

**HOLDING THE REINS OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY:
EIGHT THEMES FROM RESEARCH ON PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS
OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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Using a naturalistic inquiry approach and thematic analysis, this paper outlines the findings of a research study that examined 12 Manitoba principals' conceptions of professional learning communities. The study found that these principals consider the development of professional learning communities to be a normative imperative within the educational culture of their schools, yet their understandings of what constitutes a professional learning community, as defined by Toole & Louis (2002) are varied and partially limited. However, the principals suggested that there are eight dominant themes that are central in their conceptions of "professional learning community." The themes are: professional learning communities are about process; structural supports enable the development of professional learning communities; trust as the foundation for adult relationships; congenial relationships dominate conceptions of community; learning is an individual activity; professional teaching is derived from attitudinal attributes; teacher evaluation shapes how principals think about learning in professional communities; and, teacher evaluation impacts principal and teacher relationships in professional learning communities.

Introduction

Numerous researchers (Crow, Hausman & Scribner, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002) argue that nurturing a culture that supports staff in becoming a professional learning community is the most promising avenue for sustained, substantial school improvement. Studies demonstrate that schools with strong professional learning communities produce important outcomes for students and school professionals (Crow et al., 2002; Toole & Louis, 2002). Toole and Louis (2002) suggest that

cross-cultural research findings indicate that professional learning communities lead to improved school functioning. A professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and potent strategy for school change and improvement (Hord, 1997, 2004). School improvement efforts require that, at the school level, staff work collaboratively to solve educational problems through the development of a robust community of learners who will to take responsibility for, and be committed to, achieving student outcomes (Blase & Blase, 2003).

A problem facing research on professional learning communities has been a conceptual one, and while some suggest that the term defines itself (Morrissey, 2000), oversimplifications offer little to a meaningful conceptual understanding. Although perhaps obvious to some, the human interactions in a professional learning community have proven difficult to capture (Little, 2003). Little (p. 914) writes, “Relatively little research examines the specific interactions by which professional community constitutes a resource for teacher learning and innovations in teaching practice.” This study illustrates an example of “theory-in-use” (Argyris, 2000), by exploring principals’ perceptions of schools as professional learning communities.

The purpose of this study, using a naturalistic inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1999), was to gain a more complete understanding of principals’ perceptions of schools as professional learning communities because, as Toole and Louis (2002) argue, an “area ripe for additional research” involves listening to school leaders’ “voices from the field” on the shape and values of professional learning communities (p. 274). This study responds to the general research question: What characteristics are identified by principals in their conceptions of schools as professional learning communities?

Conceptual Framework

Even without a precise definition of a professional learning community, an understanding of the human relations that exist in schools is significant (Spillane & Louis, 2002). A professional learning community, however defined, can be viewed as a shorthand term for the kinds of adult relationships that can support individual change in classrooms across a whole school (Spillane & Louis).

Crow et al. (2002) illustrate the concept as being comprised of three concentric circles in which the innermost circle represents the relationships that exist between teachers and children, while the outermost ring signifies the relationships between staff and the community at large. The middle ring, the focus of this research study, represents relations among the staff, and mediates between the outside world and the inner workings of the classroom.

Toole and Louis (2002) claim that the idea of a professional learning community integrates three mutually influencing concepts: a school culture that emphasizes professionalism, which is client-oriented and knowledge-based; one that emphasizes learning, placing high value on teachers' inquiry and reflection; and, one that is communitarian, emphasizing personal connections. In addition, this conceptualization identifies the significance of the interactions of the social relationships within a professional learning community.

The Toole and Louis definition was chosen for this study because it signifies an interest “not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (p. 247). This definition, more than others (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001), provides for recognition of the significance of not only the type and quality of

relationships between teachers, but also between teachers and principal (Barth, 2006).

Additionally, this definition illustrates the key role a principal plays in making the relationships among the faculty discussable because faculty demonstrate a capacity to either enhance or devalue each other's professional life, and thereby enrich or diminish a school's ability to develop as a professional learning community (Barth).

A Role for Principals in Professional Learning Communities

In cultivating a professional learning community committed to professional inquiry, data-based decision making, and best practice, as well as helping teachers learn to adapt to new standards of accountability, principals can either help or hinder their schools in achieving higher levels of productivity and success (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The principal's role in nurturing a professional learning community will be complex, challenging and problematic because, in viewing teachers as members of a professional community, it will focus attention on norms of collegiality and on the ethics of professional practice (Clark & Astuto, 1994).

The professional learning community concept is anchored in the notion that a principal is responsible to enhance the attitudes, skills and knowledge of staff, create a culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, mesh pieces of the school together in a productive relationship with each other, and additionally hold individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result (Elmore, 2000).

New relationships, as found in professional learning communities, and an understanding of these relationships are crucial for school improvement efforts if staffs are to work at the hard task of establishing greater program coherence and determining the requisite resources to support improved student outcomes (Fullan, 2001; Knapp, 2003).

Method

Design

A naturalistic inquiry approach was used to examine principals' perceptions of professional learning communities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). This approach to research focuses on naturally occurring activities in natural settings (Hatch, 2002). An extensive literature review provided a foundation of disciplinary knowledge and research on professional learning communities (Boote & Beile, 2005). Two focus groups (n = 6 for each) and twelve individual interviews were held over 6 months to investigate the general research question, "What characteristics are identified by principals in their conceptions of schools as professional learning communities?"

The literature review guided the development of the focus group and individual interview questions (Kruger & Casey, 2000). Three doctoral students in educational administration reviewed draft versions of the focus group and interview questions, and provided feedback on the appropriateness and clarity of the questions. Based on their feedback, questions were modified as necessary to improve clarity. Additionally, practice interviews were conducted with two principals, not involved in the study, to solicit their feedback and to ensure the suitability of the questions.

Involvement in this study was voluntary. The focus group and interview questions received approval from the appropriate university ethics board where the research study was completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a doctoral program in educational administration.

Participants

Following operational definitions established by Statistics Canada (Ertl & Plante, 2004), the nine female and three male principals who participated in this study worked in seven private and five public Manitoba schools, which varied in student enrolment so that two principals were from small, six from medium- and four from large- sized schools. The twelve schools were geographically located in a mix of urban, suburban and rural communities. Additionally, eight of the principals worked in elementary schools, three worked in secondary schools, and one worked in a mixed school; that is a school that offers complete elementary and secondary grades (Ertl & Plante).

Analysis

The methodological approach used in the data analysis was designed to produce data that could undergo a form of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach to thematic analysis allows for themes to be surfaced as pertinent to the description of the phenomenon being studied (Boyatzis). The process involves the classification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). “It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, pp.3-4).

Unlike a template approach to thematic analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), in which a template is created from a codebook and then is applied as a means of organizing data in the form of text, this approach to analysis began with all of the discernable content of the data (i.e., the entire transcripts of the two focus groups and the twelve interviews, 320 pages of double-spaced text). The primary purpose of the analysis was to gain an understanding of principals’

perceptions of schools as professional learning communities.

The process was iterative; as analysis progressed themes were clarified, refined and amended. The thematic analysis followed a customary procedure for conducting such types of qualitative analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), which consists of two major stages before moving on to synthesizing the data with wider theory and literature.

Identifying categories and applying them to the data. The focus group and interview transcripts were read and re-read carefully to identify emerging codes and potential categories. This involved a process of reducing the text down to small units, organizing, and re-organizing according to an initial category, thus creating a large mass of data segments and annotations (McLeod, 2001). It is acknowledged that the categories identified did not stem just from the data, but were indisputably influenced by the literature review, and the researcher's experience and values (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Although it is accepted that these factors contribute to the conceptualizing process, care was taken to ensure that the categories reflected the data and that the categories fit the data rather than forcing the data to fit the categories.

Refining the categories into broader themes. Comparing and contrasting techniques (Tesch, 1990) were used to establish category boundaries, systematically assign data segments to categories, summarize the content of each category, and search for negative cases. The purpose of these analytical procedures was to detect conceptual similarities, to refine the differences between categories, and to discover patterns. This process led to the establishment of the broader themes from the data and was a continuation of an inductive process in which the broader themes fit the categories. This resulted in a composite account of the principals' experiences, drawing on the strong and recurrent themes found across categories (Boyatzis, 1998).

Delimitations

Delimitations were established for this study to limit the scope of the inquiry. This study is not intended to reflect the perceptions of the more than eight hundred principals employed in Manitoba schools. Additionally, this study accepted that the concept of a professional learning community is complex (Little, 2003). When applied to schools, the metaphor of a “learning community” may extend beyond teachers and a principal to include students, parents, community members and others (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). For the purpose of this study, Toole and Louis’ (2002) definition was chosen as the basis of an examination of the professional relationships between the adults who work in schools. Specifically, it focuses on the kinds of relationships that exist between, not only teachers, but also between teachers and principal, which can support individual and collective change in classrooms school-wide.

Findings

The findings revealed some consistency between the perceptions of the study’s participants and both the preconditions for, and characteristics of, professional learning communities, as found in the Toole and Louis (2002) definition. The study also revealed differences between principals’ perceptions and Toole and Louis’ definition, especially in regard to what preconditions characterize professional learning communities, and what structural supports enable and sustain their development.

The following eight themes, presented in proposition form, are a synthesis of the findings of the study based on their significance, not only in terms of how frequently they were mentioned and articulated by the participants, but also by how they differed or resembled Toole

and Louis' (2002) definition. Owing to space limitations, only brief excerpts, using pseudonyms, from the data are presented to illustrate the selected themes.

Theme 1: Professional Learning Communities are About Process

The participants expressed a belief that, if schools are to be professional learning communities, there is a requirement for transformational change, as was explicitly stated by Principal Orono Munroe, "I believe that the meaning of community, or the real lessons of community, comes from a transformation process."

These principals regarded professional learning communities as a continuous commitment to support the activities of staff as they grow as community, as learners and as professionals. Steve Rogers explained his belief that a professional learning community is an elusive ideal when he stated:

I don't think it's static. It's an ideal, like so much of the work that we do. We never really arrive [at being a professional learning community]. That's why we are still at it and it. [What a professional learning community is] changes. We're on that journey.

The participants viewed a professional learning community as a process, a journey, or a continuum. As Orono Munroe commented, "I like the idea that it's a process and it's not something that you actually arrive at."

Additionally, Kayla Ballantine remarked, "I think if things are in place, and a process has taken place, you end up with a group of people who feel that they can function at a high level together."

In the conception of professional learning communities, the participants focused, singularly, on the processes of becoming a professional learning community, rather than on the outcomes or products of such an entity.

Theme 2: Structural Supports Enable the Development of Professional Learning

Communities

These principals noted a number of structural preconditions that support the development of schools as professional learning communities. Among these preconditions were: time, school plans, interconnected teacher roles, teacher empowerment, and institutional identity.

When speaking about interconnected teacher roles and time, Principal Angel Salvadore said, “I think you need to provide time for small groups, the grade groups or, the teams to meet and form; however you configure it.”

In highlighting the importance of school plans in professional learning communities, Angel Salvadore also stated, “I do feel it’s a matter of focus, which happens if you have a group of people who have common goals, who have worked on those goals together via strategic planning.”

With reference to institutional identity, Sally Avril commented, “If you are a community that has an identity then your identity helps form who you are as a community. Everything else you do is going to flow from that identity.”

It seems that the participants support a general belief that, as a result of providing structural supports in the form of formal organizational structures for engaging teachers in their work and engaging them with others, professional learning communities will grow and mature.

Theme 3: Trust as the Foundation for Adult Relationships

These principals identified trust as the strongest facilitating feature for schools developing as professional learning communities. When asked about the factors that favour or limit their involvement in developing their schools as professional learning communities, the

principals expressed their beliefs that trust relationships between themselves and their respective staffs had a profound impact on their abilities to nurture their staffs as professional learning communities. Sue Richards remarked, “You’ve got to have that trust first.” Principal Patricia Hellstrom supported this and stated, “You need to build their trust.”

Trust was seen as the social condition that acts as the foundation for the mature adult relationships necessary in professional learning communities. Principal Ballantine stated, “I don’t care what the past looks like. I am not looking to blame. What I want for us is to pack our baggage, pack our defenses, stop worrying about what was happening, and instead start moving forward.”

Conceptually, while structural support preconditions are like the framing material of a professional learning community, the participants noted that trust among teachers, and teachers and principal, could be regarded as the bond required to hold the frame together. Maya Lopez viewed trust as the foundation for her notion of “professional” in her conception of a “professional learning community” when she noted, “Teachers need to feel comfortable so that other teachers can come into their room and perhaps help them to grow and to develop. In my experience this level of professionalism is, for many teachers, very threatening.”

Participants expressed the belief that trust between the staff and principal is a critical factor in schools developing as professional learning communities. John Storm commented:

I’m going to tell you what inhibits us because I’ve been living it for four years. It’s lack of trust. It’s a huge word. To me that is a roadblock. It continues to be a barrier because I really believe a lack of trust creates walls and not bridges.

Trust was seen as critical for both the individual development and collective collaboration that leads to learning in a professional community.

Theme 4: Congenial Relationships Dominate Conceptions of Community

While there was variation in the descriptions of how teachers experience interpersonal relationships within schools, the principals were fairly consistent in their view that teachers' connections are typically social. An opinion held by a number of the participants was that the relationships among staff most closely resembled ones that might be described as familial. Sally Avril reported, "A lot of people have been here a long time and we consider each other like family." Additionally, Patricia Hellstrom said, "We're like family. Because we're a small school, it's very much like family. There are no cliques. There are no subgroups."

The participants illustrated teacher connections with examples in which collegiality was seen as a sharing and supporting of individual practice, but one in which very limited professional advice was offered, and only when specifically requested. Sue Richards commented:

I don't know how comfortable teachers are in terms of offering a professional critique of each other. People don't have the comfort level in this school to offer each other a critique of their teaching.

The view of community generally presented by the participants was as places for consensus, even if that consensus enabled a misguided view of professional practice. Kayla Ballantine indicated that the "tight" relationships among faculty were, in fact, an impediment to improved practice because teachers spent considerable time protecting each other from any form of professional critique. Kayla said,

What connects them is that they believe they're really great teachers. They say they've been told they are great teachers. I have never encountered a school in which this kind of belief system exists and where there is absolutely no reason, or desire, to improve.

Theme 5: Learning is an Individual Activity

The principals regarded teacher learning as an individual activity and disposition in which individuals master new techniques, change behaviours, and display a commitment to learn throughout her/his career. Participants often referred to this as “life-long learning”. Patricia Hellstrom articulated the view that learning in the context of a professional learning community is a continuous, individual activity when she said:

It [a professional learning community] reminds individuals that they are lifelong learners and that they each still have a responsibility to continue to develop skills and knowledge in teaching and learning.

Additionally, Steve Rogers observed, “I’m rather frustrated by the lack of collective learning.”

And, finally, Kayla Ballantine noted,

When I look at the practices it is clear they couldn’t have ever had a conversation about [professional] practice because they wouldn’t still be doing what they’re doing. What I discovered is they aren’t interested in learning from each other.

While the participants expressed opinions that there may be a conflict between the kind of collective teacher learning that should occur and what actually does occur in their schools, they articulated that they were content with this tension, so long as teachers are engaged in some form of professional growth because, in some way, their teaching will improve.

Theme 6: Professional Teaching is Derived from Attitudinal Attributes

The participants commonly referred to teachers’ diligence, caring, warmth, respect and dedication to portray them as professionals. Principal Lopez commented, “First of all it’s about professional dress. Also, do they remember that they are the adults in the situation?”

Steve Rogers commented on his frustration with one teacher’s notion of professionalism:

We have a teacher who will show up in shorts and t-shirt that I think he got from the locals in Jamaica. I'd like to take a run at that guy personally and set him straight under the guides of professionalism.

The notion of a professional was described by the participants as someone who is personally dedicated to children and who is committed to meeting the needs of her, or his, individual students.

Sue Richards added:

I guess it's everything from their appearance and demeanor, interactions with parents and students, to their ability to teach effectively, and having an outcomes-driven program that is effective. We expect them to dress comfortably and professionally. The expectation around how we interact with children is very much a part of the professional culture.

The participants noted teachers typically learn to rely on themselves, rather than their professional colleagues, as the critical point of reference for practice, and to solve any of fundamental dilemmas of their teaching practice.

Principal Rogers commented:

Every time we seem to move into discussion about academic content, that's when the notion of the professional piece gets really tricky. According to them there's my style, and my interpretation, of what is rigorous grade ten English, and then there is yours. Those are tough conversations, so we just never have them.

Teachers were described as professionals in terms of their attitudinal attributes. The participants identified teachers as professionals based on individual knowledge about curriculum, instruction and pedagogy, appropriate dress, and respectful language. These attributes were seen as examples of an individual's professionalism.

Theme 7: Teacher Evaluation Shapes how Principals Think about Learning in Professional Communities

While the participants suggested teacher evaluation might possibly provide a means to improve the collective quality of teaching, the examples of how evaluation might be used to channel the collective energy of the staff that could lead to improved student achievement school-wide generally focused on whole-school professional development initiatives. Principal Ben Grimm noted that, collectively, evaluation impacts school-wide professional development when he stated, “In terms of teachers collectively, evaluation helps us see through areas of weaknesses. It’s one way of identifying the professional development needs of teachers collectively.”

Similarly, Principal Hellstrom reported, teacher evaluation allowed for issues of the “common good” to surface in teachers’ practices when she noted,

There is definitely a connection [between teacher evaluation and the school’s professional learning community] because professional learning is a staff decision and it’s done usually after we’ve had the chance to have a dialogue about their collective need for professional growth.

Classroom visits, as part of the teacher evaluation procedures, were best seen as processes that provided principals with opportunities to identify common areas of teacher weaknesses for collective professional growth.

Theme 8: Teacher Evaluation Impacts Principal and Teacher Relationships in Professional Learning Communities

These principals preferred to emphasize the key outcome of their responsibility of teacher evaluation as being the establishment of an unruffled atmosphere among staff that would lead to

the development of community. As Principal Bruce Bannister stated, “What am I looking to evaluate? I think I am looking at relationship building in the broad sense.”

Additionally, Angel Salvadore remarked that evaluation primarily provided her with insight into the relationships among staff,

[In evaluating teachers] I’m looking at their role within their partnership, within their team, within the whole school staff. I look at how they fit into the whole school community. It’s not just their role within the classroom, which is important, but also how do they fit into the picture as a whole staff and a whole school community?

Finally, Principal Munroe stated, "Through the interaction that occurs during evaluation, I am able to make connections with teachers."

Teacher evaluation was regarded as a means to build relationships with, and between, teachers. The participants focused their comments on the need to use evaluation as a means of positive interaction to build interpersonal bridges between themselves and their teachers.

Discussion

If Toole and Louis (2002, p. 274) are correct in their conclusion that the research findings are clear, “professional learning communities can generally lead to improved school functioning in most settings,” then harnessing their potential utility comes from understanding the complexity of professional learning communities from principals’ perspectives. A school developing a professional learning community is influenced by principal leadership. Since a great deal of legal responsibility, including that of teacher evaluation, can reside with the principal, principal leadership can be regarded as a critical force in a school’s capacity to influence educational outcomes for all students.

While the participants identified certain supportive structural conditions as being essential for professional learning communities, research indicates that any list of items is, of itself, insufficient to foster effective professional learning communities (Toole & Louis). Unlike Toole and Louis's conceptualization, the participants did not note that the preconditions should best be seen as mechanisms for arranging the way people interact with each other in time and space. Toole and Louis contend that structural supports, and human and social resources, only sustain professional learning communities as they interact with each other. It appears that principals may well need to intensify their understandings of the organizational supports, work structures, and interpersonal processes associated with effective professional learning communities (Pounder, Reitzug, and Young, 2002). School leaders need to develop robust understandings of how the preconditions, namely the structural supports, and human and social resources, interact with each other to enable schools to become professional learning communities.

The findings of this study appear to demonstrate that these principals are exclusively focused on the processes of becoming a professional learning community. Yet, creating a professional learning community that will improve student achievement school-wide can only materialize if principals translate good intentions and respect for process into specific actions that can be measured, and used, to build a collective commitment to improve achievement (Toole & Louis). To improve practice across a school, teachers need to engage with colleagues to question, unlearn, and discard their current, rooted understandings of teaching, learning, and subject matter that do not support student achievement (Spillane & Louis, 2002). Principals need to move beyond conceptions of collaboration as comfortable and focused on non-instructional matters and begin to regard schools as places of trust – community - and places of risk-taking -

learning organizations - where the collective commitment of teachers to improved student outcomes - professionalism - becomes a tie that binds the adults who work in schools (Toole & Louis, 2002).

The participants appear to struggle with a perceived tension that exists between a notion of teacher as individual possessing professional attributes; and the notion of a professional in a learning community, where to be a professional means that one needs to learn constantly while in community with others (Nieto, 2003). The kind of community that is required to shape teachers' beliefs to support students' opportunities to learn should allow and provide occasions for the kind of disagreement and disequilibrium that comes with critical questioning and debates of best practices. The relationships among staff that need to exist should encourage deep collaboration on matters of instruction, the nature of teaching, and of learning that surfaces and critiques core assumptions about students, how they learn, and what the role of teachers should be (Toole & Louis, 2002).

Conclusion

While it has been suggested professional learning communities hold the best promise for sustaining school improvement efforts (Crow et al., 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 2004; Toole & Louis, 2002), the efforts associated with nurturing one will lack results if a key figure in developing and nurturing it – the principal – lacks the clarity of what a school as professional learning community is, and what is required for a school to become one. There is much to be learned from these principals' perceptions of professional learning communities. The eight themes identified in this study provide a tentative framework to better understand what professional learning communities are perceived to be from

practicing administrators' perspectives, and provide some insight into what may be required to develop more complete understandings for those who wish to establish them as mechanisms for improving student outcomes school-wide.

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