

Creating Effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

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Abstract

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are increasingly providing opportunities for school teachers to collaborate in order to develop shared beliefs about learning. Five key characteristics ensure the PLC's effectiveness. A PLC requires collaboration and a learning culture of trust among teachers. A goal-oriented plan is needed that involves data-driven conversations while ensuring that students remain the focus of the PLC's work to benefit all learners. A trustworthy leader is required to support teachers with challenges and successes along the journey together. With a focus on student achievement, PLCs can provide a school with significant gains in student growth.

In order for a professional learning community (PLC) to be effective, the team needs collaboration, a learning culture of trust, a goal-oriented plan, a trustworthy leader, and a committed focus on student achievement. Although teachers work together in a common building, the collaboration needed for a PLC requires them to have thoughtful conversations and provide each other with ongoing interdependent social support. While collaboration is important, it is not possible without a learning culture of trust, which includes shared beliefs about learning while recognizing that might be difficult when teachers do not share the same values about learning together. A goal-oriented plan that focuses on student learning is needed to help teachers maintain strong communication. When a trustworthy leader in the school supports the PLC'S plans, he or she provides teachers with autonomy and helps them to overcome challenges while recognizing and celebrating success along the way. Effective PLCs have student achievement at the heart of their work; they ensure that school and system goals align with this achievement while having appropriate student data driven conversations. As teachers work together with these key characteristics of PLCs, the ultimate reward is improved student learning for the entire school.

The Power of Collaboration

Collaboration that includes thoughtful conversations and social support leading to interdependency and vulnerability is a key characteristic needed for a professional learning community to be successful. Collaboration requires teachers across multiple grade levels and disciplines to be engaged in meaningful conversations wherein sharing knowledge is a back and forth process (Routman, 2008). These conversations require teachers to experiment with ideas, problem solve, and reflect together as they develop and improve beliefs about their practice (Pyhalto, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015). When teachers work in isolation, they have "limited confidence in their ability to raise student achievement" (Black & William, 1998, p. 13). As teachers offer different ideas, approaches, and perspectives on learning, they become mutually accountable and supportive of one another (Massey & Crouch, 2015). When teachers have an opportunity to support one another through collaboration, teachers can increase work engagement, develop confidence, and persist in challenges (Pyhalto et al., 2015). Undertaking the challenging work together, teachers create collective motivation that nudges teachers to improve their practice in a supportive way (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Through collaboration, teachers develop an interdependency that includes an appreciation of mutual agreements and strategies that encourage them to ask each other for help (Pyhalto et al., 2015). While teachers work collaboratively, they make themselves more vulnerable to the group which motivates them to become a powerful social resource for each other, in order to create reflective dialogue

leading to de-privatization of practice and a learning culture of trust (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015).

The Importance of Trust

A learning culture of trust, developed through shared beliefs, is necessary for professional learning communities to be effective, but it can be challenging when teachers' attitudes about learning do not support their working together. A culture of trust is created when teachers feel like they can make mistakes, take risks, and openly admit errors without fear of being judged by colleagues (Hallam et al., 2015). The learning culture of trust can be developed within the PLCs when teachers create shared beliefs that include having an appreciation for different learning processes, understanding how to use different learning approaches to meet individual students' needs, and being open to new strategies (Owen, 2014). Teachers' shared beliefs are a starting point that can lead to establishing group norms and developing a common vision necessary for building a team (Venables, 2011). However, when teachers have attitudes about learning that require them to overcome an isolated culture of traditional teaching, teachers struggle to develop trust and devote a minimal amount of energy to professional learning activities (Tam, 2015). There is no simple solution to teacher resistance, understanding the challenge of resistance and addressing it might be a starting point (Tam, 2015). In authentic PLCs, teachers work together to move the culture of trust from teachers working in isolation to sharing and becoming dependent on one another, in order to collectively improve student learning across grades (Venables, 2011). Working together in a trusting relationship, teachers can focus on student learning through long-term planning with identifiable goals.

The Necessity of Planning

A professional learning community is effective when there is a well-developed plan with goals that focus on student learning and thereby prevent teacher communication breakdown. Planning requires that teachers are aware of what they want to learn, identify what they have already learned, and develop learning goals that model principles of assessment for learning (Davies, Herbst, & Reynolds, 2008). As teachers work to develop their goals, the plan needs to include regular meetings with a long-term approach that is three to six years in length, in order to develop routines and work through goals within the PLC (Provini, 2012). During this multi-year plan, teachers need a variety of opportunities and resources for a plan to be multi-layered with feedback and differentiated with multiple entry points to meet the needs of every teacher (Davies et al., 2008). When teachers learning together through co-planning, and implementing fun and creative learning experiences, the results can lead to improved student engagement and changes to thinking about pedagogy (Owen, 2014). While the focus of the goals is on student learning through student achievement, teachers determine what the goals will be and how they will evaluate whether the goals have been met (Owen, 2014). When PLCs operate without an established plan and goals, there are communication breakdowns that cause dysfunction within the team (Weber, 2011). An effective leader can counteract a communication breakdown, in order to bring the PLC back together and support teachers moving forward.

Trustworthy Leadership

An effective professional learning community has a leader who is trustworthy while helping to overcome conflicts, who provides teachers with autonomy, and who recognizes and celebrates success. Trustworthy leaders make developing trust a priority by modelling and mediating when the trust breaks down within the group (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). As leaders build trust with teachers by modelling authentic thoughtful conversations, teachers are more motivated in their work, feel more satisfied in their jobs, and are more likely to trust their

colleagues (Hallam et al., 2015). When there is a breakdown in trust, the leader is responsible for ensuring that teachers have the conflict resolution skills to move past hurt feelings and make decisions with the highest quality (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). While the principal's role influences how the PLC will develop, it is important that the team retains ownership. Promoting the teachers' commitment to the learning community increases their autonomy and mutual support (Tam, 2014). When leaders overstep, courageous leaders are humble and self-reflective; they own their actions, fix their mistakes, and remain committed to the teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Teacher autonomy enables teachers to help themselves and their students, so administrators must avoid "manipulating teachers into complying with eternally imposed requirements or delivering someone else's vision" (Hargreaves & Fullan, p. 137). As success is achieved, leaders intentionally and thoughtfully celebrate this success in a public way to ensure transparency in the professional growth (Dewey, 2015). With celebrations, principals show what is possible in an effective PLC, by using a strength-based approach that affirms and showcases the positive yet specific actions connected to student achievement that have been accomplished by the collective group (Routman, 2008).

A Focus on Student Achievement

Student achievement is a critical focus for professional learning communities. Effective PLCs align student achievement with school and system goals, and maintain appropriate student data-driven conversations. When teachers embrace the idea of success for all learners, they begin to ask questions such as "How could we adopt characteristics and practices in our own school that will ensure all students are learning? What indicators could we monitor to assess our progress?" (Dufour, 2004, "Big Idea #1"). When shared knowledge is created collectively as a group and aligns with the school and system goals, teachers have active involvement school reform policy work that is owned and promoted by the teachers themselves (Pyhalto et al., 2015). When this professional development is connected to school goals and priorities, and the relationship among teachers continues to grow, student achievement is highly impacted (Owen, 2014). Teachers maintain a focus on student achievement by using data to support the conversations around instruction. Conversations that include data such as student products, student observations, and conversations with students help teachers to see the concrete gains in student learning and their achievement while also determining required changes to instructional practices (Venables, 2011). When these conversations are "structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions the relationship between instructional practices and student work produce significant gains in student learning" (Owen, 2014, p. 60). Teachers use the data as an indicator of individual student progress rather than using the average student grades to analyze student achievement (Dufour, 2004).

Conclusion

In conclusion, an effective professional learning community requires collaboration, a learning culture of trust, a goal-oriented plan, a trustworthy leader, and a committed focus on student achievement. While collaboration is needed for a PLC, it is the thoughtful conversations and ongoing interdependent social support that create a collaborative team. A learning culture of trust is formed within the community, which includes shared beliefs about learning and recognizing the challenge of overcoming teachers' different attitudes about learning. As the PLC creates a goal-oriented plan that focuses on student learning, teachers are able to develop strong communications. A trustworthy leader who provides teachers with autonomy, while recognizing and celebrating success along the way, will also contribute the effectiveness of the PLC. Strong professional learning communities ensure that school and system goals align with the importance of student achievement. The most wonderful reward of having an effective PLC is that every student in the school will benefit from the inspirational work of the team of teachers.

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About the Author

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