

A View of Professional Learning Communities through Three Frames

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### **Abstract**

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are models of school organization designed to foster collaboration and continuous learning among educators to facilitate school improvement through cultural organizational changes. The PLC concept has become increasingly popular in recent years as a means of promoting organizational change through collaboration among school leaders, teachers, other staff, students, and community members. Principles that inform and guide the work of successful PLCs include commitment to change; shared vision and common goals; belief that all participants can effectively collaborate and contribute; encouragement of risk taking and sharing of ideas; use of research-based teaching strategies; and design of assessments that reflect goals. Review of the literature on PLCs reveals an examination of them through the frames of leadership, organization, and culture. Each of these is discussed briefly, along with their implications for collaborative mentoring within school cultures. Suggestions for future research directions are provided.

## A View of Professional Learning Communities through Three Frames

For this conceptual analysis of professional learning communities (PLCs) in North American public schools, we examine three theoretical frames—leadership, organization, and culture. We briefly review the educational literature on professional learning communities and the implications for mentoring, and we recommend directions for future research. Our intent is to identify expanded frames for school teams to guide research and influence policy and practice. This paper is an abbreviated version of a lengthier article (Mullen & Schunk, 2010).

### **Professional Learning Communities**

The *professional learning community* (PLC) is a model of school organization designed to foster collaboration and continuous learning among educators for facilitating school improvement through cultural and organizational changes. The PLC concept can be understood as frameworks (frames) relevant to schooling. Our synthesis of the educational literature indicates that the PLC concept has been examined from leadership, organizational, and cultural frames, with an emergent focus on learning. We define *frame* as a lens for identifying possibilities for school teams that underscore more expansive purposes, functions, and activities (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996). Power and leadership dynamics, implicit in frames, are social, mediated, and relationship-oriented (Stewart, 2006). We view PLCs and the place of mentoring within them as significant topics in terms of theory generation and the application of principles and practices in schools geared toward improved student performance. Our discussion of the three frames addresses the dynamic role of collaborative mentoring within learning organizations.

The PLC is a popular approach to change (Dufour, 2004), and has been propelled by entrepreneurial experimentation with school-wide improvement (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Faculty collaboration, student learning, and organizational performance are being sparked at an entirely new level through shared leadership, stakeholder buy-in, and synergy.

The PLC places quality teaching at the center of schooling to impact student learning (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010). Moreover, the PLC is a model of school organization designed to foster collaboration and continuous learning among educators to harness school improvement through organizational and cultural change. It is thought that school improvement must be initiated and sustained via school vehicles that facilitate across-the-board, whole-school learning (Matthews, Crow, & Matthews, 2009; Murphy & Lick, 2005). This type of community depends on a collaborative effort among teachers, leaders, and others to guide decisions that support student and teacher learning through such goals as school improvement, professional development, and accountability (Dufour, 2004; Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2006; Mullen, 2009).

Members of PLCs are school personnel who foster organizational knowledge by working collaboratively in a variety of ways that may differ among schools and include one or more groups or the entire staff (Leithwood et al., 2006). Situated as team players, educators and other school personnel commit to achieving better results for students and improving their schools through their job-embedded, instructional learning and mentoring of one another (Donahoo & Hunter, 2007; Dufour, 2004; Mullen, 2009). Within PLC schools, two distinct concepts—professional learning and community—are integrated. Given the typical isolation of public school personnel, this integration is not the status quo; thus, it is counter-cultural. Where organizational learning is evident across schools and monitored from within, PLCs have been identified as “smart” cultures (Leithwood et al., 2006) within which the social practices of bonding, bridging, and linking occur for students, teachers, and school leaders (Mulford, 2007).

Certain principles and values inform the work of PLC members for whom leadership, organization, culture, and learning are all central components of change. The most salient of these principles and actions are as follows: a common impetus for change; a shared vision and common goals regarding the need for universal design in the school; the belief that all members of the school team are equal and that increased collaborative planning among staff can support

the needs of all learners; encouragement of risk taking and the sharing of ideas; recognition that professional inquiry is crucial and that teaching strategies should be research-supported; and attention on planning for assessment that is reflected in school-wide action (DuFour et al., 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

The PLC initiative did not spread because of the grassroots experimentation of a school or district. Rather, it grew out of widespread and varied policies and implementations that reinforced this message. Dufour et al. (2008) detail the impact of influential educational organizations (e.g., the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals) serving as the backbone and catalyst of this initiative. Such associations have endorsed the belief that teachers who work in communities change their environments for the better. School teams have been called upon to work together as tightly interwoven synergistic units to improve student learning through policy, instruction, and staff development.

*Mentoring* refers to the development of knowledge and transference within educational contexts (Allen & Eby, 2007; Mullen, 2009). In PLCs, what occurs is *collaborative mentoring*, or a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth and development of all partners (Mullen, 2009). This learning partnership goes beyond assisting and coaching; it brings together seasoned and novice educators, or teachers and students, to creatively solve problems and invest time in learning, which leads to such outcomes as enhanced morale, emotional investment, and increased *self-efficacy* (perceived capabilities) and productivity (Schunk, 2008). Given that continual learning is emphasized, it is essential that members share their points of view, seek to learn, and collaboratively promote desirable results in student achievement through consensus building. A collaborative approach to mentoring through study groups and other avenues is considered the cornerstone of shared vision and school reform (Moyer, Dockery, Jamieson, & Ross, 2006).

### **Methods and Data Sources**

In total, we identified 405 sources (books, articles, reports) from 2008 to 2010 via library databases (e.g., [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov), [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com), [www.highbeam.com](http://www.highbeam.com)), journal websites, professional association websites, and university websites. Key descriptors used to identify educational literature (e.g., learning communities, learning, mentoring, policy) coalesced around research on and study of learning, learning communities, and mentoring in particular. Additional descriptors were used to search literature from a social justice perspective (e.g., teacher empowerment, social capital, democracy, equity).

We analyzed the results from our literature searches using Miles and Huberman's (1994) conventional schema for reporting results, such as emergent themes based on keywords and the repetition of them. Our descriptive analysis of relevant sources was anchored in a frequency count of recurring terms for which professional learning community was the defining construct. The results indicate that the PLC concept as an overriding theme corresponds with three meta-themes we refer to as frames: leadership, organization, and culture. These frames overlap but are discussed separately to promote clarity.

## **Results**

### **Frame 1: Leadership and the Learning Community**

Three types of leadership are salient within the leadership literature—instructional, transformational, and transactional. *Instructional leadership* is defined as the improvement of teaching and learning in schools through which the instructional quality of a school's program and the academic achievement of students are the top priorities, manifested by leaders and their staff through vision, goals, and actions. *Transformational leadership* incorporates this component but significantly transcends it to include the crucial, albeit messy and ambiguous element of changing schools into dynamic cultures of learning that foster school-wide change through such practices as distributed governance and shared power. *Transactional leadership* is defined differently, even as the polar opposite of transformational leadership: Transactional leadership gives importance to retaining outdated structures through such means as following

the chain of command that provides a clear structure for the limited role of subordinates in the managerial, administrative work of a school and the observance of authority.

These three definitions of leadership reflect common distinctions in the educational literature (Mullen, 2009; Stewart, 2006); however, these are not always as clearly delineated as they could be. Positive attribution is ascribed to the first two types of leadership for the emphasis they give to improving teaching and learning in schools (Stewart, 2006). What distinguishes these models from the transactional model is the focus of administrators and teachers on the improvement of teaching and learning. Instructional leaders focus on school goals, the curriculum, instruction, and the school environment. Transformational leaders restructure the school environment by improving working conditions.

**Implications for mentoring.** In learner-centered PLCs, teachers facilitate learning and motivation and students hear the message that they can do well. They receive feedback that informs them of their learning progress, which reinforces the capacity for learning and improves self-efficacy (Schunk, 2008). In the DuFour et al. (2008) study of high schools that converted to PLCs, students praised the caring staff who stressed that academic failure was not an option. Students made gains in self-efficacy, preparation for college, and college graduation. However, principals and others responsible for professional development must be aware that teachers' beliefs about their capabilities to perform influence their behavior and support of students (Schunk, 2008).

## **Frame 2: Organization and the Learning Community**

PLCs can be locally directed or partnership oriented. Those extending beyond individual schools or districts may embrace regional and state agencies, networks, partnerships, universities, and communities (Stoll, Bolman, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Representatives from universities, foundations, and the surrounding community affect local school culture and the professional learning of teachers. Practitioners who enter into a school–university partnership are expected to work with school and university faculties; be

knowledgeable of the requirements of the school, district, and university; understand the motives and research agendas of all parties involved; provide time for teachers to collaborate; and address areas of potential conflict (Moyer et al., 2006).

**Implications for mentoring.** From an organizational perspective, mentoring within the PLC context is a “multi-dimensional support system” that embeds social, organizational, and human capital (Nora & Crisp, 2008, p. 342). As a system, mentoring incorporates goal setting, psychosocial support, subject knowledge, and role modeling. Within the systems model, collaborative mentors challenge each other to understand their own processes of learning and identity ways to develop as mentors (Mullen, Migdal, & Rozell, 2003).

### **Frame 3: Culture and the Learning Community**

Because professional isolation is common within many public schools (DuFour et al., 2008), and because many students feel isolated on a daily basis (Dewey, 1956/1991), workplace culture must be changed. The problem of professional and personal isolation is a major hurdle that PLC initiators often face in creating synergistic collaborative cultures (DuFour et al., 2008). For PLCs to make the expected gains, collaboration must be embedded in routine structures, and student and adult learning made pervasive (Mullen, 2009).

**Implications for mentoring.** The idea of a mentor as above the group that follows one's charge is outdated. Thus, beyond supporting individual and group learning, collaborative mentoring is a catalyst for changing bureaucracies. Diversity is promoted when networks are inclusive and power relationships are changed and aligned with the principles of intercultural learning (Mullen, 2009). Traditional mentoring relationships are hierarchical, limiting, and potentially harmful, which necessitates that mentors confront negative behaviors that include prejudice, ostracizing, and silencing. Because not all mentors are comfortable with sharing power, democratic accountable school teams model expectations and monitor behaviors. A cultural force that weighs heavily on all schools is the damaging notion that teachers are objects of change. New accountability norms have turned teachers into curricular vessels of mandated



student testing and content standards (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Hence, principals are the crucial individuals for developing cultures of empowerment and teachers' collective autonomy as change agents capable of building team synergy (Murphy & Lick, 2005).

### **Future Directions**

Future directions of the research on PLCs should address many important areas of organizational/professional life, such as micropolitics, external factors and pressures, toxic culture, and differences between democracy and consensus. A recent example of a type of research study that addresses these issues and tensions within PLCs is Whitford and Wood's (2010) 6-year study of seven school districts. Primary data (e.g., survey information from teachers) and secondary data (e.g., teacher participant reflections) were collected and analyzed as part of a systematic, field-based data analysis of PLCs both founded and investigated by the research team in New Mexico, Washington, Pennsylvania, Florida, and New Jersey. The results showed that the establishment of PLCs in various schools promoted positive collaboration and conversation between teachers and coaches as one of several major outcomes. The researchers also found that while PLCs introduced a set of complex problems, these gave teachers and other leaders the opportunity to name their own professional problems, as well as the chance to find creative, team-building ways to resolve them.

Researchers who lead or participate in partnerships with school–communities may find this anchored theoretical orientation that we have presented helpful for enhancing their work and commitments to organizational change. PLCs offer fertile ground for conducting research. Through dissemination of the findings, researchers can help to inform educational policy and promote effective practices.

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