Factors Influencing the Establishment and Sustainability of Professional Learning Communities: the Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative study was designed to identify factors that teachers view as having the most influence on the establishment and sustainability of a professional learning community (PLC). This phenomenological study used narrative inquiry to collect data. The factors revealed in this study included trust, communication, proximity, team structure, and campus leadership. Each factor was examined through positive and negative lenses to gain a deeper understanding of ways to most successfully influence the establishment of a PLC.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, Teacher Perspectives, School Leadership

1. Introduction

Researchers and educational leaders feel that turning school systems into professional learning communities (PLCs) is the single most important initiative to improve public education (DuFour&Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004). A PLC is a community designed around the commitment and consideration of its stakeholders. The members of the community consist of anyone with a vested interest in the organization. Specifically, PLCs are groups of educators who work together with shared visions, beliefs, and values (DuFour, Eaker, &DuFour, 2005). Essentially, members are committed to learning and improving the organization at all times (Dufour, 2004). The concept of PLCs is not new, yet school districts struggle to find the best way to implement an effective PLC design. Unfortunately, some schools attempting to structure PLCs are failing at the task.

Professional learning communities have gained recognition as an effective strategy for professional development for educators (Dallas, 2006; Schmoker, 2004). PLC's consist of groups in which educators review and critique existing beliefs and assumptions about education, community, teaching, and learning. Little (2003) noted that PLCs are groups in which new knowledge that pertains to instruction and content is generated. Implementing an effective PLC may be one of the most important steps a school can make to improve school climate and student outcomes. This research project attempted to identify from the teacher's perspective the most important steps to successfully implement a PLC.

2. Significance of the Research

Many reform efforts have failed because of the superficial nature of reactive interventions and developments. The design of PLCs in schools has encouraged improvement that is deeper and more sustainable than most surface-level change efforts (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

However, some efforts to implement PLCs resemble other superficial reform efforts. In these situations, PLCs are presented as solutions to problems instead of system designs that are conducive to finding solutions to problems (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Treating PLCs like reform efforts appears to be an ineffective approach to implementation. The idea of PLCs should be implemented to design a community of learners who are capable of creatively finding solutions, instead of being implemented as the solution (DuFour, 2007). When PLCs are implemented as the solution, they become subject to common criticisms that many reform efforts have encountered. However, if PLCs are designed to truly enhance collaboration and reduce top-down styles of leadership, they have the potential to make a positive difference in education.

The idea of PLCs and the research involving these systems has existed for several years. Some school districts have been involved for years while others have taken no steps in the direction of restructuring district operations to become a PLC. Regardless of the situation in a particular district, research has shown that PLCs hold the greatest chance of creating sustainable change while improving a school district. However, little qualitative research exists that reflects teachers' perspectives regarding the PLC model and its implementation.

This study explored teachers' perspectives to provide insight for professionals who have begun or plan to begin implementing a PLC design in a school. Gaining a better understanding of human reactions to change and the PLC initiative may assist school personnel in achieving early and positive outcomes. Further, school administrators in districts that operate as a PLC benefit from the knowledge of generalized views held by teachers who might not be willing, or have the opportunity, to voice their opinions in other settings. The findings from this study are available to administrators for review and alteration of practices to foster the community's growth. To that end, this study reveals common obstacles and identifies how one successful school navigated the implementation of a PLC.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify key factors that contribute to and hinder the success of building a positive PLC culture by examining a school that followed a PLC design initiative. The perspective of teachers at the campus where the implementation has taken place determined whether each factor of the PLC design was positive or negative. Gathering information on teachers' perspectives helped isolate key factors that are relevant to the implementation process. This study will help district leaders develop plans for similar implementation processes in their district.

Further, this study will also allow district leaders to review the components of an effective PLC as well as factors that led to the establishment and sustainability of those components. The important components that are consistently presented for a functional PLC are (a) shared vision, values, and goals; (b) shared leadership; (c) collaboration among teachers; (d) professional development; (e) collaboration with all stakeholders; (f) induction into PLCs; and (g) student learning and achievement (Blankstein, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Murphy, Jost, & Shipman, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Hipp and Huffman (2010) narrowed these into five PLC components: (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) shared values and vision, (c) collective learning and application, (d) shared personal practice, and (e) supportive conditions. This study investigated the factors that influence these five specific components.

4. Review of the Literature

Extensive literature is available that supports the effectiveness of PLCs in creating and supporting change. DuFour and Marzano (2011) illustrated the effectiveness of PLCs when they stated that the affect that principals have on teachers indirectly influences student achievement. In other words, there must be collaboration among the principal and teachers for the principal to have an effect on student achievement. DuFour and Marzano also described that the isolated nature of teaching presents a major barrier between the principal and the teacher. Fulton, Yoon, and Lee (2005) said that this type of isolation is consistently linked with a school's inability to improve. Therefore, if principals only indirectly influence students and teachers work in isolation with little or no collaboration with principals, then principals actually have no impact on students, and improvement is not possible. Effective collaborative efforts and a community that is dedicated to learning at all levels provide the greatest chances for school improvement. As such, the teachers in this study provided insight into what a collaborative design can do for other schools based on what it has done at their school.

The Excellence Movement of recent decades provided school leaders and educators with goals to increase the quality of education. However, these goals seemed to have little, if any, success in improving the educational system. DuFour and Eaker (1998)claimed, "The failure of the Excellence Movement had been widely attributed to the fact that it represented a 'top-down' attempt to mandate improvement" (p. 6). DuFour and Eaker (1998) also posited that the professional learning community is based on an entirely different structure than most schools. To be transformed into learning communities, educators must first be prepared to acknowledge that the traditional guiding model of education is no longer relevant in a post-industrial, knowledge-based society. Second, they must embrace ideas and assumptions that are radically different than those that have guided schools in the past.

The idea behind PLC's is certainly not new. Aikin's (1942) study was the earliest attempt to create collaborative cultures in schools. Teachers were given opportunities to work in groups and explore possibilities. The schools involved in the study went against traditional concepts and searched for alternative forms of teaching and evaluation. As such, the selected schools operated with high levels of autonomy. Schools in the group that varied the most from traditional schools created cultures where all stakeholders were involved in decision-making processes. These schools were considered the most experimental because when schools had the autonomy to restructure, teachers were forced out of isolation and into a culture of collaboration.

Senge (2006) was instrumental in describing what it meant to be a learning community. Specifically, he discussed the idea of *systems thinking* where businesses and other human endeavors should be viewed as systems instead of singular factors. He also described an invisible fabric that bound things together and caused them to work in collaboration. Senge proclaimed that it is difficult to see this fabric and the big picture of how things work together; however, he also noted, "Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved" (p. 7).

Hord (1997) coined the term *professional learning community* (PLC)and identified characteristics that must be present to create a PLC. The first characteristic is shared leadership, which requires school leaders to give teachers greater decision-making power and allow them to assume leadership roles within the school. She also required that a shared vision and values guide teaching and learning. The third component in a PLC is collective learning and application. This component allows teachers to collaborate and discuss goals, issues, and strategies to overcome issues. This component was designed to establish trust among peers and develop the desire to succeed as a team. The fourth characteristic involves personal practices and allows educators to build personal and professional goals. Teachers begin to develop relationships of accountability with each other in realms of their lives in and out of the school setting. The final component of PLCs deals with supportive conditions that are required for teachers to work together as needed. When teachers collaborate and share in leadership activities, the complex organization of schools becomes understandable and manageable.

5. Methods and Procedures

This study was a qualitative phenomenological study that gathered data through narrative inquiry. The researcher's questions were designed to generate responses that provide a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions of the PLC design in which they work as well as into the factors that aided the establishment of that design. The interview process purposefully engaged participants in a discussion about important PLC components that are commonly found in scholarly literature. These components include shared vision, values, and goals; shared leadership; teacher collaboration; professional development; collaboration with parents and the community; induction into PLCs; and student achievement. The data collected in the current study helped answer the two research questions:

1. What factors are identified as having the greatest impact on the implementation and sustainability of the five PLC components identified in the literature?
2. How can the factors identified to affect the five PLC components be manipulated to improve implementation and increase sustainability of PLCs?

The following sections describe the selection of participants, study design, and treatment of data.

6. Setting, Participants and Data Collection

Experts at aTexas Region Educational Service Center (ESC) were asked to identify a school they have had experience with and that has excelled in implementing the components of PLCs. The ESC professional staff work directly with schools in this area to improve practices systemically, and they are most capable of identifying a sample school that qualifies for this study.

Ten teachers were selected from the identified school to participate in the interview process. Selected teachers were required to have been at the particular campus long enough to see the transition from a traditional climate of isolation to the collaborative PLC climate. It wasnot necessary for teachers to have a deep understanding of the term PLC. Rather, it was more important that they have an understanding of the PLC components at their school.

Interview responses were digitally audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested that researchers develop a coding system to organize transcribed data. In their description of the coding process, they suggested that recurring words or phrases overlap and create themes. Moustakas (1994) described a coding system in which significant statements are grouped horizontally so they are not repetitive or overlapping.

The researcher analyzed the transcribed data for recurring ideas or ideas that directly related to the study topic. As those recurring ideas developed into themes, the data collected were sorted into categories based on their significance to the topic. This continual reading and separating each piece of information into the proper category left a reduction of data that allowed the researcher to present the essence of which factors in PLC implementation teachers believed to be most effective in the sustainability of each PLC component. Developing themes and coding the data allowed the researcher to consider any field notes that were relevant to the interview data and include it appropriately.

7. Findings and Implications

It is widely accepted that PLCs effectively improve student achievement and help districts manage change initiatives (Hord, 1997, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Olivier & Hipp, 2006; Schmoker, 2006). However, PLCs as well as practices implemented under the guise of PLCs are widely misunderstood (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2005). The data presented in this study represent teachers' perspectives on each factor represented. The data indicate that the campus followed a PLC design that included all five components presented by Hipp and Huffman (2010).

The following sections present the five factors found in the data, which include trust, communication, proximity, team structure, and campus leader. Each factor presented is an answer to the first research question. As participants identified each factor, they also answered the second research question by providing suggestions on how certain factors could be changed to improve the PLC.

7.1 Trust

Every participant in the current study discussed the level of trust she felt and the influence it had on the PLC environment. Those who had strictly positive experiences and high levels of trust described a climate that was open and comfortable. These participants described an environment where peers were willing to work together without being afraid to ask questions and collaborate. This environment was similar to the type of environment researchers describe as being conducive to cooperation (Eaker et al., 2002; Senge et al., 2000). Additionally, Little (1990) noted that this type of collaboration and cooperation benefits students. According to participants in this study, that type of trust was more present when they felt like open communication existed among team members, team leaders, and campus leaders. Participants also reported that communication and trust were higher when team members were located in close physical proximity to one another.

7.2 Communication

Open communication must be present for teachers to collaborate and operate as a PLC. This factor is also important in establishing trust among peers (Little, 1990). Most participants discussed communication in a positive way as being conducive to the PLC climate. The study campus had very formal structures that allowed for constant communication spanning any gaps in the hierarchy of the campus. Staff members had venues to discuss things with team and campus leaders. Additionally, discussion could occur in any direction among the staff at the study campus.

The campus leader was given much of the credit for creating the formal structures that made communication easier for team members. This finding was consistent with DuFour and Marzano's (2011) discussion of the power the campus leader has in positively influencing student achievement.

Factors that participants identified as causing negative feelings about communications were trust, proximity, team dynamics, and campus leader. A lack of trust existed because the team did not seem to rely on each other to solve problems. The team leaders felt over worked and the rest felt that the leader was pushing them around.

7.3 Proximity

Keiffer-Barone and Ware (2002) found that decreasing isolation among teachers through collaboration leads to an increase in teachers who take greater responsibility for their work, students, and schools. Most participants in this study reported that they did not feel isolated in their work. They described being closer to team members and other teachers in classrooms located in closer physical proximity than to others. Participants have several accounts of teachers sharing ideas with partners across the hall or with teachers at the lunch table during their lunch period. Most participants expressed the idea of proximity without even recognizing any significant value. In other words, most participants just shared those stories in passing.

Wineburg and Grossman (1998) discussed the complications of developing a system of collaboration. The reserachers concluded that allowing time and common collaboration areas for teachers made the process easier. Kruse (1999) described the importance of ensuring that collaborative efforts included all faculty members, and noted that school leaders should create opportunities for faculty members to engage in discussions about school issues that might benefit the entire school community. Physical proximity was reported to play a part in causing another complication in the sharing that is necessary for PLCs.

7.4 Team Structure

All participants viewed structuring the teams to include grade-level teachers with one team leader for each subject as a positive factor. All participants valued the ability to operate as teams and keep up with the things that were happening on campus. They all felt informed and aligned with one another because of the specific structure of the teams. The idea of the structure the participants described was similar to the systems thinking idea presented by Senge (2006) because groups were bound by a common identity based on grade level. While all participants agreed on the formal structures, some reported flaws based on some of the informal structures.

While collaboration usually increases when formal grouping procedures are in place within an organization, the informal dynamics of groups tend to have as much influence on the culture of an organization. Bolman and Deal (2008) described task roles, which suggest that formal tasks can be demanded of different individuals in a group who are expected to accomplish those tasks. However, without informal group roles, the task roles will leave employees frustrated. Specifically, these individuals will not have the esteem or self-actualization that they would have in the right culture and environment. Likewise, it is more daunting when leaders lead alone than when they involve all members of a team who can bring varying cultural views and experience.

7.5 Campus Leader

Participants discussed the campus leader more than any single factor. The campus leader was influential in building trust, was given credit for the sufficient communications, was described as having the power to change proximity, and was given credit for creating the team structure. Participants described the leader as being dedicated to the success of the school and every student enrolled therein. Collins (2001) described the need for an effective leader to be committed to such. Lunenburg (2010) discussed the necessity for leaders to involve others in the decision-making process and empower them to act upon their ideas. Specifically, participants said their principal created that sense of community that Senge et al. (2000) said evokes cooperation in an environment where individuals are not afraid to ask questions and search for answers.

Supovitz and Christman (2005) found that the number one factor in creating a school with shared leadership was teacher autonomy. The group must have group leaders that inspire the cooperation and input from other team members. Additionally, the campus leader is responsible for designing teams that are able to function. All participants described a hands-on approach that was necessary for the principal to develop a collaborative campus climate. The campus leader played a significant role, and it was in no way separated from any of the other four factors revealed in this study.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide very practical qualitative elements that expand existing research on the subject of PLCs. Educational literature is complete with quantitative evidence on the value of PLC components. This study identified, from teachers' perspectives, factors that have the most influence on implementing and sustaining PLC components in a school setting. Those factors include trust, communication, proximity, team structure, and campus leadership. The manner in which the factors identified in this study influence the establishment of PLCs is important to know for all who wish to maintain a properly functioning PLC and benefit from a design that research has shown to be highly effective.

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