

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The starting point for professional learning is in schools and classrooms

By Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller



Learning communities are best defined as “ongoing groups ... who meet regularly for the purposes of increasing their own learning and that of their students” (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 2). Although learning communities vary in form and context, they share some fundamental core beliefs and values. Based on the idea that educators can learn from each other, learning communities create and maintain an environment that fosters collaboration, honest talk, and a commitment to the growth and development of individual members and to the group as a whole. They work from the assumption that teachers are not mere technicians who implement the ideas of others, but are intellectuals who are doing knowledge work. This means that learning communities privilege theory as well as practice; they encourage and support members to examine their

practice, to try out new ideas, and to reflect together on what works and why; and they provide opportunities for the collective construction and sharing of new knowledge. Equally important to the concept of a learning community is the connection it forges between professional and student learning. As educators identify and solve problems of practice together, they build the capacity and collective will to move forward the equity agenda of their schools and districts and enhance the learning and achievement of all students.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

We have selected five research studies that bolster the case that learning communities in schools are a critical element in professional development and student achievement. Each of these studies has made a major contribution to a growing and powerful research base about learning



Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students **occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.**

communities, how they can transform classroom practice, and, ultimately, enhance student learning. What follows are descriptions of each study and how it adds to our understanding of what learning communities are, what they do, and how they develop.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2001, 2006) undertook a large-scale study of 22 high schools in Michigan and California in which they described the characteristics of teaching communities and the kind of instruction they promoted. Only one of these communities embraced the ideas associated with a true learning community. In a weak community, where teachers worked in isolation and had little opportunity to engage in conversation with each other, instruction was text-focused and teacher-directed and students also worked in isolation and on routine assignments; educators graded on the curve. In a strong traditional community, where teachers and students were “tracked” in formal hierarchies according to experience or ability, teaching took the form of standards-based instruction and emphasized accountability that was measured by tests. By contrast, in learning communities — where teachers collaborated around teaching and learning and developed expertise through shared knowledge — teaching was fueled by the belief that all students can learn, focused on active student engagement, and ultimately led to enhanced student learning.

Where McLaughlin and Talbert drew portraits of contrasting teacher communities, Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) focused on a single learning com-

munity. Their idea was to join an English department with a history department and observe and document its development, which they defined in stages of beginning, evolution, and maturity. They uncovered distinct stages of growth. The first stage involved the formation of group identity, where teachers playacted a community and formed a pseudo-community in which there was little civility or interaction. What followed was a process the researchers called the navigation of fault lines, where opposing forces competed for attention, negotiated their essential tensions, and fought through their differences. The final stage involved the teachers taking communal responsibility for individual growth. As they moved through these stages, community members learned how to deal with differences, eventually recognizing that conflict can be dealt with openly and should be expected, and that all could grow from a connection to one another by working at various approaches to student learning.

Lieberman and Wood (2002) studied two teaching communities that took place during the National Writing Project summer institutes at UCLA and the University of Oklahoma in Stillwater. The researchers found that though the sites differed in location (urban and rural) and age (long established and newer), they shared 11 social practices that helped meld a strong community. These included:

1. Approaching each colleague as a valuable contributor;
2. Honoring teacher knowledge;

3. Creating public forums for sharing;
4. Engaging in dialogue and critique;
5. Turning ownership over to learners;
6. Situating human learning in practice and relationships;
7. Providing multiple entry points in the learning community;
8. Guiding reflection on teaching through reflection on learning;
9. Sharing leadership;
10. Promoting an inquiry stance; and
11. Encouraging a reconceptualization of professional identity and linking it to professional community.

When engaged in these practices, teachers internalized not only learning in communities, but gained many strategies that they could do in their own classrooms.

In a series of observations that lasted several years, Little and Horn (2007) and Horn (2005) developed an extensive case study of a content-specific learning community that took place in a single high school. The Algebra Group, as it came to be called, was composed of nine teachers who met weekly. They began each meeting with a “check-in,” during which members were invited to discuss a problem they were encountering in their teaching or to offer for group consideration a new idea they had come across in the past week. The check-in served as a starting point for the serious, honest, and focused talk that became the signature practice of the group, engaging members in a level of “disclosure of and reflection on problems of practice” (Little & Horn, 2007, p. 50) that went much deeper than congenial conversation. It generated new learning and led to a deeper understanding of mathematics and how to teach it. As a result, students in the urban, working class school where the group convened and taught became noted for their high rates of participation and achievement in math. These researchers added that it is not only working together that makes a community, but also a particular kind of “talk” that deepens the communities’ understanding of practice.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) reported on Project START, a community of postbaccalaureate student teachers, their cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and college faculty who met weekly to engage in collaborative inquiry. The project was embedded within a larger research community that spanned 20 years and included a wide array of teacher-directed groups. These diverse research communities considered topics as wide-ranging as “language and literacy; curriculum and pedagogy; race, class, and gender; modes of assessment; and cultures of schools and teaching” (p. 66). As a result of their work, Cochran-Smith and Lytle uncovered a theory of action that propelled the groups. In challenging the theory-research split, teacher inquiry propelled a reconceptualization of the teacher role as involving knowledge construction and social action.

These five studies provide evidence of the critical role of learning communities in educator development and student

learning. For many years, it was assumed that professional development should be delivered from external sources. Research and experience have taught a different lesson: The starting point for professional learning is best located in schools and classrooms where teachers work and where they can define and solve real problems of practice. Professional communities build relationships between and among teachers who share students and who are working for greater student learning. Communities eliminate teacher isolation and start with what teachers know and do. They expose teachers to what they need to know, offering support and opportunities to learn from one another about how to provide the richest possible opportunities for student growth. Many teachers have significant expertise and can facilitate learning with their colleagues in a learning community. This kind of expertise can’t be bought.

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ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

Because each learning community develops in its own way and within its own particular context, it is difficult to isolate a set of generic practices. What follows is a list of ways that we have seen successful communities go about their work:

- They meet regularly and take the time to build collegial relationships based on trust and openness.
- They work hard to develop a clear purpose and a collective focus on problems of practice.
- They create routines and rituals that support honest talk and disclosure.
- They engage in observation, problem solving, mutual support, advice giving, and peer teaching and learning.
- They purposefully organize and focus on activities that will enhance learning for both the adults and students in the school.
- They use collaborative inquiry to stimulate evidence-informed conversations.
- They develop a theory of action.
- They develop a core set of strategies for connecting their learning to student learning.

CHALLENGES

Building authentic professional communities in schools creates areas of tension and challenge. The most obvious challenge that learning communities face is that they embrace a set of norms and rules that are often in direct conflict with those of the schools in which they are located. Schools adhere to a bureaucratic model that privileges compliance to mandates over reflection on practice and external monitoring of benchmarks over peer review and feedback. On the other hand, professional

communities require an orientation that values openness to new ideas and practices and mutual accountability for learning (Talbert, 2010). It is very difficult to enact these values in a bureaucratic culture. Professional norms that enable and reward collaboration and support a shared vision are the foundations for learning communities. A culture that focuses on problems of practice and invests in the resources necessary to achieve educational equity is a culture where learning communities can grow and thrive. Figuring out how to negotiate a professional orientation in a bureaucratic structure is a difficult, but necessary, task.

The second challenge concerns the locus of control for the content and the process of the agenda of a learning community. In the face of pressure to provide a quick fix for the complex problems of schooling, it is often difficult for learning communities to hold onto control of the conversation. As federal, state, and district mandates take prominence, concerns about

teacher and student learning may be pushed to the bottom of the agenda. The challenge for learning communities is to guard against the usurpation of the teacher voice and the reduction of the professional learning community to just one more standardized professional development tool.

The third challenge has to do with time. There is no fast track to developing an authentic learning community. As we have learned through the work of Little and Horn (2007), it takes time and effort to unpack conversations and to get at real problems of practice. The capacity to engage in honest talk is of critical importance and develops gradually as trust and collegiality take root. And as Grossman, Wineberg, and Woolworth (2001) make clear, it also takes time to navigate the fault lines of differences in subject matter, approaches to teaching, gender, race, and ideas of privacy. Learning communities that acknowledge differences and allow them to co-exist reach common ground only after an extended process of continuous engagement and commitment.

The final challenge is sustaining a community that is an integral part of school in the face of rapidly changing demands on teachers, teaching, and learning. When successful, communities can change the culture of the school for students, teachers, and administrators, but the members must hold onto the commitment to creating shared values, maintaining a collective focus for student learning, working collaboratively in coordinated efforts to improve, and holding onto collective control over decisions affecting their teaching and learning.

When rooted in the everyday life of a school, learning communities can be sustained. Members of the community have to pay attention to the purposes of the community and find ways that they can push back on the routine pressures of schools. In this way, nurturing the community becomes a new way of thinking about continuous learning, improving one's practice, and finding ways to improve student achievement.

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