from the previous model warrants a shift in professional development to support the implementation. The 1999 iteration provided additional support documents labeled as Foundations for Implementation (Manitoba Education and Training, 1999). These were designed to provide “teachers with theory, recent research findings, classroom strategies, and practical suggestions for implementing curricula” (Sections 1-3). The new Manitoba ELA curriculum framework is layered with new conceptualizations, architectures, practices, and philosophies. These are complex, abstract ideas that require time, thought, discussion, and action to unpack and explore. The writers acknowledged this challenge:

Shifts in curriculum design and growing knowledge related to changing educator practice require shifts in implementation models. Current processes must represent networked, connected, and emergent processes that engage educators deeply and in sustained ways in conversation, reflection, and action.

(Manitoba Education, 2020, p. 2)

Because research and evaluation of professional learning's (PL's) effect on student outcomes is sparse, little is known about its impact on student outcomes (Baird & Clark, 2018). While Hattie (2012) listed professional development as having an effect size of 0.51, he also recognized that teachers must embrace quality teaching and assist other teachers “in a collaborative manner to attain excellence” (p. 37). However, Fitzgerald and Theilheimer (2013) noted that research on PL has not focused on teachers as part of a team.

While many PL models exist, teachers' integration of new policies or ideas in current practice is rare (Goodyear et al., 2017). Nevertheless, when departments roll out new curriculum, it is the teachers who are expected to make changes to their practices in the classroom (Borko, 2004). Without deep understanding, however, the application of the innovations is usually feeble, inconsistent, and incoherent (Fullan, 2008). Leaders and educators often rush to the next solution without examining possible significant effects (Fullan, 2008). Educational systems seem “caught in a cycle of innovation upon innovation with schools expected to continuously embed new approaches, policies, methods, and ideas” (Goodyear et al., 2017, p. 325). Therefore, the “lack of transformative and yet sustainable curriculum change” (Goodyear et al., 2017, p. 326) is an ever-present problem in education.

At the outset of a curriculum renewal in Australia, researchers asked teachers, “What would be the most helpful support for you?” (Albright et al., 2013, p. 117), and the most common response from teachers in K-12 centered on the need for professional development. Teachers in this study completed an in-depth, online survey answering closed- and open-ended

questions. Teachers recognized that PL must help them dig in and unpack the new curriculum, and afford them with chances to merge these new understandings with current practices.

The quality of teachers has a profound effect on student learning (Breakspear, 2021), and schools need to create a community of learners who are willing to do the challenging work because they are driven to improve student learning outcomes. Curriculum changes, such as those embedded in the Manitoba ELA curriculum, will require guidance and support of teacher learning (Borko, 2004). Creating a climate where a curriculum is used daily requires all educators and leaders to put the curriculum at the centre of their discussions, planning, and instructional design (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching [NIET], 2020). Curriculum implementation requires professional development for teachers who use the principles of inquiry through the model of professional learning communities (PLCs).

## **Literature Review**

### **Challenges of Learning-Centered Curriculum Implementation**

Learning-centered curricula are often not fully implemented as intended because of the complexities and variations that exist in school structures and teaching practices (Hubball et al., 2007). Schools are more successful when they adjust their focus away from curriculum content and toward process (Hamilton et al., 2013). In Hamilton et al.'s (2013) study of key competencies in five secondary schools in New Zealand that were implementing new curriculum, the interviews revealed four themes for early implementation success: pedagogy, the ability to merge new curriculum with existing curriculum, deep understanding and support of new philosophy, and continuous monitoring of the process. The successful schools in Hamilton et al.'s the study included "iterative explorations" (p. 47) in their implementation plans, whereby teachers and school leaders came together to learn about the new competencies and then plan how to incorporate these ideas into their practice.

### **Process – The Professional Learning Community**

PLCs have operated and been written about under various labels, but they are generally defined as "people working together (either in real or virtual time/space) to collaboratively and critically reflect on their practices, to learn together and to plan for improvement" (Edwards, 2012, p. 26). Teachers work together using supportive structures and processes to reflect on the specific strengths and challenges of their students, and then they work together to design lessons and materials to support student improvement. These teams function through iterative cycles of collaborative inquiry that resemble the action research model. They shift the focus from individual teachers functioning in isolation toward teams collaborating on tasks, grappling with challenges, and sharing ideas.

While this sounds promising, it is not an easy task. Not all teams are successful, and not all success is lasting. Edwards' (2012) documentation of a project in New Zealand identified three phases of these communities: "establishing, converging and diverging" (p. 36). These phases point to the importance of establishing and renewing investment in relationships to sustain the learning communities.

### **Importance of Relationship**

If recurring collaboration is important to successful curriculum implementation, then working to create this culture of collaboration and the necessary structure to sustain it must be prioritized. Lipton and Wellman (2012) recognized that "collaborative inquiry requires vulnerability to learn in public, be patient with process, and suspend self-interest to serve a larger purpose" (p. 5). Being vulnerable requires a high degree of trust among team members.

For learning to occur, a healthy community must be established through relationships built on respect and trust contributing to an improved sense of belonging and collective ownership (Edwards, 2012).

Time spent on relationship and community construction is often overlooked, undervalued, or dismissed as “warm and fuzzy” and therefore a waste of time. Where these attitudes stem from is beyond the scope of this paper, but an attempt will be made to argue why a focus on establishing and renewing relationships must play a role in developing the collaboration necessary for curriculum implementation.

Hargreaves and Elhawary’s (2019) qualitative study on experienced teachers’ introduction to collaborative learning in six Egyptian schools identified the power of relationships in fostering teacher efficacy. In an environment characterized by competitive and traditionally hierarchical relationships, the researchers identified significant shifts in improved feelings of self-worth and in the manifestation of self-enhancement. Self-improvement and a willingness to take risks and explore from a position of curiosity all stemmed from the root of supportive relationships, whereby “teachers felt valued and authoritative” (p. 56).

Following their qualitative study about how professional development could support teamwork, Fitzgerald and Theilheimer (2013) concluded that a “climate of trust, respect, open communication and clear organization emerged as important for risk-taking necessary for teachers to learn together” (p.103). Teachers in the study reported that team building was the most important benefit from the professional development.

Being part of a team does not mean that members simply seek to get along. To truly do the work, successful groups prize diversity over getting along, thereby increasing creativity and rich learning experiences (Edwards, 2012). When members are open to learning and willing to be critical of their own practices, relationships quickly form. Forming a high functioning team is not an easy task and some resistance is likely. Creating task groups intentionally can help to broaden perspectives and promote relationships (Lipton & Wellman, 2011). The language participants use to discuss how they work with others may reveal their attitudes toward collaboration: word choice (e.g., “deal with” vs. “collaborate with” (Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013, p. 107)) and body language. Frequent, clear, two-way communication that includes all members is central to effective teamwork (Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013). There are many examples where being polite and avoiding challenge has stood in the way of any meaningful gains (Timperley et al., 2008). It is important to assess team effectiveness by examining the link between teaching and improved student learning (Timperley et al., 2008). To preserve the focus on improving student outcomes, groups can use student artifacts to center discussion and planning. Establishing relationships prompts teachers to challenge their own practices and critically reflect on how those practices support student improvement.

## **Alternative Models**

Just because a program is popular does not necessarily mean it is having a positive effect on student outcomes (Timperley et al., 2008). When such programs have been developed devoid of real teaching/learning contexts, their value is further diminished. While prescriptive models are thought to be an answer to implementation variability, the gains (if any) appear not to last long (Fullan, 2008). In addition, curriculum implementation as top-down, bottom-up, or through partnerships has not been helpful (Goodyear et al., 2017).

In a qualitative study of a model using critical discourse analysis, Crowley (2017) found that “publishers of commercially produced curriculum materials and programs position teachers as technicians in need of procedural knowledge” (p. 478). Approaches that offer “predetermined sets of instructional routines and implement specific technical strategies” (Crowley, p. 483) are about asserting control and often limit “efforts to decolonize the curriculum” (Crowley, p. 478). Crowley concluded that this style of professional development is being used to try to solve management problems and that pedagogy is being contorted to fit a mythical, singular “best

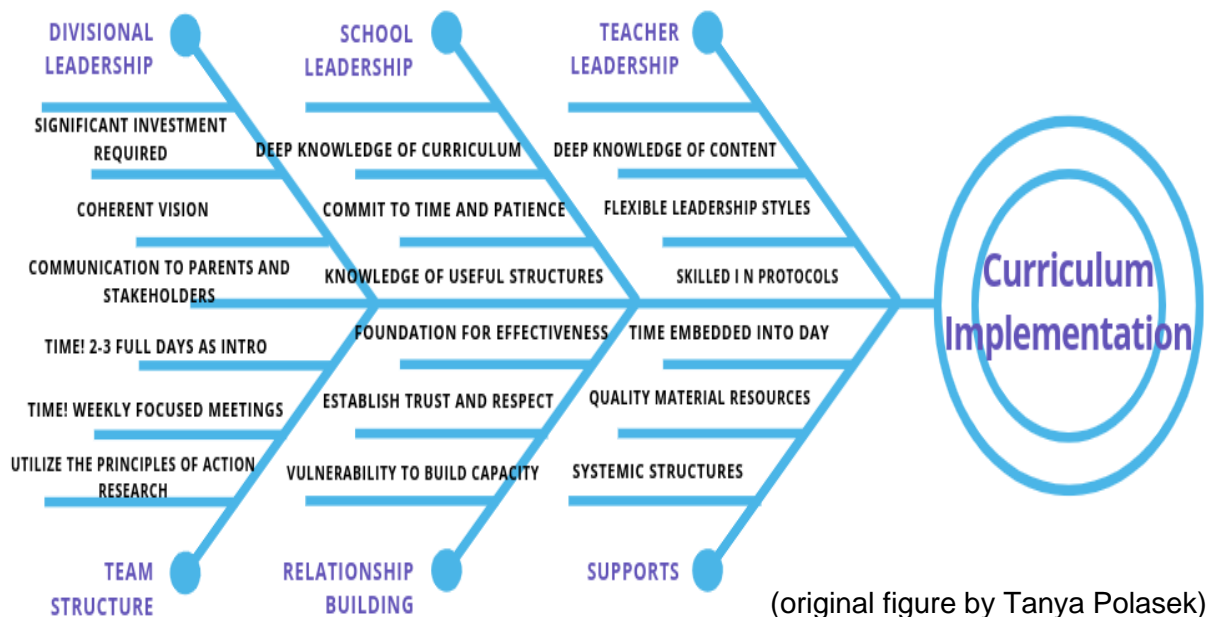
practice” (p. 483). Teachers must remember that they are often the experts of their own contexts. However, they need to be challenged to enhance their knowledge and methods to improve student outcomes based on their unique contexts and evolving research. Training to follow scripted and prescribed programs is far from the inquiry-based model aimed at student improvement through the growth of a reflective practitioner.

### The Proposed Model

Successful curriculum implementation relies on effective and sustainable teacher professional development to support capacity building and improved student outcomes. The proposed model can be seen in Figure 1, where the top section of the fishbone diagram delineates the three key leadership roles (divisional, school, teacher) and the bottom section identifies the key components (team structure, relationship building, supports) of a successful PL model to enable and sustain curriculum implementation.

**Figure 1**

*Professional Learning Model to Support and Sustain Curriculum Implementation*



### Importance of Quality Professional Development

School improvement needs progressive and innovative ways of reorganizing and reconceptualizing the work that teachers do (Lipton & Wellman, 2012). Recent models of PL focus on how to harness the power of teacher learning to drive student achievement. How this is accomplished is crucial because teachers are often reluctant to change. This is understandable because to abandon an old practice means admitting its ineffectiveness (Walpole et al., 2019). To help teachers make the shift, new learning must be understood within the circumstances of their old learning (Baird & Clark, 2018). Quality PL relies on teachers’ willingness and opportunity to discuss and develop personally relevant and meaningful understandings (Timperley et al., 2008). Without effort to learn the current understanding of individual teachers and collective teams, teachers may view professional development as irrelevant to their job (Fitzgerald & Theilheimer, 2013, p. 111). NIET (2020) insisted that “the most effective professional learning blend support for ‘what’ is being taught with ‘how’ it is being taught” (p. 5).

In Manitoba, teachers have at least five days of PL allotted by collective agreements and provincial law. This is in addition to other days that teachers can access or time embedded in their day for growth. According to Walpole et al. (2019), “teachers deserve PL that is designed to motivate them, is intellectually engaging, and provides meaningful support for their everyday work” (p. 431). To achieve this, schools need a comprehensive system that can coherently integrate many complex structures and programs, and ensure that everyone has the common goal of improving the learning of adults to positively affect student growth (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

### **Why the PLC Model Is Useful for Curriculum Implementation**

According to the Manitoba Education website their “goal in English language arts is to support PL to help build local capacity that sustains school divisions and schools as learning organizations and enhances classroom practices” (Government of Manitoba, n.d., para. 1). The structure and protocols of the PLC are ideal as a system by which the Manitoba ELA curriculum can be implemented to create and sustain student outcome improvement. PLC’s big ideas of “(1) a focus on learning, (2) a collaborative culture, and (3) a results orientation” (Buffum et al., 2018, p. 11) align with the support encouraged by Manitoba Education.

When implementing new curriculum, teachers need a collaborative PL model to support their own learning in order to ensure successful improvement in student outcomes. Teachers need support to become expert educators, and combining curriculum with collaborative PL creates a comprehensive approach to support this effort (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). When these are combined in a logical way, it is easier for teachers to make sense of them (NIET, 2020). Implementing and sustaining curriculum relies on the three Ps: personalization, precision, and professional learning (Fullan, 2008). If teachers are to understand how their practice needs to change to reflect a new curriculum, they will need continuous learning embedded within their job (NIET, 2020). PLCs are ideal for new curriculum implementation because they harness the power of collaboration to make knowledge from information (Edwards, 2012).

By using protocols, members build capacity to facilitate group work (Lipton & Wellman, 2011, p. ix). Breakspear's (2021) introduction of Teaching Sprints provides useful structures and protocols for teams:

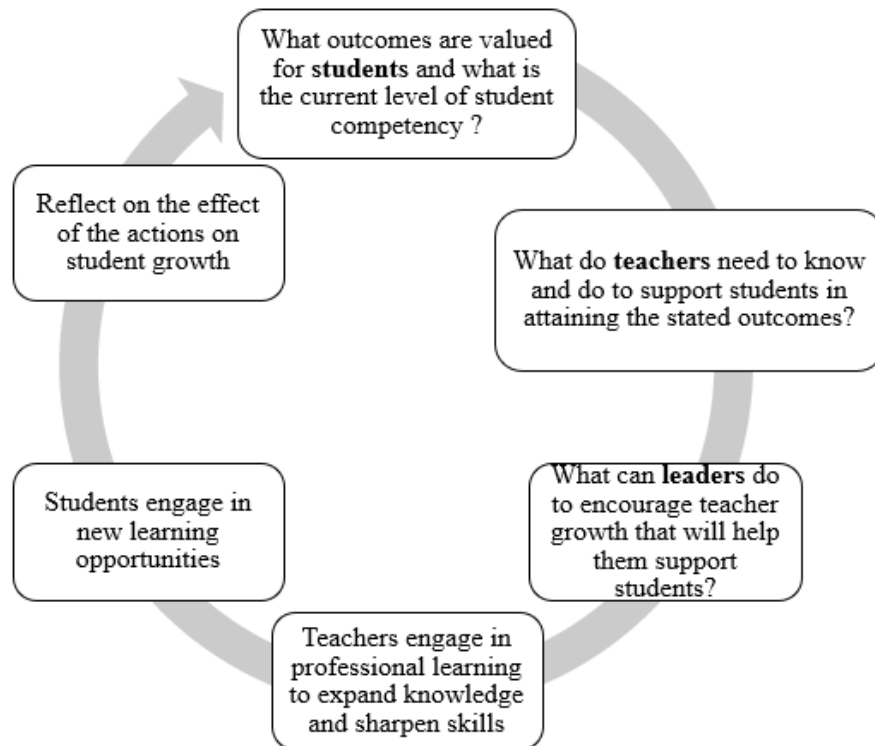
The process supports teacher teams to define highly specific areas of student learning to improve, design evidence-informed strategies, and to collect evidence to check their impact. Through engaging in these focused, manageable and energizing Sprints, teachers have an authentic opportunity to improve their practice while lifting student outcomes. (para. 2)

PLCs are flexible, fluid, enable collaboration, develop capacity of schools/teachers, and influence teaching practice and self-efficacy (Edwards, 2012; Walpole et al., 2019). Departments of education spend copious amounts of money and time developing quality curriculum materials, but the materials alone are not enough (Albright et al., 2013). PLCs provide schools and teachers with the structures and supports they need to successfully implement new curriculum.

### **What This Looks Like in Action**

Participating in a PLC where educators are focused on students offers teachers the chance to work through new content without forgetting the target: student improvement (Timperley et al., 2008). A cycle such as Figure 2 would serve as an ideal model to implement the Manitoba ELA curriculum.

**Figure 2**  
*Teacher Inquiry and Knowledge-Building Cycles*



(adapted from Timperley et al., 2008)

Such a cycle requires knowledge-building through teacher inquiry cycles with the goal of improved student outcomes.

To establish a PLC, teachers need immersive training at the beginning to build knowledge and then several occasions throughout the year to come together and learn (NIET, 2020). Using the PLC model creates opportunities for teachers to engage in challenging and complex work in a supportive and collaborative way. Following the initial training, groups might practise analyzing and working with exemplars of student work to form instructional plans, practise those within the group, and then use them with their own students in the classroom (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). Teachers would then return to the group with new student samples and use these to guide further instruction. This approach (led by collaborating teachers using a non-evaluative method) “created dramatically higher trust and ownership among teachers” (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017, p. 10).

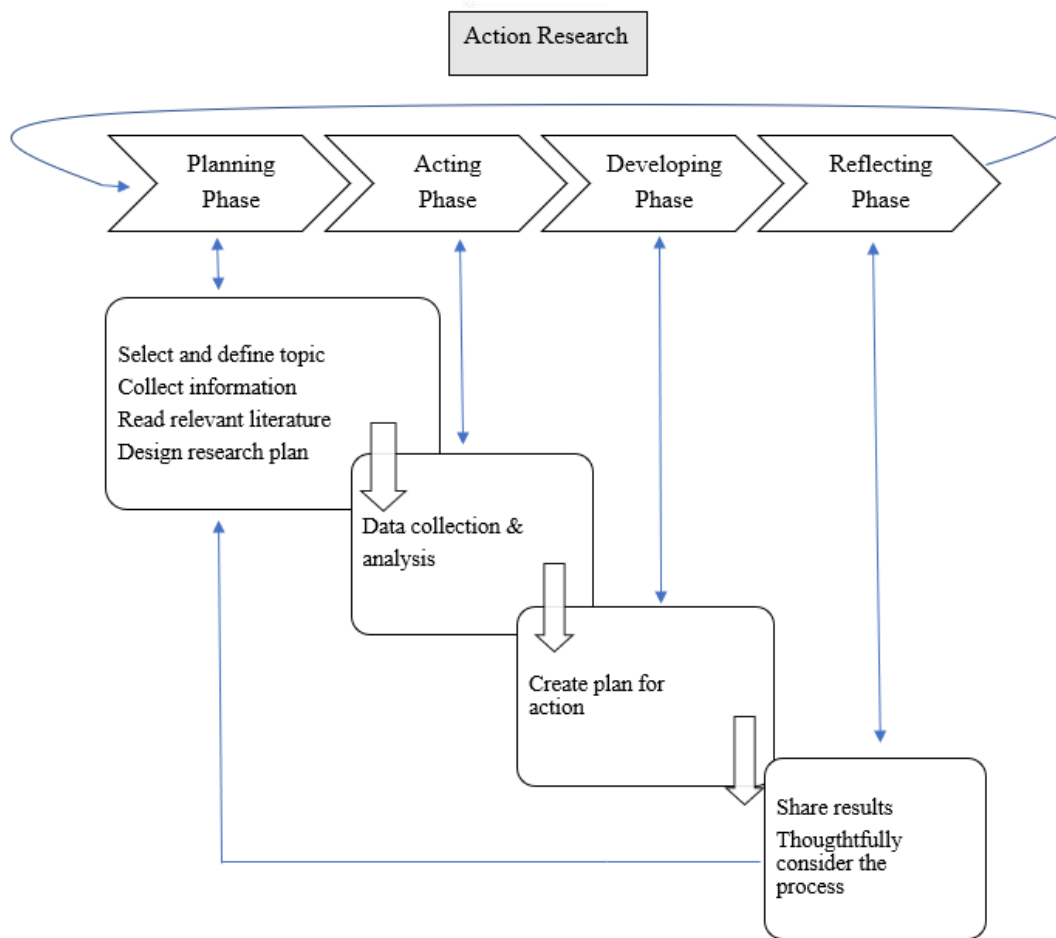
Unlike the previous curriculum, the new Manitoba curriculum framework does not state the targeted student outcomes. As Timperley et al. (2008) stressed, student outcomes “must be clear to the teachers engaging in professional learning experiences” (p. 8). Teachers will need expert guidance and support to ensure they have a solid understanding of the concepts and practices encased within the curriculum. For successful implementation, it is essential that the discussion and collaboration continue throughout the year (NIET, 2020).

### **Action Research To Promote Student Growth and Equity**

Action research cycles can be used as a structure to support educational change in practice. It can offer “a process by which *current* educational practice can be changed to *better* practice” (Mertler, 2019, p. 13). The process involves planning, acting, developing, and

reflecting as described in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*The Process of Action Research*



(adapted from Mertler, 2019)

Action research provides teachers with a straightforward and iterative structure to support their learning and implementation of the ELA curriculum. In the architecture of the PLC, teachers can attend to artifacts, develop respect, trust, and empathy for others, commit to individual and collective learning and efficacy, and be vulnerable in making mistakes and learning from them (Walpole et al., 2019). This process also works to ensure equity for students because good ideas are not held by any one individual teacher, but instead are shared and used by the community (Hirsh, 2018; Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

### **Divisional Leadership**

Schools need leaders to project a vision of PLCs, build capacity at all levels, and support teachers and school leaders in realizing this vision. Divisional systems for PL are not often connected to training on curriculum (NIET, 2020). However, schools and teachers need ongoing investment to meet the demands of successful implementation.

The process of change can be supported by divisional leaders through the following steps:

- Build capacity (Edwards, 2012; NIET, 2020).
- Understand their own communities and contexts so they are better able to make decisions about which strategies will have the biggest impact (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).
- Recognize and respect “the artistry and skill required to teach students for deep comprehension” (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017, p. 15), and support teachers by aligning systems to reach the intended goal.
- Communicate with parents to bring them up to date with new curriculum expectations so that they can strengthen teachers’ efforts by supporting learning at home (NIET, 2020).
- Leaders should employ the same model of professional learning to help them monitor their progress and make continued improvements (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

### **In-School Leadership**

In-school leaders need a strong base of understanding to support curriculum implementation, and while this is crucial it is also rare (NIET, 2020). The leader must set the stage and ensure that the climate is right for teachers to learn (Timperley et al., 2008). Extraneous demands must be reduced, and other ongoing initiatives must align with the overall vision. In creating this vision, school leaders need to be intentional and work to develop a supportive architecture rooted in the philosophy of the curriculum: “Implementing changes also requires simultaneous, coordinated transformation of multiple aspects including practice, thinking, systems, behaviour and beliefs throughout the school” (Hamilton et al., 2013, p. 47).

It is important for leaders to remember that in order to do this work, teachers need to feel safe. If teachers fear negative repercussions from inquiry that reveals anything less than top quality performance, they will not participate in a worthwhile way (Timperley et al., 2008).

### **Value and Importance of Teacher Leaders**

PLCs function best when facilitated by content experts (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). Teacher leaders are ideally suited for this role in curriculum implementation because of their content knowledge (NIET, 2020, p. 10). Teacher leaders must be effective, and the meetings must be structured and useful for teachers (NIET, 2020). These leaders are responsible for creating a trusting and respectful learning climate in their PLCs (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017). Schools and groups need to harness the power of these leaders to do the hard work of taking the first step (NIET, 2020). Once this occurs, leaders can then begin to shift their leadership style from instigator to a more distributive style that invites an organic uptake of the ideas (Edwards, 2012). Successful teams take ownership of the structure, decisions, and results, leading to a collective knowing of these structures and processes (Lipton & Wellman, 2011). The PLC model offers an ideal structure to build the capacity and encourage this organic leadership growth through iterative cycles.

### **Supporting Teachers**

Teachers need to *be supported* and to *feel supported* in order to do the challenging and complex work of curriculum implementation. Discussing the strengths and philosophies of the new curriculum can be a useful strategy to support teachers (NIET, 2020). Repeatedly, the research insists that teachers need time, space, and structures to collaborate while they dig into a new curriculum. There needs to be a balance of challenge to their current practice and



support for taking new risks (Timperley et al., 2008). This is not something done overnight. Remaining engaged with an idea for an extended period of years, not months, is needed to move from old practice to new practice (Fullan, 2008; Timperley et al., 2008). Because learning develops in a cycle rather than in a straight line (Timperley et al., 2008), PLCs are ideal for supporting this growth in teachers.

PL is more successful when there is a combination of theoretics and practical applications (Timperley et al., 2008). Much of the new Manitoba ELA curriculum functions as a theoretical framework with few readily available practical exemplars. Using the cyclical model, embedded in the PLC design to support teachers' implementation, seems ideal to address this. In addition, the act of "designing learning activities is useful for consolidating teachers' understanding of learning goals, encouraging both reflective and active practice" (Hamilton et al., 2013, p. 50).

Approaching PL from an inquiry stance can be a useful support for teachers. This will open a door for teachers to view their responsibility in educating themselves in ways that can improve student outcomes. Highly developed assessment skills will assist teachers in better understanding what their students are able to do and what learning the teachers need to help their students (Timperley et al., 2008).

Being self-reflective and self-regulatory are attributes that support growth for teachers. One way for teachers to monitor their progress effectively is by identifying objectives and signposts toward them (Timperley et al., 2008). PL needs to take different approaches, depending on the content and the beliefs and skills of the participant. For teachers to learn new skills or accept new philosophies, their current understandings and assumptions need to be activated.

## Conclusion

A shift in the direction and philosophy of the 2020 Manitoba English Language Arts Curriculum from its previous document requires a change in professional development to support the implementation. However, curriculum change that is both transformative and sustainable is an ongoing dilemma in education (Goodyear et al., 2017). Successful curriculum implementation relies on quality teacher professional development to support capacity building and improved student outcomes. The research supports teachers' need for time, space, and structures to collaborate while they work to implement a new curriculum (NIET, 2020). The structure and protocols of professional learning communities, including the use of action research inquiry cycles, would support the implementation of the Manitoba ELA curriculum to create and sustain student outcome improvement.

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### **About the Author**

*Tanya Polasek has been teaching high school English language arts and drama at MacGregor Collegiate for the past 17 years. Tanya earned her Bachelor of Education at the University of Regina and is currently completing her Master of Education in curriculum and pedagogy at Brandon University. She resides in Carberry, Manitoba, with her husband and two children.*