



Professional Learning Communities: A Growing Need for Excellence in Schools and Varsities

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Abstract

International research evidence supports the need of creating an atmosphere of collective learning and development in any educational institution. Many teachers continue working independently in their own discipline and pedagogy. However, several academicians are actively promoting collaborative learning and other interdisciplinary approaches. Studies argue that well-designed and established Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in any educational organisation would have a significant positive impact on both teaching practices and the academic excellence of its students. In this study, emphasis will be on studying the significance of implementing PLCs in our schools and colleges for the consistent organisational development and pursuit of academic excellence.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, Academic excellence, Teacher collaboration, Professional development, Organisational change

1. Introduction

If you swap a dollar with me, you and I will have one dollar each. If you swap an idea/knowledge with me, we will have two ideas

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each. But, if you swap a strategy or a skill with me, both of us will sharpen our strategies and master in our skills through our reflective teaching learning process and we will have an extra strategy or skill to take home from each other. This is exactly what is happening with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Professional Learning Community is a group of educators at schools or colleges that meets regularly, shares their knowledge and expertise and works collaboratively to improve their efficiency to become better educators. This is a form of professional development which is known by different terms such as: professional learning groups, collaborative learning communities and so forth. According to Richard DuFour (2004), one of the prominent experts of the topic, Professional Learning Community is completely a collaborative process toward their target of *learning for all* in the education settings.

Professional Learning Communities have become an essential part of the educational culture today. The tempo of change, especially in the realm of knowledge, has multiplied in this modern world of Blogs, Wikis, Twitter, Ning, Jing and so on. Our knowledge is being outdated faster than ever in this modern digital world. With this knowledge revolution, our students hold better and advanced knowledge in their palms. In this context, Professional Learning Communities are a must have and are more crucial than ever before in every educational system. These learning communities would collaboratively construct and reconstruct their knowledge in their specific subject area and help in collectively improving their understanding about their educational system and the research developments in the teaching/learning process. This will help teachers to serve their students at their best (Huber, 2010).

2. Purpose of PLCs

The core objective of any educational system is to ensure that all students learn and are not just taught. Therefore, the focus will be shifted from teaching to learning. This shift will make a great impact on the school system. To ensure *all students learn* is the main objective of any professional development. The major significance of a Professional Learning Community lies where the teachers can reflect, share and discuss what they can do or how they can ensure

that every student is learning. When an education system functions as a Professional Learning Community the teachers will become more aware of the variation of the student learning capacity. The teachers can discuss this discrepancy in the Professional Learning Communities and come up with new strategies or receive support from other teachers and counsellors to handle their problems in the teaching/learning process (Dufour, 2006).

The purpose of the Professional Learning Community can be drawn from those three words themselves. The word 'professional' means, a person with expertise in a specialised field and the one who wants to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. The word 'learning' is an ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. The word 'community' is defined as a unified body of individuals. Therefore the major objective of a Professional Learning Community in a school is that of ensuring that its members, both teachers and students, engage in ongoing study and that the entire school system is committed to continuous improvement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Though it seems that this continuous improvement objective is separate, but in reality it's the practical step toward achieving the main goal of any educational system which ensures the learning of all students in the system.

To establish a better relationship among staff for collaboration and team learning is another major goal of any PLCs. Having good professional relationships among teachers, students, administrators, parents and other support staff in the school community are vital to the well being of every person and establishing a learning pro environment in the educational culture. Professional Learning Communities provide a chance to interact with each other, in turn, that interaction will provide opportunities for individuals to get to know each other better. Once trust is formed, chances of members opening up and sharing more information will result in more knowledge and understanding, which will benefit all in the learning communities. This trusting relationship among all stake holders in the school community will help them to work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all (Dufour, 2006).

Personal mastery is another objective of the Professional Learning Community. Senge (1990) believes that an organisation learns only

through the learning of its individual learners. He also stated that the organisation committed to evolve the capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members. This tells us that student learning is not sufficient in the educational system. They are not the only learners in the school. The entire school/college community needs to learn. Therefore, personal mastery is an unavoidable necessity for any kind of education system to be successful during the educational process and the years that proceed for the educator and student. Personal mastery is something that is awarded to people who are committed to life-long learning. A Professional Learning Community is the best way to implement and instill this personal mastery commitment in the educational context.

Creating an effective learning environment is the crucial goal of any education system. All the objectives of any PLCs are specifically for creating this learning environment by complementing the vision of any existing educational system. Professional Learning Communities are ultimately for helping students' and staffs' learning and growth by creating an effective learning environment. These objectives of the Professional Learning Community will promote the success of *all* students through the opportunity it provides for all the members of the school or college to interact, share ideas, and express accomplishments, frustrations and difficulties with others. This sharing will create mutual understanding and better relationships, thereby improving trust among the members of the school system and enabling them to respond in a larger cultural and collaborative context.

3. Impacts of PLCs

Researches have proven that the culture of an organisation is a major component in determining what the members believe and practice (Thompson, 2002). Through active participation in learning communities, teachers can empower their ongoing learning school culture to better educate the young people effectively (Senge, 1990). This culture can be fostered through the reflection of the school vision. Fullan, Hill, & Crevola (2006), claim that a shared vision and ownership will foster the quality process toward success. Developing and reflecting a common mission and vision, aimed at

improving students' achievement through Professional Learning Communities, can contribute positively in putting the efforts in the ongoing learning process of the teachers in the educational system (Doolittle, Sudech, & Rattigan, 2008).

Nobody in the school, even the principal, or any kind of incentive can create a culture or vision into the school system or make some behavioural changes in the members of the school. Researches have also proven that programmes that use rewards to change people's behaviour are ineffective on the long run. Alfie Kohn (1999), researched hundreds of studies to prove that people actually do inferior work when they are lured with grades, money, or other incentives. Alfie Kohn shows that while manipulating people with incentives seems to work for a short period of time, it is a strategy that does not sustain and often leads to lasting harm. "Our workplaces and classrooms will continue to decline, he argues, until we begin to question our reliance on a theory of motivation derived from laboratory animals" (Kohn, 1999). Rewards should only be used for a short period of time; instilling the importance of intrinsic motivation for students. Researchers suggest that cognitive behavioural strategies to change self-talk can be effective interventions to increase resilience in the face of depression and medical disorders (Butler, et al. 2006). A Professional Learning Community can incite this intrinsic passion for a consistent strive for a continuous learning and growth culture in our education system.

Since teachers are the first learners, their involvement in a Professional Learning Community will foster their knowledge and efficiency; thereby producing better outcomes of students (SEDL, 2012). Senge (1990) found that organisations learn only through its individuals who learn. He also stated that the organisation committed to capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members. Therefore, continuous learning of members of an organisation is significant to its growth and efficiency. This personal mastery comes from the commitment that people give to life-long learning. In a school context this personal mastery is something inextricably connected to its teachers.

Researches have also proven that multiple opportunities to discuss in Professional Learning Communities can build a stronger trust

among teachers and between teachers and principals. It will also help in building commitment toward the developmental learning activities of the school (Doolittle, Sudech, & Rattigan, 2008). Professional Learning Communities are the best place to interact openly and understand each person in the school community. This understanding will promote better trust relationship and collaboration in the school community. Studies have proven that this trust relationship among school communities help them to work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all (Dufour, 2006).

4. Implementation of a PLC

The implementation responsibilities relay mainly on the leadership of the educational organisation. No single individual is more important to initiate, improve and sustain any professional development than the school principal (Jackson and Davis, 2000). Louis and Kruse (1995) found that the supportive leadership of the principal is the core human resource of a school's Professional Learning Community. The responsibility of the principal is to lead the learners. He/she cannot carry out this teaching-learning process individually, nor can he/she take the responsibility alone. The principal must form a core group to support him/her in implementing and carrying on the Professional Learning Community requirements of the school or college. Through this context of shared leadership and responsibility with other teachers and supporting staff, in the school, the principal can easily execute a Professional Learning Community in any educational system.

The time frame is very important for an effective professional development programme. Professional development will not be effective unless sufficient time is given for observations, reflection, and dialogue with colleagues. For an effective professional development to be effective, continuous support is needed in both time and resources (DiPaola & Hoy, 2007). Typically any organisational development programme should be a continuous process of at least one year. It should start from the very first two months of the academic year to establish the need of the developmental programme in the school/college community, and the remaining portion of the year should focus on the rigorous

implementation. External professional consultation might be a good way to understand the context and sketch of the implementation and evaluation plan.

Establishing a need of having a PLC is the very first stage of implementing PLC in any educational system. If the teachers do not fully understand the need and vision for change, the effort will not be effective. The leadership needs to identify some interested and committed teachers from each department within the school/college. Representatives from supporting staff will also be utilised to form a core team for implementing the PLC in the system. Based on the core committee's open discussion and brainstorming session, the principal would call a staff meeting to introduce and effectively describe the need of having a PLC in the school/college for its further progress and academic excellence. At the staff meeting the principal will introduce the core committee and divide the entire staff into smaller subgroups based on their area of expertise.

The subgroup will meet once in every two weeks and discuss the vision of the school/college which is lead by the core committee members. Usually the vision statement has become a sheet of paper posted near the principal's office (SEDL, 2012) that no one really reads or implements in the school/college. Sharing vision is not just agreeing with others' good ideas but creating a mental image in the school environment that this is existentially important and essential for the organisation. In the PLC, all staff will be encouraged to reflect, discuss and become involved in the process of sharing vision in the school context in its teaching learning process. The vision of almost every educational institution is centred on the academic excellence of every student. This group reflection and discussion of values and vision will help to create specific norms of behavior that the staff will support in the school culture. When teachers take this pledge seriously and ask questions of each other, they begin to focus on various ways to execute this motto in the teaching-learning process of the school.

A study conducted on Professional Learning Community's influence on leadership and student learning by Thompson, Larry and Niska (2004), found that team learning is one of the prime factors of student success. The powerful collaboration that

characterises the Professional Learning Community is the process where teachers work together and systematically analyse and improve their classroom practices. They engage in different questions and express their views or concerns on their teaching-learning process. Everyone in the community gets the opportunity to provide input, criticise professionally and improve and finalise a strategy specifically for that particular situation. Teachers learn a great deal from this team discussion. (Dufour, 2006). There can be a couple of staff development workshops or motivational speeches incorporated to complement the PLC process.

Teachers work within various committees from month to month. They may work with teachers from the same discipline one month and then could work with teachers across different disciplines another month. Once teachers feel comfortable within their learning communities, various professionals from the local community can be invited to the group for sharing their expertise. Having an online platform such as blogs and moodle or google and so forth for resource sharing might serve as a greater help with this process of learning development.

Appreciation lunches can be hosted for the staff in different groups, in which all can get together and develop a cohesive bond by implementing a “pat on the back” in which faculty and staff has the opportunity to nominate other colleagues for a job well done. These recognised faculty and staff will receive a token of appreciation for their outstanding individual or group performance they have done in Professional Learning Communities. Similar programmes will also be implemented throughout the year to increase the bond between all the members of the PLC subgroups. In these various subgroups of PLCs, teachers and administrators learn in a social setting where participants interact, test their ideas, and share new information with each other. These interactions would multiply the sources of ideas, knowledge and expertise in the educational system. This would inspire teachers’ passion and excitement for teaching which in turn result in more meaningful lessons for their students. Researches have proven that collaboration in PLC is a powerful strategy to analyse and improve their classroom practice. In this collaboration structure, according to Durour (2006), teachers work in teams; engage in open discussions and questioning to

promote deep team learning. This process will lead to a higher level of student achievement (Dufour, 2006).

A specific evaluation procedure is very important for effective professional development (DiPaola & Hoy 2007). Evaluation of the implemented Professional Learning Community development programme should be done in two stages. The first level of evaluation will be conducted after three months of its implementation. A survey will be conducted to measure the participants' satisfaction, difficulties and their further suggestions for the better implementation of the project. For the second stage of evaluation, members would be randomly selected and interviewed. Some open-ended responses will be collected from them. A one-shot development programme will not create any substantial changes in teachers' performance. The sustainability of the programme will be assured by empowering the core committee leadership and making them accountable for this project's sustenance and support.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the PLC would definitely foster academic excellence in any educational institution through its different varieties of professional interactions and shared practices of the teachers. Teachers would take more ownership and leadership roles for the progressive changes in the organisation. They would feel more confident and equipped in the teaching-learning process. It would create a culture of self-reflection, which is the key of any professional growth among the teachers in the organisation (Fuller, 2016). These learning communities would create a culture of sharing ideas, improving trust and collaboration for enhanced teaching-learning experiences in schools for higher education and in colleges for a competitive marketplace in global society (Hilliard, 2012).

Interdisciplinary teaching-learning models are being accepted widely and it is becoming more of a need to tackle some of our major and global challenges of the world (Fuller, 2016). Professional Learning Community would be a great step toward that process of interdisciplinary approach in schools and colleges. Through teacher's frequent collaboration and partnership, there

would be a possibility of offering more co-taught interdisciplinary courses. There would be an increase in the incorporation of instructional innovations and effective techniques being shared and used. The PLC implementation would definitely improve the collective ability to help all students learn (DuFour, 2004).

In conclusion, we can say that with an effective implementation of PLC there would be a better commitment among teachers to their school's vision and motto, which ensures commitment to the academic excellence of all students. The entire educational system would have a shared responsibility in building a learning culture and better academic achievement. The implementation of PLC will increase the level of knowledge, level of morale and the level of satisfaction of the teachers. The teachers will try different teaching methodology that will inspire student achievement and motivation. Therefore, implementing PLC is very significant to the success of any academic institution. Teachers are the first learners and when they participate in PLC they become more effective; thereby, increasing student achievement. However, the success or the failure of any Professional Learning Community mainly depends not on the concept but on the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.

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