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COLLABORATION, COLLEGIALITY, AND COLLECTIVE REFLECTION: A CASE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

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This case study documents and interprets teachers' experiences in a professional development initiative called Changing Results for Young Readers in British Columbia. The reflections and discussions of a group of teachers in a rural school district were examined in order to understand how the participants constructed their realities relative to their involvement in professional learning communities. Analysis of the teachers' descriptions of their experiences provides insights on the significance of collaboration, collegial relationships, and shifting mindsets about the work of teaching, and these insights are important for understanding how professional development opportunities can be structured and facilitated to support the complex role of professional learning.

Introduction

School districts in British Columbia have been involved in a provincially designed and funded initiative called Changing Results for Young Readers aimed at building the instructional capacity of classroom teachers as well as the collaborative capacity between these teachers and literacy intervention teachers with the goal of supporting teachers' literacy instruction in their classrooms. This initiative reflects a provincial trend toward creating inclusive classrooms where teachers can work collaboratively with literacy resource teachers to provide quality instruction for all students in the classroom. While research indicates that this inclusive approach has benefits for all students in the classroom (Allen, 2006; Allington, 2009; Butler & Schnellert,

2008), understanding how teachers experience the changes in practice that come with participation in collaborative professional learning requires more attention.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been identified in the literature as an effective organizational approach for providing opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative learning to improve their practice (Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlan & Talbert, 2001; Lieberman & Mace, 2008). PLCs can allow for collaboration and reflective practice, where teachers can come together with their colleagues to actively learn about and reflect on their practice with their colleagues (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009a; Stoll et al., 2007). There has been significant research and writing on the potential benefits of professional learning communities for school improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Hord, 2004; Stoll & Louis, 2007). What seems less well understood is the practical experience of establishing and sustaining these communities from the perspectives of teachers, learning from them about how PLCs are effective structures for engaging them in more meaningful professional collaboration toward improved teaching practices. In this article we provide an “inside lens” of the PLC to describe and analyse the teachers’ experiences with collaboration in a PLC. Participants described for us their understanding of the benefits and challenges of building and sustaining relationships with colleagues, establishing norms and structures for collective learning, and building new professional identities through this experience. Their descriptions provide important insights about the challenges of balancing the demands of a classroom role with the new complexities teachers often face as they are required to engage in PLCs and other initiatives, along with important insights related to how teachers are increasingly recognised as key players in how they think about school improvement.

In this article we document the progress of establishing a learning community of classroom and literacy intervention teachers across one district as part of a provincial program to support early readers in the classroom. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the development of a district-mandated PLC from the perspective of the teachers to uncover the nature of their professional learning experiences with their teaching and literacy support colleagues in the PLC. We aimed to understand if and how they established a process of transferring their learning from these experiences to their work in classrooms. While we were primarily interested in understanding how teachers' professional learning experiences were transferring to shifts in their teaching practices, we hoped to also learn more specifically about how the PLC experience was influencing how these teachers engaged in the process of creating inclusive classrooms to instruct all young readers in the classroom setting.

Professional Learning Communities: A Theoretical Framework

For decades, research and writing on PLCs has identified that a focus on collaboration, collegial relationships, and professional learning through reflective practice can provide a structure for supporting and sustaining improved teaching and learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Hord, 2004; Stoll & Louis, 2007). These aspects of PLCs emphasize the shift away from isolated teaching practices to a collaborative and shared model of teaching where practices can be highlighted and evaluated within the collaborative inquiry model of professional learning (Halbert & Kaser, 2013). The concept of PLCs relies on the assumption that practice needs to be transformed and enhanced at the school level, and, therefore, a shift in teaching (or perhaps thinking) is required (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess 2012). Stoll et al. (2006) describe PLCs as “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an

ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way” (p. 223). Timperley (2011) noted that professional development for teachers needs to be linked to identified learner needs in order to make a difference to learner outcomes. PLCs allow teachers to take ownership of their own learning, with continued support from a select group of colleagues.

Aligned with our purpose of understanding the PLC experience from the perspective of the teacher, and to inquire into how participation in a PLC can provide the support and structure for collaboration toward improved teaching, we framed this study with a more specific focus in the PLC literature on collaboration, relationships, and reflective practice—three elements that were also a specific focus for establishing the PLC structure for this school district initiative. Given that we were focusing on teachers as learners within the context of a PLC structure and process, we recognised the potential for enriching understanding of the professional learning process for teachers through the lens of adult learning theory, and have included this perspective in the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

Collaboration

The evolving process of collaboration allows learning to continue among educators by becoming more in-depth as the capacity of the PLC develops (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009a). Multiple opportunities for collaboration between professionals allows for continuous learning and enhanced accountability among the members of the learning community and these collaborative work opportunities can be a way to breathe new life and energy into teaching and learning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009b). Timperley (2011) suggested the need for teachers to develop professionally requires a transformative rather than an additive change to teaching

practice. A collaborative environment is created as educators work together to examine and question their own practices, reflect on outcomes, and share their personal learning voyages with others (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009a). Within the culture of collaborative learning, teachers are consistently encouraged and supported to experiment with innovations and have a sense of professional entrepreneurship (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Instead of relying on external control measures, schools rely on purposes, professional socialization, collegiality, and natural interdependence (Sergiovanni, 1994). Shared expertise allows the interdependence to grow. When teachers can come up with knowledge together, as a collective, it strengthens the group as a whole and elevates the members to an equal level of expertise, rather than a hierarchal structure of expertise (Sergiovanni, 1994). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) described the safe feeling of a collaborative culture as being “not pressure cookers of guilt and perfectionism, but slow-boiling pots that allow vulnerabilities to be voiced and doubts to be articulated” (p. 114).

The Affective Nature of Professional Learning

The interdependent nature of a PLC requires trust among colleagues. When there is a trusting, caring environment the members of the community are more likely to engage with others in the learning process, and, therefore, take more risks with a level of support evident on a daily basis (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009a). There is a greater level of trust and buy-in when teachers are talking with other teachers about their practice and their professional learning journey (Sergiovanni, 1994). Indeed, Timperley (2011) suggested that “teachers cannot readily engage in cycles of inquiry and knowledge-building when they feel criticized or put down for not being good enough” (p. 41).

The affective component of building and sustaining PLCs tends to reflect the importance of establishing trust and respect as essential to building relationships for learning among colleagues. Adult learning is often socially interactive (Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2006; Mezirow, 2000; Yorks & Marsick, 2000), and groups can provide the necessary environment to facilitate the learning. While Mezirow (2000) focused transformative learning theory on the individual learning that happens as people articulate experiences to others and engage in dialogue involving different perspectives, Yorks and Marsick (2000) emphasised that organizational learning focuses on collective learning of a group of people and stated that “the goal of organizational transformation is allowing the organization to more effectively realize its performance objectives” (p. 254). Although the goal of organizational learning may be perceived as self-serving for the organization, the intended outcome may lead to more independence and autonomy in an organization, which may create a sense of ownership over the learning process. If a group can create knowledge for itself (Cranton, 2006), then the group is building a shared sense of meaning and developing the culture within the organization (Yorks & Marsick). Cranton (2006) noted that, “transformative learning becomes an expansion of consciousness that is collective as well as individual” (p. 48). Of importance for the context of professional development is that engaging adults in transformative learning processes does not follow a recipe approach to planning and implementation because no one can predict how an individual or a group will respond to new ideas or interpretations (Brookfield, 1986; Dirkx, 2006).

Reflective Practice

Professional growth for teachers is catalysed through peer observations, trying new things, testing different perspectives, and developing intellectual curiosity about teaching and

learning (Musanti & Pence, 2010). This reflective practice is a necessary component of learning. According to Jordi (2011), “reflection is predominantly conceptualized as the rational analytical process through which human beings extract knowledge from their experience” (p. 181).

Professional learning communities can provide the structure for engaging in collegial dialogue about what is learned through reflective practice and for talking about teaching practices in relation to taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning.

The main purpose for analyzing and reflecting on students’ needs in professional learning situations is to develop ongoing professional learning for individual teachers and to consistently improve practice, where “teaching is a nuanced dance in which teachers integrate their knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, in order to be responsive to students’ needs” (Timperley, 2011, p. 16). Emphasising the importance of focused professional learning, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) explained that PLCs “should be neither inconsequential talking shops nor a statistical world of scores and spreadsheets that take on a life of their own, far removed from real students. PLCs should be places where focused conversations and inquiries . . . lead to improvements” (p. 163). Kaser and Halbert (2009) described how a shift in mindset is required for teachers to engage in professional learning that transfers to greater quality and equity in classrooms for all learners. They suggested that this shift can happen as teachers work together to reflect on their practice and inquire into their habits and beliefs. In the next section we provide an explanation of the PLC initiative that was developed in one school district to contribute to developing the professional learning habits of mind with the intention of shifting toward improving literacy instruction practices in the classroom.

The Study

Background

This study took place in one small, rural school district in British Columbia. In conjunction with a provincial initiative to improve literacy in primary grades, Changing Results for Young Readers (CR4YR), a PLC structure was implemented within the district. To support developing a team approach to literacy, the school district funded teacher release time for seven PLC meeting days dedicated throughout the school year for participating classroom teachers and literacy intervention teachers. The CR4YR initiative is grounded in the belief that successful early reading is not just a matter of teaching children how to read, but also of building an environment that fosters and supports strong literacy skills. To this end, this provincial initiative uses the PLC model of professional development to create a community of literacy instruction by inviting educators to share experiences with each other, to offer support to build classrooms conducive to supporting early reading behavior, and to enhance teachers' knowledge of and competence with teaching struggling readers.

Structure of PLC Meetings

The general framework for the PLC in this study was based on the provincial initiative and included the following roles: a provincial facilitator, two Early Reading Advocates (ERAs), literacy intervention teachers, and classroom teachers. The provincial facilitator was appointed by the Ministry of Education to facilitate four out of seven of the sessions and work collaboratively with the ERAs to provide support and encouragement, while also facilitating the group processes. The ERAs worked in collaboration with the provincial facilitator to learn effective methods of guiding professional learning for the classroom teachers and the literacy

intervention teachers. The ERAs accepted full responsibility for facilitation of the sessions when the provincial facilitator was not in attendance. The classroom teachers and the literacy intervention teachers were learning together by sharing experiential and theoretical knowledge within the PLC framework. To help focus professional learning, classroom teachers chose one student from their classroom to serve as their case study student (a student who was also receiving literacy support from one of the literacy intervention teachers involved in the sessions). The classroom teachers and the literacy intervention teacher at each school formed an informal “school group” that shared a common inquiry question, discussed the case study students at their school and collaboratively decided on a course of action.

Each classroom teacher selected one area of literacy instruction as their focus for the year-long inquiry into their teaching practice. Each of the seven sessions included facilitated conversations by the ERAs designed to engage classroom teachers and literacy support teachers in professional conversations inquiring into their teaching practice, as well as a presentation on some aspect of research-based literacy instruction by the ERAs. In each session all classroom teachers were expected to document (in collaboration with a literacy support teacher) what they tried, what they noticed from the change in practice, and what they were planning on trying before the next session. They were also expected to share their observations with the PLC members. Teachers often shared the results of their ongoing inquiries and their learning journey in each session, at times requesting support from other teachers when they felt they needed to try something different. The literacy intervention teachers were an important part of the PLC, since they shared knowledge of the case study students and current research on literacy practices, and were a support for the classroom teachers. The literacy intervention teachers and classroom

teachers collaboratively derived future actions to try out with their students, often working as a team in the classroom to implement the change of practice.

Methods

In order to gain a thick and rich description of the experiences of the teachers as they engaged in a collaborative inquiry team approach to learning about literacy strategies and interventions for teaching all young readers in the classroom setting, we used a case study method (Merriam, 1988). The participants met for seven full-day sessions beginning in October 2012 and ending in May 2013. Participants were asked to share their learning experiences in a reflective journal at each PLC meeting. Additionally, they participated in an in-depth interview with the lead author at the end of the first year of the PLC sessions.

Participants

There were 14 classroom teachers and 6 literacy intervention teachers who participated in the PLC initiative. Two ERA's from the district and one provincial literacy facilitator were additional members of the PLC. Of these PLC members, four classroom teachers and four literacy intervention teachers volunteered to participate in this study by sharing their reflective journal entries and participating in a reflective interview at the end of the school year. The four primary teachers (Grades 1–2) and the four literacy intervention teachers are all women, they work in semi-rural schools, and are fully qualified teachers with varying degrees of experience in primary school ranging from 1 to 25 years of teaching experience. They teach at schools with high concentrations of students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes. In general, this

school district has a transient population due to the disadvantaged economic growth in the area and the boundaries of the district span over 150 kilometres of mostly rural communities.

The lead author of this study was both a participant and a researcher. She has fourteen years of teaching experience in grades one through twelve, and she has taken on the role of ERA for the past two years. As an ERA within the school district, her responsibilities included attending provincial symposiums for CR4YR, planning and facilitating sessions with the other ERA, sending data collected on student learning based on teacher observation to the Ministry of Education, and collecting data on teacher learning for the purpose of this study. She also attended the PLC sessions as a literacy intervention teacher, working with one of the classroom teachers to support new learning and implementation of new practices in the classroom. We highlight the embedded aspect of the researcher as a leader of this PLC initiative as both a unique opportunity for an insightful analysis of this PLC initiative, and also as a challenge noted by the researchers to be mindful of how her personal connections to the participants and her desire for the success of this initiative might be surfacing in how data were analysed and presented.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data were gathered from reflective journal entries completed at each of the seven sessions and a standardized, open-ended interview (Patton, 2002) with each of the classroom teachers and literacy intervention teachers who volunteered to participate in this study. Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed word for word. The transcribed interviews were analyzed as an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and abstracting data, as outlined in research for conducting qualitative, interpretive research (Miles,

Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Transcripts were read and coded at an individual level where themes and patterns began to emerge. We then analyzed and coded the data at a level of comparison, evaluating the richness of the fit of the themes across the transcripts. We each coded the data and then compared our emerging patterns and themes. As mentioned, we took care to notice and reflect on where the lead researcher's role as a participant might be influencing how we were reading the data. Initial open coding resulted in these categories: collaboration (sharing, joint work), collegiality, shared practice (goals, leadership), student achievement, reflective practice (learning), and support. These categories were collapsed into three main themes: collaboration, collegial relationships, and shifting mindsets about the work of teaching and learning. We use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants. In the following section, we describe the three themes that emerged from the analysis process, and provide a discussion of our findings.

Findings

Given that the overall goal of the CR4YR initiative was improving student achievement in reading, we begin with an overview of emergent reading skills noted by the participants, followed by a description of the themes that emerged from our analysis of the teachers' PLC experiences, such as the expressed welcome change from the professional development delivered by experts at workshop-type sessions, the professional and personal benefit of developing meaningful collegial relationships with teachers from other schools, and the improvement they noticed in how they were reflecting on their practice.

Student Achievement: Emerging Reading Behaviour

At the first Changing Results for Young Readers professional development session, participating teachers were asked to choose a struggling reader in their class to focus their time, energy, and attention on throughout the school year. The purpose of the case study student was to “zone in” on one student’s achievement to gain understanding of how they were responding to the changes in literacy pedagogy the teachers were “living” in their classroom by noticing how the case study student was responding to aspects of their teaching practice that they were tweaking through this initiative. Although this was a focused approach on one target student, hopeful outcomes would include the whole class benefitting from the change in teaching practices and improved reading achievement among all students. The achievement data for the case student were collected through reflective journal entries where teachers focused specifically on what they tried in the classroom, what they noticed about student achievement, what they learned, and what they would like to try next.

All of the case study students showed achievement in some aspects of literacy. For example, Lynn wrote that her case study student began to positively see himself as a reader and a writer. More specifically, he had improved in sight word vocabulary, reading stamina, and “independently choosing a wider variety of literacy activities as opposed to choosing either word work with playdough or listening to reading at the listening centre.” Coral explained that her student was almost reading at grade level average, but more importantly he had a “better attitude now that he knows he has strategies to decode and problem solve on his own. Confidence has helped him self regulate better and focus on tasks.” She reflected on the fact that the biggest change occurred with her student when he “had the responsibility of showing someone else the expectations, [and] we knew he understood because he had to perform for them.” Ann explained

that although her case study student was not reading within grade level expectations, his improvement since the beginning of the year seemed obvious. Ann documented that she felt the student began to feel like an expert when she put him in a “teaching role” in the classroom, which resulted in his desire to pick up books on his own and start reading at home, as well as asking for more challenging books to read independently. Lerae expressed some frustration with the lack of progress her student seemed to make throughout the year. Although her student was demonstrating an improvement in an emergent level of reading behaviour, she was not yet meeting literacy expectations. Lerae explained in her interview, “as a teacher you like to think you are making a difference in each child’s life and that particular student seems to be kind of stuck and . . . each month having to say well it kind of stayed the same, still the same, still the same—that was hard.” Lerae documented that she tried many different approaches to inclusive literacy instruction with her whole class, such as guided reading for differentiated learning and individual conferencing to focus on specific goals in reading behaviour with her struggling readers, but her frustration was apparent with the lack of evidential progress in her case study student.

Many teachers documented successful experiences in their changes in teaching practice throughout the year. Ann explained that in her class, “students are much more aware about why I’m teaching the things I’m teaching. I think just reflecting on what you’re doing causes you to do it with the students as well.” She explained that as she is teaching her students how to think like a reader, she reflects on her actions and thoughts out loud in front of her class. Lita documented that she was trying different reading strategies she learned about from colleagues during their PLC discussions, and that she felt excited when she noticed the outcome. She reasoned, “I’m sure it was valuable for [the students] because I saw them respond.” Both Ann

and Lita were able to observe results in their students' overall classroom experience that linked to what they saw as their own professional learning. Lynn described in detail how she implemented her own professional learning into her classroom through a buddy reading system she established within her school community. She wrote:

Before I had the big buddies work with my class and specifically with my case study student I spent a month teaching the older students how to be literacy coaches. During these lessons the grade 4/5 teacher had my K/1 class. The school agreed to use the same language and resources for all classes so we developed a common language. Once it was time to have our buddy class' students work together they knew how to support the younger students while they read which included having conversations on reading strategies . . . This was powerful for both groups of students. My case study student showed a dramatic increase in engagement time when working with a big buddy. On his own he would wander the classroom, look only at pictures and wouldn't choose good fit books.

Lynn and Kristy both described in their reflections the power of their learning from their case study student, and how the whole class benefited from the experience. Lynn noted that, "even though you are just focusing on the one I was able to obviously take that information to other students as well in the class and you can start to see patterns." Kristy agreed as she recorded, "if you're looking at your class in general it's too big. Having the one student and being able to see, 'were there any changes in that one student?' It just gave you clarity."

Collaboration: A Welcome Change to Professional Development for Teachers

Most teachers arrived at the first session expecting the standard delivery of professional development—a transmission of information that they would then be expected to take back to the classroom and implement. They expressed discomfort, at first, with this new model of professional development and a sense of personal and peer accountability for their learning. For many of the teachers in this study, this was the first time that they had experienced a formal

structure for collaborative dialogue about their work. Their expectations about collaboration prior to this experience did not necessarily align with what came to be mostly positive experiences of learning to collaborate through sharing their teaching practices with the PLC members. For example, Coral anticipated that “we would all sit there and complain, but that’s not how it turned out at all, people really were sharing great ideas and helping.” Her reflection highlights the importance of maintaining a positive focus on a shared goal, so that the movement forward is toward discussing teaching beliefs and practices. If a sense of interdependence is fostered in a group of professionals, then everyone has the opportunity to “give and take” as needed, which allows for the participants’ needs to be met. Lerae experienced this fluidity in the conversations during the PLC meetings and shared, “Molly would say something and then Coral would jump in and we would just sort of, our ideas would just sort of you know, grow and become better, versus if we just went back to our own classroom.” For the most part, the participants’ experiences with sharing their practices were meaningful conversations that lead to real learning and eventual shifts in their teaching. The power of the school group became the connection to conversations that occurred in between the PLC sessions in an on-going, informal manner within their own school. This deepened the conversations between the teachers and the literacy intervention teachers and allowed for continuous contact throughout the school year. The teachers welcomed the meaningful learning that ensued as they were given autonomy in their professional learning.

One value that became apparent through the interviews was the teachers’ conviction that learning needs to be constant for professionals in education. New ideas and theories are continuously emerging, so teachers need the time and space to try out new things in the classroom and constantly adapt their practices to meet the ever-changing needs of their students.

The teachers in this study experienced an increase in their sense of peer accountability as well as the sense of connecting through a shared goal as they engaged with each other in conversations focused on their teaching and their students' learning. Kristy reflected on this PLC process and explained, "we grow as teachers and we change as teachers and we learn new things and I just found it so exciting to work with her . . . seeing her experiment with new things . . . she was just so excited to be trying new things."

The idea of establishing shared learning goals as part of developing a collaborative culture of learning was a desired outcome of the PLC initiative, but it was a challenge given that the teachers were not used to a collaborative model of professional learning in their schools. To some extent, all the teachers in the study developed shared goals. The goals were either centered on student learning, curriculum implementation, or professional learning for teachers, and these goals were determined by the team of teachers. An emerging need and desire for increased and improved professional learning to meet these goals was an organic process that grew as the teachers met, without needing external pressure to continue toward meeting the goals. Kristy explained this sense of peer accountability that was emerging with the classroom teacher about a student's reading progress and realized, "oh, we haven't really had a big impact on this student. So, now, okay, we've got another two months or whatever, so we've got to take a new [approach]." Some teachers decided to do team planning and try new teaching strategies in the classroom, and then reflect on the results. Lita explained, "you felt more confident about going back and saying I'm going to give this a try in the classroom . . . it was confidence to try some new things and knowing that other people were on the same page and trying things as well." Often the shared goals meant working together and supporting one another in the classroom

environment. Lita explained she would talk with her colleagues and suggest, “why don’t I support you in this way, or . . . I will try to do that within the classroom.”

A few teachers commented on the necessity of having time to discuss goals to ensure they were aligned with the collective vision of the school community and the intentions formed between classroom teachers and specialist teachers. Coral explained the importance of shared goals in “keeping our expectations the same” and Lerae explained it was helpful because “we had spoken and we knew where we were targeting.” By having the time to discuss goals and come to some kind of consensus moving forward, the teachers realized the benefit within the school environment. Molly explained, “everybody was on board and I think that those things are critical . . . I think you need to really develop, not develop, devote huge amounts of time, and time for ideas, time for the people involved . . . so you’re seeing progression of skills throughout and also so that everybody knows exactly what is being worked on.”

Collegial Relationships: A Personal and Professional Benefit of This Process

Effective PLCs require a level of trust so that members can feel safe to lower their defences to be able to take steps toward meaningful learning. When this happened in the PLC, the teachers started to show vulnerability, and a sense of interdependence started to become a reality. Teachers described how their professional conversations allowed them to see in a new way that their challenges are often similar and shared, and that they can work together to solve or support one another. Kristy described her experience with other teachers in the PLC as she remembers realizing “they are having the same struggles you are having and they are trying different things than you’ve tried and so you now have a whole group that is sharing successes and failures.” Lynn stated, “people allowed themselves to be more vulnerable and share out, they

weren't so reserved about sharing out things, there wasn't that feeling of being judged because I'm not doing this." Lita agreed that it was beneficial to "reflect with each other honestly about how things were going, what you're struggling with." The perceived lack of negative judgement in this community when sharing their difficulties and struggles made it possible for participants to view others as equals and to engage from a place of empathy and compassion for the struggles shared by their colleagues. Teachers had their own sets of challenges and areas of growth, but through conversations held in a community of trust they could now see how they could support each other through some of their shared challenges and opportunities.

Through this experience the teachers gained trust and a feeling of comfort with the other participants in the group. A few teachers said that the difference between learning from an expert in a one-day workshop and working in an ongoing way with teachers in the classroom next door is often a level of trust needed for the real process of learning as a teacher to occur. Kristy explained, "I think just over time everyone got more comfortable, more open, more relaxed, more willing to share and less fear of being judged and . . . our last session I just thought was beautiful, it was just, like this open community of people sharing thoughts and ideas without fear." Lerae described a deepening level of trust and interdependence as the year progressed and she felt more comfortable with the group. For example, she shared "by the fourth month I felt more comfortable [asking questions of the group] and no one heckled me or rolled their eyes at me when I did that." Similarly, Coral explained, "I didn't find it judgmental at all. Even when someone asked for help for something, people would sort of throw out answers or possible answers and you could just try them or not try them, but you never felt like someone was thinking you weren't doing your job right." Similarly, Joan explained, "I wasn't afraid to say, well this isn't really working, do you have any ideas?" and Ann shared that "it was easier to say

this isn't really working for myself and my student, what can I do?" The teachers all spoke about the overwhelming support they felt in the group. A few teachers vocalized the need to show vulnerability in order to gain the trust and deep level of support from the other teachers, and others shared how honest conversations about their practices were invaluable to their professional growth. The teachers in this study appreciated the opportunity to come together to co-construct their learning in community with their colleagues from different schools. This learning community provided an opportunity to develop trust and emotional connections with their colleagues that deepened and enriched their professional learning.

Shifting Mindsets About the Work of Teaching: From Isolation to Collective Reflection on Practice

For many of the participants, their experience of teaching had been one of solitary practice carried out in isolation in their classrooms. The PLC initiative provided a novel opportunity to connect with colleagues to share their private practices with the aim of improving all of their teaching. What they realised was that this collaborative experience helped them to open up their teaching for feedback on how to improve, but also how to celebrate what they were doing well. For example, Coral was encouraged that the sharing of her practice with her PLC members "made me feel like I was actually doing my job right" and Kristy wrote in her journal that these collaborative conversations "made me realize I am more on-track than I thought."

Some of the teachers chose to reflect about very specific teaching practices or students. This was their time to use in a reflective capacity that would benefit their learning, so teachers could personalize this time and ensure it was valuable to them. Coral wrote in her reflective journal about, "how much detail there is when you break apart the strategies and interpretations

of analyzing why students may be hitting roadblocks in acquiring reading skills.” Further, Kristy commented on the strength of focusing on one student at a time in a professional learning capacity and having the time to consider how to move that student forward with their reading progress. She said the individual focus “really makes you stop, and look, and think, is it impacting this child? And changing direction when it’s not.” All the teachers spoke about the luxury of having the time to reflect during their busy professional lives. The teachers in this study affirmed that their private practices need to be made public to bring to light areas for improvement, but also to share their learning journey through their inquiry and to give opportunities for teachers to hear encouragement about what they are doing in their classrooms. This sense of belonging, trust, and support emerged over time in this group of colleagues who were collectively committed to improving their teaching practice, and this affective component of the PLC was essential for empowering these teachers to take risks and move forward in a new way with their personal and collective professional learning and development.

Discussion

Part of creating a PLC culture in schools is providing enough opportunities for teachers to meet together and establish a learning climate that values and welcomes honesty and courage to share teaching practices as an on-going inquiry, as well as a level of vulnerability that serves to strengthen the emotional bonds of the group as they work from a place of empathy and care rather than defensiveness and judgement. Timperley (2011) affirmed that teachers cannot freely engage in collaborative inquiry and professional knowledge building if they are feeling criticized or put down for not being competent within their profession. Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) noted that teachers often work in isolation for much of the day and so they are missing the

evaluative process or positive feedback that can calm anxiety and stress related to work performance. For the teachers in this study, a solid level of trust among the PLC members was an essential aspect of the learning climate created by the group.

Taking what we know from adult learning theory, we can assume that transformative learning happens when adult learners have opportunities to interact with other learners, have time to talk, are able to reflect and make sense of their learning in relation to their prior experiences, and can connect the learning to their own contexts, purposes, and needs. The learning climate needs to be a safe environment in which to try out new ideas and share personal experiences (Brookfield, 1986; Gravani, 2012; Mezirow, 2000; Terehoff, 2002). There is growing attention being paid to the affective component of the learning community model (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2009a). However, more research is needed to better understand the social and emotional context of professional learning.

Finding a balance between the need for PLC facilitators to provide autonomy to teachers for their own professional learning needs and to establish a learning climate in which the focus of conversations remains on teaching and learning is a challenge (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2014). The opportunity for the lead author to be fully immersed in this study gave her the insight into the deep conversations that were happening during the sessions and an in-depth understanding of the situations brought up in the reflective interviews at the end of the school year. By participating in the provincial symposium sessions three times throughout the school year, she was able to gain a clear vision of the creation and implementation model of the initiative. Although the initiative was “top-down” in its organization and implementation, her role as a teacher in the system provided a level of collegial respect and trust that allowed for a safe learning climate in which the participants felt they could engage in honest and courageous

sharing about their teaching practices—both the challenges and the successes. Further research is needed to understand the influence of the facilitator for cultivating and sustaining a professional learning climate that will enable authentic and meaningful learning for all members. Limitations in this study are apparent in the relationship built between the lead author and the participants due to the multiple roles the lead author experienced during the course of the school year.

Although the trusting relationship may have allowed participants to further disclose during the interviews; conversely, the relationship may have distorted the information the participants chose to share.

Finally, although there has been significant research and writing on the benefits of a professional learning community approach for improving teaching and learning in schools, there is little agreement about what constitutes such a community in practice. According to Mitchell and Sackney (2009a), the ways in which school systems are formed means that “most of the professionals in them are neither learning nor communities. Instead, they are a collection of people in search of recipes, strategies, and structures that define them according to the received wisdom of what a learning community ought to be” (p. 103). As we learned from the teachers in this study, opportunities to reflect with colleagues about teaching and learning remain few and far between for most educators. We take seriously Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2012) caution that “isolation protects teachers to exercise their discretionary judgment in their classrooms, but it also cuts teachers off from the valuable feedback that would help those judgements be wise and effective” (p. 106). There were limitations to this study, with challenges ranging from the lead researcher as a leader of the PLC to the small sample of teachers. However, the insider perspective of this study provides insights on the experiences of teachers bridging the theory–practice divide of professional learning communities in schools, a necessary addition to ongoing

research on how to create opportunities for teachers to benefit from the valuable learning opportunities that can emerge in a group of educators committed to transforming their teaching.

Conclusion

Establishing a culture of professional learning among teachers is of increasing importance at all levels of the school system. However, there continues to be a need to understand teachers' experiences within these initiatives to gain a better sense of how to lessen the gap between what is known from the theory of professional learning communities and how these learning communities are implemented and sustained in schools. In this article we provided a description of the implementation process from the perspectives of the teachers involved. From their accounts, we determined that collaborative professional learning opportunities remain elusive to most teachers, but that exposure to this kind of professional development is generally a positive and effective model for shifting teaching beliefs and practices. We noted the essentiality of attending to the affective components of the adult learning climate, and the ways in which these teachers were able to move forward in their learning when they felt supported, cared for, and respected as part of a teacher-led professional learning community. More research is needed to more fully understand how to facilitate and sustain meaningful professional learning communities of teachers in schools and across districts.

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