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A Structured Approach to Teacher Collaboration Within Professional Learning Communities

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A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO TEACHER COLLABORATION
WITHIN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A Project Report

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

School Administration

By

Laura Ann Davis

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is a paradigm shift occurring in the world of education and professional development. This shift is a change in professional development being delivered from the *outside*---such as workshops, guest presenters, and commercially packaged curriculum, to one of professional development being created on the *inside*---teacher collaboration via professional learning communities (Schmoker, 2004).

Research findings have repeatedly confirmed that a significant factor in raising academic achievement is the improvement of instructional capacity in the classroom....Effective professional development to improve classroom teaching also concentrates on high learning standards and on evidence of students' learning. It mirrors the kinds of teaching and learning expected in classrooms. It is driven fundamentally by the needs and interests of participants themselves, enabling adult learners to expand on content knowledge and practice that is directly connected with the work of their students in the classroom (Corcoran 1995; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995; Little 1988; Elmore 2002)....Professional learning communities meet these criteria (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2007 p. 1).

“Professional learning communities have emerged as arguably the best, most agreed-upon means by which to continuously improve instruction and student performance. For reasons that will become clear, they succeed where typical staff development and workshops fail” (Schmoker 2006, p. 106).

The idea of utilizing teacher expertise in collaborative dialogues and activities in small teams is not a new one. It is the intentional focus on improving student learning, not just on improving instruction, which is a new way of looking at teacher collaboration.

When teachers and administrators work together in a collegial environment, learn together, support one another, and take joint responsibility for student learning, the challenges of high standards become more manageable and motivating.

Educational experts stress that effective professional learning communities are more than collegial groups. Because collegial groups can serve to reinforce the status quo, even including negative beliefs and practices that may be 'unfavorable to children'. (Shannon & Bylsma 2007, pp. 101-102).

A vision of Professional Learning Communities is one of teams of interdependent teacher researchers who engage in focused, recurring cycles of instruction, assessment, and adjustment of instruction (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006 p.3). In order to be productive, educators that want to maximize collaboration with colleagues in their learning communities need the time to be focused, structured, and manageable in addition to sharing common learning targets and goals. Michael Fullan (2005) notes, "Capacity building is not just workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit of *working together*, and you can't learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose" (p. 69). While there are a multitude of challenges to this model of professional development, many schools and districts are looking more and more to this model of professional learning communities to change their systems from the 'inside-out' with those closest to the students---their teachers.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to develop a teacher handbook for a more structured approach to teacher collaboration within professional learning communities. Many groups of teachers have successfully participated in small teams, including focusing on such activities as team building, scheduling, parent communication, discussing lesson plans and curriculum, and sharing strategies to improve student behavior. Unfortunately, this is where most teams are stymied, unsure of how to take their collaboration to a higher level. The next step needed is to move forward and truly start looking at student learning and analyzing instruction practices as well as assessments, in order to increase student achievement. This project addresses how to get to that next level so as to utilize this group collaborative time by the creation of structures or guidelines based on the most recent research available on professional learning communities.

SIGNIFIGANCE

“The question confronting most schools and districts is not, ‘What do we need to know in order to improve?’ but rather, ‘Will we turn what we already know into action?’” (DuFour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 1). Educators have a good idea of what needs to be done and this project focuses on how to move from knowing to doing. Initially the handbook will be shared with colleagues on my team, other team leaders in my building, our professional development specialist, and with my building administrators. At each secondary school in our district, certificated staff is assigned to a team of colleagues that teach the same grade level or in some cases teach similar content. A leader is appointed for each team by administration and is assigned a myriad of tasks and expectations as outlined in the job description in the handbook. Many of the teams in our district are

struggling with the concept of collaborative time that goes beyond a simple business meeting or discussion of lesson plans, so this handbook will also be shared with team leaders, professional development specialists, and administrators in four other secondary schools in our district.

TERMS

The following terms are referred to throughout this research project.

capacity building: Developing the collective ability---the dispositions, knowledge skills, motivation, and resources to act together to bring about positive change (Fullan, 2005, p. 4).

collaboration: A systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 214).

Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning (CASL): A process of collective inquiry into the ties between teaching and learning centered on standards-based assessments

consensus: Achieved when all points of view have been heard and a general or widespread agreement among all members is apparent even to those who oppose it

Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs): Critical skills and knowledge students must acquire in each subject

formative assessment: An assessment for learning used to monitor and advance a student's learning

Grade Level Equivalent (GLEs): learning targets organized by grade level for each essential learning

instructional leadership: leading learning communities in the practice of teaching and learning

mission: Fundamental purpose of an organization, best created by all involved in the organization

Professional Learning Community (PLC): Educators committed to working

collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 217).

SMART goals: Goals that are Strategic & Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Timebound (O'Neill, Conzemius, 2005).

summative assessment: An assessment to evaluate learning at the end of a unit of instruction to determine what students have or have not learned

team norms: Ground rules or protocols created by the team via consensus

values: Attitudes, behaviors, and commitments that must be demonstrated in order for the team to work toward the organization's vision

vision: A realistic, credible future for an organization

CHAPTER II

Introduction

In the world of education, the area of professional development is in a state of constant flux. What are effective schools doing in this area? What meaningful professional development practices are educators actually incorporating in the classroom?

What are the challenges schools face in this day and age of increased accountability?

Research evidence strongly suggests that schools whose students are being successful on the WASL are doing so because the educators at the school have adopted a different set of beliefs driving school-wide educational practices... Teachers in these schools have adopted a new set of ideas about school functioning and found new ways of organizing and running the school *collaboratively* (Fouts 2003, p. 33).

Well-functioning professional learning communities are an essential component of effective schools, have been proven to increase academic achievement, and are the future of professional development (Schmoker 2001).

In reviewing the literature, the focus is structured around three areas:

Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) vs. Teams/Groups, Steps to Creating an Effective PLC, and Establishing a Focus on Learning & Results. There is an extensive body of research on these topics, much of it qualitative in nature, but it is clear that PLCs, if created and conducted correctly and systematically, can have a positive impact on student achievement (Schmoker 2001). . How much of an impact? That depends on a wide variety of factors. In addition, there are some flaws inherent with the research.

One flaw is that it is difficult to point just to PLCs as the main component of increased student achievement. There are far too many factors that go along with effective schools and school improvement to attribute all the positive results to one thing. What else are the schools and district doing that might contribute to increased student achievement? Often times it is the quality of the instructional leadership that drives achievement, in addition to other things such as teacher expertise and experience. Professional Learning Communities are only one piece of the puzzle. Another flaw found in reading the research as mentioned previously, is that of very little quantitative research data. Nearly every article, research study, and book indicates that educators perceive PLCs make a difference, but it is not often very clearly documented and backed up by longitudinal data. Yes, rising achievement scores are data, but more often than not, scores are the only data collected. For future school administrators and instructional leaders, PLCs are clearly the template for professional development in the future. The challenge is to create a well-functioning learning community that utilizes systematic and structured guidelines to continuously improve the learning of everyone in the community. How can we improve teaching and learning? Mike Schmoker quotes Carl Glickman's response who states, "The answer is no mystery. It's as simple as this: I cannot improve my craft in isolation from others. To improve, I must have formats, structures, and plans for reflecting on, changing, and assessing my practice [which]...must be continually tested and upgraded with my colleagues. (FN56)" (Schmoker 2004, p. 431).

Characteristics of PLCs vs. Teams/Groups

What is the difference between a professional learning community and a team? Many schools and districts around the country are claiming they have professional

learning communities, but all too often these groups of well-intentioned educators are working as a team in some aspects, but not as a team that intentionally and consistently focuses on learning. These groups are labeled as teams, teacher communities, teacher networks, critical friends groups, and communities of practice, among other things. While the label of the group isn't critical, the purpose of the group is. "A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 3).

A core concept of PLCs is that of collaboration. Many teams of educators collaborate on a variety of topics and projects, but the collaboration stops at their classroom door, and the educator works essentially in isolation. The focus of many of these groups is too often on the instruction rather than on what students are learning. "In a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school" (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 3). Collaboration is much more than simply working together. As defined by Judith Warren Little (1981) and quoted by Barth (1990):

Collegiality is the presence of four specific behaviors, as follows: Adults in schools *talk about practice*. These conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise. Adults in schools *observe each other* engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about. Adults engage together in *work on curriculum* by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum. Finally, adults in schools *teach each other* what they know about teaching,

learning, and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated, and shared (in Barth, 1990, p. 31).

Other differences include the way meeting times are structured, how tasks are delegated, and who is ultimately held accountable. “A successful face-to-face team is more than just collectively intelligent. It makes everyone work harder, think smarter and reach better conclusions than they would have on their own”, James Surowiecki, as quoted by Schmoker (2006 p. 105). The chart below indicates some of the key differences between a team of teachers working together and a Professional Learning Community.

TEAM/GROUP	PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY
Focuses on <i>what teachers are teaching</i>	Focuses on <i>what students are or are not learning</i>
Individual Accountability	Individual & Collective Accountability
Collaboration mostly on curriculum content, behavior issues, schedules, etc.	Collaboration on developing curricula/lessons, creating formative & summative assessments based on GLEs, collectively analyzing assessments & other data, & adjusting instruction accordingly
Teaching done in isolation; Independent	Teaching shared with peers; Interdependent
Depend upon facilitator or authority figure to determine agendas and create structure	Facilitator encourages open-ended discussion and active problem solving by all members
Strong, focused leader	Shared leadership roles
Individual work projects	Collective work projects
Leader delegates tasks	All work on important tasks while smaller task taken on by volunteers

“The very essence of a *learning* community is a focus on and commitment to the learning of each student....In order to achieve this purpose, the members of a PLC create and are guided by a clear and compelling vision of what the organization must become in order to help all students learn. They make collective commitments clarifying what each

member will do to create such an organization, and they use results-oriented goals to mark their progress” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 3). While the major purpose of a PLC is a focus on learning for all in the community, other characteristics comprise the work of these groups. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many identify several of these critical components in their most recent publication (2006 pp. 3-5):

- “A Collaborative Culture with a Focus on Learning for All”
- “Collective Inquiry Into Best Practice and Current Reality”
- “Action Orientation: Learning By Doing”
- “A Commitment to Continuous Improvement”
- “Results Orientation”

Shannon and Bylsma’s research lists the tasks of a PLC in a much more defined way, stating, “The mark of effective professional learning communities, according to some experts, is for educators to collaboratively work to

- Develop curricula and lessons
- Identify and commit to common learning and performance proficiency standards for students
- Create and give common formative assessments
- Analyze student data for gaps between expectations and outcomes
- Review and score student work together
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning based on the work
- Determine next steps to build on student strengths

- Work together to improve classroom practices (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Schmoker, 2006).” (Shannon & Bylsma 2007, pp. 55-56).

In addition to the previous lists, other research indicates that characteristics such as shared values and norms, reflective dialogue, high levels of trust, decision-making authority, continual growth, and deprivatizing teaching practices are essential characteristics for a PLC (Vescio, Ross, & Adams 2006). “...the work of professional learning communities is data-informed, standards-driven, and focused on instruction, equity, and results...But PLCs go beyond the scope of study or support groups: they require that group members reflect honestly and openly together about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better and continually building their capacity to do so” (AISR, p. 2). Keeping these characteristics, tasks, and purposes in mind, the successful creation of a professional learning community is a challenge for instructional leaders and maintaining it is a continuous process. “Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; and working together is success” (Henry Ford as quoted by Richardson 2005, p. 5). The next section of this literature review outlines the steps necessary for establishing effective learning communities.

Steps to Creating an Effective PLC

“Principals and teacher leaders must be very intentional about helping groups of teachers become communities of learners” (Richardson, 2005, p. 1). There is a large body of research that suggests how to create an effective PLC, with the first step being the collective creation of a mission or purpose statement for the entire school community. “Identifying the core purpose of an organization is a critical element of effective school

systems as well as successful businesses and other entities” (Shannon & Bylsma 2007, p. 27). “In a professional learning community the mission statement is given meaning by addressing three corollary questions. If we believe the primary mission of schools is learning, then:

1. What do we expect all students to learn?
2. How will we know what students have learned?
3. How will we respond to students who aren't learning?”

(Eaker, DuFour & DuFour 2002, p. 12). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many see a school-wide mission as one of four pillars of support for the foundation of effective PLCs, with each pillar posing a question. “The mission pillar asks the question, ‘Why?’ More specifically, it asks, ‘Why do we exist?’ The intent of this question is to help reach agreement regarding the fundamental purpose of the school” (2006, p.23). While critical to the process of school improvement, simply writing a mission statement will not inherently improve schools. “The words of a mission statement are not worth the paper they are written on unless people begin to *do* things differently” (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 19). The school community needs to bring their mission to life, and take it beyond the written words involving everyone in the community.

The next step is to create a collective vision. “There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile and achievable vision of the future, widely shared” (Nanus 1992, p. 3). While the mission pillar asks why, “The vision pillar asks ‘What?’: “What must we become in order to accomplish our fundamental purpose?...Vision provides a sense of direction and a basis for assessing both the current reality of the school and the potential

strategies, programs, and procedures to improve upon that reality” (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 24). This shared vision is essential to the entire school community as it provides all members of a group a clear picture of where they are heading and what the community will look like when the purpose is accomplished. Educators must be able to see and describe this future in vivid detail.

“Teachers and administrators must also tackle the collective commitments they must make and honor in order to achieve the shared vision for their school or district. The third pillar of the foundation, the values pillar, is an attempt to clarify these collective commitments....it asks, ‘How must we behave to create the school that will achieve our purpose?’” (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 25). This next step to creating an effective PLC involves a conscious focus on behaviors and commitments by all members of the learning community. Determining values clarifies to each community member the collective expectations of everyone in the school, and is way to begin implementing the vision.

The final pillar of PLC support, according to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, is one that encompasses goals. “The goals pillar identifies the targets and timelines that enable a staff to answer the question, “How will we know if all of this is making a difference?”” (2006 p. 26). Detailed goals provide specificity, accountability, and documentation of results or the lack of. “Furthermore, goals are absolutely essential to the collaborative team process. We define a team as a group of people working together *interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which members are held *mutually accountable*” (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 26). O’Neill and Conzemius (2005) coined the term SMART goals, which provide an acronym to help set clear goals. SMART goals are

strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Timebound. At this stage in the PLC process, these goals are school-wide, based on district and state standards.

With these school-wide foundations in place---mission, vision, values, and goals--
-the real work of the PLC can go forward. In fact, these foundational steps are so critical to an effective PLC they are listed as one of the nine characteristics of high-performing schools. "A clear and shared focus: Everybody knows where they are going and why. The focus is on achieving a shared vision, and all understand their role in achieving the vision. The focus and vision are developed from common beliefs and values, creating a consistent direction for all involved" (Shannon & Bylsma 2007, p. 27).

Assembling of a team of educators that will make up the PLC is the next step for school leaders. The group should be relatively small and its members determined by the focus of the group. Most often PLCs are organized by grade-level, subjects taught, or by those who share the same group of students, but there are other configurations (Annenberg Institute for School Reform). Teams can be formed as a task force to work on a particular problem that has been identified or teams can be formed based on professional development needs (DuFour & Eaker 1998). The membership can also be static or fluid, but again this is dependent on the focus of the group. "Teachers should be organized into structures that allow them to engage in meaningful collaboration that is beneficial to them and their students" (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 95). Once teams are formed, the next challenge is time.

In an ideal situation, collaboration time is provided on a daily basis for PLCs to meet, with some longer periods of time planned throughout the year.

The school that hopes to become a professional learning community must provide teachers with time to reflect, to engage in collective inquiry, to collaborate, and to participate in continuous improvement processes. It will regard these activities as productive and will provide time for them in a systematic way (DuFour & Eaker 1998, p. 123).

How this time is built into the schedule varies with each school and district, but many school leaders have been very creative in finding solutions to this dilemma. Finding common time, freeing up time, purchasing time with substitutes, restructuring time, or practicing time saving procedures are all ways to carve out more time for collaboration. How the collaboration time is used is also critical to the success of the PLC. DuFour & Eaker summarize collaboration time as follows,

First, time for collaboration must be built into the school day and year. Second, the purpose of collaboration must be made explicit, and structures must be provided to facilitate it. Third, educators must be trained and supported in their efforts to become effective collaborators. Fourth, educators must accept their individual and collective responsibilities for working together as true professional colleagues (1998 p. 130).

There must be a structured approach for teams to utilize so this collaborative time is used as constructively as possible. Effective leaders will direct the work of teams to the critical questions because those are the conversations that have the biggest impact on student achievement (DuFour & Eaker 1998).

Now that the team has been assembled and given structured collaboration time they are accountable for, the PLC is ready to establish explicit team norms or ground

rules that are written down and agreed to via consensus. “When individuals work through a process to create explicitly stated norms, and then commit to honor those norms, they increase the likelihood they will begin to function as a collaborative team rather than as a loose collection of people working together” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 103). Amy Delephant, a team development consultant and published author who works with schools, states “Teams need to have conversations about ‘how to do the work’ instead of just plunging in to do the work. They need to spend time building trust and relationships with each other. If they don’t do this in the beginning, teams will have to stop and do this eventually” (Richardson 2005, p. 3). One study of high-performing teams found that the members:

- Are willing to look at issues from another’s perspective
- Can demonstrate understanding of unspoken feelings and interests of other members
- Are able to confront each other in kind and constructive ways
- Create cordial friendships amongst themselves based on mutual respect
- Are able to self-evaluate
- Seek meaningful feedback to continually improve
- Display positive attitudes about work of the group
- Are proactive about problem solving
- Understand team’s link to the larger organization
- Establish external relationships with others that can help support team goals

(Druskat & Wolf 2001). All of these characteristics take time to develop, but are necessary if a team is to advance to a deeper level. “If teachers are to work

collaboratively to clarify the essential learning for their courses and grade levels, write common assessments, and jointly analyze the results, they must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principals as ineffective” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 102). This deprivitization of teaching is risky for many educators, but fears can be overcome with time, the establishment of trust, and by keeping an open mind to the collaborative process.

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many offer the following advice when creating group norms:

- Discuss previous negative and positive experiences when working in a group
- Creation of norms is the responsibility of each team, not handed down from someone else
- Norms should be statements of behaviors and commitments, not beliefs
- Review norms at the beginning of each meeting for at least the first six months
- Teams should evaluate their norms to see if they are working at least twice a year
- Focus should be on a few essential norms, not a long extensive list
- Violation of norms should be discussed (2006 p. 106)

Other issues to consider when creating norms include defining how the group will process decisions and structure a consensus format that is based on win-win outcomes. Now that the foundation has been built and teams have established norms, it is time for the real work of a PLC to begin---that of improving learning for all in the community, which is the focus of the third section of reviewed literature.

Establishing a Focus on Learning & Results

Effective leaders will direct the work of teams to the critical questions because those are the conversations that have the biggest impact on student achievement.

Clarifying what students must learn, monitoring the learning of each student, responding to students who need additional time and support for learning, and challenging students who have already mastered the intended outcomes are the most critical tasks in a school. It is imperative, therefore, that educators work together interdependently to become more skillful in these critical areas, and that these questions become the priority within and among collaborative teams (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 108).

The real work of a PLC is guided by the critical questions each member of the team must constantly ask themselves, and is where educators need to begin to focus on learning. “The constant collective inquiry into ‘What is it we want our students to learn?’ and ‘How will we know when each students has learned it?’ is a professional responsibility of *every* faculty member” (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 46). The dialogue that is created from these questions becomes the academic focus, creates the collective commitments, and fosters the professional relationships that enhance learning for students and teachers (DuFour et al., 2006).

The process begins with identifying the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and the appropriate Grade Level Equivalents (GLEs) that the PLCs will focus on. Using collaborative time and state standards, the entire team first

needs to prioritize which standards are truly essential, as the reality is there are more GLEs than can possibly be taught well in a school year. "...the important determination of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education should be a collective, rather than an individual, decision" (DuFour & Eaker 1998, p. 154). To help guide this process, teams should consider the following questions:

1. Does it have endurance? Do we really expect our students to retain the knowledge and skills over time as opposed to merely learning it for a test?
2. Does it have leverage? Will proficiency in this standard help the student in other areas of the curriculum and other academic disciplines?
3. Does it develop student readiness for the next level of learning? Is it essential for success in the next unit, course, or grade level? (Reeves 2002, as quoted in DuFour et al., 2006 pp. 47-48).

It is important to remember, however, that PLCs should start with a manageable number of these team learning targets, especially when beginning this process for the first time. "Not every lesson needs to be created by the team. But such interaction illustrates how regular opportunities to help one another construct, assess, and refine lessons, units, and assessments could have an impact far beyond each team-made lesson or unit" (Schmoker 2006, p. 113).

All teachers must be able to clarify these learning standards and utilize them to plan lessons, units, and assessments. "Teachers are most effective in helping all students learn when they are clear regarding exactly what their students must know and be able to do as a result of the course, grade level, or unit of instruction" (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 51). Establishing the curricular content based on the GLEs so that all members of the team are

working together on the same curriculum at approximately the same time is essential for the next step; that of creating common formative and summative assessments (DuFour et. al., 2006). “The best way to provide powerful feedback to teachers and to turn data into information *that can improve teaching and learning* is through team-developed and team-analyzed common formative assessments” (DuFour et. al., 2006, p. 149).

“When teachers design assessments, give each other feedback through peer reviews, evaluate student work, and plan together for improvement, they are engaged in highly effective professional development” (McTighe & Emberger 2006, p. 38).

Assessments need to be ongoing and a regular part of the teaching and learning cycle and are more meaningful if designed by the PLC specifically for their learning goals and their students. “Frequent monitoring of each student’s learning is an essential element of effective teaching; no teacher should be absolved from that task or allowed to assign responsibility for it to state test makers, central office coordinators, or textbook publishers “ (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 49). Once the learning target is established, the next step is to decide on the format of the assessment, as it should match the target and the reason for assessing the learning. While some GLEs can be assessed by a simple test, task, or quiz, others require a different assessment form. It is this *other* form of assessments that is best suited for the process McTighe and Emberger outline.

“Performance assessments that use real situations that reflect the world beyond the classroom are called ‘authentic’. These tasks are typically open-ended to allow students more choices and to encourage a variety of responses, but they still are judged against established criteria” (McTighe & Emberger 2006, p. 39). In addition to tests, quizzes, portfolios, and observations, McTighe and Emberger (2006) recommend using

performance assessments as they can provide both feedback to inform instruction as well as provide a summative evaluation. “Teachers use three strategies to collaborate to develop performance tasks and assessments:

1. Collaboratively design tasks and assessments based on desired learning results.
2. Have peers review tasks and assessments for feedback on designs.
3. Conduct a group evaluation of student work elicited by the tasks” (McTighe & Emberger 2006, p. 40).

The first strategy McTighe and Emberger identify involves members of the PLC creating a task through which students will demonstrate their skills and learning concerning a selected learning goal. “Not every goal requires a performance assessment. Performance assessments are needed when the goals are procedural, (involve skills or processes, such as problem solving) or call for students to understand concepts or principles” (McTighe & Emberger 2006, p. 40). Once the task is created, the next step is to collectively develop the criteria that students and teachers will use to assess the task. When designing the criteria, which usually results in a scoring rubric, the PLC needs to consider the degree of understanding, the work quality, and the impact or results of the tasks desired.

The second strategy involves a peer review process, with descriptive feedback on performance tasks and criteria. This feedback is intended to clarify the task and the expectations for the students and staff. Finally, the last strategy McTighe and Emberger focus on is that of group evaluation of student work after the performance task has been completed. “When teachers use common performance assessment tasks and rubrics, they

collect data in the form of student products and performances that can be used to determine how well students understand what they are learning” (McTighe & Emberger 2006, p. 41). The PLC reconvenes, assesses student work, and establishes data that will help guide teaching and improve student learning. “It is through the collective examination of results---tangible evidence of student learning---that teachers’ dialogue moves from sharing opinions to building shared knowledge, which is an essential step on the journey to developing the capacity to function as a PLC” (DuFour et. al., 2006, p. 147).

It has been said that collecting data is only the first step toward wisdom: sharing data is the first step toward community. If the school...is to become a professional learning *community*, it must create the structures and the culture to ensure data from common formative assessments become easily accessible and openly shared among teachers who are working together interdependently toward the same SMART goal that represents higher levels of learning for their students. Every teacher should be able to ascertain how the performance of his or her students compares to all similar students taking the same assessment (DuFour et al., 2006, pp. 150-151).

In the world of qualitative research surrounding education and data collection, Jim Collins shares a businessman’s perspective on results stating,

It doesn’t really matter whether you can quantify your results. What matters is that you rigorously assemble *evidence*—quantitative or qualitative---to track your progress....All indicators are flawed, whether qualitative quantitative....What

matters is not finding the perfect indicator, but settling upon a *consistent and intelligent* method of assessing your output results...(2005, pp. 7-8).

The focus of a PLC is not simply accumulating data; it is the focus on results.

“Schools only become PLCs if they switch their focus from inputs to outcomes and from activities to results” (DuFour et. al., 2006, p. 147). Schmoker, (2001), states his thoughts

about results in this way, “Productive teamwork requires a steadfast concern with measurable results. Results are possible only with common assessments. Such assessments are the glue that holds standards, curriculum, and instructional dialogue together as we strive for improvement” (p. 14). There needs to be embedded and continuous improvement based on the results of the collectively created assessments.

Shannon and Bylsma (2007) indicated this as well, with this cycle of analyzing instruction against student results as one of the nine characteristics of high-performing schools. “Members of a professional learning community continually assess their effectiveness on the basis of results: tangible evidence their students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their future success” (DuFour et. al., 2006, p. 117). Schmoker takes this data and results a step further, stating

It’s more important to look for patterns as opposed to every individual child’s performance. If you’ve got 30 kids, or 150 kids, and you can find the predominant patterns of weakness amongst those students, the time and energy that you devote to those predominant patterns is going to pay off for the greatest number of individual students (2001 ASCD excerpt p. 2).

Once the results have been analyzed, the next steps depend on the results. If the results over a period of time are deemed a success, celebration and recognition are in order and

are important, and if not, interventions need to occur. First, a look at the impact of celebration and recognition, or as Schmoker defines them ---team wins (Schmoker 2006.

“The case for generating a steady stream of short-term team ‘wins’ is not new and is pure common sense. If anything, it is mystifying that schools have yet to institute structures that allow people to see that their hard work is paying off---this week or

month---not next year or five years from now” (Schmoker 2006, p.122). DuFour and Eaker (1998) write about the connection between celebration and school culture stating,

One of the most important and effective strategies for shaping the culture of any organization is celebration. The celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals of an organization reveal a great deal about its culture---how its people link their past with their present, what behaviors are reinforced, what assumptions are at work, and what is valued (1998, p. 141).

As much of the time our educational system is publicly criticized, it is critical that this recognition for improving results occurs on a regular basis for members of the learning community. It can also serve as motivation for future endeavors. The next question the research deals with is the response of PLCs when student results are below the levels of expectations.

“Public school educators in the United States are now required to do something they have never before been asked to accomplish: ensure high levels of learning for all students. This mandate is not only unprecedented; it is at odds with the original goal of schools...inconceivable to the pioneers of public education” (DuFour 2004 et al., pp. 2-3). When students are having difficulty with the learning, PLCs need to have a cadre of available intervention options and a group of supportive staff.

Professional learning communities create a systematic process of interventions to ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they experience difficulty. The intervention process is timely and students are directed rather than invited to utilize the system of time and support (DuFour et al., 2006 p. 71)

It isn't enough for educators to ask themselves if students are learning unless they have a plan when they discover students who need more help. A systematic school-wide process must be put into place to make sure students receive additional support and time.

- The process should ensure students receive the intervention in a *timely* fashion--- at the first indication they are experiencing difficulty.
- The process should *direct* rather than invite students to devote the extra time and take advantage of the additional support until they are experiencing success.
- Most importantly, students should be guaranteed they will receive this time and support *regardless of who their teacher might be* (DuFour et al., 2006, pp. 74-75).

If a system is put into place with the above key pieces, another strength of the PLC model is that of staff support as well. "It is not just the student who benefits from this systematic support. An army of adults is there to help the teacher help the student. The teacher is not alone" (DuFour et. al., 2006, p. 75). While there are always time constraints, union issues, and central office issues, interventions can be built into the school day with some creative team planning. (DuFour 2006). "It is disingenuous for any school to claim its purpose is to help all students learn at high levels and then fail to create a system of interventions to give struggling learners additional time and support" (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 78).

Summary

“Mere collegiality won’t cut it. Even discussions about curricular issues or popular strategies can feel good but go nowhere. The right image to embrace is a group of teachers who meet regularly to share, refine, and assess the impact of lessons and strategies continuously to help increasing numbers of students learn at higher levels”

(Schmoker 2006, p. 178). From defining the differences between a PLC and a group of teachers to intervening when students need more time and support, the steps to creating an effective professional learning community are many. In addition, the process takes time, a challenge when educators are feeling the pressures of the current mandates concerning student achievement. PLCs are a step in the right direction and a more meaningful way to provide professional development, but they are not without their drawbacks. Professional Learning Communities require schools to change their practices of isolation, to provide time for collaboration on a regular basis, and recreate school climates and cultures. “To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6).

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURES

Participants

The participants involved in my project are the seven members of my sixth grade teaching team, building administrators, our building Professional Development Specialist, and five building team leaders. While a few have many years of experience in the educational field, most have less than ten years experience. None have had any formal training in collaboration with the exception of our Professional Development Specialist who has recently completed his doctorate project which involved increasing the capacity of teacher leaders. As my colleagues were selected due to their relationship with myself or due to their leadership roles, all participants were asked to voluntarily take part in my project, with the choice to opt out. As a teacher collaboration handbook was seen as a much-needed tool, all were eager to participate in piloting parts of the handbook that was created.

Setting

The participants are all a part of a middle school staff in a suburban school district on the western side of Washington State. The district reconfigured our secondary schools two and a half years ago, creating middle schools instead of junior high schools. As a part of this restructuring, secondary teachers were given thirty minutes of team collaboration time on a daily basis in addition to their regular planning time. This collaboration time can be used as each team sees fit, with most teams meeting as an entire team of six to eight members once or twice a week. Other days the collaboration time is used with 'small' team combinations, with members aligned along subject matter or

shared students. Now in our third year, we are ready to move beyond our current model of collaboration, which all too often entails simply daily ‘meetings’ where schedules and logistics are discussed, with very little accomplished to improve student learning.

Materials

- Team Collaboration Handbook including parts of the following:
 - Learning By Doing Software---Reproducibles
 - Survey---What Stage is Your Team In? (Don Clark,
<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leader.html>)
 - Kathy Hunt-Ullock Team Training Modules
 - CASL Staff Development Resources (Langer, Colton, & Goff 2003)
 - Self-Created Documents
- Learning By Doing Handbook (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many 2006)
- Team created formative and summative assessments
- WASL Scores
- Quarterly Grades
- District Standardized Tests—Baseline Writing Assessment, Degrees of Reading Power Test, Math Module Assessments, District Science Assessments

Design/Procedure

Using the materials listed above, the sixth grade team will meet on a weekly basis for one hour to collaborate. This collaboration involves curriculum mapping, unit pacing, lesson design, and peer observations. In addition to collaborating on curriculum, the team will create, utilize, and critique a minimum of one formative and one summative or district

assessment the third and fourth quarters of the school year. Data will be shared with team members, administrators, and other participants.

It should be mentioned that other grade level teams did not utilize the handbook in its entirety, although several of the team leaders did present parts of the handbook to their teams and invited them to use these activities with their colleagues. With encouragement from the researcher, all of the team leaders attended a training workshop on Professional Learning Communities presented by Robert Eaker in November of 2007 and have copies of his latest book and software, Learning By Doing.

Time Schedule

This project was piloted during the last four months of the school year, with some professional development involving team leaders beginning several months prior to my presenting parts of my draft collaboration handbook, including the Eaker workshop in November. Parts of the handbook were presented to all staff in February, March, and April, with the first draft of the handbook given to team leaders in early May. A final draft is anticipated in June after input from my participants, with the handbook being used at a team leader training day in August. As for other time needed, collaboration time is allotted daily to team members, and time was allotted at staff meetings and staff training days for presentations of some parts of the handbook. Team leader professional development took place outside of the school day, and was facilitated by our professional development specialist.

CHAPTER IV

Teacher Collaboration Handbook

Team Leader

Handbook

Lakeridge Middle School

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Please note:

These pages have been redacted due to copyright restriction.

Chapter 4, pages 3 - 85: These pages have been redacted due to copyright concerns or restrictions. References for these redacted sources are found on page 89.

Quotes

- We have discovered that there are ways of getting almost anywhere we want to go, if we really want to go there.---Langston Hughes
- I have discovered in life that I can do anything, but I can't do everything. No one can go it alone. Create your team!---Robert Schuller
- Anything one person can imagine, other people can make real.---Jules Verne
- You alone can do it, but you can't do it alone.---Frank Vizzare
- We may not have it all together, but together we have it all.---Ruth Rogers
- Can't usually means wont. We can...if we will.---Don Ward
- I believe in individuals banding together for a higher purpose. Some people don't like organizations. But it is always awesome to me when you can pool a lot of people who have so many talents. That's when you can really make your program move.---Hortense Canady
- To make a difference is not a matter of accident, a matter of casual occurrence of the tides. People choose to make a difference.---Maya Angelou
- One person may supply the idea for a company, community, or nation. But what gives the idea its force is a community of dreams.---Andre Malraux
- We are the ones we've been waiting for.---June Jordan
- Sometimes you just have to create what you want to be a part of.---Geri Weitzman
- A vision is not a vision unless it says yes to some ideas and no to others, inspires people and is a reason to get out of bed in the morning and come to work.---Gifford Pinchot
- Making a living is only part of life.---Cecil Andrus
- If we have a big enough 'why', we will always discover the 'how'.---Tara Semisch
- The future? The things that got us here will not get us there.---Peter Drucker
- I am convinced that if the rate of change inside an organization is less than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight.---Jack Welch
- People tend to resist that which is forced upon them. People tend to support that which they help to create.---Vince Pfaff
- Change means movement. Movement means friction. Friction means heat--- and heat is required for growth.---Dan Zadra
- It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and hope, and growth.---Alan Cohen
- We cannot become what we want to be by remaining what we are.---Max DePree
- Change is inevitable. It's direction that counts.---Gil Atkinson
- Ideas bring people together, but ideals hold them together.---Dan Zadra

Quotes Continued

- We just keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.---Walt Disney
- Creativity is like a muscle. You either use it or lose it.---Roger von Oech.
- Don't expect anything original from an echo.---Dunc Muncy
- If you have always done it that way, it is probably wrong.---Charles Kettering
- Ideas are one thing and what happens is another.---John Cage
- Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans.---Peter Drucker
- It's the start that stops most people.---Phil Rognier
- The 'what if' question begs for completion: 'What if we tried?'---Dale Dauten
- Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must first be overcome.---Samuel Jackson
- The fact is we'll never have all the information we need to make a decision--- if we did, it would be a foregone conclusion, not a decision.---David Mahoney
- We have 40 million reasons and not a single excuse.---Rudyard Kipling
- We don't grow unless we take risks. Any successful organization is riddled with failures.---James E. Burke
- Someday is not a day of the week.---Michael Nelson
- All of us can take steps---no matter how small and insignificant at the start--- in the direction we want to go.---Marsha Sinetar
- Most of my ideas belong to other people who didn't bother to develop them.--- Thomas Edison
- The whole is the sum of its parts. Be a good part.---Nate McConnell
- There is somebody smarter than any of us, and that is all of us.---Michael Nolan
- It takes each of us to make a difference for all of us.---Jackie Mutcheson.
- We have to be able to count on each other doing what we have agreed to do.---Phil Crosby
- The team player knows that it doesn't matter who gets the credit as long as the job gets done. If the job gets done, the credit will come.---The EDGE
- Everyone leads. Leadership is action, not position.---D.H. McGannon
- If you tell people the destination, but not how to get there, you'll be amazed at the results.---George Patton
- Being a leader is not about making yourself more powerful. It's about making people around you more powerful.---Betty Linton
- It's not who we think we are that holds us back, it's who we think we're not.---Commitment to Teamwork
- In the end a leader casts a long shadow. What kind of shadow are you casting?---James Belasco

Quotes Continued

- If you don't provide your teammates with information, they'll make up something to fill the void.---Carla O'Dell
- We are drowning in information and starving in meaning.---Rutherford Rogers
- The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.---Sydney J. Harris
- Be careful, think about the effect of what you say. Your words should be constructive, bring people together, not pull them apart.---Miriam Makeba
- Don't overreact to the grumblers and troublemakers.---Beth Bingham
- Remember that 20 percent of the people are against everything all the time.--Robert Kennedy
- Problems can become opportunities when the right people come together.---Robert Redford
- Help each other be right, not wrong. Look for ways to make new ideas work, not for reasons they won't. Do everything with enthusiasm. It's contagious.--Ian Percy
- Quality is not a spectator sport---everyone's involved.---Jack Welch
- There is no such thing as 'them and us'. In a world this size there can only be 'we'---all of us working together.---Don Ward
- Either we're pulling together or we're pulling apart. There's really no in-between.---Kobi Yamada
- Success is sweetest when it's shared.---Howard Schultz
- Celebrate what you want to see more of.---Tom Peters
- To love what you do and feel that it matters---how could anything be more fun?---Katharine Graham
- It's supposed to be hard; if it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.---Tom Hanks
- Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has.---Margaret Mead
- The influence of each human on others in this life is a kind of immortality.---John Quincy Adams
- You ask me how I want to be remembered. What I want on my tombstone? "Si se puede---It can be done!"---Dolores Huerta

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CHAPTER V

RESULTS

As a result of this project, many of the district and Lakeridge Middle School sixth grade building level assessment scores have increased. In our district Degrees of Reading Power Assessment, sixth grade scores increased an average of 2.89 % over the same students' scores in fifth grade. The Lakeridge Middle School sixth grade writing assessment scores increased from a 13.2 average score in September of 2007 to 18.6 in March of 2008 for the six writing traits assessed. Although there are always other factors involved when looking at assessment data, the sixth grade team concluded that using a systematic approach to collaborative time increased our efficiency and improved teaching and learning. WASL results will be analyzed next September, especially in the area of Mathematics, as that was our major focus of improvement and collaboration this year.

Other qualitative results include increased communication and support between building team leaders. Team leader professional development sessions will continue next year on an ongoing basis as a result of this project using the handbook as well as current research. The building leadership team revised the job description of team leaders to incorporate the responsibilities of teaching team members how to better use collaborative time. In addition, a team leader training day has been established for next August, with the handbook at the center of the training. At the district level, Professional Learning Communities will be the professional development focus for the upcoming school year, so Lakeridge Middle School will be ahead of other schools as a result of this project.

Conclusion

Professional Learning Communities are an effective delivery system of meaningful professional development, a concept backed up by a multitude of research.

As mentioned previously, much of this research is qualitative, with the quantitative research centering on assessment scores that can be affected by other factors.

Professional Learning Communities can have a positive impact on student achievement if the correct structures, resources, and processes are implemented. In fact, only one negative research study was unearthed in which the criticisms revolved around the time it can take to make a team of teachers an effective learning community. In creating a teacher handbook, there are a whole host of resources to utilize; it is a matter of carefully selecting those which will work the best to define, shape, and guide 'how' to collaborate in a meaningful way to increase student achievement.

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