How Schools Can Improve their Functioning as Professional Learning Communities

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The purpose of this research project is to examine professional learning communities in six Canadian French-language elementary schools at different stages of development, in order to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing their acceptance and progression of this mode of operation. This research also examines the links between these factors at the various stages.

The Issue

One of the biggest challenges facing education today is academic success for all students because of the increasing complexity of teaching as schools open their doors to a more varied clientele (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). New realities such as the policy of success for all students and the complex difficulties of learning in a knowledge-based society require that schools examine their mode of operation and take a fresh look at the work of teachers and school administrators alike, as to make schools more efficient. It is recognized that the organization of tasks in the school environment can isolate teachers from their colleagues, both physically and intellectually, and reduce opportunities for professional

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interactions (Fullan, 1999; 2001). More than ever, teachers must depend on their colleagues, experts and networks of professionals that can assist them in meeting and overcoming challenges (Little, 1992; Louis & Miles, 1990). Teacher collaboration and, more specifically, schools operating as professional learning communities would appear to be necessary conditions for developing teacher competencies in order to improve student learning (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2004; Fullan 2001; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

By professional learning community (PLC), we have in mind a certain mode of operations for schools, which depends on the collaboration of all participants and which encourages staff to undertake together, activities and deliberations aimed at a continuous improvement in the academic success of students (DuFour & Eaker, 2004). Staff exchange opinions and knowledge and are always in a learning environment. With its structure that promotes the dissemination of expertise within the team, the PLC also becomes a powerful tool for professional development (Butler, 2005; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2004.). By aiming to satisfy all the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, teachers assume a shared responsibility for results and collectively agree to pursue common goals by accepting a collective responsibility for all students. There is a consensus in the current research that confirms the positive influence of the PLC approach on the improvement of student learning (Blase & Kirby, 2010; Harris, 2006; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). However, we understand little of the factors that determine the acceptance of this type of functioning. Though it has been shown that working as a PLC is an effective tool in reducing the drop-out rate and improving academic success (Dibbon, 2000; Louis, 2006), participants from francophone educational environments have only recently started to show an interest in this tool and a preliminary survey shows that most studies have originated from anglophone environments (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2004; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Marks, Louis & Printy, 2002). For this reason, the “Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture” decided to fund a research project whose goal is the review of professional learning communities in six elementary French-language schools in Canada having reached different stages in their progression as a PLC. The study will seek a better understanding of the factors behind the acceptance and the progression of this mode of operation. This
research project will not only identify the factors underlying the development of learning communities, but also the relationship amongst these factors for different stages of operation.

**Observation Grid for the progression of schools as Professional Learning Communities (PLCOG)**

When reviewing the literature related to PLC, seven indicators stand out as being crucial in evaluating this progression: a) the school’s vision; b) the physical and human conditions that allow for teachers to cooperate, learn and share together; c) the cooperative culture of the school; d) the manifestation of leadership from both teachers and school administrators; e) the dissemination of expertise and shared learning; f) the topics addressed based on account concerns related to student learning; and, g) decision making based on accurate data (Cate et al. 2006; Dibbon, 2000; Dufour & Eaker, 2004; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Leclerc & Moreau 2009; Miller, 2005; Roy & Hord, 2006; Schussler, 2003; Stoll & Temperley, 2009). These seven indicators were used by Leclerc, Moreau and Lépine (2009a; 2009b) to analyze the progression of the school as a PLC and to identify three stages of progression. This approach allowed the development of the Observation Grid for the progression of schools as Professional Learning Communities (PLCOG) and to specify three stages of development: initiation stage (level 1), implementation stage (level 2) and integration stage (level 3).

**Objectives**

The following question arises: How do we encourage teachers to adopt this method of operation? Many queries then follow: Are certain factors more prominent for one or more of the three stages of progression of the learning community (Leclerc, Moreau & Lépine, 2009a)? How do we explain that certain schools benefit from this mode of operation, while others cannot overcome obstacles tied to such an organisational change? How can we motivate a school to progress as a professional learning community?

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2 The methodology used for the development of the PLCOG is described at the following address: http://www.eera-ecer.eu/ecer-programmes-and-presentations/conference/ecer-2009/contribution/255/?no_cache=1&cHash=de6e2d7c33
The specific objectives are the following:

1. Identify the factors that influence operating as a professional learning community in elementary French-language schools;
2. Analyze the links that exist between these factors and the level of progression of professional learning communities in these schools.

**Methodology**

This research was completed within the context of an interpretative research paradigm. The research took place between 2006 and 2010 and comprised three phases. In the first phase of the research, from 2006 to 2008, the research team developed a grid to follow the progression of the schools as a PLC. Three to five group meetings per school were held with 130 participants from 15 elementary French-language schools. In the second phase from April 2008 to April 2009, using data collected during group interviews and private meetings from the fifteen participating schools, the researchers studied the factors relevant to the progression of schools as PLCs and the impact on the school administration. The results of the second phase were published in Leclerc, Moreau and Lépine (2009a). Finally, in the third phase from April 2009 to June 2010, data relevant to the factors which influenced how six of the schools were operating as PLCs was analyzed; two schools were at the initiation stage (level 1), two were at the implementation stage (level 2) and two were at the integration stage (level 3). The six cases under review cover the three stages of progression.

**Results**

In short, certain conditions are essential to ensure a school’s progression as a PLC, regardless of its current stage of development: making time for meetings, ensuring support for teachers and a follow-up to the collaborative meetings, recognizing success by encouraging staff and involvement of teachers in decision making. However, certain distinctions must be made between the stages of development. At the initiation stage, it appears crucial to ensure that team members share and accept the vision and have clear expectations. In addition, meetings must be structured to be productive. It is vital that the administration be present and that it provides some guidance. At that stage, it is
essential to develop a culture of collaboration which is the foundation for a genuine PLC. At the implementation stage, it seems that having a model of a more advanced PLC can promote the progression of the school as a PLC. The administration also has a crucial role to play, namely to promote inquiries and questioning by the teachers just like a research team (a culture of inquiry). Finally, at the integration stage, the characteristic factors of a school operating as a PLC are: a) distributed leadership amongst the teachers, b) the importance attached to the monitoring of learning, allowing discussions to be refocused on the achievements of students, and c) more demanding options for the professional development of teachers.

Conclusion

This study allowed us to better understand the factors which come into play when fostering the progression of schools as professional learning communities. Accordingly, this study makes clear that the degree of influence of the school administration plays a major role. Making time available for meetings is not sufficient as interpersonal relationships are very important in developing a solid culture of collaboration within the teaching body. It also appears that schools operating in a more traditional hierarchy are not capable of adapting to a form of distributed pedagogical leadership required to reach the integration stage. In essence, our results generally support the conclusions of other studies that have focussed on the need to support teachers to facilitate the operations of schools as a PLC.

References


Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professionnal Learning Communities : Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.


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