

Making room for collaboration and teacher research in professional learning communities

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Abstract:

Over five months, six middle school teachers gathered together every other week to participate in a “teacher research” professional learning community (TR PLC). As the facilitators of the TR PLC, we witnessed how this group of teachers, over time, began to see themselves and their teaching differently as a result of engaging socially with each other and conducting teacher research. One participant, Ben (all names are pseudonyms), an English Language Arts teacher, shared in an interview that for the first time, he felt there was “room” for him to collaborate with his colleagues as an equal since they were all learning about teacher research together. For him, the TR PLC created a social space where the distinctions between novice and veteran teachers were lessened.

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

**Making Room for Collaboration and Teacher Research
in Professional Learning Communities**

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Over five months, six middle school teachers gathered together every other week to participate in a “teacher research” professional learning community (TR PLC). As the facilitators of the TR PLC, we witnessed how this group of teachers, over time, began to see themselves and their teaching differently as a result of engaging socially with each other and conducting teacher research. One participant, Ben (all names are pseudonyms), an English Language Arts teacher, shared in an interview that for the first time, he felt there was “room” for him to collaborate with his colleagues as an equal since they were all learning about teacher research together. For him, the TR PLC created a social space where the distinctions between novice and veteran teachers were lessened.

Ben is not alone in his experience in a TR PLC. In fact, Sagor (2009) argues PLCs are the perfect place to support school-wide teacher research initiatives. When joined together, teacher research and PLCs have been known to foster teacher change by developing professional learning groups that examine relevant tensions about teaching and learning in the classroom

(Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Poetter, Badiali & Hammond, 2000). In TR PLCs teachers engage in problem solving and seek out alternative viewpoints from other practitioners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Such inquiry allows teachers an opportunity to make their knowledge about learning visible to themselves and others.

It is clear, therefore, that TR PLCs not only shape individual teachers' learning but also create a space that helps teachers improve their instruction in order to enhance student learning. However, the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association [NGA] Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) have greatly impacted the work teachers do in PLCs because administrators see the need to increase teachers' professional development related to these new standards (Farbman, Goldberg, & Miller, 2014).

In this article, we share how six middle school teachers engaged in inquiry while participating in a TR PLC the year after the CCSS were implemented in their school district. Due to the newness of these standards, there was an overall feeling of anxiety starting at the highest level and it filtered down to individual schools, administrators and teachers.

What We Did Differently

The middle school frequently used PLCs as a form of staff development, but this time instead of the principal choosing the focus of the meetings, the teachers had an opportunity to explore a question related to his or her teaching by collecting and analyzing data and sharing findings at a local teacher research conference. The principal agreed to allow us to start the TR PLC if we could tie in the Common Core State Standards. The TR PLC was structured to allow maximum opportunities to engage in conversation about inquiry. For example, the teachers shared whole group, worked with partners and met one-on-one with the facilitators. We also

spent time discussing a common text, *What works: A practical guide for teacher research* (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006) which allowed the first time teacher researchers to build background knowledge about inquiry as they engaged in it.

Engaging in Inquiry

Typically, when teacher researchers engage in inquiry they choose a “burning question” that is relevant to their teaching and classroom to investigate. Although the TR PLC was designed to allow each teacher to do this, the educators in this group decided instead to co-construct one question that they would all individually research: What instructional strategies support students in generating constructed responses? Information about the teachers and their data collection can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Teacher’s Demographics and Research

Teacher	Years of Experience	Subject Area	Grade Level	Data Sources	Findings
Hannah	23	Social Studies	7th	Notes from conferences, student work, lesson plans	Conferencing with students about their writing takes time but helps develop their constructed responses.
Samantha	19	Math	7th	Student work, observation notes, weekly assessments	Students need more opportunities to explain how and why they came to math solutions.
Anna	25	Social Studies	8th	Lesson plans, student work, observation notes	Students need to have more access to primary sources before they are tested on responding to them.

Ben	5	ELA	7th	6 different graphic organizers, student work, lesson plans, observation notes	Some types of graphic organizers are more effective than others in supporting students with crafting constructed responses.
Catherine	19	Family & Consumer Science	6-8th	Student work, observation notes, student interviews	Being an empathetic teacher is just as important as teaching the content.
Dominique	17	Spanish	6-8th	Lesson plans, student work, assessments	It is not enough to talk about writing responses in Spanish, students really need to see examples to understand.

The teachers chose this particular question because they had heard that constructed responses were going to be added, in all content areas, to the end of grade tests as part of the implementation of the CCSS. “We want to work smarter and not harder” shared Anna when asked about the decision to research one question instead of choosing individual questions. Ben said Hannah originally suggested the idea and after they talked about it at bus duty, they decided that was their plan.

Once the decision to investigate a central question was made, the teachers seemed more relaxed in the subsequent TR PLC meetings. Dominique wrote in her research journal: *We are often given so few choices typically about what and how to teach, the openness of researching my own question was too much.* Choosing to investigate one question as a group allowed the teachers to learn about teacher research from a low-stakes position.

Next, the teachers began the process of reading the literature on constructed responses in their particular content area. For example, Dominique read articles about helping students craft constructed responses in Spanish while Hannah read about supporting students in writing responses in Social Studies.

As we continued to meet, it became clear that engaging in teacher research allowed the teachers an opportunity to collaborate in new ways. For example, during the March meetings, the teachers worked in pairs, first talking about each of their data sources and then asking their partners questions. “I have all of these notes from conferences with students. In my research journal I kept track of if I used mini-lessons or taught about question analysis whole group. Looking at the students writing, I can tell that when I used mini-lessons, they created stronger responses,” said Hannah. “So what do your conference notes tell you?” asked Samantha. “I guess that conferencing is important too, especially for the quiet students who don’t speak up even in small groups,” replied Hannah. After Hannah finished talking through all of her data sources, Samantha took her turn to do the same. Having conversations with their peers fostered a deeper understanding of the data analysis process and it offered opportunities for the teachers to grow in their confidence as teacher researchers.

In April, the collaboration in the TR PLC took a different form as the teachers began to think about how to present their findings at the teacher research conference. Ben created a flowchart based on all of their data to show that regardless of their content, strong constructed responses include: 1) an argument; 2) several details; and 3) examples of those details. He displayed this chart on the SMART board. “That is amazing and so true,” said Dominique. Others nodded their heads in agreement. The teachers agreed that Ben’s flow chart would be part of their presentation. There were big smiles on everyone’s faces.

The six teachers chose an overarching question ultimately because of their concerns about the changes to the EOGs from the CCSS. Finding the answer to their joint question mattered to all of the teachers in the TR PLC because they genuinely believed the results would support students' learning.

Discussion

Engaging in teacher research can help redefine professional development because it is a way for teachers to learn from and about their practice (Cochran-Smith, 2003). What can schools do to further foster this desire to research teaching practices? First, allowing teachers to have choice within PLCs may foster better conversations about instruction (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Often PLCs are connected to school improvement plans and focus on the needs of the school but not the needs of particular teachers. It is important that PLCs support teachers in being catalysts of change rather than perpetuate the status quo (Wood, 2007).

Second, providing teachers with opportunities to share their research may further foster inquiries into their teaching practices. Administrators could support this by allowing time during staff or data team meetings for teachers to raise questions about their teaching and share how they found solutions. Massey and Duffy (2004) report that the primary purpose for most teachers to investigate their instruction is to act or understand differently so that their students' learning is enhanced. When teachers have more opportunities to hear from each other, the potential for improved literacy instruction is enormous.

In today's schools, due to abundant assessments, teachers continue to be positioned as recipients of other's knowledge, not creators of their own understandings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The implications we outline above are suggestions and hinge on the ability of administrators to find time for teachers to talk, question, and generate their own understanding of

instruction. When schools foster collaboration, in PLCs or other venues, educators will truly begin to improve their teaching.

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