

Improving Student Learning Through Professional Learning Communities: Employing a System-Wide Approach

Greg Paterson, University of New Brunswick, Canada

Abstract: Effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) contribute to the overall improvement of student learning when a system-wide, leadership-based approach from the district and school level is applied by aligning a common vision, goal, and purpose. Despite a government-led implementation of PLCs province-wide in New Brunswick schools over ten years ago, the efficacy of PLCs in one particular New Brunswick school district has demonstrated little evidence of effectiveness or improvement. A district leadership team employed an Internal District Instrument (IDI) survey to measure areas of strength and barriers as it relates to its PLC formation and growth. Additionally, the team collected pre and post perception survey data from twenty teachers (n=20) during a summer learning session on building and sustaining PLCs. IDI survey results indicated that the district leadership team was seeking help in the domain of professional growth and development and that teachers and administrators were finding PLCs to be ineffective, to lack direction, and to fail to meet teacher-learning needs.

Key words: Professional Learning Communities, Teacher Learning, System-Wide Approach, Teacher Effectiveness

Introduction

Improving student achievement in reading, mathematics, and science have been an area of focus for improvement in many provincial governments and school districts across Canada (Council of Ministers of Education, 2018). To achieve the goal of improved learning, the implementation of collaborative professionalism, also referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), has been regarded as a common practice in many schools. The Government of New Brunswick implemented the concept of collaborative professionalism in the public school system nearly a decade ago (Williams, Brien, & Sprague, 2008). Nevertheless, because of the inconsistency of the implementation and purpose of PLCs throughout schools and districts, the long-term impact of PLCs in some New Brunswick schools needs further inquiry. Multiple variations of PLCs in schools with different mandates and configurations are the norm. For example, rarely, do any PLCs share a consistent vision, purpose, or mandate (G. Hall, personal communication, July 4, 2018). Consequently, effective PLCs improve collaborative professionalism when a system-wide approach from the district and school level is applied.

The Power of Effective PLCs

When the principles of a PLC are followed throughout an educational organization, district leadership can identify evidence of student and teacher learning, teaming, norming, and specific goal setting at the student, teacher, as well as school level. Specifically, according to Dufour, Eaker, and Dufour (2005), the four essential questions posed by PLCs are:

1. What do we expect our children to learn? (Goals and Expectations)
2. How will we know they are learning? (Effective Assessment)
3. How will we respond when they do not learn? (Intervention)
4. How will we respond if they already know it? (Stretch learning)

The poor implementation of PLCs in any teaching environment may negatively contribute to student learning (Venables, 2018). For example, the lack of teacher collaboration can contribute to misaligned learning outcomes between subject areas. In addition, learning targets that could be reinforced within and across subject areas may fail to materialize. Furthermore, if schools are to become learning organizations, PLCs need to transition from a teacher-centered model to a learning-centered model (Williams, Brien, & LeBlanc, 2012). For example, a lack of teacher collaboration can lead to inappropriate use of outcomes-based teaching that forces teachers to cover large volumes of curriculum and evaluate student learning using a testing format (Williams et al., 2012). This traditional model leads to an increased workload for teachers, whereas a collaborative model facilitates sharing between subject areas when teachers plan creatively together. The collaborative professional learning model is essential to helping teachers increase their effectiveness. The effectiveness of this model was demonstrated by research conducted by Psencik and Brown (2018), whereby district leaders and principals mutually commit to learn every day and more importantly ensure that everyone learns with them. Fullan (2005) suggests that in order to implement professional learning communities effectively, district leadership must consider all three levels of school systems, districts, and provincial departments of education. The system-wide implementation of a PLC is a priority at the school and district level and

aims to improve instruction and student learning. The alignment of all three levels of the system model provides a streamlined approach, whereby teachers, administrators, and district staff are all learning and working toward the same common purposes: improved instruction for students as well as learning for teachers and leaders.

Improving Student Learning

One of the hallmarks of high functioning PLCs is the impact of a system-wide approach that prioritizes learning and collaboration amongst educators. The effectiveness and sustainability of PLCs depends on many aspects including team work and disciplined collaboration (Fullan, 2010). PLCs operate under the premise that the key to students' improved learning is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (Dufour et al., 2005). In such cases, the attention is directed at learning rather than at teaching. The change of PLCs to prioritize learning rather than teaching requires a shift from schools being bureaucratic institutions concentrating on teaching compliance to communities of active learning focusing on collaboration (Williams et al., 2008). Therefore, the same principles that prioritize learning over teaching would apply when a district's leadership employs a system-wide approach. In this case, the focus is on learning rather than on teaching and therefore the focus shifts from being administrative-led organizations to becoming an active learning community. Consequently, the quality of a learning organization is reflective of its leadership (Barth, 1984). Accordingly, a healthy culture of learning will germinate at all levels including the district leadership team, principals, and teachers in every school. In this culture, an active learning community could look like a common book study among all three levels with time to meet face to face, discuss, and share learnings over a period of time. An active learning community could also include time for district staff, administrators, and teachers to observe the best instruction and learning practices on videos, with release time provided to debrief and collaborate with each other during the instructional day.

A System-Wide Leadership Approach

A school district's curriculum team in New Brunswick, Canada aimed to re-establish effective PLC culture as a means to improve student learning by re-introducing the concept of PLCs at the district level in early spring, 2018. The curriculum team intended to model learning and facilitate cycles of continuous improvement not as instructional leaders, but as leaders for learning (Psencik & Brown, 2018). The team also sought to model what high functioning PLCs looked like for school principals, teachers, and school staff and was committed to refuting the current status quo of lacklustre student achievement results as acceptable. Therefore, the team was committed to achieve outcomes including learning about methods of high yield teacher praxis, balancing assessment practices, facilitating student engagement, and building social capital as a team, while prioritizing goals in the district improvement plan. To accomplish these outcomes, the team started with a focused, researched-based approach to evaluating what principles and priorities mattered most.

To help the curriculum team determine what areas of improvement were the highest priority, they completed the PLC Internal District Instrument (IDI) Survey (Williams & Brien, 2017). Unlike many self-evaluation surveys, this instrument was research-based, current, and locally developed. A summary of the anonymous survey results in Table 1, displays the district curriculum teams' perceived barriers and areas of strength for the categories of district culture, structure and operations, district leadership, and professional growth and development.

Table 1: Results of Internal District Instrument Professional Learning Community Survey

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Strength</i>
<i>District Culture</i>	Office tasks are assigned by administration. Office staff seldom solicit teacher input when making decisions.	
<i>Structure and Operations</i>	Organization mandates a single path for communication. Allocation of district resources is seldom collaborative.	Hiring practices for educational leaders often reflect district goals.
<i>District Leadership</i>	No barriers identified	District leadership approach fosters empowerment. This district builds leadership capacity. This district strongly supports growth and positive change. District policies and practices promote instructional leadership. District Educational Council sets goals and trusts district leaders to manage the system.
<i>Professional Growth and Development</i>	Funding for professional learning is a low priority. Curriculum team is not involved in a major learning activity every year. There is very little sharing of individual professional learning experiences among educational leaders in the district. Educational leaders seldom work together to focus on professional learning or district goals. Meet and interact with counterparts in other districts on professional learning matters.	Monthly meetings for educational leaders in this district often have a learning component as part of the agenda. Educational leaders in this district frequently participate in professional learning activities outside the district (e.g.- other districts, Department of Education, external conferences).

Source: Adapted from Paterson, 2019.

Analysis of the findings indicated that the team perceived multiple barriers in the domain of professional growth and development. Specifically, the funding for professional learning was not perceived to be a priority in the district. Teaming and learning within the district and with other districts was found to be an area in need of improvement. Agreement to take the survey and discuss its results was the first step of district leadership, which prioritized the need for collaborative professionalism and helped start building its professional capital (Hirsh, 2018). The building of professional and social capital within and throughout the organization is one way to re-establish PLCs system-wide.

Building professional and social capital in an educational organization involves a number of interwoven elements that contribute to the overall mission of improved learning for teachers. This improved learning is continuous, job-embedded, and knowledge-based for the majority of educators. The concept of social capital researched by Bourdieu (1986) and later studied by Putnam (1995) suggested that members of society can attain position and social advancement by working hard to achieve a better quality of life through modalities like education, volunteering, and networking. Alternatively, the definition of social capital from Venables (2018) suggested that the benefits of teaming, collaborating, and collective goal setting in an educational organization can foster team dependence when teachers plan instruction together and benefit the common good instead of only advancing the individual. In other words, Bourdieu (1986) and Putman (1995) focus on building professional and social capital in the context of individuals, whereas Venables (2018) advocates the building of professional and social capital in the context of the collective whole. To that end, the district leadership team intends to coach schools

to set professional growth goals by teams instead of setting individual teacher goals. Moreover, district leadership intends to shift the focus of schools from improving individual teacher instruction to improving schools through disciplined, collaborative learning through effective teaming.

Schools and school districts were, and still are, notorious for building human capital, or for investing in the individual versus the whole team approach. Some examples that characterize human capital building are sending a teacher to a conference, inviting a guest speaker to a staff meeting, setting a goal individually, holding one-on-one teacher administrator conferences, and fostering administrator dependence (Venables, 2018). The building of human capital is not to propose that any of the examples above are ineffective, it is simply to suggest a paradigm shift that building social capital for the individual is different from building social capital for the collective. For example, some ways of building social capital through teaming are learning together in a PLC, training teachers to become more effective leaders, holding teams responsible for their own team-based norms, establishing professional growth goals, building meeting time into the daily schedule, fostering team dependence, planning instruction together, and reflecting on collective goals versus individual goals on a regular basis (Dufour et al., 2005). A distributive type of leadership model requires less work for school administrators as well as transferring ownership of the team's direction into the hands of the teachers involved.

District leadership recently declared PLCs as a system-wide priority by making professional collaboration part of the district's new three-year Ends Policies goals. Rather than trying to improve the system from the classroom level, it was determined that a barrier to effective PLC implementation lies in the failure to consider all three levels of the system—teachers and administrators, district leadership, and the provincial department (Fullan, 2010). Rendering the need to make PLCs a system-wide priority to help facilitate the whole system change, district leadership took the ownership of the situation and committed to better understanding the gaps in its own side in order to become facilitators of learning for the entire district.

Re-Establishing Professional Collaboration at the District Level

In addition to taking the IDI survey, district leadership also held a summer learning session in 2018 to help teachers learn the basics of effective PLCs and to address the barriers that have hindered the implementation and sustainability of PLCs over the last decade. The professional learning session invitation advertised during the last few months of the school year and the session was provided without cost or remuneration for teachers to attend during the summer break.

The pre-learning survey feedback indicated that many attendees have generally lost touch with the concept of effective teaming. Additionally, attendees were very cognizant that many teachers only see PLCs as an ineffective meeting with little benefit to their own teaching assignment, professional learning, or improvement to the system as a whole. Words like engagement, goal setting, capacity building, purpose, efficiency, and leadership were all key words that attendees mentioned as elements they wished to see in their respective school-based PLCs. Pre-learning session survey results in Table 2 demonstrate that teachers found current PLC structures as ineffective and that PLCs failed to meet teacher needs overall.

Table 2: Pre-Summer Learning Survey Responses

What specifically about PLCs do you want to learn about on July 4, 2018?

- How to most effectively use the time - How to facilitate a PLC meeting - What should be accomplished in a PLC meeting (end product, what we are walking away with e.g. plan, specifics, etc.) - How to monitor progress. A.J.
 - With new staff in the fall, and staff who are still unsure what a PLC is all about, I would like to be able to explain the importance of having PLC meetings. I feel some teachers just look at it as something they need to do rather than something that is valuable. L.L.
 - How to make PLCs' more effective and engaging, as teachers often dread going to PLC meetings. In particular, setting goals, tracking progress and making the most out of everyone's time. M.G.
 - My last professional learning for PLC was at a conference with the Dufour team. I would like to have a refresher course on all the main aspects, what does it look like in 2018? What are the main components (steps to follow) at the school level in our district? J. T.
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- I would like to learn strategies to build capacity within my PLC team. Ideas to keep the team moving forward without the presence of an administrator. G. F-C.
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Accordingly, two questions presented to the group after the learning session show the feedback of participants' post-learning session in Table 3.

Table 3: Post-Summer Learning Session Responses

What is one take-a-way you have from the learning session on PLCs?

- The online meeting form is a great way to keep track of what is going on in the school in terms of improvement. C.B.
 - PLCs can be a powerful tool to address student and teacher needs. Having a leader facilitate a PLC is a good thing. V.B.
 - Short-term goals are necessary. G. F-C.
 - PLCs must have common norms and a leader to facilitate them. A.P.
 - It is necessary to have a team leader to facilitate a PLC; as well, establishing team norms is a requirement. G. P.
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What 'next steps' are you considering for the upcoming school year as it relates to PLC work in your school?

- To formalize our PLC meetings. C.B.
 - We need to revisit team norms to establish good working relationships. Larger goals should be more specific with the acknowledgement that steps to reach a goal look different for different levels of learners. V.B.
 - Rework goal pages and meeting note pages in our PLC binders or contact our district representative to work on the pilot project. G. F-C.
 - Going over purpose and structure with teams. A. P.
 - Volunteering to be a PLC team leader. G. P.
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Teacher feedback provided district leadership with a clear perspective of the participants' comfort relating to professional collaboration, collective efficacy, and disciplined collaboration (Fullan, 2010). Essentially, district leadership seeks to model a new system of mobilizing educational support through fostering adult learning theory when rolling out a system-wide initiative; thus, making sure that teachers learn best when their learning closely connects with their needs (Brissenden-Smith, Moreno, & Peloquin, 2018). Although this was a small sample of teacher survey feedback, it was helpful to start the conversation and preliminary planning in building a blueprint for professional collaboration district-wide.

Counter Arguments

The overall goal of the district was to revive and implement effective teaming and professional collaboration through PLCs using a system-wide, leadership-based approach with a common vision, goal, and purpose. The district leadership team recognizes that it needs to model professional collaboration and leadership for teachers to understand the benefits that PLCs bring to their teaching and to the success of their students and colleagues. However, it is unclear how the district will effectively model PLCs. What is clear is that curriculum, assessment, and instructional coaching support provided from the district to schools determined what their instructional needs are through collaborative teaming. Rendering support in this way prepares teams to re-think why they need external pedagogical help. First, concepts of pedagogical support align with the evidence-based practice of coaching being an effective strategy to help teachers reflect on what they learned from team meetings. Second, it allows time for teams to collaborate, discuss, and problem solve. Finally, it transfers the locus of responsibility from individual teachers requesting instructional support to the group deciding how the support rolls-out at the school and classroom level.

The survey questions intended to be very open on purpose as not to sway teacher feedback one way or another or to lead teacher responses in any direction. Furthermore, the survey of a few teachers attending a summer learning session is too small of a standardized sample of the entire teaching community. In addition, the survey used to collect the data was not normalized. It was, quite simply, an opportunity to collect the data from nearly 20 teachers

that voluntarily attended the summer professional learning session. In no way do the results from this survey represent the consensus of the general population of teachers or staff at the provincial level. Nevertheless, teacher feedback from the survey did illuminate which barriers to implementation and growth areas are influencing PLC efficacy and lack thereof in the district.

Finally, research from Fullan (2010) suggests that a system-wide approach required provincial involvement as well as district and school buy-in. In this paper, the re-implementation of PLCs was only discussed at the school and district level. Plans may ensue with provincial stakeholders about what impact professional collaboration is having on the provincial school system when PLCs are high functioning in all districts province-wide.

Conclusion

A district leadership team was eager to be an effective PLC and contribute to the overall improvement of student learning through a system-wide, leadership-based approach. To accomplish improved learning, the team first addressed areas of its own strengths and barriers derived from the IDI survey (Williams & Brien, 2017) and will share these results with school administrators and teachers in the upcoming year. Therefore, transparency and trust will model how to help teachers understand that professional collaboration was not something that is pushed down from the district onto schools and then onto teachers. Instead, the proviso of job-embedded learning aligned with teacher learning needs is giving teachers a stake in the overall collective improvement system-wide. Hopefully, a collaborative approach to job-embedded learning will help teachers better understand the potential for student learning and improved teacher praxis. The next step for the implementation of PLCs are for district leadership to determine when the Internal School Instrument (ISI), (Williams & Brien, 2017) survey will be administered to help school administrators voluntarily determine what areas of support each school may require to help build high functioning professional learning communities on a go-forward basis.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Paterson is a qualitative research analysis lead with the New Brunswick Institute of Research, Data and Training with the University of New Brunswick. Greg's research interests are in educational leadership, reading and instructional leadership, and First Nations studies. Greg can be reached for discussion about similar research interests at gregory.paterson@unb.ca.