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A National Perspective: An Exploration of Professional Learning Communities and the Impact on School Improvement Efforts

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ABSTRACT

A Nation at Risk, Goals 2000, and No Child Left Behind are examples of external factors that compel educational leaders at local schools and districts to explore reform initiatives in order to meet federally required results. Because of political mandates to improve student learning and instruction, educational leaders are searching for initiatives to ensure success for all children. A number of initiatives designed to improve student performance and the quality of teaching are available for educational leaders. One such initiative is professional learning communities.

The purpose of this article is to make a case, based on historical reform efforts, for educational leaders to transform schools into professional learning communities. Professional learning communities empower the teaching staff to work together with administrators and other teachers to provide quality instruction and improve student learning. According to Shirley Hord, “As an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement” (1997). There are five attributes of a

professional learning community: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. These five attributes change the organizational arrangement of schools.

The Learning Organization

Peter Senge has positively impacted both the business world and the education community. Senge was awarded the honor of being named a 'Strategist of the Century' by the *Journal of Business Strategy*. Only 23 other men and women have held the prestigious honor of having the greatest impact on the way business is conducted (Smith, 2001). Author of *The Fifth Discipline,* Senge popularized his vision of a learning organization. In 2000, Senge wrote another book, *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education,* transferring the concept of learning organizations into the world of education. Senge created the vision of a learning organization defined by five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. A discipline is a series of principles and practices that we examine, master, and incorporate into our lives (Smith, 2001). For these five disciplines to successfully work, there must be a fundamental shift of mind among the members in the organization. Once this shift has occurred, organizations are able to continually expand their capacity and become learners for life.

Personal mastery is the first discipline. For the organization to learn, each individual member of an organization must continue to learn. Without individual growth, the organization will stand still. Of course, this does not assure the organization will continue learning just because each member learns; however, the converse is true. An organization will not continue learning if the individuals are not learning. Personal mastery goes beyond competency and skills; it is about deepening our personal visions, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively (Smith, 2001). Observing and trying to make sense of current realities is another aspect of personal mastery. For example, educators might want to ponder why students are failing or dropping out of school. Teachers might want to ponder the isolation or connectedness they feel at work. According to Senge (1990), personal mastery "…is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas" (p. 142). Looking within oneself is not easy, but is necessary for personal growth.

Another discipline is mental models. Senge defines mental models as "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (1990, p. 8). Mental models can be illustrated as two individuals observing the exact same scenario. When asked to account what they observed, each will provide a different explanation. Mental models tend to hinder a person's ability to change. Assumptions are often made because individuals have a predefined notion of how things ought to be. For instance, a teacher might assume

that students do not care about their education because of their off task behavior during class. A parent might assume the teacher does not care about his/her child because the teacher does not call home when the child is off task during class. The practical application of mental models dispels the often misperceived notion, in both the world of business and education that people will not ask questions unless they know the answers. Senge (2000) explains, "People ask questions in the practice of this discipline because they are trying to learn more about their own, and each other's, most deeply held attitudes and beliefs" (p. 68).

Creating a shared vision is another discipline that will keep organizations learning. Many people still have the misconception that it is the CEO's or principal's job to create the vision. In other words, a person with authority creates the vision; however Senge (2000) reminds us that a vision created by a leader will not be sustained. All people have some idea or vision about what they want to accomplish each day. Such as, teachers have a vision of the best practices they wish to implement in the classroom; students have aspirations of what they want to learn; parents might have a vision that their child be able to read, and educational leaders have a vision to meet state mandated standards.

According to Senge (2000), "The discipline of shared vision is the set of tools and techniques for bringing all of these disparate aspirations into alignment around the things people have in common…" (p. 72). Individuals bring to the establishment personal aspirations they wish to have fulfilled, but then individuals will always have one thing in common: the school or the organization. Without a shared vision, the organization will be challenged to communicate its purpose. Shared visions are uplifting and tend to encourage experimentation and creativity, plus they can create enthusiasm that spreads throughout the organization (Smith, 2001).

Building on personal mastery and shared visions, team learning is a discipline that will be good for both the individual and the organization. Senge (1990) states, "The discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together' (p. 10). Teaching teams should dialogue about student assessments and instructional best practices with the hopes of improving student achievement and their own teaching methodologies. Unfortunately, some teaching teams come together without an agenda and, at the conclusion of the meeting, have not accomplished anything that will improve themselves or their students. This is not to say that teachers must think alike to be a member of a productive functioning team. Teachers who think differently from one another can enhance the team learning process. In an interview with Jane Schultz (1999), Senge discusses learning organizations as "…diverse webs of and teams who continually help one another, rely on one another, and learn with and from one another, not individuals" (p. 3).

Systems thinking is the fifth discipline that fuses and integrates the other disciplines into one comprehensible body. One aspect of systems thinking is focusing on the whole, as opposed to focusing on the individual parts – a practice not usually practiced. For example, a principal's office is a fast-paced area where problem solving occurs every minute. A parent calls, a teacher comes to the office, a student is in the office, a counselor needs assistance, or another administrator is requesting help – each of

these situations requires an immediate response. The system that is in place is to prioritize the problems and then begin "putting out the fires," so to speak. Instead of searching for solutions to why the problems are occurring, the focus shifts to solving the problem and then moves on to the next problem. Thus, a cycle of problem solving is set in motion. Senge (2000), suggests that in the long run each quick fix will do more harm than good: "Moreover, reacting to each event quickly, and solving problems as quickly as they come up, helps develop a kind of "attention-deficit culture" in the school system" (p. 77). Instead of discovering methods for preventing each crisis, people become good at reacting to a crisis. Senge has identified a number of systems thinking practices, each with a different degree of rigor, approaches and views. Each systems thinking form can be used for different purposes and in different circumstances.

While learning organizations were created for the business sector, they easily transfer to the world of education. Hord (1997) affirms Senge's book and its description of learning organizations, which might serve to increase organizational capacity and creativity in schools. As Senge's concept was shared with educators, the learning organization name was changed to learning communities. In an interview with Schultz (1999), Senge says,

> To meet today's challenges of globalization, changing
> work forces, evolving competition, and new technologies,
> the only hope for building and sustaining momentum in a learning
> organization requires a fundamental shift in thinking and actions (p. 1).

Creating an organization with an emphasis on developing personal mastery, creating mental models, building shared vision, improving team learning, and understanding systems thinking will have the potential of allowing organizations or schools to be more convivial and creative.

Professional Learning Communities

The school model currently in place is not sufficient enough to meet the national education goals of today, where all children are expected to comprehend rigorous content at a higher level. "Developing the capacity of individuals and staff members to engage in meaningful reform and restructuring to benefit students continues to be the challenge for school leaders" (Huffman, 2003, p. 21). When considering reform initiatives, researchers offer educators several paths for reform, all having a common thread. Lezotte (as cited in DuFour et al., 2005) "…concluded that school reform could be neither successful nor sustainable unless it was embraced by the teachers, administrators, and support staff that define the professional learning community" (p. 182). Senge (1990) suggests, "The most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization" (p. 4). DuFour (2004) says, "…focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results" (p. 6). Darling-Hammond (1993) recommends,

"Teachers should have opportunities to engage in peer coaching, team planning, and teaching, and collaborative research that enables them to construct new means for inquiring into their practice. Participation in professional communities through school and teacher networks also deepens teachers' understanding" (p. 758). Sparks (as cited in DuFour et al., 2005) asserts, "Successful professional learning communities clearly demonstrate what is possible when teachers learn and collaborate within their schools as part of their daily work" (p. 156). According to Watkins and Marsick (1999), "A centerpiece of reform recommendations is that parents, teachers, administrators, staff members, and students join together to learn their way through change as communities of inquiry and experimentation" (p. 78). The common thread of educators working together collaboratively to improve both instructional practices and student performance can be accomplished through professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities consist of three big ideas: Ensure that students learn; create a culture of collaboration; focus on results (DuFour, 2004). It seems obvious, ensuring that students learn should be the primary role of schools, but many schools are not succeeding with this big idea. In a traditional school, what students are taught seems to outweigh whether or not they learned. In a professional learning community the educators shift their focus from what is taught to what is learned. According to DuFour, the shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning will have profound implications for schools (2004). Further, DuFour suggests once this shift begins, educators will ask themselves three critical questions: (1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when each student has learned it? and (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? The third question is the essence of a professional learning community and captures the meaning of the first big idea.

Today, in education, saying and agreeing that all students can learn is popular, but the real question should be do you believe all children can learn. Hopefully, every person affiliated with a school believes that all children can learn. In order for all children to learn, teachers, when responding to the first question, must have a firm grasp of the essential knowledge and skills within their areas of instruction. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek believe "…the premise of learning for all demands that each teacher knows exactly what every student is to accomplish as a result of each unit of instruction" (p. 22). Once teachers respond to the first question of what students are to learn, the next question that follows is how teachers know whether or not students have actually learned.

DuFour et al. (2004) argue that if a school is functioning as a learning community, frequent formative assessments will be given. They further state the assessments should be analyzed and compared; and as a result, teachers should ask, "Are the students learning and what steps must we take to address the needs of those who have not learned?" (p. 24). Once educators have determined whether or not students have learned, then the educators must decide what happens in their school when a student does not learn.

Any school functioning as a learning community will not only ask question three but will aggressively respond to each student who is not learning. Working collaboratively, educators would devise individual intervention plans for each student so learning will take place. For a school to successfully transform into a professional

learning community all three questions will be answered and the school staff will begin to respond to students as individuals as opposed to communally (DuFour et al., 2004).

Creating this culture of collaboration is the second big idea of a professional learning community. The end result of student learning can be reached through the avenue of educators collaborating. DuFour (2004) argues, “Despite compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation” (p. 9). Not only do teachers need to work collaboratively with administration, the principal must create time for teachers to work together with their own peers. Individuals in a school working collaboratively are more likely to experience school improvement.

In a professional learning community, focusing on results is the third big idea. A team of teachers works together to improve student achievement and the end result becomes a guide for future improvement. DuFour (2004) encourages, “Every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress” (p. 10). By working together, teachers will have comparison data and can make informed decisions about instructional practices to improve student achievement. DuFour (2004) concludes, “It requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement” (p. 11).

In a professional learning community, there are six characteristics that make the three big ideas come alive. DuFour and Eaker (1998) identify the characteristics as (1) shared value mission, vision and values (2) collective inquiry, (3) collaborative teams, (4) action orientation and experimentation, (5) continuous improvement, and (6) results orientation. Senge’s five disciplines for learning organizations work simultaneously with the characteristics of learning communities. Shirley Hord (1997) at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory has been researching learning communities and has developed a similar set of attributes which are as follows: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) collective creativity, (3) shared values and vision, (4) supportive conditions, (5) and shared personal practice.

Shared Mission, Vision, and Values

The sharing of mission, vision, and values is the first characteristics of a learning community. Principals, who have a vision about a particular innovation, including learning communities, might find difficulty in initiating the reform if the staff is not collaboratively developed thus producing long term sustainability problems. Fullan (1992) notes, “Rather than impose their individual visions, principals would do well to develop collaborative work cultures to help staff deal with all these innovations” (p. 19). As stated by DuFour and Eaker (1998), “What separates a learning community from an

ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create" (p. 25). Each school staff member has a personal vision and the leader should be able to guide collaborative discussions so a common vision can be created for the school. Huffman (2003) suggests the task of the educational leader is to share and combine the personal visions of the faculty members into a single collective vision to be embraced by all. Further, Hord (1997) recommends sharing a vision creates a mental image of what is important to an individual and to the organization, and in addition staff sharing fuels school improvement that has an undeviating focus on student learning. As noted above, lead researchers in this area all agree that creating a collaborative vision for the school will more likely produce long term results where all staff members are working towards the same goals.

Collective Inquiry

Individuals in learning communities are never satisfied with the current education culture. Learning by seeking answers to questions, collaboratively researching new ideas, discovering new methods, and testing and evaluating them are what drives individuals in functioning learning communities. In addition, the above learning strategies could change individual belief systems. Change in an organization is difficult and sometimes changing individual personal beliefs is necessary. However, this can prove to be more difficult. Changing personal beliefs is more likely to happen when the individual is discovering and researching.

Senge (2000) describes the "deep learning cycle" where the domain of enduring change is dependent on skills and capabilities, awareness and sensibilities, and attitudes and beliefs. Learning takes place when each of these reinforces one another. Ross, Smith, and Roberts (as cited in DuFour & Eaker, 1998) developed the "team learning wheel" similar to the collective inquiry process. Ross et al. identified four steps in the process: public reflection – members discuss and challenge one another; shared meaning – members arrive at a common ground; joint planning – members create an action plan; and coordinated action – members carry out the action plan. In order to effect change, collective inquiry is a necessary step and it requires openness on the part of the individuals to test their personal belief systems.

Collaborative Teams

Teaching in isolation has become the norm for schools, especially at the secondary level. It is important for teachers to see a sharing of ideas as a valuable practice. Too often, teachers (and schools for that matter) do not share their ideas. Instead, they keep anything that works a secret. DuFour and Eaker (1998) note, "The

basic structure of the professional learning community is a group of collaborative teams that share a common purpose" (p. 26). Much research has been done in the area of collaborative teams indirectly linking teacher collaboration to student achievement. Senge (2000) says, "A strong professional community encourages collective endeavor rather than isolated individual efforts" (p. 327). According to Haberman (2004), an attribute of a learning community is collaboration where, star teachers become involved in team teaching and other collaborative efforts in program development, writing, and research. Achinstein (2002) observes a renewed interest in fostering teacher community or collaboration as a means to counter teacher isolation, improve teacher practice and student learning, and build a common vision for schooling. Teachers engaging in professional collaboration have a greater capacity to improve student learning.

Students will benefit when teachers come together to share ideas about instructional best practices and student assessments. In a report of the National Association of Secondary School Principals on the high school of the 21st century titled, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution,*

> The success of a high school depends on its being more than a collection of unconnected individuals. The word "community" implies a commonality of interests and so it should be in any high school. The building of community very much involves the members of the staff. And, on a practical level, the synergy of cooperation ought to end up enabling the educators in a high school to accomplish more for the students than they could by acting on their own. School improvement more readily succeeds in situations in which teachers work in a collegial manner (p. 90).

Stiggins (as cited in DuFour et al., 2005) discusses teacher team work and assessment and "the extent that we team to (1) analyze, understand, and deconstruct standards, (2) transform them into high-quality classroom assessments, and (3) share and interpret results together, we benefit from the union of our wisdom about how to help our students continue to grow as learners" (p. 82). Students learn when teachers learn together and share with one another.

Action Orientation and Experimentation

Leaders and teachers who are members of learning organizations do not sit back passively; rather they are always taking action. Having members in the learning community who are inactive is unacceptable. One aspect of the action orientation characteristic is the ability to experiment and test new ideas. Failure is an option in such that the community learns from their mistakes and tries again. DuFour and Eaker (1998) make the following comparison: "While traditional organizations tend to brand such experiments as failures and then seek to assign blame, learning organizations consider

failed experiments to be an integral part of the learning process – opportunities to learn and then begin again more intelligently" (p. 28). Action orientation and experimentation is similar to Senge's mental model discipline in that humans tend to have preconceived notions based on beliefs and experiences. Senge (2000) explains, "We live in a world of self-generating beliefs that remain largely untested. We adopt those beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, plus our past experience" (p. 68). By experimenting and testing hypotheses we are able to dispel preconceived notions and be open to new and original ideas.

Continuous Improvement

Transforming a school into a professional learning community becomes a way of life for all individuals involved. Members of the organization realize the vision will never be completely achieved, but is always something that is worked towards. DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest members of the learning organization always be engaged in four key questions: (1) What is our fundamental purpose, (2) What do we hope to achieve, (3) What are our strategies for becoming better, and (4) What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts" (p. 28). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) talked to teachers who say, "…the PLC process is energizing rather than frustrating because month by month and year by year they see new evidence that their collective efforts do indeed have an impact on student learning" (p. 140). Further, teachers interviewed by DuFour et al. communicate that a PLC is a wonderful journey, even if the journey has no final destination.

Results of Orientation

The bottom line of any organization, either business or school, is results. Constant assessments are critical in the process of reform along with creating a results-oriented culture. In a PLC, all five characteristics are hollow unless they can be linked to results. DuFour and Eaker (1998) state, "Unless initiatives are subject to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement" (p. 29). Results orientation can be linked back to the three questions within the first big idea of ensuring that students learn. Positive results will be obtained if teachers are answering the three questions: (1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when each student has learned it? (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

Conclusion

In conclusion, schools have traditionally been designed to ensure that children are taught. This traditional design collides with the foundation of professional learning communities that all children will learn and will learn at high levels. Fulton (2003) passionately states,

> The current factory-model school, while seemingly efficient, is, in fact, grossly inefficient, inappropriate and ultimately inequitable, as it requires that all children adapt to the mean. Those who do not lean at the speed of the assembly line lose out and/or drop out; those who could learn more, do not. Individualizing instruction for each learner is no longer a dream – it is an educational birthright for all children (p. 32).

According to Huffman and Jacobson (2003), "Past decades have seen many educational reforms, all of which are supportive of advancing student interests and providing the best possible educational experience" (p. 239). The reform era, the excellence in education movement, and the business sector have led educational leaders to explore the idea of schools as professional learning communities.

Educational leaders who desire to create an environment of professional learners will systemically transform the organizational culture of their schools so that learning communities become "a way of life." The organizational structure will change as leaders empower teachers to become an integral part of the decision making process. Skilled leaders are needed for this kind of change to endure time. A call to action to improve schools can be accomplished through professional learning communities with strong sustainable leadership.

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