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Citation for published version:

Kennedy, A 2016, 'Professional learning in and for communities: Seeking alternatives discourses' Professional Development in Education, vol. 42, no. 5, pp. 667-670. DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2016.1220541

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/19415257.2016.1220541](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2016.1220541)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Professional Development in Education

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Professional learning in and for communities: seeking alternatives discourses

Collaborative professional learning has grown enormously in popularity over the past decade or so, with common acceptance of the establishment of groups called, variously, teacher learning communities, communities of learning, professional learning communities etc. Their establishment is validated by research such as Cordingly et al's (2005) systematic literature review which concluded that professional learning is more likely to be effective if it is both collaborative and sustained over time. While there is much to be said in terms of the potential positive outcomes of collaborative professional learning, there are also potential drawbacks such as the imposition of externally-driven agendas and the capacity for dominant group members to exercise undue influence on the group's activities and modes of operation. It is also perhaps no coincidence that the rise of in-house collaborative professional learning has occurred at a time of economic downturn, providing a cheaper way of 'providing' professional learning opportunities for educators and other professionals.

However, the rise in popularity of collaborative professional learning opportunities conflicts with the concomitant rise of individual accountability mechanisms in the learning professions, often characterised by sets of professional standards and associated tools such as reaccreditation. These policy tools can easily serve to discourage collaboration and can lead to the pathologisation of the teacher (Kennedy, 2016).

While this tension between collaborative and individualised efforts seems to characterise modern times, Sanford et al. (2012) provide another lens through which this conflict might be understood. Writing about their attempts to 'decolonize' teacher education in Canada, they reflect and report on an initial teacher education programme founded on Indigenous principle which actively work against the individualistic, competitive and neoliberal discourse which frames teacher learning and development across much of the developed world. They describe this situation as characterised by 'testing, examinations, and projects evaluated by predetermined standards, maintaining students' belief in the ideology of competing for the top marks and working as individuals striving for personal success' (p. 19). This approach stands in direct contradiction with Indigenous pedagogical principles such as inclusivity, community building and the recognition and celebration of individual uniqueness. Sanford and colleagues set about building courses based on these principles, in process eschewing principles of competition, individualism and uniformity, and seeking to develop 'community wisdom'. The article is an inspiring, challenging read, forcing us to consider an alternative to the Euro-American centric approach so dominant in much of the world. In the context of PDiE it forces one to think about how these principles might impact on continuing professional learning... imagine a world where the development of school community wisdom was the priority, where teachers with different skills were lauded and celebrated, seen as part of a team rather than a 'super-operative' who must be excellent at everything; a world where teacher learning was emergent rather than reductive, where success is routinely celebrated, where teachers are valued first and foremost as team members, and where professional learning approaches actively encourage this.

It is against these ideas that I consider the range of articles published in this issue – a collection of articles covering a range of different national and professional contexts.

Gardiner and Weisling provide a fascinating account of what they term ‘inside’ mentoring practices – those which occur during the action of teaching, e.g. co-teaching or demonstration teaching. They claim that such practices are less often used while ‘outside’ mentoring practices are favoured (outside mentoring practices being those which occur before or after a lesson has been taught). Interestingly, while their study suggests that inside mentoring practices can enhance new teacher development, the coaches in the study reported reluctance to use such approaches, citing concerns with authority, credibility and relationality. When we consider this within the perspective outlined at the outset of this editorial, it seems clear that what has been identified as effective mentoring practice is at risk due to a range of factors which could be described as fitting within a Western, neoliberal discourse where hierarchies and individual assessment prevail. One wonders then, how the outcomes of this study might be received within an alternative setting where community wisdom and collaborative endeavor prevailed instead.

Eckert et al focus on the impact of a ‘policy fellowship’ on teacher leaders’ career pathways. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they report that a majority of participants moved position post-fellowship. The article contributes to an ongoing debate about the extent to which meaningful and ‘transformative’ professional learning results in participants seeking new, fresh challenges in other posts. This is often reported as a negative side-effect of professional learning in that the original organisation/establishment loses a member of staff who has, most likely, increased their professional capability. This, however, suggests a very inward-focused view of workforce development, where establishments seek to ‘own’ their staff. If we consider the education community as a much wider entity, then the sharing and movement of staff should be considered as a real benefit to the collective wisdom, and should be seen as something to be celebrated and encouraged.

The focus of Wingrave and McMahon’s article is on the ‘academicisation’ of the early years workforce in Scotland. It reports on the perspectives of a group of Childhood Practice students who have been undertaking degree-level studies as part of a workforce remodelling policy designed to ensure that leaders of early years establishment satisfy the new ‘Standard for Childhood Practice’ which is calibrated at degree-level. Their study looks at changing identities within this particular workforce and considers some of the consequences of the policy reform. Looking at the development from a wider perspective, while designed to raise quality, it undoubtedly supports a neoliberal trajectory of enhanced surveillance and individualisation of early years staff. This stands at odds with the Indigenous principles outlined above which promote community rather than individualism. It raises some interesting questions around how quality can be improved and enhanced in ways that do not force us into the pathologisation of individual staff members. The situation also serves to illustrate how pervasive the dominant discourse is in serving to shape how we as a society consider education and educator quality.

Speering’s article, set in the remote Northern Territory of Australia, encourages us to consider the concept of ‘community’ and what its parameters and characteristics are, or might be. Importantly, Speering’s study identifies the particular importance of ensuring that local context and shared experience play a central role in professional development programmes. It would seem reasonable to suggest that these characteristics are central to

effective professional development in other geographically located areas, and that we can learn a lot from exploring processes in specific 'crucibles' of practice.

Peercy et al consider professional learning within the context of an online course for teacher candidates, further reminding us to consider more deeply what the parameters, possibilities and confines of 'community' might be. Their article focuses on the extent to which students can develop 'practice-based' knowledge via online approaches, as opposed to merely learning 'content'. The specific professional learning activity explored in this article involved synchronous video-conferencing, and the authors conclude that while synchronous online learning may not be able to replace face-to-face learning entirely, the boundaries of its possibilities are still worthy of exploration, as we move to understand more deeply what constitutes community in a globalized world.

Papavassilou-Alexiou and Zourna report on an empirical study of the impact of Drama in Education learning on the practices of a group of secondary teachers in Greece. They claim very positive outcomes for the teachers, going beyond simply enhancing their pedagogical competence. The article prompts us to consider more deeply the wider impact of particular professional learning activities, resisting the push to consider professional learning as simply a means of demonstrating professional accountability, often exhibited through standards.

Cramp's article reports on a leadership study visit to India. He explicitly critiques the 'competency-based frameworks common in English leadership development programmes', instead arguing for a conception of leadership as a process of humanitisation. His article highlights the potential impact of professional learning which takes place outwith the usual locations, in this case in an international setting. While overseas trips might not always be possible, Cramp's findings suggest we need to look at other ways of providing an international dimension to professional learning, thereby challenging our views on community.

In her article, Gutierrez examines the development of a classroom-based professional learning community through the introduction of lesson study. Here, the focus on community-building is explicit from the outset. Building a collaborative and professional learning environment is seen as one of the key aims. While the article reports positively on the impact of lesson study in this particular context (elementary school science teachers in the Philippines), it is worth speculating on the systemic policy affordance or constraints which serve to enhance or to limit the collaboration in a sustainable way.

Stevenson et al. report on a study of the role of school leaders in facilitating continuing professional development. Their findings suggest that in this group of 102 school leaders across 17 schools, leaders express a preference for technology-mediated approaches, and also use technology to access and draw on material from 'popular thinkers in education'. This raises questions about the extent to which leaders' facilitation of CPD also has the propensity to act as a gatekeeping function, promoting preferred approaches for particular purposes. While acknowledging that leaders have a key role in developing positive professional learning cultures in schools, it is also important to think about the particular dominant discourses that shape what is and is not possible under such leadership.

Kubalíková and Kacien's article provides a fascinating policy analysis of CPD in Slovakia. Their analysis presents a picture of both constraints and possibilities; the struggle to develop community learning, but within a system that does not currently exert intense externally-imposed quality measurement demands. While the lack of external quality measurement may seem like a positive situation from some national perspectives, offering a space for teacher-driven accountability, the authors report a struggle to garner momentum from the ground-up. The situation reported by Kubalíková and Kacien suggests that it is not only the space that is required for teachers to drive their own professional learning, but also a culture that values and supports collaborative decision-making and action.

In the final article in this issue, and indeed in this volume, Impedovo and Ligorio explore the impact on nine African teachers of engaging in an international Masters programme on science education. This border-crossing experience, in both a geographical and intellectual sense, reportedly enhances the participants' agency in terms of their will and capacity to enact their learning in their own school settings. These teachers prioritise colleagues, pupils and the community, suggesting a strong sense of beliefs and values which fit well with the Indigenous principles outlined at the outset of this editorial.

While the above articles provide a rich and stimulating set of ideas relating to professional learning, it is clear that even with an international dimension to their origins, the majority are firmly situated within a Western, Euro-American-centric paradigm. While this is in many ways to be expected, and is of course extremely relevant to our readership, we actively wish to encourage contributions from authors who locate professional learning within alternative discourses, thereby adding to the richness of our combined wisdom.

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