School as a Professional
Theory and Practice

Brian McDermott, Mary Parsons and Helen O’Sullivan illustrate with examples the value of the PLC approach to better schools

Professional learning communities were the focus of the INTO Education Conference of 2011. In the context of a school, a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a group of teachers (and perhaps other members of the school community) coming together to look critically at their own practice, learning together to help their students become better learners. It may be just a small group who share a common interest or the whole school community. The following stories (see boxes) tell of two primary teachers’ leading such an initiative in their schools as part of undertaking research for a master’s degree.

IMPROVING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF SCIENCE

My research took place in a 16 teacher co-educational primary school in South County Dublin during one school year. Ten mainstream class teachers were involved but all staff members were kept informed at staff meeting updates and through monthly email alerts.

At the September staff meeting, in my role as science co-ordinator, I proposed that for the year ahead we would focus on improving the teaching and learning of science in our school and I introduced the concept of PLCs as one way of doing that. Teachers agreed to try it out. We formed three learning groups. Two teachers volunteered to act as facilitators with me. Teacher A to facilitate Junior and Senior Infant class teachers’ meetings; Teacher B to facilitate first, second and third class teachers’ meetings and I facilitated fourth, fifth and sixth class teachers’ meetings. The learning teams met monthly. The facilitators also met monthly to prepare and learn together about facilitating peer professional learning. All meetings occurred outside of school hours.

During each learning group meeting, teachers reviewed one aspect of science teaching and learning in the school. They collectively decided on a) an area of practice to improve in the coming month, b) the action to be taken, c) the tasks to be delegated and d) data to be gathered to monitor what was/wasn’t working.

At the end of the process I interviewed the participating teachers to get a sense of their experiences. Teachers felt that the PLCs provided a forum for their professional voices; allowed them to participate in school wide decision making and to shape school practice and policies. Teachers also found the PLC process increased their sense of ownership of the teaching and learning of science in the school and increased the opportunities for professional learning and professional self-reflection. Time很重要的 meetings during the year was an issue as all teachers were involved in after school activities.

Curriculum overload was also identified by teachers as a barrier to the PLC process because it can prevent teachers finding the time to implement their collaborative decisions. Teachers’ lack of subject knowledge in a particular area was recognised as a potential barrier as teachers could be reluctant to come forward as facilitators. My advice for teachers intending to set up a PLC would be to adapt a model or models to suit their school’s particular needs.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

My research took place in a vertical mainstream all-boys primary school with a pupil enrolment of 320 located in an urban setting. The purpose of the intervention, conducted over an academic year with a group of eight teachers, was to introduce the practice of Assessment for Learning (AFL) as an integral dimension of teaching and learning in the school through adopting the practices of a Professional Learning Community. The aim of the research was to explore the issues that emerged when leading such an innovation in an Irish primary school.

Teachers formed learning teams as described in the previous case study. Continuous learning was at the heart of this professional learning community. At the outset teachers identified the need to improve their understanding of Assessment for Learning. To that end outside expertise was invited to lead a whole staff workshop on how to go about introducing the practices at whole school level. Subsequently, by sharing ideas teachers came to meaningful understandings on how to incorporate AFL into their daily practice. Monthly goals were set at the learning group meetings, actions were agreed, monitored, and the evidence of learning discussed at the subsequent meeting. Thus teachers became actively engaged in collaborative learning and experienced learning as social which is a concept that underpins approaches to professional learning communities and formative assessment.

We learned a number of things in this journey:

* Participants identified learning in situ as particularly beneficial, learning close to their own classrooms in their own school, ‘sharing and learning in the context and situation where they work’.
* The third outcome was that the quality of professional relationships improved.

The environment of sharing ideas, and receiving and presenting feedback led to enhanced professional competencies, allaying fears and allowing participants to make sense of the changes that were involved. All participants believed that their improved practice led to improved learning for their students.

Cúrsaí Teagaisc
From these two stories we can deduce that the idea of a PLC is quite applicable in the Irish context although it is one that emerged in North America in the 1990s. At that time research identified certain schools, often in challenging circumstances that were better than others in developing good teachers and where children learned better. It was noted that a number of things were happening simultaneously in those schools:
1. Teachers discussed and agreed on their values and vision about learning and teaching;
2. Teachers assumed responsibility, shared the leadership, for overall school effectiveness;
3. Teachers formed teams with the specific purpose of learning to be better teachers together, inviting colleagues to see them at work and give feedback.
4. Everybody in the school community was included and assumed a questioning stance, unafraid to ask big questions and finding the data needed to answer those questions: Why are some children leaving our school unable to read? Who are they? How do we find out? Then what will we do about it? How will we know if our strategy is working or not?
5. Principals and others in leadership and management positions not only engaged in the process but actively supported it by changing how the school was organised or by bringing in outside expertise to help where teachers identified a need.

These characteristics are fundamental to the concept of a PLC. They are interdependent and the absence of even one changes the concept. Asking hard questions and gathering data to inform strategy are critical to the functioning of a PLC. Any group of people coming together to talk about their practice does not automatically constitute a PLC – there is a danger that the term is now being used so ubiquitously that it is losing all meaning. A support group is different from a planning group; each has a distinct purpose which is different again from the purpose of a PLC. Unless participation in a school-based PLC leads to improving classroom practice, making the hidden visible and improving what and how the students learn then it is not functioning as a PLC.

A PLC will take time to develop and schools may need the support of an external experienced facilitator. However, it is in fact a very simple and straightforward approach to having better schools – the challenge is in caring enough to persevere in making it happen.

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