

Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities

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Chapter 2. The Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

As stated in Chapter 1, this literature review is structured around five broad questions:

1. What are professional learning communities?
2. What makes professional learning communities effective?
3. What processes are used to create and develop an effective professional learning community?
4. What other factors help or hinder the creation and development of effective professional learning communities?
5. Are effective professional learning communities sustainable?

In establishing the scope of the review, several considerations were relevant. First, since literature specifically focused on PLCs has largely been published since about 1990, this was our starting point for that aspect of the review. However, we also had to make judgements about which key antecedent ideas had contributed to the development of the concept and practice of PLCs: hence, earlier studies are referred to as appropriate. Second, what appears here is a final, updated review. It should be noted that the most recent references did not appear in the initial review and, therefore, did not shape the early data collection instruments. Furthermore, as new understandings about professional learning communities have emerged in the last couple of years, these areas have also been elaborated in more detail than in the initial review completed in March 2002. Third, until the last few years, most of the directly relevant research had taken place in North America, and this is reflected in the studies reviewed here. However, once again, studies from other countries are included as we judged appropriate. Fourth, it should also be noted that the literature examined was of different types. Some was based on careful empirical research that aimed to understand PLCs, often also trying to develop knowledge that could subsequently be applied to improve practice and policy (Wallace and Poulson, 2003; Bolam, 1999). Some, however, either proposed theory about professional learning communities or provided recommendations for improving practice with limited evidence to back these up. Accordingly, we have tried to use accepted research criteria in making judgements about 'rigour,' 'robustness' and 'reliability', indicating the strengths and limitations of the literature as appropriate.

2. WHAT ARE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

In this section, we examine what the literature has to say about the term professional learning community, then look at how the concept has developed and 'unpack' the different words.

a. Defining 'professional learning community'

There is no universal definition of a PLC. 'Professional learning community' may have shades of interpretation in different contexts, but there appears to be broad international consensus that it suggests a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Toole and Lewis, 2002); operating as a collective enterprise (King and Newmann, 2001). Summarising the literature, Hord (1997, p1) blended process and anticipated outcomes in defining a '*professional community of learners*' (Astuto et al, 1993) as one:

. . . in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.

The notion, therefore, draws attention to the potential for a range of people, based inside and outside a school, to mutually enhance each other's and pupils' learning as well as school development.

b. How the concept has developed

The concept of professional learning community seems to have emerged from a variety of sources. At one level, it is connected with notions of enquiry, reflection and self-evaluating schools. In this respect the idea of an effective professional learning community is not new, given that certain key features were evident in the work of education writers in the early part of the last century. For example John Dewey was committed to the view that:

...educational practices provide the data, the subject matter, which forms the problems of inquiry.(Dewey, 1929)

A generation or so ago, Stenhouse (1975) argued that teachers ought to be school and classroom researchers and play an active part in the curriculum development process. Schön (1983) was influential in advocating the notion of the 'reflective practitioner'. From the school-based curriculum development movement of the 1970s, there emerged a series of projects and activities on the 'thinking school', the 'problem-solving school' (Bolam, 1977) and, perhaps most notably, the 'Creative School' (CERI, 1978). Later, in the 1980s came the shift to the self-reviewing or self-evaluating school (McMahon et al, 1984).

The actual term 'professional learning community' appears to be one that has emerged from those working within the profession and those supporting schools, for example, in a research review for practitioners by Hord (1997). Most references to 'learning community' are related to learning through community service, ICT, HE and other community learning. 'Professional community' by contrast, is a body of research starting in the 1980s largely concerned with schools and departments as mediating contexts for teaching (Talbert et al, 1993; Kruse et al, 1995):

. . . teachers' responses to today's students and notions of good teaching practice are heavily mediated by the character of the professional communities in which they work . . . schools differed strikingly from one another in the strength of their professional communities – reporting clear differences, even within the same districts, in levels of collegiality, faculty innovativeness, and learning opportunities as perceived by teachers (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993, p.8).

In developing their framework for professional community, Louis et al (1995, p.4) explained that they used the term:

. . . to emphasize our belief that unless teachers are provided with more supporting and engaging work environments, they cannot be expected to concentrate on increasing their abilities to reach and teach today's students more effectively.

Seashore and colleagues (2003, p.3) elaborate:

By using the term professional learning community we signify our interest not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically

examining practice to improve student outcomes. . . . The hypothesis is that what teachers do together outside of the classroom can be as important as what they do inside in affecting school restructuring, teachers' professional development, and student learning.

c. Unpacking the concept

It is not insignificant that the word 'learning' appears between 'professional' and 'communities'. For example, while her main focus was on teaching and its impact on student outcomes in Tennessee elementary schools, Rosenholtz (1989) distinguished between 'learning enriched' and 'learning impoverished' schools. As McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) point out, not all strong professional communities have an orientation to practice that is conducive to change or even concerned with improvement, and Little (1999) distinguished between schools with strong teacher communities in which the professional culture was either that of 'traditional community' (where work was co-ordinated to reinforce traditions) or 'teacher learning community' (where teachers collaborated to reinvent practice and share professional growth).

At the heart of the concept, however, is the notion of community. The focus is not just on individual teachers' professional learning but of professional learning within a community context – a community of learners, and the notion of collective learning. Westheimer (1999, p.75) highlighted five features most commonly identified by contemporary theorists exploring community: shared beliefs and understandings; interaction and participation; interdependence; concern for individual and minority views (*"Members of a community, while sharing interests and a commitment to one another, don't always agree"*); and meaningful relationships. Central to the notion of school community is an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders (Louis, Kruse and associates, 1995; Hargreaves with Giles, 2003).

The community focus emphasises mutually supportive relationships and developing shared norms and values whereas the focus in the literature about professionals and professionalism is towards the acquisition of knowledge and skills, orientation to clients and professional autonomy. This can lead to tensions not least in matters concerned with the regulation of teacher behaviour (Louis, Kruse and associates, 1995; McMahon, 2001) and the operation of any performance-related pay systems. In a North American context, Fullan (2001) concluded that effective schools had established professionally collaborative cultures and argued that attention should shift from focusing on individuals (eg. merit pay, career ladders etc) to developing schools as professional learning communities.

Further queries are raised about the concept. How inclusive is the community? Should it include all staff in the school or just teaching staff? Huffman (2001) suggested that more mature professional learning communities involve all their stakeholders in building vision, but those primarily involved are those in school. Much of the literature considers only teachers (including school leaders) to be members of *professional* learning communities. For many schools, however, especially those in certain contexts and those with younger children or large numbers of pupils with special needs, the role of other staff employed by the school can be equally critical. With a new workforce agreement between the English Government and all but one of the teaching unions (ATL et al, 2004), and a national emphasis on remodelling working patterns and deployment of staffing (NRT, 2003) it has become increasingly important to understand the contributions of the different members of professional learning communities.

The organisation of many schools also makes it likely that professional learning communities may be operating at a number of different levels. For example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) found strong and weak departmental teacher learning communities in their study of 16 high schools, but also found school-wide learning communities in three of the schools.

3. WHAT MAKES PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES EFFECTIVE?

In this section we describe five characteristics of professional learning communities highlighted in the literature, and question whether professional learning communities go through different growth stages. Finally, we look at the impact of professional learning communities. It should be noted that many others researching and writing about the characteristics of professional learning communities (PLCs) from whom we derived our characteristics list were implicitly at least assuming that if the characteristics were present, these communities were 'effective', for example, by being "much closer to exemplary PLC practices" (Cowan et al, 2004).

a. What are the characteristics of professional learning communities?

Professional learning communities, as described in the literature, appear to share five key characteristics or features:

Shared values and vision. Having a shared vision and sense of purpose has been found to be centrally important (Andrews and Lewis, 2004). In particular, there is "an undeviating focus" on all students' learning (Hord, 2004) because individual autonomy is seen as potentially reducing teacher efficacy when teachers cannot count on colleagues to reinforce objectives (Newmann and Welhage, 1995; Louis, Kruse and Associates, 1995) suggest that a shared value base provides a framework for "shared, collective, ethical decision making?"

Collective responsibility. There is broad agreement in the literature that members of a professional learning community consistently take collective responsibility for student learning (King and Newmann, 2001; Leithwood and Louis, 1998; Kruse et al, 1995). It is assumed that such collective responsibility helps to sustain commitment, puts peer pressure and accountability on those who do not do their fair share, and eases isolation (Newmann and Welhage, 1995).

Reflective professional inquiry. This includes: 'reflective dialogue' (Louis et al, 1995), conversations about serious educational issues or problems involving the application of new knowledge in a sustained manner; 'deprivatisation of practice' (Louis et al, 1995) frequent examining of teachers' practice, through mutual observation and case analysis, joint planning and curriculum development; the seeking of new knowledge (Hord, 2004); tacit knowledge that is constantly converted into shared knowledge through interaction (Fullan, 2001); and applying new ideas and information to problem solving and solutions that address pupils' needs (Hord, 1997).

Collaboration. This concerns the involvement of staff in developmental activities with consequences for more than one person, and goes beyond superficial exchanges of help, support, or assistance (Louis et al, 1995) for example, joint review and feedback (Hord,

2004). The link between collaborative activity and achievement of shared purpose is highlighted (Newmann and Welhage, 1995).

Feelings of interdependence are central to such collaboration: a goal of better teaching practices would be considered unachievable without collaboration, linking collaborative activity and achievement of shared purpose. This does not deny the existence of micro-politics, but conflicts are managed more effectively in some professional learning communities. Indeed, as Hargreaves (2003, p.163) notes:

Professional learning communities demand that teachers develop grown-up norms in a grown-up profession – where difference, debate and disagreement are viewed as the foundation stones of improvement.

Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted. All teachers are learners with their colleagues (Louis et al, 1995). In Rosenholtz's (1989) 'learning enriched schools', "professional self renewal" is "a communal rather than solitary happening". Collective learning is also evident, through collective knowledge creation (Louis, 1994), whereby the school learning community interacts, engages in serious dialogue and deliberates about information and data, interpreting it communally and distributing it among them.

It is also suggested that the various characteristics are intertwined and do not operate separately (Louis et al, 1995; Hord, 2004).

b. Do professional learning communities progress through different stages over time?

School improvement and change literatures identify different phases of change (Fullan, 2001; Miles, 1998). Those studying the business world have also identified predictable and sequential patterns of stages of organisational life cycle change (Quinn and Cameron, 1983; Mulford, 1998). It is unclear, however, whether these would apply to the development and sustainability of learning communities where a key goal is continuous learning rather than the implementation of a specific change initiative. Mulford (2004) suggests that the success of organisations depends on their stage of development. Effectiveness might be considered in terms of evolution over time, such that some schools are at a very early stage of developing the characteristics of a professional learning community (early starters), others are further along the process (developers), while some are more established (mature). Dalin (Dalin with Rolff, 1993) mirrors this in his discussion of school's life cycles.

Research on senior management teams (SMTs) (Wallace and Hall, 1994) highlighted how teams perennially evolve as their members' experience of working together unfolds. The group learning curve was especially sharp when the membership changed. Mutual trust developed slowly, and was fragile and easily undermined if one or more members transgressed the norms of SMT colleagues. Similarly, it seems probable that professional learning communities are fluid, rather than fixed, entities, perennially evolving with accumulating collective experience.

Studying this level of detail of the change process professional learning communities go through is at a relatively early stage internationally, but a project in the United States has been exploring how professional learning communities progress through different phases. The researchers looked at progression from initiation to implementation to institutionalisation, as a means of reflecting the growth in schools seeking to become professional learning communities, and mapped their five characteristics against the phases. For example, for shared values and vision, during initiation they found the emphasis was on

espoused values and norms. Moving into implementation, there was a shift to focusing on students and high expectations. In the less frequent cases of institutionalisation, shared vision actually guided teaching and learning (Huffman and Hipp, 2003).

If a conception of professional learning community is adopted that allows for ineffective, starter, or cruising (Stoll and Fink, 1996) professional learning communities, then effectiveness cannot be directly created. What can be done is to create conditions that facilitate the development of effectiveness, and facilitate it from different starting points.

c. What is the impact of professional learning communities?

Impact cannot be considered separately from purpose. Professional learning communities are a means to an end: *The goal is not to 'be a professional learning community'*.(Morrissey, 2000). A key purpose of professional learning communities is to enhance staff effectiveness as professionals, for the ultimate benefit of students. .

Little (2001) reports that research has steadily converged on claims that professional community is an important contributor to instructional improvement and school reform. Lewis et al (1995) found that in schools with a genuine sense of community there was an increased sense of work efficacy, in turn leading to increased classroom motivation and work satisfaction, and greater collective responsibility for student learning. In Australia, Andrews and Louis (2004) also found that where teachers developed a professional learning community, it not only enhanced the knowledge base of the group, but also had a significant impact on their work in their classrooms. Bryk and colleagues (1999), however, caution that the path between professional community and instructional improvement is not necessarily direct, because instructional improvement may be only one of many purposes of the school. They note how a high performing school with a long history of providing challenging intellectual work for its pupils, that develops into more of a professional community, might be orienting its professional interaction towards conserving existing practices rather than changing them. In contrast, in high poverty settings, like Chicago where their study took place, preserving the status quo would be *"likely to perpetuate substandard practice in many cases"* (P758). Bryk and colleagues' findings lead them to suggest that *"if professional community in fact fosters instructional change, it does so by creating an environment that supports learning through innovation and experimentation"*(p.771). In this they make links to the literature on organisational learning (Silins and Mulford, 2002). In a recent research study, Seashore and colleagues (2003), also suggest that while professional community has a role to play in changing classroom practice, its effects may be less than those suggested by some previous studies. They concluded that a possible explanation for this, put forward by Toole (2001), was that teachers' individual mental models – the "schemas" or maps they draw on to guide their professional practice – determine whether individual teachers are actually ready to change, whilst professional community has more power in determining whether such pedagogical changes will persist over time schoolwide.

Looking specifically at work-based learning and other forms of professional development, until recently there has been limited, hard research evidence about their effects on student learning (Analytical Services, 2000) with the exception of those with very specific aims (Joyce et al, 1999). There are some indications, however, that there may be a link between professional learning communities and enhanced student outcomes. A 'learning-enriched' teachers' workplace appears to be linked to better student academic progress (Rosenholtz 1989) and Louis and Marks (1998) found that in schools with positive professional communities students achieved at higher levels. This they, note, is ultimately explained by

teachers in classrooms focusing on ‘authentic pedagogy’ – higher quality thinking, substantive conversations, deep knowledge and connecting with the world beyond the classroom. In a study of high schools, Wiley (2001) has found that individual student achievement in maths is positively affected by an increase in the amount of learning in a school resulting from professional community, but this is only the case in schools where teachers experience above average transformational leadership. The effects are also particularly strong in disadvantaged areas. Lee and Smith (1996), in a longitudinal follow-up study of 820 US high schools and almost 9,904 teachers, found that achievement gains for eighth and tenth grade students (in maths, reading, science and social studies) were significantly higher in schools where teachers took collective responsibility for students’ academic success or failure (one of the key characteristics of professional community). In the Netherlands, the researchers who carried out a study exploring the link between departmental professional community and mathematics test scores of 975 students in a sample of representative junior high and senior high schools concluded that shared goals, joint decision-making, shared responsibilities, consultation and advice were important but insufficient to improve educational practice and, consequently, student achievement (Visscher and Witziers, 2004). Rather, effects resulted when departments:

. . . consistently translate their shared vision and willingness to cooperate into a system of rules, agreements and goals regarding teaching and instruction, and evolve their professional activities around this by obtaining data on student performance, which in turn serves as a feedback mechanism for improving teaching and learning. This differs from a ‘softer’ approach stressing reflective dialogue, sharing materials, shared vision and the inner value of professional development. (p. 798)

It has been argued, however, that: “the value of community needs to be disentangled from instrumental values of improving measurable student outcomes (eg. achievement)” . . . because: “*Community is really about the quality of day-to-day life in schools*” (Furman-Brown, 1999) . It should be noted, however, that the aggregate of extensive research in the school effectiveness tradition suggests that intermediate variables like the professional relationships between staff and extent to which they work collaboratively are significant but account for less process (Creemers, 1994). variation in effectiveness than other in-school factors directly related to the teaching and learning

4. WHAT PROCESSES ARE USED TO CREATE AND DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES?

Creating and developing professional learning communities appears to depend on working on a number of processes inside and outside schools. These are described under four headings: focusing on learning processes; making the best of human and social resources; managing structural resources; and interacting with and drawing on external agents. We draw not only on specific professional community literature but also that related more broadly to professional development, school improvement and the management of change (see Hopkins, 2001 and Miles, 1998 for summaries) and capacity building (Harris, 2001; King and Newmann, 2001; Stoll, 1999).

a. Focusing on learning processes

Formal professional development opportunities

A professional learning community cannot be built solely through providing professional development opportunities for staff. Nevertheless, if the community is to be intellectually vigorous then members need a solid basis of expert knowledge and skills and there needs to