

Declaration of interdependence



Educators need deep conversations about teaching and learning to spark real changes in practice

BY TRACY CROW

JSD: As we have been compiling this issue of *JSD* on professional learning communities, I have been fascinated by how many schools and districts are seizing the concept of community, and yet how relatively few examples there seem to be of effective working communities. Why is this concept so hot right now, and why aren't more schools getting it right?

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Judith Warren Little: The interest among educators in collaborative work goes back a long time. Back in the 1980s, Andy Hargreaves and I both wrote cautionary tales about how hard this is to do and about how a lot of what comes under the banner of collaboration doesn't add up to much. At that time, efforts to build more collaborative workplaces seemed localized and homegrown. Now there's an industry out there, whole programs for introducing professional learning communities in schools.

Most of the research doesn't supply much guidance for what those organized efforts might pursue. Most research, my own included, tends to identify existing instances of robust communities, but doesn't really account very well how they got there. So professional learning communities are hot, they are



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increasingly organized, but they have been relatively weakly informed in terms of trajectories — how you would get started, what you would focus on. At the same time, there's good evidence that where you get strong workplace communities and relevant support for ambitious teaching, you see schools that are improving.

I want to really underscore the conceptual neutrality of the term community — there is nothing about community that is necessarily virtuous or improvement-oriented. There is certainly evidence throughout history of very strong communities that are

up to no good. Strong communities are much better about preserving practice and viewpoint than they are about changing. However, if groups have a disposition to embrace community in pursuit of instructional improvement and to embrace investigation of their own assumptions and practices toward that end, then community can be transformational.

JSD: What do communities need to thrive?

Little: With that disposition in place, you still have to ask, what resources are available to that community for making headway? Even groups of teachers who are committed to reform and interested in and willing

to collaborate aren't necessarily equally positioned to marshal the kind of resources that would let them do really productive work together or to really support each others' learning. They have different resources — resources of internal leadership, of knowledge,

of time and space and curricular materials — and so just the fact that many of them are coming together willingly or eagerly won't allow you to account for what they accomplish. That coming together may be necessary but not sufficient.

If people are operating with a different set of curricular resources, then they have less to anchor their conversations about practice. If they never see each other's practice, that limits their ability to make any headway. If their time together is all about getting the next week's work organized and not about actually examining what's going on with kids' understanding, that limits their progress. The more that the thinking and work and experience of students is available to the community of adults as a resource for examining their practice, the more headway they can make.

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School leaders are in an interesting and potentially difficult place. On the one hand, if you don't have leadership that supports collective attention to problems of practice, to helping people develop sophisticated instructional knowledge and skills, then it's very unlikely that we're going to get anything more than the scarce examples we have now.

On the other hand, when district or school leaders take the initiative in the current policy climate to promote and establish collaborative groups, such efforts may be experienced by teachers in the way that Hargreaves described as "contrived collegiality" — that is, people are brought together to do work that is defined by others. They're brought together to do partic-

ular tasks of data analysis, looking at evidence, mapping out standards, aligning curriculum and assessment. All of that may be really valuable work. The question is who owns it.

So the leadership task becomes both organizing the school or the district to support that kind of ambitious work and creating conditions where people really endorse and claim it as central parts of what it means to be a professional. If working as a community doesn't carry value added over what teachers are able to accomplish independently, then it won't be worth the transactional costs, the investment of time, and the competition with what teachers feel that they have to do individually.

JSD: What aren't schools better prepared to do this work?

Little: We're not actually organized for the kind of professional community that we're all describing. One of the early analyses of the school workplace that really gained a foothold was Dan Lortie's, in the book *Schoolteacher* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). He talks about the structural isolation of the classroom and the egg crate school, that we're organized socially to absorb high levels of turnover in the workforce.

So if we're finding it hard to organize for community, what are we organized for? We seem to be organized more for independence more than interdependence and organized for workforce turnover rather than continuity. We're organized as if teaching were easy rather than hard, given the relatively low level of investment in professional development and that we expect first-year teachers to shoulder the same burden as a veteran teacher.

The image of the teacher is that everyone solves his or her own problems. You might rightfully argue that a number of problems that a teacher

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experiences as individual problems are really deserving of collective attention. However, to the extent that they get experienced as individual problems, then there isn't much impetus or much support for professional community.

JSD: In some of your recent research, you have looked very closely at the conversations teachers have in their working teams. What do you see there?

Little: One of the things that we've been trying to attend to particularly in conversations that go on just during the ordinary workplace interaction is whether and how they actually afford sustained attention to problems of practice, to actual classroom experience. We've been looking at the ways in which conversation may develop in a way that turns away from teaching or turns towards discussion of teaching. One of the differences between groups is when a problem of practice surfaces, first of all, does it get noticed? Sometimes people will say something and it gets deflected, it gets turned into a joke, or it gets ignored. When the problem is noticed, what happens next? What often happens is something we've been calling normalizing, that is, the issue is recognized as an ordinary, expected, and shared problem of the classroom. People express reassurance — "Oh, don't worry, this happens to all of us," or "I had one like that." There is an expression of recognition that this is something that happens in the classroom, followed by reassurance, and an offer of advice. But when the conversation develops in very rich ways, it doesn't stop at reassurance and it doesn't move quickly to a remedy. Instead, a question is asked, or you hear an invitation to say more that allows for a detailed accounting of the classroom story. So the invitation to say more is one of the things

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that marked the learning-rich conversations. There is a bridging back and forth between the particularities of what happened on this day and more general principles and practices and ways of seeing.

If groups have to press on with the daily task of having something to teach, the conversations are much more likely to move to the quick remedy, the helpful sources of advice. Groups are less likely to take the time to examine their own assumptions and to really unpack the nature of a problem so that the conversation yields more than the quick fix.

When groups dig more deeply

into issues of teaching and learning, these are also people who are in and out of each other's classrooms. They are able to bring stories of the classroom into group meetings and to convey them with enough specificity and transparency that people can have meaningful conversations about them. These teachers share a curriculum, they share an understanding of particular instructional approaches, and they're able to have conversations after school that are really anchored in their shared understanding of each other's teaching in school. Groups whose knowledge of each other's classroom is much more limited and rudi-

mentary just aren't positioned to have the same kinds of conversations.

Other important supports for these kinds of conversations are deep curricular and subject matter understanding and content knowledge for teaching particular groups of kids. There are issues of expertise. Groups that don't have the means to unpack and resolve their problems can only get so far in having a discussion, especially by themselves. The conversations can point to places where school leaders or district leaders could help build the capacity of the group to do more with the conversations they're having.

JSD: Is this where external support can make a difference?

Little: My views about the contributions of formal professional development have changed somewhat in the last few years. I've come to be more appreciative of the combination of strong workplace supports for learning in and from practice combined with the use of well-designed external professional development, for a couple of reasons.

One is some school-level research we did on professional community.

The groups that really were doing sophisticated digging into problems of practice and providing really strong supports, for example, for beginning teachers, had strong external ties. They were not operating in an internal vacuum; they were not maintaining that they didn't need anybody else. They had strong partnerships with external networks, with professional development programs that supplied them with conceptions of teaching that they held in common. They received technical assis-

tance and encouragement. External professional development was a real resource for teacher communities that were making progress. So that was one lesson for me.

The other is that I've been both reading about and doing research in programs of highly designed subject-specific professional development. I have seen what teachers are able to learn in a subject that they feel insecure about with really scaffolded professional development. This is not something that a school group could easily do on its own. The professional development I'm referring to is really consistent with what people would call intellectually and socially ambitious teaching.

JSD: What about internal leadership — what is the role of participants in the group in moving the work forward?

Little: This is another challenge related to professional communities — teachers' ambivalence about their own leadership within schools. If you look at the research on the effective groups that are out there, we certainly see practices of leadership at the workgroup level that help account for the group's ability to tackle tough issues. However, in doing interviews with people in leadership roles over the years, I've been struck by the number of times that people say, "Well, I don't really consider myself a leader" or "You know, I have this funny view about leadership — we're all equals." Somehow, many teachers hold the image of teacher as leader as inappropriate, as an invoking of hierarchy versus a view of leadership as informed initiative on practice. A view of leadership in terms of initiative on practice could be highly reciprocal — there can be more than one source of initiative in a group. The support from teachers for informed initiative seems crucial to the func-

tioning of these groups that clearly influence practice.

This ambivalence about leadership seems to be based on a couple of grounds. The first is the strong egalitarian roots in the occupation. In order to lead in an organizational sense, in the past, you'd have to move to administration or you'd have to make a claim to a greater expertise than someone else. Those views are all tied into the fact that people have been willing to say that there is no knowledge base that informs teaching, that teaching is all a matter of style; therefore there's no basis on which people would move into a leadership role.

The second is the way in which over the years people have been recruited into purported leadership roles on the basis of possible enthusiasm for given reforms, but with variable levels of actual teaching experience. The people whose leadership status seems most accepted are those with real depth of experience, where there is a degree of social trust in them as leaders and an acceptance that this is an appropriate organizational thing to do. But there are examples of people in their second or third year being recruited into department chair positions or mentor positions for beginning teachers, and they're still just figuring it out themselves. That has made it difficult for people to move into positions that could help a professional community to move forward. ■

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