From Experience to Expertise:  
Professional Development through Collaborative Inquiry

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Abstract

This research paper presents the outcomes of a professional learning community (PLC) of teachers involved in a personal service approach to professional development. The PLC was conceptualized as an inquiry-based professional development intervention based on teachers’ specific needs. Participants represented 4 regions that encompassed a large Ontario school board district. Through a qualitative grounded theory research approach, two key outcomes emerged from the data, including, ‘Intrinsic motivation to improve teaching and learning’ and ‘Critical reflections in teaching.’ By critically reflecting on their teaching within the PLC model, the teacher-participants guided their own professional development in the context of self-affirming practice. Since the research project was contextualized in the literature, the paper further discusses how this professional development model is ideally suited to meet the needs of teachers and students of the 21st Century. Lastly, it is suggested that this PLC model can be replicated in similar contexts by schools and school boards across the Golden Horseshoe.

Introduction

Developing and supporting highly qualified teachers is the most cost-effective means of improving student achievement (Martin-Kniep, 2008). Quite simply, continuous professional development for teachers is a critical component of school improvement. Addressing the needs of the 21st century learner is, however, a daunting task to which teachers, principals, and school boards are commissioned. As a result, educators are attentive to the literature on professional learning and development. According to Lieberman (2009), “teacher leaders find new ways to nurture community among their colleagues and work hard to expand their own knowledge base and take risks by expanding their teaching and learning” (p. 24). Ensuring that students meet with success in the 21st Century requires a new kind of teaching that is conducted by teachers who understand learning and pedagogy. In “State of the Profession: Study Measures Status of Professional Development,” Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) examine key
characteristics of professional development for educators. The authors argue that “teachers need to be able to respond to the needs of their students, and the demands of their disciplines, while at the same time developing strong connections between students’ experiences and the goals of the curriculum” (p. 42). This is assumed to be a large undertaking for educators. In order for teaching to be effective, professional development needs to be intensive and ongoing, connected to practice, focused on teaching and learning, connected to other school initiatives, and yield strong working relationships among teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

In a recent review of literature on professional development, Broad and Evans (2006) collated research findings about the content, delivery, and process needed for experienced teachers’ professional growth. First and foremost, they found that professional development needs to be attentive and responsive to student learning and performance. The authors defend the need for authentic themes of professional development that pertain to classroom incidents and issues presented in the day-to-day work of teachers in relation to student learning. Broad and Evans (2006) argue that “professional development should be respectful of those theoretical and technical knowledge bases that inform the act of teaching” (p. 41). A teacher’s knowledge base develops from the experience and learning that take place in and out of the classroom. While providing effective and meaningful professional development for teachers is a challenging and multifaceted enterprise, it is the core of teachers’ professional work as they develop expertise and efficacy in their practice (Broad & Evans, 2006). Effective professional development requires that teachers have meaningful experiences. Broad and Evans (2006) claim that important components of professional development include, “the linking of teacher learning to student learning; providing many varied learning processes; using learning frameworks; and ensuring that reflection with forward planning are part of the learning cycle” (p. 5).

Interestingly, Easton (2009) suggests that “educators have so little practice in explaining their choices, actions and assessments that they are often uncomfortable to do so” (p. 14). PLCs assist educators to delve into essential questions about their practice and profession and be conformable in their role as professionals. Garmston and Wellman (2009) identify the impetus for educators to acquire and improve “new sensitivities that can discern what is not readily apparent to the sense of teaching and to help craft new ways of improving schools for the journey ahead” (p. 1). The PLC, thus, is a model that sustains school improvement and is particularly suitable to the Ontario context.
Purpose of the Paper

This paper discusses the key outcomes of a unique project of professional development that situates teachers' knowledge in a context-based and reflective PLC environment. Further, by contextualizing the research project in the literature, the paper discusses how this professional development model is ideally suited to meet the needs of teachers and students of the 21st Century. Lastly, it is suggested that this PLC model can be replicated in similar contexts by schools and school boards across the Golden Horseshoe.

Theoretical Context

The project was research-based and contextualized according to the relevant scholarship. We review the literature that supports the development of the project, namely, the characteristics of effective PLCs. Professional Learning Communities are considered an effective means of professional development, due to the fact that they address the diverse need of teachers in terms of meeting students’ unique learning styles. DuFour and Eaker (1998) propose that:

If the purpose of teacher development is to enable the school to help all students achieve an education, and if all students learn in different ways, it must follow that an effective staff development program will expand the teacher’s repertoire of skills to address the diverse learning styles of students. (p. 263)

PLCs are perceived as a useful tool for professional development because they are not determined by traditional and generic professional development workshops, often delivered by central school board staff members to teachers. The PLC is an innovative technique of professional development because it is based on the engagement of participant dialogue. Garmston and Wellman (2009) argue that “these new challenges we will face in education are not about working harder – there is hardly a profession in which people pour out as much energy and work – but is about working in new ways” (p. 3). The goal of PLCs is to enhance the effectiveness of professionals to benefit student learning through a new way of professional development.

Consider as well that Little (cited in Crow, 2008), who has been examining group learning for over 30 years, suggests that:
When groups of educators dig more deeply into issues of teaching and learning, these are people that share an understanding of particular instructional approaches, and are able to have these conversations after the PLC because they are anchored in shared understanding of each other’s teaching in schools. (p. 54)

A PLC is a forum for this type of shared understanding. Little (2007) also concluded that “if groups have a disposition to embrace community in pursuit of instructional improvement and to embrace investigation of their own assumptions and practices toward that end, then community can be transformational” (p. 53). This is the type of professional development that is the goal of effective PLCs. Professional learning, in this light, provides teachers with “substantial professional development in a given area to improve their skills and their students’ learning; most professional development is much shorter” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 43). PLCs typically collaborate for extended periods of time. In Ontario, Broad and Evans (2006) state that “professional development frameworks and practices need to be respectful of the emerging literature that highlights the complexity and multi-faced nature of teaching excellence and the professional learning process, what we might refer to teaching with deep understanding” (p. 40). These authors argue that adequate time must be invested by teachers to account for the array of supports that are available for professional growth.

Furthermore, Martin-Kniep (2008) explicitly concludes that “PLC can become structures where teachers become experts and contribute to the improvement of student learning” (p. 11). She explains that “now more than ever before, teaching requires collegial structures that enable teachers to articulate, refine, negotiate, question, and share expertise from practice so that they can benefit students” (p. 11). Practitioners require conducive forums where they can learn from each other and share their experiences with other teachers (Martin-Kniep, 2004). As classroom practitioners and members of a PLC, Solomon (1999) explains teachers “co-construct communities of professional inquiry regarding teaching and learning” (p. 251). DuFour, Eaker, DuFour, and Karhanek (2004) discussed extensively the merits of teachers’ dialoguing around the topic of effective teaching strategies. Such discourse bridges the gap between what Martin-Kniep (2004) identifies as “a great distance between theory and practice regarding teaching and learning” (p. 56). The challenge for educators rests in supporting teachers to use theory and in turn manifest their learning through individual practice. A PLC endorses that teacher participants identify, articulate, and use the
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research-proven best practices that are successful in theories about teaching and learning (Martin-Kniep, 2004). In comparison, Garmston and Wellman (2009) explain that “a deep transition is not in the knowledge base, but in the way teachers apply their knowledge within their new identities” (p. 6). For Martin-Kniep (2008) the PLC is “a means of increasing teachers’ expertise, which is the most direct path to improved learning for students” (p. 10). Similarly, Servage (2008) states: “Learning in a professional learning community is understood, for the most part, as best practices or a body of pedagogical, technical expertise that in theory will guarantee positive academic outcomes for students” (p.65). It is suggested that teachers who learn in this type of structured group develop the adaptability needed to meet the needs of students in the 21st Century.

Methodology

Participants and Data

Five elementary school teachers (3 female; 2 male) from one school board located in southern Ontario were selected to attend three PLC full-day meeting sessions. The school board is a member of the Golden Horseshoe Learning Consortium and includes urban and rural school communities. Participants’ range of experience was between 3 and 12 years. Each participant was involved in various leadership initiatives within their schools and regions.

Participant A coaches numerous sports teams, is the numeracy lead teacher in the school, has served as the student public speaking competition chairperson, is a special education team member, and is enrolled in a Master of Education program. Participant B also coaches various sports teams, and is a key member of the divisional professional development committee at the school. Participant C is a Special Education Resource Teacher providing programming to students of various exceptionalities from K-Grade 8. Participant C also has a Master of Education degree and is the principal designate in the school. Participant D leads the school instrumental band and choir. Participant D is a core member of the school improvement team. Participant E is the program team leader in the school, and serves in various pivotal roles related to literacy education.

Participants’ reflection logs constituted the data for this study. Participants were asked to record their reflections in writing at various intervals throughout the 3-day PLC sessions. Each log was prompted to solicit both independent and group reflection. Participants were encouraged to share their observations, impressions, and concerns of the professional development interventions.
Professional Learning Community Model

The PLC model conceptualized for this project is substantially different from traditional professional development paradigms and is reflective of an *in-service* approach. The PLC model accounted for the literature on professional collaboration to offer a more *personal service* approach. In light of the model, professional development was determined by the needs of the teacher-participants themselves, and were not externally driven.

Each of the respective interventions throughout the three days of the PLC consisted of engaging activities directly related to participants’ needs. The sessions were inquiry-based to support the interests of the participants. The first PLC session was titled, *Turning Experience into Expertise: Collaborative Inquiry as Professional Development*, where teachers reflected upon a question that they identified as critical their professional learning and development. The second PLC day focused on *Educating for the 21st Century: Learning by Sharing*, and included investigating transformational teaching strategies identified as most relevant to participants’ practice. The final session, *Think Big, but Act Small*, asked participants to interrogate a dilemma-based circumstance in their practice before subjecting it to the collective expertise of the group.

Data Analysis

A qualitative grounded theory analysis was employed in this study. Grounded theory is a non-linear approach to distinguishing themes that emerge within participants’ experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After each PLC meeting session, data were collected and analyzed. The process of axial and selective coding identified preliminary codes that assisted in determining the sequence of events for the subsequent PLC meeting dates. Creswell (2008) describes this emerging theory design as an image of a “zigzag [to] help understand this procedure” (p. 442). Key phrases that emerged in the data were used in the line-by-line examination of each participant’s responses (Chesler, 1987). The phrases were inductively analyzed and grouped into conceptual themes. Themes were clustered into categories that were constantly compared throughout the data analysis (Eaves, 2001). The researchers cross-checked the data to triangulate the results to increase the study’s validity and reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

The PLC enabled the participants to reflect upon what it means to be both teacher and
learner. As one participant explained, “each of the discussions regarding transformational teaching strategies related to the types of instructional strategies that are needed to support student learning.” Two key outcomes were grounded in the data, including, ‘Intrinsic motivation to improve teaching and learning’ and ‘Critical reflections in teaching.’

**Intrinsic Motivation to Improve Teaching and Learning**

Participants perceived that “teachers need to change their approach to teaching and learning to accommodate the 21st century student.” One teacher-participant in the PLC mentioned that “learning more about 21st century approaches to teaching and learning challenges us to move further away from traditional teaching methods.” The discussions in the PLC further revealed, as one participant explained, that transformational teaching strategies must “build critical thinking and problem solving skills, where teachers and students must be given a chance to be confronted with problems that they can attempt to solve using various strategies.” In order for this to be meaningfully incorporated into teachers’ practice, one participant suggested that it is necessary to establish “deeper understandings of how students and people learn differently.” Participants distinguished that the 21st century educator is both a teacher and a learner who “acquires skills that are essential and will endure over time.” A different individual stated, “To move forward teachers must consider the world we live in to prepare students to thrive in it.” Participants’ intrinsic motivation to improve teaching and learning stems from a “willingness to change and try new strategies in the classroom.” Such motivation is founded on the premise that is most fittingly articulated by this participant: “We can always be better at reaching and meeting student needs.” The intrinsic motivation displayed by the teachers in the PLC was demonstrated through discussions surrounding their personal strengths and needs in the areas of teaching and learning. As a result, the participants began to plan and ask for the support they directly needed to develop the next steps in improving their practice.

At the core of participants’ intrinsic motivation was their priority on addressing students’ needs. One participant believed that she needed to “break out of her old habits of teaching using traditional methods, and pass on the message to use strategies that are research proven to work.” She began to question her understanding of, “if what I am doing has worked in the past with other students, it should work now.” Another teacher mentioned that the PLC “makes me stop and think about my own teaching and if it is meaningful for all my students.” One member criticized that
teachers should be “attempting to create 21st century learners who are critical thinkers, problem solvers, and independent learners even if it is a daunting task.” This participant explained that “all students in the classroom begin learning at different levels with various diverse life experiences and this needs to be taken into account.” Participants attested to the importance of being intrinsically motivated by “students need [their own] instructional strategies and proper assessments [that lead] to effective growth for students.” A participant explained that teachers need to “challenge students to rationalize their thinking and to abandon trivialities of content and aim at developing skills for life.” Echoed in this same conversation was the “common belief that all students can learn if given the chance and teacher support.” However, participants wrote that “pushing the learner forward from where they are and meeting all their needs is overwhelming.” Underscoring student need is the reason teachers are in the classroom. As pointed out by the participants, this is not always an easy task because of the potential overwhelming needs of each individual child. Teachers in this model of a PLC were given time to account for their concerns and work collaboratively to discuss the needs of the students in their care.

Critical Reflections in Teaching

Although the concept of reflective practitioner is not a new phenomenon in the literature, participants’ perceptions were grounded in what was very much a meta-cognitive context. Participants reported that they believed teachers needed to be given time and guidance to “constantly reflect on teaching practices and attempt to improve in reaching all students.” A participant stated that she knows she is “constantly learning and continuing to develop and change as a teacher, but would like the security of doing something different in my practice.” For this participant, being in a PLC was a “positive and safe learning environment which allowed for some security while also letting me learn something new.” A different teacher commented that “there needs to be time to reflect and develop a balance between professional development in content areas versus skills, because content is infinite.” This participant also expressed that “the more discussions I had in the PLC made me aware that there are more questions than answers in teaching and learning.” Another participant explained that “many of our discussions and personal reflections have helped me feel relief that I am not alone in my questions and confusion.” One teacher commented, “I’ve realized the importance of questioning my practice and how things are conducted: not just accepting what is handed to me by someone else.” Teachers in the PLC agreed
that “we need to embrace change, but remain committed to what works and that takes time and thinking.” Quite candidly, one participant stated that a “high curriculum demand and pressure to meet evaluation and reporting expectations causes me to break down and succumb to feeding students the answers just to get it done.” The opportunities to meta-cognitively reflect upon their practice and the pedagogical implications shared by their colleagues throughout the PLC, allowed participants to critically consider various approaches, skills, characteristics, and attitudes that collectively contribute to improving their practice. This meta-cognitive approach to professional development allowed each teacher in the PLC to take time and consider their strengths and shortcomings as it relates to their practice.

Furthermore, by critically reflecting on their teaching within the PLC model, the teacher-participants guided their own professional development in the context of self-affirming practice. As one participant mentioned, she was able to “openly express relevant concerns about teaching strategies and discuss her understanding of how to use research proven strategies that actually work in the classroom.” This was echoed in a response where a participant stated that in the PLC “I was able to discuss how I planned to move forward, and take risks because I felt that I am not left alone in my struggles in the classroom.” A participant said that through reflection, he was “willing to learn and change practice as research develops in education and use suggested new strategies in teaching and learning” as long as he was “given time to develop this understanding.” Grounded in the data was the sense of participants’ appreciation that the PLC sessions were driven by the essential questions that they themselves presented, examined, and reflected upon. A teacher stated that her ability to “ask good questions” and reflect upon them essentially affirmed her pedagogical approaches, believing that she could “achieve more consistency in meeting student learning needs and progressing towards higher levels of achievement.” Each member in the PLC was able to “focus on specific needs relating to student learning and speak to other teachers for support.” One teacher mentioned that this really allowed him to see the PLC as “promoting change for better learning” by allowing the teacher to support his or her own professional learning and development. The PLC gave each of the participants an opportunity to participate in self-affirming professional development.

Discussion

Learning in the PLC model under discussion came in many different forms. One participant accounted for the fact that “no classroom or school is unique in the sense that we all have
challenges, but when we have the same focus and time to learn to collaborate and share best practices, students win.” Another teacher emphasized, “in this PLC, communication and collaboration encouraged consistency and continuity among members’ understanding in the group.” A different participant concluded, “professional growth does not just come in the form of taking an AQ course.” This member explained that he believed professional learning is when “teachers take the time to reflect on the world they live in and what is in store for their future and the future of their students.” Participants in the PLC confirmed that “coming together as a group was the most important thing for your profession and career to support your personal growth.” The PLC model encouraged and facilitated collaboration among participants. It established a conducive forum to share and dialogue about issues, questions, and circumstances that were most relevant to the participants themselves.

The PLC model ensured that sufficient time was afforded for participants to engage in this professional development opportunity. The results of this study indicated that developing as a teacher and learner exist interdependently; specifically, participants further understood themselves as learners and strove to improve as teachers. In the discussions regarding the needs for teaching and learning in the 21st Century, the teacher-participants developed insight into skills that are necessary for effective teaching that permeate across subject areas. In gaining these insights, the members developed confidence that they had the skill set necessary to be effective teachers equipped to improve student learning. Fullan, Hill and Crévola (2006) explain that teachers have the “complex and challenging task of transforming classroom instruction into a precision-based process” (p. 28). Through the conversations in the PLC, the participants sustained their personal growth process and enhanced their skills to support every student. Fullan (2008) advocates that “the focus must be on improving classroom instruction and adopting processes that will create a more precise, validated, data-driven expert activity that can respond to the learning needs of individual students” (p. 81). It was pertinent that the teachers had a chance to investigate instructional strategies and examine questions that emerged in their teaching practice in an attempt to develop a profound and reflective understanding of their teaching and learning.

The data attests to the fact that it was a priority for participants to examine and reflect upon their immediate concerns regarding student needs. Learning in groups while reflecting on personal and professional needs gave the teacher-participants the opportunity for professional growth. This PLC-model nurtured constructive dialogue regarding research-proven practices that are
considerably more complex than what may usually be presented at in-service workshops (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). The PLC served as a venue where significant research-proven strategies were discussed, understood, and questioned in relation to each specific teacher’s need. As a result, the discussions in the PLC were rich in context and content.

As an outcome of their involvement in the PLC, the participants expressed their heightened knowledge of research-proven instructional strategies. There was no pressure from the group to conform or be an expert in the use of any one individual strategy or initiative that was presented. The participants understood that to be successful in helping students learn, they needed to be flexible and adaptive to deal with the multitude of strategies from which students could benefit in the 21st century classroom. Participants freely and candidly discussed various strategies to positively affect their practice and benefit student learning. The time devoted to discussions in the PLC gave teachers the ability to do what DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) describe in the following statement: “Educators who acknowledge and honestly assess the current reality are far more likely to be successful in changing it” (p. 250). Taking the time to reflect in the PLC granted the teacher-participants an opportunity to focus their thinking on issues related to teaching and learning. These issues included personal accounts of dilemmas in their practice that participants shared with the group to solicit the perspectives and expertise of their peers. All participants, regardless of where they were situated in the continuum of their career, expressed the challenges that they felt needed to be addressed in order for them to grow in their practice. These discussions gave participants a chance to approach the professional development opportunity with a meta-cognitive lens. The process of reflective practice enabled participants to feel connected to a broader purpose outside of their individual classrooms and to be involved in what Fullan (cited in DuFour et al., 2005) describes as “the culture of the district” (p. 212). Given that each participant represented various schools, disciplines and divisions across a school district, participants were privy to discussing a wealth of issues and circumstances.

Recommendations

The PLC model being presented is especially suitable for replication in similar contexts by schools and school boards within the Golden Horseshoe Learning Consortium.

First, the PLC model positions teachers to learn from their experiences and build professional capacity by identifying the issues of greatest relevance to their teaching practice. This
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PLC model empowers each participant to engage in critical discourse of utmost importance to their immediate context as it relates to teaching and learning.

Second, the PLC allows participants to critically and reflectively review their pedagogical practice. Participants affirmed their new learning, increased their teaching repertoire, and therefore transformed their practice. Providing time for participants to dialogue with their colleagues from other schools was a key component of this model.

Lastly, it is recommended that professional development be structured in PLCs that foster teachers’ self-understanding as learners and teachers of the 21st Century. By empowering teachers to guide their own professional development in the context of a PLC situates the focus of the learning on participants’ current needs in the classroom, and more importantly, upon issues related to student learning and achievement.

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References


