Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement

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Processes for Developing Learning Communities

Peter Senge was asked (O'Neil, 1995) what he would do, if he were a principal of a school, to transform the school into a learning organization.

Senge's Suggestions

Senge replied that initially he would find the teachers who were interested in doing things differently, who have "some real commitment and passion to do it," and get them to talking to each other. Pulling a core group together is a strategy frequently used for mobilizing and moving people in an organization. Starting with the "starters" is practical, Senge added, but at the same time, planning how to include others is very important also. Simultaneously, Senge would initiate an ongoing visioning process based on reflection in a safe environment where people can share what they really care about.

Before change can be planned and implemented, a school must decide what it stands for and where it is going (Ashby, Maki & Cunningham-Morris, 1996). As personal visions are communicated, individuals begin to develop a shared vision, grounded in trust and mutual understanding. And an organization must not only develop and communicate its vision but consider the use of its vision, making decisions consistent with the vision as "evidence of the organization's commitment to its role and to itself" (Garmston & Wellman, 1995).

Senge concludes by noting that nothing in schools or other organizations will change unless individuals' beliefs, ways of seeing the world, skills, and capabilities are given an environment conducive to change. O'Neil's interview with Senge is more philosophical than pragmatic; the reader will need to consult other sources for implementation guidelines.

Reinventing a School: A Case History

Boyd and Hord (1994b) describe how a succession of principals and their staff changed the paradigm of a school that was destined to be closed because of declining enrollment. The school organization benefited by the input of the various principals, who emphasized different areas. The school's survival through what might have been a destabilizing situation - the progression of several principals - gives special hope to others. The story of this school illustrates that professional learning communities were under development before corporate culture took up the refrain in 1982.

It may be that the presence of a crisis is a real key to gaining attention and action

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for change. This school's crisis was followed by the assignment of a new principal who brought a mission for the school that focused on respecting, celebrating, and building on the characteristics and the native abilities of the children.

The Vision

The focus on the children and shaping the school to fit them and their needs was enhanced by a vision that included attention to staff who would share broadly in making decisions for the school and who would be supported by continuous staff development to ensure wise decision making. The principal advocated a "person-centered" approach for staff management because, she said, "teachers can't honor children until they have been honored themselves" (p. 2). Teachers were interviewed to ascertain if they were interested in the "new" school or if they would prefer to transfer.

Teacher development became a priority, and all available resources were channeled in that direction. Teachers visited other schools, read articles and books, attended conferences, and shared their experiences through regular discussion at Faculty Study, a weekly two-hour block of time that had been obtained by restructuring the weekly school schedule. In this way the staff were nurtured, and a shared vision began to develop.

Relationships

A second principal who rapidly succeeded the first (who had been provided on short-term loan from her full-time job as principal in another school) helped teachers to identify problems of learners, which they then studied and resolved, focusing on the *cognitive dimensions* of the staff's job. But he also pulled them together in recreational ways for further bonding. Sometime it was an impromptu after-school staff volleyball game in the gym, or an end-of-the-week visit to a local restaurant to celebrate the week's accomplishments, or a potluck supper with staff's families attending. These activities were instrumental in helping the staff build an atmosphere of trust and caring relationships.

Empowerment

A third principal's goal was enabling the staff, students, and parents to participate more fully and to contribute their emerging expertise to the good of the whole school. She developed several systems for circulating logistical information, both within the school and to parents and the community-at-large, so that such announcements would not take up valuable time at staff meetings. To make teachers feel valued, she encouraged special events that recognized teachers and their talents. She supported teachers who were writing proposals for obtaining program grants; she streamlined administrative procedures and organized a management team so that teachers could have an effective, hands-on voice in decisions.

Academic Focus

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With the arrival of the computer age came yet another principal, whose specialization and professional preparation were in the area of curriculum. To the professional learning community that the staff had created he added a renewed emphasis on students' learning tasks, with computer technology as an instructional tool and a curriculum designed to foster multiculturalism. For nearly an entire school year, the staff read about, studied, and discussed the curriculum, brought in current users, and attended a conference that focused on it. Their thorough knowledge of its purpose and philosophy, not to mention its content, provided the basis for informed decision making about adopting and implementing the curriculum.

During the period of development, staff learned how to give constructive feedback to each other and resolve group conflicts. Peer mediation, a program that develops skills for students in resolving conflict, was also implemented.

In this elementary school, the steps or factors in developing a community of learners were very similar to Senge's ideas: pull interested, willing people together, engage them in constructing a shared vision, develop trust and relationships, and nurture a program of continuous learning. This staff learning community exemplified the deep study and analysis of new programs recommended by Alexander, Murphy, and Woods (1996) and lamented as typically lacking in school change efforts. More detail about what was done to develop the school professional learning community may be found in several papers (Boyd & Hord, 1994a; Boyd & Hord, 1994b; Hord & Boyd, 1995).

A Synthesis of Five Case Studies:Lessons Learned

From a set of studies conducted by collaborating researchers, Louis and Kruse (1995) synthesized and reported the learnings from five urban schools studied. They characterized the learnings as "Getting There: Promoting Professional Community in Urban Schools" (pp. 208-227). These authors organized the learnings from the multi-year studies into two groups: those related to principals and/or other campus-based leaders and those significant to persons providing leadership outside the school.

Campus-Based Leadership

In linking the school leadership role to the development of professional community, Louis and Kruse identified six issues.

Leadership at the center. In three of the schools that were more successfully developing community, the school leaders clearly positioned themselves in the center of the staff rather than at the top. For instance, in one school, two directors who provided leadership located their desks in the communal teachers' room, rather than in a separate office. In another school, in the absence of the principal, a school-based coordinator for the school improvement project operated from the center. She put her office in a central location, making it easier to invite teachers to

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gather for professional conversation - informal events dedicated to discussion about learning. In this way, she downplayed her role as coordinator and emphasized her role as supporter and provider of assistance.

In contrast, the leadership team at one of the less successful schools expressed their "superior status" in various ways, with isolated offices, and sole determination of agendas for meetings that they conducted. They consistently reminded teachers that they had the responsibility for making decisions about a variety of issues. In yet another school, the principal provided no leadership and did not support anyone else in the role, assuming that teachers somehow would take charge.

To summarize, leading from the center requires being at the center - a physical presence, with accessibility the key. Second, leading from the center means giving up some of the expected leadership behaviors (such as being authoritative, or always running the meetings) in favor of sharing such behaviors with others. And third, individuals who lead at the center take advantage of every opportunity to stimulate conversation about teaching and learning, to bind faculty around issues of students and instruction.

Teacher's classroom support. It is clear that instructional leadership is a requirement of a developing community of professionals in which "increased cognitive understanding of instruction and learning and a more sophisticated repertoire of teaching skills" are goals (pp. 212-213). In the more successfully developing schools, there were persons available to provide support to individual teachers. And, in one of the schools, individual teachers' problems with teaching and learning were brought before the whole group of teachers for discussion and problem solving. This strategy enhanced the individual teacher's growth in teaching competency and reinforced the community's responsibility for teaching and for each other.

In the less successful schools, leaders failed to give attention to teachers' needs for improving classroom skills. In these schools, even when the physical arrangement of the facility encouraged teacher visitation and interaction, teachers rarely took advantage of such possibilities.

The main issues here are that leaders need to assist teachers in improving their classroom performance; leaders can look to others, either inside or outside the physical building, but the leader must be certain that help is available. And in order for teachers to feel okay about asking or receiving assistance individually, a climate in which instruction is viewed as problematic must exist.

A vision of professional community. Leaders model the behaviors of a professional community, keeping the vision of such a workplace culture alive and visible. As Louis and Kruse observe, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living through communicated

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experience" (p. 215) and a professional community is founded on a "process of communicating ideas, ideals, shared concerns, and interests" (p. 216). Thus, the autocratic leader who holds all the power, who is dominating, and who makes all decisions will not likely model participatory behaviors related to democratic practice.

The democratic professional community allows dissent and debate among its members, and this can result in increased understanding and learning of the members. Tradition and "the way we do it here" are challenged and discussed as a means to new insights and practices. The leaders' vision of a democratically grounded community of professionals was an important factor in the development of the successful schools' communities of professional learners.

A culture of high intellectual quality. Acquiring and applying new knowledge is an intellectual task and a high priority in a professional learning community. Leaders in the most successful schools actively supported a culture of inquiry through constant scanning and bringing in of new ideas and people to help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and to develop increased skills. Leaders championed the need for information and data so that staff engaged in discussions of "What is working and how do we know?" (p. 219). The leaders also supported and promoted action research by teachers as a means by which teachers consumed and generated new knowledge.

Teachers need continuous interaction to assimilate significant ideas, as well as support for examining and identifying new practices that can increase their effectiveness. For this to happen, leaders must take personal action to make connections to research and promising practice outside the school or provide the external means for doing so.

The management of conflict. A reflective organization is one in which the members question its activities and challenge its values. Such reflection almost certainly leads to conflict. Principals can address this conflict by providing an environment in which teachers resolve their dissension through discussion and debate. In essence, this means persistently addressing disagreements through a series of opportunities, provided by the principal, for continuous discussion and exploration.

Frequently such discussion results in an accommodation of differences among individuals and a sense of arriving at a solution that everyone can live with, even if all are not wholeheartedly in favor of it. Such discussion, made possible by the principal, allows individuals to rethink their decisions and actions. Addressing conflict is in direct opposition to the traditional posture of ignoring or avoiding conflict. Effective leaders manage conflict by providing a safe forum for discussion, reinforcing the values of the community, and being willing to live with uncertainty and ambiguity as the participants work through the issues involved.

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An inclusive community. As Senge noted above, one way to begin developing a learning organization, or a learning community, is to start with those ready to start - but, he cautioned, it is imperative to include all the staff of a school, and that is the hard part. Louis and Kruse warned that unless the initiative extends beyond the enthusiasts, the "community will remain, at best, fragmented" (p. 222).

At one of the schools reported by Louis and Kruse, an external stimulus kept a core set of issues on the agenda for cross-team discussion, providing the opportunity for schoolwide professional community development. At another school the principal was particularly sensitive to including all staff and systematically identified issues that required the attention of all teams of teachers. The principal at a third school praised individual teachers who were improving their practice but neglected to reinforce and applaud teachers' collective efforts - not an inclusive approach.

Leaders in the study schools typically did not realize the necessity of creating opportunities that would pull all of the faculty together in pursuit of a common objective or goal. The message for leaders is that they must provide foresight and personal involvement in nurturing the expansion process. One key, as mentioned, is fashioning meaningful ways for teachers to come together to focus on issues and work that concerns all of them.

Support Beyond the School

In addition to the actions suggested for campus-based leaders in promoting schoolwide professional communities, Louis and Kruse examined additional data beyond their cases and made inferences about actions that should be taken by others outside the school to promote community development.

School-based management support. Although a majority of states have mandated site-based decision making, or school-based management, district policies and actions frequently distract schools from the localized work that they are expected to do. For example, districts sometimes create facilities that do not nurture community development among teachers that the school is targeting. District textbook selections that are out of sync with a school faculty's identification of students' needs is another example of a highly centralized district structure that can wreak havoc with a local campus's efforts to focus on local needs in a decentralized way.

In larger districts teachers complain that because of the size of the territory, district level policy and decision makers do not understand them and their situation, and thus get in the way. On the other hand, a school in a large district can remain "hidden" with its independent activities if the district staff provides no attention to them. The school in the first case study illustrated such a situation for some years, until the arrival of a new superintendent who increasingly centralized decision making, and thereby interrupted the school's long-standing history of

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community study and site-based decision making.

What this seems to say is that some two-way understanding and accommodation on the part of schools and the external governance and control systems at the district and state levels are necessary. If schools are to operate as thoughtful communities of professionals who address the unique problems of their own schools and simultaneously operate within the district and state context, some basic agreements must be reached.

Effective school leadership. A key factor in the reports of all the case studies examined in this section is the role of campus-based leadership. This is not a new factor in school change efforts but is an essential one. For the past two decades principals and other school leaders have been the focus of research and leadership development. Rather like the disappointing results of attention given to school change noted at the beginning of this review, however, what has been learned about school leadership has not resulted in significantly more effective school leadership.

Given the recurring focus on the role of school leadership and the continuous reconfirmation of its significance, perhaps the most important task of district- and state-level school improvers is to target this issue, regardless of whether the goal is the development of professional learning communities.

Information and assistance. Urban schools are particularly hard pressed to access resources that can be important means of support. Because their budgets are "lean," schools that are not well funded must depend upon inventive and resourceful principals - the garage sale junkies, as some have called them. These creative administrators find resources, both material and human, to support their school's efforts for improvement. Another resource that such school leaders can find is time. It would seem important for districts to discover dramatic new ways to address the problems of resources and support for schools and their leaders.

Community attention to teachers' needs. There is a real need for community voices - school board, district office staff, local politicians - to direct their attention not only to the needs of students and learning but to the needs of teachers as well. The frequent contest of these voices for power and control distracts from the focus required for improving the educational opportunities for students in schools. Louis and Kruse called for more consistent intellectual leadership from the top level of the system.

Other Suggestions and Ideas

As illustrated by this review of the literature, there is little information to provide guidance in creating and developing professional learning communities. The two sections of this review that report case studies of schools are noteworthy in their response to this need.

While none of the literature provides an explicit step-by-step set of directions or procedures for creating professional learning communities (and simplistic, recipe-type prescriptions would not be appropriate), the literature does reveal some additional approaches that may lead to the invention of such communities. These suggestions follow in the hope that they will initiate or stimulate alternative ideas that may be useful or that at least may forestall unproductive approaches.

Boundary Reduction

In one secondary school, the principal addressed issues of the physical plant, allocation of office space, hiring and promotion, and shared decision making to reduce the boundaries between high school departments. These factors contributed to the creation of a collaborative environment in which teachers appeared to be more confident in their abilities to face challenges and less threatened by the prospects of change (Wignall, 1992). These elements resonate with the Boyd and Hord (1994a) factors of reducing isolation, developing staff capacity, providing a caring and productive environment, and promoting increased quality.

Study Groups

One means by which to lead staff into a collective learning experience is through study groups (Marsick & Watkins, 1994; Murphy, 1991). Individuals read a book or selections of text and meet to discuss the implications and applications of the material for their particular setting. Teacher networks and study groups offer the possibility of long-term collaboration focused on instructional practice that can influence teachers' views of their roles and work (Floden, Goertz, & O'Day, 1995). Marsick and Watkins suggested other entry points for developing learning communities: action-reflection learning - planning for action, taking action, and then reflecting on its outcomes; working on real problems; or tackling flaws in the organization. The idea is to build a culture that helps people to gain new knowledge that can make a difference in their work.

Action Research

Calhoun (1994) encouraged the use of action research to develop learning communities. Action research, in essence, engages teachers in looking at what is happening in a school, determining if teachers can make it a better place by changing curriculum and instruction and the relationships of the staff with students, assessing the results, and continuing the cycle. To do this requires rearranging the ways that people in the school relate to one another, by acquiring new skills in order to change, and learning to be effective problem solvers for the school.

Calhoun identified the necessary conditions for action research to be supported: a staff committed to a better educational program for all students; an articulated agreement about how decisions will be made by the staff together; a team of facilitators who will support and guide the staff in the action research process;

groups (small groups or all staff in the school) that meet regularly; an understanding of how action research works; and technical assistance. Calhoun's book on this topic is worth further exploration.

Staff Development as an Entry Point

Corcoran (1995) maintained that the typical formats for staff development are most often a waste of time because they lack a clear focus and effective follow-up and they are not part of a more long-range scheme of learning for teachers. As Floden, Goertz, and O'Day (1995) note, it takes more than a workshop to truly develop teachers' new abilities. "Because workshops alone seldom alter dispositions and views of self, reform efforts that hope to build capacity must use a wide range of strategies" (p. 20). Floden and colleagues pointed out that an essential component in the implementation of these strategies is time for discussion, observation, and reflection (activities of learning communities).

Teachers' attitudes toward change and commitment to student learning are key ingredients in achieving reform (O'Day, Goertz, & Floden, 1995). These researchers found that teacher attitudes and abilities are shaped and reinforced not through the traditional model of staff development but in the contexts in which they work and learn, including the communities formed by their relationships with other professionals. In these communities, individuals or groups of individuals bring in new ideas for examination and discussion with their colleagues. This structure provides the forum and the support for collective learning (professional development). The support, noted the authors, is ongoing and focused on improving student achievement.

Organizational Capacity

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) concluded that schools with strong organizational capacity begin with a well-defined school mission. Add to that the authority for the school to hire staff with views that are consistent with the articulated mission, and then provide leaders who keep the school on track. Garmston and Wellman (1995) reported that developing such collective capacity in an organization requires a setting in which increasingly high-performing individuals strive for mastery and improvement, knowing they can always expand their effectiveness. In such an environment, leaders

- Initiate and manage adaptivity so that the organization changes and improves while maintaining its core identity
- Develop and support vision, values, and focus goals so there is congruence in the heads and hearts of everyone in the effort
- Develop and nurture interdependence in order to draw strength from each individual and to provide opportunity for cooperation
- Develop and apply systems thinking, looking for patterns and relationships within and outside the system, allowing more creative responses to appear

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- Interpret and apply data,leading the entire organization's membership in the activity
- Gather and focus resources (pp. 10-11)

This map provided by Garmston and Wellman will require the uninitiated leader to gain the resources and skills needed to develop these capacities in a school. Thus, again, more explicit experiences, studies, and stories are needed to provide suggestions about how to accomplish these things. It is worth noting that Garmston and Wellman described strong-capacity schools as "collaborative places where adults care about one another, share common goals and values, and have the skills and knowledge to plan together, solve problems together, and fight passionately but gracefully for ideas to improve instruction" (p. 12). This characterization is consistent across the reports on schools that operate as professional learning communities.

Rituals

Mentioned earlier in this paper was Deal and Kennedy's (1982) work on describing the culture in corporate America and the use of stories, rituals, and traditions to maintain that culture. Hallinger, et al. (1996) addressed the role of ritual in building communities of learners. They explored how Asians foster community and nourish spirit; they indicated that North Americans can learn from Asian staff developers about the creation of learning communities through the use of rituals - leaving the reader to identify, develop, and share such rituals.

Behaviors

Robert Lindberg (1995) asked us to remember that although belief must underlie a permanent change in human behavior, belief is most likely to follow behavior rather than to precede it; therefore getting individuals to take action or to behave in certain ways is a more efficient starting point than trying to change beliefs so that behavior will follow. Thomas Guskey (1986), in his staff development model, suggested the same strategy - pushing teachers into using a new behavior and directing their observation to its positive effects on students, thus encouraging the teacher to adopt more behaviors and new beliefs.

In Summary

The reader may have noticed the rather prominent role of the principal in the suggestions noted in this paper for initiating and developing professional learning communities. This may seem at odds with the concept of community, which strongly urges the involvement and active participation of the staff. As noted earlier, the principal's role is a significant factor in any change effort. Louis and Kruse (1995) reminded us that "it is clear that principals or other designated leaders continue to be best positioned to help guide faculty toward new forms of effective schooling" (p. 209). Thus strong actions by the principal on behalf of community development are necessary, it appears, to "get the ball rolling" and, once the initiative is under way, it is also necessary for the principal to share

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leadership, power, authority, and decision making with the staff in a democratically participatory way.

There are, however, few models and little clear information to guide the creation of professional learning communities. Although much discussion, theorizing, and reporting on the subject has taken place in the business sector, such experiences may or may not translate well to public schools. In the educational arena, writers have lamented the lack of research-based procedures that contribute to the formulation and establishment of professional learning communities. It may be that this organizational arrangement is yet too new or too infrequent in schools to have a history and a base of empirical research. This strongly suggests a need for studies that address the question.