

FORGING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: USING PLCS TO ENHANCE INQUIRY AND LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract:

This study explores how Professional Learning Communities enhances the teaching -learning process in institutions. Educators need to form professional learning communities that aspire to explore contemporary pedagogy through supportive dialogue and also need to foster a collaborative, safe and inclusive community of empowered and engaged learners in the classroom by relating curriculum to students' lives, community strengths and challenges, and global events. Through effective collaboration, administrators and teachers work through a continuous improvement process as a learning organization. The professional learning community model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned institutional reform efforts.

Key Words: *Learning, Teachers, Community, Skills, Classroom.*

There is no universal definition of professional learning communities; however, most scholars generally assert the meaning centers on teachers examining their practice to improve student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). De Neve, Devos, and Tuytens (2015) define professional learning communities as: “a school organization in which a group of teachers share and question their practice from a critical point of view. This questioning happens in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, and inclusive way...(32)” Professional learning communities have been incorporated into many classroom reform efforts (Duke, 2006; Hord & Rutherford, 1998) because a growing body of research suggests they facilitate teachers in developing new skills and strengthening their pedagogy (Louis & Marks, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), which in turn influences and enhances students' learning.

A Professional Learning Community represents the institutionalization of a focus on continuous improvement in staff performance as well as student learning and judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. The idea of improving institutions by developing professional learning communities is currently in vogue. People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the institution Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress. The professional learning community model has now reached a critical juncture, one well known to those who have witnessed the fate of other well-intentioned school reform efforts. In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative, followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative.

Teachers' professional learning to support students must deviate from the traditional “one-size-fits all” nature of professional development model that has failed to respect teachers' knowledge, contribute to institution improvement or advance student learning. There is great emphasis put on providing students

with differentiated learning opportunities that are relevant and applicable, so why are teachers still being subjected to professional learning that does not reflect these ideals? Teachers have been “trained”: trained to provide equitable education, trained to incorporate positive behaviour interventions, trained to use proactive classroom management strategies, to name just a few. This “training approach” for teachers is rooted in a deficit model – the idea that there is something wrong with teachers that needs to be fixed or that we are “containers” to be filled by an expert. A more effective approach to professional development for teachers is learning that is collaborative and on-going, with a consistent focus on student learning. Transformative learning for teachers, like students, occurs when it is directly applicable and hands-on (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009), not the “banking” kind of education (Freire, 1970).

One way to create this kind of authentic, on-going form of professional learning is to build a culture where teachers engage in professional learning communities. To be most effective, teachers must intentionally make the best use of structured professional learning time through a focus on student learning, collaborative processes of inquiry and decision making, and an emphasis on results. When the focus on student learning is how to make lessons more accessible to all students, teachers are implicitly engaged in equity-driven work.

Being involved in a professional learning community can make this high-pressure, high-stress job more sustainable, given that a PLC offers teachers a safe space to learn and grow together. Effectively facilitated PLCs can be a powerful lever to build a culture of collective efficacy. Conceptualizing education in terms of social justice has been an important agenda for educational researchers and teacher educators. The social justice agenda aims to prepare teachers to be professional educators and activists who are committed to dismantling social and educational inequities. It is a crucial factor in development of more equitable and just school and society. Social justice supports access for all students to high-quality, intellectually rich teaching that builds on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds; fosters democratic engagement among young people; and advocates for children and youth by situating inequities within a systemic socio-political analysis.

Social justice, however, is interpreted through a range of different practices and values with multiple philosophical and theoretical groundings. While much attention has been paid to how teachers are prepared in social justice-oriented teacher education programs, there is a scarcity of studies investigating how their learning is translated into practice. Teachers generally acknowledge and struggle with the disconnection between ideals of social justice and their day-to-day teaching contexts. The learning community must be considered both within and beyond the classroom. Educators need to form professional learning communities that aspire to explore contemporary pedagogy through supportive dialogue and with collegiality. Educators also need to foster a collaborative, safe and inclusive community of empowered and engaged learners in the classroom by relating curriculum to students' lives, community strengths and challenges, and global events. The modern learning classroom for learners should aim to engage in processes that engage in consensus-building, model participatory democracy, and empower students as agents of change. For that we need to critically engage with pedagogy and curriculum to develop consensus-building, model participatory democracy, and promote student agency.

Each student in a classroom brings something new and distinct to the table, including world views, backgrounds, experiences, cultural contexts, preferences, dislikes and personalities. Making sure each student feels like they belong in the classroom is essential in order to maximize the effectiveness of the learning process. Every classroom should be culturally responsive to the needs of our diverse students. While there are many specific strategies and resources that are targeted to increasing language acquisition and encourage academic success in specific subject areas, it is incumbent upon every educator to employ an approach that can help the student to feel a strong sense of belonging and investment in their school. All educators within the organization must embrace the belief that all students can learn at high levels. The

focus and commitment to the learning of each student are the very essence of a learning community. Taking responsibility for student learning goes beyond placing stipulations outside the educator's control. Taking responsibility to ensure all students learn at high levels starts with an honest, current reality check concerning the organization's culture. This honest conversation about educational culture begins when an organization asks itself 'Are we here to teach, or are we here to ensure that our students learn?' It is important to remember that improvement does not come from focusing on teaching, but by focusing on learning of essential skills.

In order to develop an effective culture of collaboration and collective social responsibility, there must be clarity regarding the focus of collaboration and systematic support to ensure the work is fully implemented. Once clarity and support for implementation is secured, working collaboratively cannot be optional. An essential foundational structure of the PLC process must include collaborative teams of educators who work interdependently to achieve common goals while holding each other mutually accountable. Through effective collaboration, administrators and teachers work through a continuous improvement process as a learning organization. Achieving the fundamental purpose of ensuring all students learn at high levels can only be achieved through collaboration. Establishing collective social commitments and holding accountability for collaboration throughout each stage of the process is critical. Change does not occur overnight and it is only sustainable when teams stay focused on the right work. Research has expanded and education standards have changed dramatically over the past decade. Educators who work together as a professional learning community and use research-based practices can achieve their social justice goals. Students deserve it!

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