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The Unfolding of a Professional Learning Community

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Abstract. This study focuses on the emergence of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in a new international school in southern China with particular emphasis on the views of participants. Using a cross-sectional survey given to the founding faculty, respondents provided rich qualitative data from which themes were gleaned about the emergence of distinct cultures in these developing PLCs. Dynamic systems operating at micro- and macro-levels in the initial stages of a newly formed PLC were discovered that have an impact on group development and the larger school culture. Practical considerations that may help administrators, teachers, and teacher-leaders in initializing the conditions for a PLC are also discussed.

"I think a PLC should be the starting point of all great ideas."

-Teacher in PLC, 2013

I.

Introduction

Statement of Problem

This problem of practice focuses on the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the context of a new international school setting in China. Of particular interest is the unique perspective of viewing PLCs in their respective stages of emergence from the perspective of the participants. This study will aid administrators, teachers, and teacher-leaders in thinking about the initial processes and practices in the beginning stages of creating PLCs at their respective schools.

Purpose

The International School of Somewhere (ISS) is a new private, Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 co-educational day school that opened in August 2012 to 54 expatriate students from 10 different countries. Current enrollment as of April 2014 is 146 with 26 faculty members from four different countries. Since the Director's arrival in July 2012, it has been a primary goal to

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establish a positive school culture among this new and growing population of student and adult learners based on collaboration, mutual respect, and support, in order to foster a strong commitment to the vision of establishing ISS as the preferred international school for expatriate children in the city, delivering innovative educational experiences and to be regarded among the top international schools in southern China within five years. Towards that end, the development of Professional Learning Communities was fostered as a way to not only impact the emerging culture of the school but also to meet the specific goals of the mission and vision. This was the first foray into establishing PLCs for both the Director and the teachers.

This study was designed to serve multiple functions. First, it was a reflective investigation to view how the PLCs' culture unfolded and to assess the health of the PLCs after the school's first year of operation and after a significant influx of new faculty members. Second, it was meant to shed light on those factors that contributed to or retracted from the groups' development. Third, and as an outcome of the first two reasons, this study was meant to provide essential information on how to better support and foster the growth of the PLCs, thereby contributing to the development of a strong school culture of learning.

Theoretical Framework: Emergence of Culture

Emergence of culture is a phenomenon that has been studied from the perspective of how stimuli are experienced by "one's social group" in both cognition and behavior (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 683). The emergence of culture has its genesis in the "social tuning" (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 684) that occurs among members of a group. This theoretical lens provided the frame in which to view the unfolding of the culture, norms, and practices of the newly formed PLCs at the private, independent international school in China. Emergence of culture indicates that "people's cognitions and behaviors are more affected by their social groups than they imagine" (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 688). The findings also show that "group members' assumptions about one another's stimuli experiences can lead to great social tuning" (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 688).

Social tuning is manifested by a "psychological mechanism allow[ing] for the emergence of culture…" (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 688). It is believed that "social tuning is a highly implicit process" (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 688) and that the studies undertaken indicate initial support for the emergence of culture through social tuning of group members (Shteynberg, 2010, p. 688). Another study on the emergence of culture states "the influences that dominate the development of a culture (in a particular school setting that was undertaken) are much more evident in a new situation" (Stine, 2000, p. 19) similar to the PLC under study here.

Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) identified four sub-processes of sharing learning within an organization that encompassed how one intuits, interprets, and integrates learning within their group and how that learning then becomes institutionalized within an organization. These four sub-processes occur over three levels: individual, group, and organization (p. 524). For this particular study, the authors are focusing on the emergence of learning and culture between the individual and group levels. Another study by Fiol and Romanelli (2012) has identified the microsocial processes that promote the emergence of groups and, in their language, of a similarity cluster (p. 597). Fiol and Romanelli (2012) state, "that the formation of a new similarity cluster depends on the development of a 'community of practice' "(citing work by

Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al. 2002, p. 598). Fiol and Romanelli (2012, citing Hannan et al., 2007, and Stinchcombe, 1965) propose that [similar] "domains of activity…[are the] first basis for the rise in audience interest in and attention to emerging forms of organizational activity" (p. 599). Further, "within such domains…new ideas likely emerge constantly in ongoing discourse about better ways of doing things" (Fiol & Romanelli, 2012, p. 599, citing Stinchcombe, 1965).

II.

The Current Study

This study consisted of a cross-sectional survey design, which met the criteria of comparing two or more educational groups in terms of the practices and interactions (Creswell, 2012, p. 378) exhibited in the growth of newly developing professional learning communities at a private, independent international school in China. A web-based questionnaire was developed for collecting the data from the teachers in each professional learning community in this private school in China. Survey Monkey was used in designing, collecting, and analyzing of the survey data. This cross-sectional design collected data at one point in time on the present views (Creswell, 2012, p. 377) of the respective teachers in five different professional learning communities.

Professional Learning Communities

Carolyn McKanders (personal communication, April 12, 2014), Director of Organizational Culture for Thinking Collaborative, recently described the overuse of the term 'Professional Learning Communities.' She feels that calling many groups PLCs is largely incorrect because they simply do not have the essential elements of a PLC. A decade ago, Dufour (2004, p. 6) also recognized that "[p]eople use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education . . . In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning."

Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many (cited in Dufour & Dufour & Eaker, 2008) provide a definition for a professional learning community:

> educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional leaning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continual, job-embedded learning for educators. (p. 14)

Dufour (2004) distills the essence of PLCs down to three *Big Ideas*, which include (1) ensuring that students learn, (2) establishing a culture of collaboration, and (3) focusing on results. These elements form the bedrock upon which groups forge their identity as legitimate PLCs. Instead of being a *thing*, first and foremost, professional learning communities are more of a process. In order to flip the concept and better reflect its true spirit, C. McKanders (personal communication, April 12, 2014), proposed a new term, one based on action: professional communities learning.

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Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker (2008), revisited the seminal work on PLCs from the late 1990s, which at its core is about doing what we do better. They reflected upon the premise of that original Dufour and Eaker book: "The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities" (cited in Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008, p. 1). While recognizing the essential elements of PLCs, based on research and experience in the intervening years from that original book, they present new or deeper learnings, which provide a richer understanding about the nature of PLCs, how they are formed and how they are sustained.

As mentioned in the Purpose section, it is recognized that PLCs are inherently linked to cultures. Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker (2008) place a strong emphasis on culture and examine barriers to the PLC's successful realization. First, teachers "have been conditioned to regard school improvement as programs to adopt or practices to implement, rather than as an ongoing process to build their collective capacity to achieve the purposes, priorities, and goals of their organizations" (p. 21). Second, to effectively reculture an organization, one needs to consider the complex patterns of mental models and mythologies that educators use to filter the deluge of observations and experiences in order to make sense of them (Dufour, Dufour and Eaker, 2008). This latter is no easy task because it means getting to the heart of people's beliefs and assumptions, many of which are unconscious.

Schein (2010) claims that "founders of organizations start the culture-forming process by imposing their own assumptions on a new group" (p. 235). While necessary, it is insufficient to foster a sustainable environment within which the PLCs will thrive. Dufour, Dufour, and Eaker (2008) offer further insights. For example, in the original book, having a well-articulated mission, vision, values, and goals were emphasized, but educators and organizations must *live* these principles and align their practices if they are to take shape and meaning. Another refinement includes the importance of frequent, common formative assessments of children as a means to focus on assessment *for* learning and not just *of* learning.

Providing teachers with timely and relevant information to improve their practice is also critical for the effectiveness of a PLC, and this is achieved through informed and precise conversations about effective techniques (Dufour & Dufour, & Eaker, 2008). Effective PLCs develop processes to expand the learning for all students, those struggling to learn and those excelling.

Distributing leadership amongst teacher leaders in the school, as well as supporting them in this important skill development, provides for stronger PLCs (Dufour & Dufour, & Eaker, 2008) and ultimately mitigates against the effects of a critical leadership succession. The authors also recognize the benefit of structuring classrooms using the same principles of a learning community. As such, in the true spirit of a learning community, the authors have demonstrated their own refinement of their understanding of this powerful model.

Cannon and Griffith (2007) synthesize much of the research for establishing and maintaining effective groups. Components include group goals and a shared vision; group structure and strategy including defined roles and responsibilities; clear and open communication; skilled leadership; well-managed power relations; effective decision-making; diversity in groups; conflict management; team development and training; and team learning. Whether the group possesses these components or not determines their performance. Similarly,

Blanchard (cited in Dufour & Dufour & Eaker, 2008) also provides six characteristics of high performing organizations: shared information and open communication; compelling vision; ongoing learning; relentless focus on customer results; energizing systems and structures; and shared power, high involvement, and collaborative teams. As Professional Learning Communities are themselves groups and organizations, their performance as well is largely determined by their ability to foster these components and characteristics effectively.

Giles and Hargreaves (2006) investigate the sustainability of innovative schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities during reform efforts. They cite three factors that have historically contributed to decreased sustainability over time. The first is that fellow professionals regard innovative schools as unlike *real schools* and may resent the possible diversion of resources to get these innovative schools up and running. This resentment translates into resistance towards any scaling up efforts that takes place from the innovative schools.

Fink (cited in Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 125) identifies a second factor: "innovative schools seem to possess a predictable, evolutionary life span of creativity and experimentation, overreaching and entropy, and survival and continuity." Change in leadership, loss of key faculty, a shifting of student demographic, and policy change can all lead to the *attrition of change* leading to a school's inevitable decline. A third factor deals with critical historical incidents or external environmental changes that ultimately impact a school that is incapable of adapting to the new conditions (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006).

International schools, by their nature, often operate in isolation and thus, are not entirely subject to the first challenge stated above. However, international schools do have highly transient populations amongst students, staff, and leadership and the danger of attrition of change is high. By examining three case studies of innovative schools in Ontario, Canada, Giles and Hargreaves (2006) show that sustainability of PLCs and learning organizations can be achieved if they learn how to halt the evolutionary attrition of change by renewing their teacher cultures, distributing leadership, and planning for leadership succession" (p. 152). They also can focus on more inclusive relations with the community.

III.
Method

Participants

Ninety-two percent of the teachers, (N=24), participated in this study in September 2013 at this newly established (year 2012) private, independent international school in China. Each teacher at this school identifies with one primary professional learning community: (1) Early Childhood (2) Elementary, Grades 1-5 (3) Upper, Grades 6-12 (4) Specials; i.e., Music, Physical Education, and Visual and Performing Arts (5) Mandarin. Participation in this study was voluntary. Names on the survey were optional. Out of the 24 respondents, 46% (N=11) chose to provide their names.

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In identifying which professional learning community a teacher identified with, 23 respondents (96%) identified with a particular group, with 1 respondent not identifying with a particular group.

Procedures

Where the objective of this survey was to explore how a newly formed professional learning community develops its norms, culture, and practices, open-ended questions were asked of the respondents. One closed-ended question, to name the PLC to which they identified, was asked. This particular closed-ended question assisted in coding the responses and in analyzing the data based on PLC assignment (Creswell, 2012, p. 386).

The survey consisted of asking ten questions, including the optional name (Q1), identification of PLC already discussed (Q2) and the remaining eight-open-ended questions listed below with the respective response rate for each question.

Table 1: Survey Response Rate

Questions 3-10	Response Rate
Q3: How does your PLC define learning?	96% (N=23)
Q4: Was there a moment for you, personally and/or professionally, where you experienced an insight or a key learning while being a part of the PLC?	96% (N=23)
Q5: What core strengths, values, qualities, ways of working or interacting do you see in your PLC?	92% (N=22)
Q6: What new learnings or practices have emerged from your PLC that you can incorporate into your teaching?	96% (N=23)
Q7: How do you see the process of sharing your learning with others at (your school)? Are you able to share your learning from your PLC to another PLC? to the whole school? to other schools?	96% (N=23)
Q8: What do you see as essential factors in developing a culture of learning? What factors do you see that help you grow professionally as an individual and as a school?	96% (N=23)
Q9: How do you see the PLC contributing to positive school outcomes (i.e., student engagement, initiative, caring, quality work, student achievement?)	100% (N=24)
Q10: What do you see as barriers inhibiting your learning in your PLC?	92% (N=22)

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All the participants received an electronic letter introducing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, the right to withdraw at any time, and the informed consent paperwork to participate. Where the survey was deployed electronically, the participants had the opportunity to complete the survey during professional development time and during a faculty meeting. The questions in this survey were adapted from an Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) methodology, which asked the teachers to share the core strengths, values, qualities, and ways of working in their respective PLC.

Data Analysis

The data culled from this cross-sectional survey was analyzed in two ways: (1) by categorizing the responses into themes (Creswell, 2012, p. 387) from each of the open-ended questions and (2) by categorizing the responses into themes that were generated by each of the 5 different PLCs. Open-ended responses required transforming word responses into the frequency of times a response was mentioned (Creswell, 2012, p. 387). For example, from Question 3, "How does your PLC define learning?" responses included "learning is an on-going process"; "learning is a long process of acquiring effective teaching strategies and aligning practices." Both authors independently analyzed the data in this manner and then discussed the themes found.

Potential Ethical Issues

Where one of the authors (the Director of this private, independent school in China) has direct authoritative control and daily interaction with the teachers in this survey, the first author took the responsibility to design and to distribute the survey to the teachers so as to minimize any signs of undue influence on the Director's part. The Director did stress to the teachers that their participation was voluntary and would not influence their job performance, working conditions, or any other work-related responsibilities. The teachers also had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions.

IV.

Results

One of the teachers surveyed stated that the whole idea of a PLC is about "strength in numbers...We can do more together. We either stick together, or dangle separately." We do not want anyone to be left dangling, particularly at this fragile stage of early development as the PLC's transition from its emergent stage into a more mature stage of evolution.

The key quality that starts this process of gelling together as a group is having a shared experience or shared knowledge (Shteynberg, 2010). The co-author on this article and the founding Director of this international school observed that the teachers in the Specials group were not coming together as readily as the other groups. Further, the 'floaters' also anecdotally expressed feedback that they are striving to find their roots and expressed concern that they lack

a true kinship with any group given their transience. (The 'floaters' were those individuals whose participation were required across multiple PLC groups and included the librarian, counselor, and IT Director).

The survey began by asking how each PLC defines learning. We saw many similar responses that said that learning is an ongoing process where one is constantly searching for ways to improve teaching strategies, methods, and differentiation. Another teacher shared that a PLC is building upon prior knowledge and history; sharing those ideas, beliefs, and strategies; and making improvements and finding success. It is through that important process of discussion and collaborative exploration that the group's identity is forged.

Another theme that emerged from the surveys was the need to have consensus within each respective PLC. The PLC is an opportunity to have openness, to ask questions, to clarify understanding and to have the PLC be a meaningful experience.

The word "cohesive" emerged time and again as did the need for a foundation of trust on which to build the PLC. What appears evident in this developing culture of a learning community is the need for these interactions that foster trust to be first established at the individual and small group level before one could expect these risk-taking behaviors to spread to the larger context of the school. In this sense, nurturing an environment where individual teachers feel comfortable to express their voice at the *micro* level is an essential prerequisite for these interactions to be manifested at the *macro* level. True organization-wide consensus building, therefore, is a more likely outcome when it is first experienced between individuals and small groups. Only then is a more sustainable process at the larger group even possible. This transition to the larger group is related back to Crossan, Lane, and White's (1999) theory, which shows that new cultural elements emanate from individuals and permeate to the organizational level.

A dramatic example emerged from the experience of the Upper School (Grades 6-12) PLC in our survey when one of the teachers shared an example of consensus building when evaluating student work as a group. The teacher shared the following: "I got the distinct impression that our group was open to building to a consensus even though we had different opinions about the student work." What is happening here is very pivotal - the individual teachers are receptive and open to emergent thinking as a group. As such, the consensus building process developed within the context of some cognitive conflict that did not derail the team's development but likely strengthened it.

Furthermore, there is a need to have a foundation of trust. To quote from one of the teacher's responses, "One area of key insight coming from PLC involvement is the importance of relationships, interactions, and communication [that] is in the PLC group. Trust is key in any relationship and the development of the PLC relies on the honesty of its members. The openness gives members the freedom to ask questions, to share ideas, and to have a stronger learning environment."

A core strength that became evident is that all teachers have a voice. This isn't just a voice to complain or vent but to have the PLC serve as a way to relate ideas and to work out

differences. One teacher revealed that she has learned to open up and to share ideas. She finds herself watching as others add content that makes the idea stronger and ties more closely to the curriculum standards. This is a poignant example of not dangling by oneself.

Listening is also key. One needs to have a natural curiosity for a PLC; if not, it limits one's ability to improve as a teacher. There is also an important sense of continuity that happens over time within a PLC. One teacher stated, "Our PLC recently used one meeting to look at reading assessments. We all assessed the same reading test at the same time and discussed the results. This gave us the opportunity to see our areas of possible confusion or weakness and find continuity as a team in our assessment expectations and strategies." This idea of staying consistent or having continuity in their ongoing professional growth was attributed to the PLC as one teacher stated, "PLC brings continuity to teaching and assessment." A PLC keeps everyone in the loop through effective dialogue and discussion. Another outcome of the PLC was summed up by one of the teachers who saw the interconnections of a teacher's impact on the school and how learning helps to create better teachers. This interconnection can be summed up in the following diagram:

Figure 1: Positive Reinforcing Cycle

Positive Reinforcing Cycle
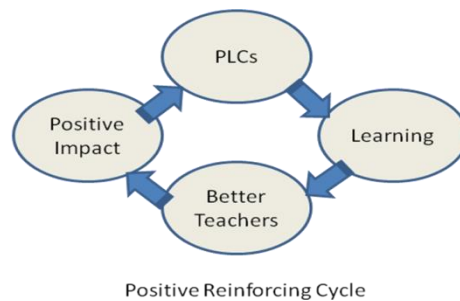
As in all considerations of improving education, there are two points to be made: what is working well or contributing to success and what needs improvement. The above discussion focused on those qualities that contribute to a successful PLC. To round out the other important perspective, another question was asked on the survey as to what barriers may inhibit the learning in a PLC. Resoundingly, responses included the need for more time. More time to spend in a PLC, to engage in exploratory discussions and meaning building, and more time to spend on various issues that arise.

Another area that presented itself in the data was the constraint of insufficient professional development required for the PLC to reach its potential of adequately exploring collective areas of interest and need. In effect, not having access to the right 'tools' or professional knowledge can either stifle further development or inspire the team to lobby for these vital resources and training. In this school, we see a self-advocating elementary PLC continually seeking development opportunities while one of the other PLCs appears to be in limbo and no longer even meets.

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V.

Discussion

Those teachers who identified themselves as being in the Specials PLC reported that this group still had to define their goals. In thinking about the make-up of this group, the authors recognized that if there is no shared content to discuss, developing group goals might be more difficult. Shteynberg (2010) stated that "creating shared memories facilitates the subsequent creation of shared attitudes that concern those memories" (p. 684). The authors see a link between having shared goals as a genesis of creating those shared memories.

As discussed in the Results section, the 'floater' strategy, though well-intended, has proved to be an area worthy of closer attention given the lack of connection that has been experienced in other PLCs. Effective PLC development appears to follow similar team dynamics where they go through the forming, storming, and norming cycle. Not having a home PLC may have the effect of altering the team dynamic and consequently disrupting the previously established norms of interaction. This periodic cycle of entry and re-entry seems to have the effect of negatively impacting the continuity required to build a sustainable sense of identity, one of the key factors of inclusion.

A sense of ownership or buy-in by each member of the PLC is an essential prerequisite for teams to embark on their developmental journey. Others have experienced less collaborative growth in part due to a 'silo' effect of not sharing similar subject areas, and this may be the result of an absence of a shared purpose. Without this shared purpose, it is difficult, if not impossible, to create a team identity and the necessary commitment to 'learn' together. Because learning is a risk-taking exercise, requiring us to make mistakes, to ask for help, to expose our weaknesses, and otherwise to admit that we do not have all the answers, there is also the opportunity to create a safe environment for these prerequisites of learning together. For some, this is difficult in a public forum. If we do not have trust in those upon whom we are relying for support, we are left to dangle . . . and that's an uneasy feeling.

One of the clear take-aways from this investigation is the need to nurture this fragile and tentative emergence of group interaction. For many, this is not a spontaneous occurrence and it requires structured opportunities for all voices to be heard. The most functional of the PLCs developed strong team charters on which they spent considerable time getting their norms of understanding just right. They labored, respectfully debated, engaged in cognitive conflict, and willingly conceded previously held positions to come to collective agreements on why they were there and how they would support each member to strive towards their professional potentials.

Strong leadership, both at the school and PLC levels, also appears to be an essential element for healthy PLCs to function. While the Director is also a 'floater' who does not attend each PLC meeting, having skilled facilitators and peer coaches within the PLC to provide the required ongoing nurturing to move the team forward can serve as a strong foundation. In the absence of these key players who continuously model and drive professional learning, and who hold high standards of collaboration, there is a greater tendency for teams to hover or to revert back to their individual default positions without cause to strive for new heights. In many ways, these teacher-leaders are the glue that binds the group together, ensuring the potential danglers

are brought into the fold and are empowered to provide their own significant contributions. In essence, then, it is a positive feedback loop continuing to build upon previous successes and mitigating against periodic setbacks.

Implications for Practice

There are dynamic systems operating at two levels in the initial stages of developing a PLC: the micro and macro levels. The following suggestions are practical considerations that may help administrators, teachers, and teacher-leaders in initializing the conditions for a PLC:

1. Have a common content area or areas of responsibility or influence as the focal point.
2. Recognize teacher-leaders as a critical role in binding the group.
3. Create an environment in the PLC that fosters trust and encourages each person's voice.
4. Problem solve collaboratively in order to help the group to move forward.
5. Develop a team charter and enjoy the process of thinking together.
6. Provide essential dialogue and discussion time for teams to reflect, collaborate, and learn interdependently.
7. Be open to the conflict in a safe and supportive environment.
8. Recognize what the barriers are that inhibit the learning in a PLC.
9. Model positive school culture of support and collaboration.
10. Encourage peer coaches to continually move the team forward.

Limitations of the Current Study and Considerations for Future Research

A limitation of this study is that it gathered data on the perceptions, experiences, practices, and interactions of each PLC at one point in time. To design a longitudinal study in which researchers investigate the changes over time within the culture of each PLC would add greatly to this body of knowledge on how PLCs change, what their needs are, and what new practices could emerge. Also, another study that investigates the intersection of the PLCs with the entire school community would provide a rich, *big picture* view of the value of PLCs and their dynamic place within the larger system of the organization.

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