

# Professional Learning Communities: Concepts in Action in a Principal Preparation Program, an Elementary School Team, a Leadership Team, and a Business Partnership

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## Summary

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# Introduction

The Professional Learning Community (PLC) model has moved to the forefront in the field of education as one of the most effective frameworks to improve student achievement and overall school success. The research conducted for this paper provides evidence for systemic and action based improvement using the PLC model in four diverse venues: candidates enrolled in a leadership preparation program, a school faculty to improve its learning culture, a district level team, and a business partnership. The first case study used the PLC framework to develop, implement, and assess the preparation and training of educational leadership candidates. The second case study was incorporated by a principal and faculty to identify ways the PLC model could be put into practice to enhance learning in the school culture. The third case study was the use of the PLC model with a superintendent and a team of school principals. Finally, the PLC model was introduced to develop a business partnership. The business partnership was a unique use of the PLC model, which has historically been utilized in the educational arena.

The research on professional learning communities in even its early stages has conflicting views. The work of DuFour and his colleagues suggest a long lasting and impactful reform using the new grass roots approach to meaningful change (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Fullan, on the other hand indicates professional learning communities in many schools are just the latest superficial innovation that at best may occur in isolated situations but rarely as true systemic change in the various school districts he has studied over the past six years (Fullan, 2006). The case studies in this paper have attempted to address the pros and cons of the literature on PLC's.

Two fundamental concepts, andragogy and the knowing-doing gap, were applied to each case study. The application of andragogy ([Knowles, 1984](#)), the theory of adult learning, attempts to explain why adults learn differently than other types of learners. Andragogy suggests that the best practices in adult learning provide learners with principles of high levels of involvement in planning, experiential learning, relevance, and pragmatic application (Knowles, 1984).

The second premise applied to this PLC study was the *knowing-doing gap* suggested by Pfeffer and Sutton (2000). This concept has historical roots in many areas including education, whereby adults are knowledgeable within an area of learning but frequently fail to take action.

“The answer to the knowing-doing problem is deceptively simple: embed more of the process of acquiring new knowledge in the actual doing of the task and less in the formal training programs that are frequently ineffective. If you do it, then you will know it” (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000, p. 27). This study sought to insure that new knowledge would include application and action.

Participants in each case first gained knowledge of the PLC model, followed by efforts to apply the main principles of the model in order to impact their role and environment.

The emphasis on theory to practice is supported by the adult learning literature as well the PLC literature in *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work* (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many, 2006). The following four cases were developed by first introducing the principles of professional learning communities followed by opportunities to apply it to themselves and others in a school or business environment.

# Case Study One: Preparation of Leadership Candidates

If Rip Van winkle were to wake up after 100 years of sleep, it may be said by many in the area of leadership, that he would see very little change in educational administration preparation programs. The Levine report (2005) and a recent report from the Education Schools Project (2005) called into serious question the quality of programs that prepare school administrators. Faculty in the North Central College Master's Program in Educational Leadership have taken a serious look at its leadership preparation program and the call for national reform in school leadership. This small liberal arts college answered many of these charges through the development of a cohort for leadership candidates based on the Professional Learning Community model. The single most significant focus of this model suggests that "to truly reform American education we must abandon the long-stranding assumption that the central activity is teaching and re-orientate all policy making and activities around a new benchmark: student learning" (Fiske, 1992, p. 253). Using the *Learning by Doing*(2006), the cohort utilized the PLC principles during an 18 month masters program in principal preparation. The following PLC principles were applied: a focus on learning, collaboration and teaming, collective inquiry, action orientation, continuous improvement, assessment of results and celebrating success (Dufour, et al. 2006).

## Implementation

The purpose of developing a PLC cohort for leadership candidates was to address the following areas: redesigning the master's program using the relevant curriculum,

creating a selective admission process, quality faculty, establishing an extensive 18 month internship of theory to practice, and assigning a principal mentor from the field. Ten candidates were nominated for the PLC cohort, each by their school principal. In turn, the principal became the candidate's mentor during the 18 month experience. Three full time college faculty members delivered all of the courses and provided training sessions for the principal mentors. These three faculty members also served as a field coach for each candidate.

# Sustainability

The success of the PLC cohort for leadership candidates can be assessed using traditional measures. All candidates completed the program courses with excellent grades, passed the state administrative exam, developed a professional portfolio, and completed over 200 hours of field experiences. The more compelling longitudinal assessment will be the performance of each candidate as a school leader. Three PLC candidates were hired for administrative roles and three continued as curriculum and instructional specialists, an administrative role between teaching and administration. The sustainability of the PLC cohort program will require active participation by principals and superintendents in partnership with college faculty in principal preparation programs.

# Findings

The development of a PLC cohort provided anecdotal data that suggest positive reform in educational leadership preparation.

- One of the ways to reform educational administrative programs is to reduce the gap between the reality of K-12 education and principal preparation programs. The PLC model provides a bridge between these separate worlds, a divide that for too long has jeopardized the quality of principal preparation.
- The PLC model provides a single and magnified focus on learning, an area often lost in disjointed and theoretical administrative curriculums.
- The use of the PLC model provides a common purpose, language, and collaborative outcomes that benefit all the learners in the school community, beginning with the principal as the lead learner.

The same PLC principles that are improving the quality of education in K-12 settings can also foster needed improvement in administrative preparation programs. "When a school or district functions as a professional learning community (PLC), educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it" (Dufour, et al., 2006, p. 3). The PLC cohort program provided a positive step in future leadership reform using a model that will be an effective, familiar, and welcome

landscape as candidates travel from an administrative leadership program and into the role of a school leader.

# Case Study Two: A School Emerges As a Professional Learning Community

Professional learning communities (PLC) have become the *hot topic* in the K-12 educational setting. Many schools are striving to embed the PLC concepts into their educational delivery processes as a means to enhance student achievement. In this case study an elementary school principal sought to engage staff on a volunteer basis to gain knowledge of the PLC concepts and then determine whether these concepts would be worthwhile for the entire school community to put into practice. The principal worked on the premise that “a school cannot function as a PLC until its staff has grappled with the questions that provide direction both for the school as an organization and the individuals within it” (Eaker, et al., 2002, p. 3).

## Implementation

The Walker’s Grove staff began learning about professional learning communities, through a book study. The sixteen participants in this group spanned all grade levels in K-5 and included a differentiation specialist and a reading specialist. Each participant in the book study received *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. This book study was organized to meet once a week for a total of six sessions. The first session introduced the concepts of a PLC and was facilitated by the principal. The concepts that were to be addressed during this book study were: creating a purpose, creating a focus on learning, determining how to respond when students don’t learn, building a collaborative culture, creating a results oriented PLC, using relevant information to improve results, and understanding consensus and conflict in a PLC.

The book study allowed participants to facilitate each of the learning sessions and the participants shared this information with their colleagues who were not participating.

This sharing of information created a heightened awareness and led to the second phase of the implementation of a PLC which was to share with the entire staff. Some comments that were made by the participants about what they had learned were: “We’ve been working as a PLC in many respects this year even though we didn’t know it, which should make it easier to get the rest of the staff to join the PLC bandwagon.” “Collaboration is much more than being an active member of a team, it is constant focused action and communication towards a goal.” “For members who don’t want to get on board, show, invite them in, find ways to involve them.” “We really are doing a PLC in our school more than I realized with data collection, and analysis.” These reflective comments provided a good foundation for continuing the implementation process for a true PLC at this elementary school.

# Sustainability

As a result of the book study a *Cultural Shift Survey* was created for the entire staff to complete (DuFour, et al., 2006). This survey provided a foundation for where Walkers Grove faculty would begin the process developing a PLC. The faculty are continuing to use this information throughout the year to move from a teaching focus to a learning focused community. A PLC Committee, with a representative from all segments of the school community, is working with the results of the survey to determine professional development plans for the future.

# Findings

Lessons learned at the K-5 school setting demonstrated that allowing people to have time to discuss, engage, and build and sustain relationships are key to the success of a PLC. Ultimately, this success will provide for high achieving students within this community. Other findings include:

- The book study provided a structure to implement the concepts of the professional learning community in a smaller group setting in order to infiltrate the larger community.
- *Slow and steady* should be the mantra for implementing and sustaining a professional learning community in a K-5 setting. By providing a slow process of starting with a small group setting, it allowed the concepts to slowly infiltrate the larger school community in order to transition to the next phases.
- Relationships need to be built and maintained throughout the PLC implementation process.

# Case Study Three: A District Leadership Team Becomes a Professional Learning Community

Professional Learning Communities, typically implemented at the school level, enhance teacher development. The PLC structure, however, is equally effective in providing professional development for a school district's administrative team. Principals, together with the superintendent, benefit from participation in a PLC in ways similar to that of teachers. Principals develop leadership skills individually and collectively when they learn in harmony from each other. When the superintendent also participates, the potential is high for professional growth and implementing the PLC concept throughout the district. Consider the case of the Arlington School District (Washington), where a group of twenty one administrators implemented a PLC and discovered both rewards and challenges from this way of working together (West & Derrington, 2009).

## Implementation

Arlington's principals attended a summer DuFour PLC workshop where discussion began about the possibility of implementing PLC's in their schools. Upon returning to the district, they wondered how they might continue the dialogue and also take the next step to translate their ideas into action. The principals shared their enthusiasm for continuing this work with the superintendent and asked for collaboration time. Acknowledging the principals passion and commitment to work together, the superintendent dedicated a significant amount of regularly scheduled administrative meeting time to begin a superintendent-principal PLC. They chose a book as a catalyst for the dialogue, dedicated a consistently scheduled meeting time, and began the discussion. These school leaders quickly found challenges in this new way of interacting as a team. With the superintendent present, for example, evaluation concerns surfaced when apparent shortcomings, doubts, and frustrations were shared in front of "the boss". Moreover, not all team members had the same level of enthusiasm for the topic or dedication to do the necessary reading and reflection prior to PLC meetings. Thus

the team found that developing a set of operating norms was an important first step to guide the process and assure accountability to the team.

# Sustainability

The greatest challenge to sustainability occurred after the initial two years of implementation when the superintendent retired and a new one hired. Moreover, the new superintendent was the only new member of the administrative team, albeit the most powerful controller of the district team meeting agenda. Principals report that during the superintendent interview process, the principals sent a strong message that they wanted to continue the PLC structure. They sought assurance that the new superintendent would be a collaborative learning partner and sustain the supportive time and relationship structures in place. The principals hoped that the peer learning process they'd developed would remain the same regardless of who might be the superintendent. While admittedly the team is not exactly in the same place it may have been under the former superintendent, the administrative PLC will continue due to the strength of the principals' belief in the process and the stability of working with the same team of principals over several years.

# Findings

- Time is a challenge because every meeting has an already full agenda and leaders are busy. Time must be reallocated within the structure not added-onto already busy schedules.
- The superintendent must relinquish control and become a peer in the PLC dialogue process.
- A foundation of trust and support must be present to allow for authentic conversations.
- Team interpersonal skills guide positive team learning.

Lessons learned in this school district illustrate that relationships, time, structures and skills need to be simultaneously addressed in order to develop a district leadership team that has the capacity to continuously learn in a PLC model (West & Derrington, 2009).

# Case Study Four: Early Stages of a

# Business Partnership Education and Business Learn PLC Concepts

Educational leaders are inundated with messages from business executives that tell us to be more like corporate America. However, learning is a two way street. Business leaders can also learn from leaders in education as this case illustrates. Washington State leaders found that there are basic leadership skills that all exemplary leaders have in common. Whether you are a CEO of a business, the principal of a school, or a superintendent, a leader is a leader.

## Implementation

The leadership learning between these unlikely partners began with informal conversations between a principal, a superintendent, and a business executive. Conversations regarding the similarities in leadership responsibilities inspired these leaders to share their experience and learn from one another. To do this effectively they agreed that the dialogue would require a structure. Thus the group agreed to meet monthly for breakfast and focus discussions on a leadership book and its application to their respective work. The educators introduced the concept of Professional Learning Communities and discussed how this concept might apply to a group of leaders in any profession.

The principal sought and received a small Professional Development Resource Grant from the state principal's association and purchased a book for each participant. The book, *The Founding Fathers on Leadership*, by Donald T. Phillips was chosen as a book of interest to both business and school leaders. This book examines leadership through the story of the American Revolution and the leadership role of our founding fathers. The book appealed to all group members regardless of their profession. Furthermore, it is readable, interesting and requires no specific understanding of educational or business concepts.

## Sustainability

Monthly meetings continued throughout the year with good attendance and lively discussions. Frequently someone would surface a challenging problem he or she was facing. Following a collaborative discussion, potential solutions were brainstormed and later implemented in the workplace. The group continues in the second year to continue the dialogue using a different leadership book as a catalyst. Two of the original seven dropped out and were replaced by new members. Those who continue report acquiring benefit from the discussions and collegiality. This collegial relationship is important because, unlike a school or district employee team, traditional leadership methods and the power of authority cannot be applied to volunteers.

## Findings

All participants agreed that the educator-business book study is beneficial to reflecting on leadership challenges and attributes. Furthermore, educators gained the support of business leaders. Business leaders learned the complexities of education. Participants also learned that skills required in leadership are quite similar between professions. They identified examples of commonalities including systems thinking, effective communication, and the need to build relationships. All of the members gained insights into leadership commonalities and into each other's professional world. Participants also report that a trust necessary for the dialogue was developed during this first year implementation (Derrington & Cummings, 2008). This trust building is viewed as essential when building a group of diverse participants who do not interact on a daily basis in the workplace.

## Findings and Future Studies

Each case study provided positive anecdotal evidence that the use of the professional learning community model improved learning and collaborative relationships. The principles for adult learners and the knowing-doing gap resulted in participants taking action based on new knowledge regarding professional learning communities. The use of the PLC model provided a common purpose, language, and shared outcomes for teachers, principals, superintendents, business partners, and all learners within these case studies. A commitment of time is a resource that must be reallocated within the structure for each of the settings. This time commitment will be most effective if the participants value that the work that is being done is worthwhile. While Fullan indicates the need for systematic change, there is also evidence in this study and others (Fullan, 2006) that the fundamental issue in developing and sustaining a culture of learning

begins with providing teachers with meaningful opportunities to engage in sustained conversations that focus on teaching, learning, and a collaborative culture.

For the critics of the PLC model, the question remains: What model can provide a foundation for multiple stakeholders to begin conversations, build trust, and share common values that will result in meaningful action? These three writers suggest that the principles of a professional learning community are transparent and applicable to many venues with many potential outcomes.

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