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Professional Development and the Growth of Professional Learning Communities in Education

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Running Head: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITES

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE GROWTH
OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN EDUCATION

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Professional Development and the Growth
of Professional Learning Communities in Education

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Abstract

Professional development will most certainly always be a part of education. Even though professional development standards and practices may change over the course of time, its importance and implications for students will not. It is part of the educator's job to continually their teaching techniques and practices. One must stay up-to-date on the most current methods in education in order to assure student success. With that being said, professional development has evolved into more than just attending workshops and meetings. It has evolved into professional learning communities (PLC's), which enable educator's to reach out to their students in new way, and help them reach their academic goals. From improving ACT scores to closing the gap to student success, it is clear to see the positive impacts that PLC's have brought to education (DuFour, 2014). PLC's are expanding within districts throughout the United States, , and the impact they will have on education will be measurable in years to come

Key Words: professional development, professional learning communities

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Professional Development And The Growth
Of Professional Learning Communities In Education

Professional development has become a crucial part of the education system. It provides support for our educators, and helps ensure achievement for our students. The effectiveness of professional development has become one of the most common concerns in educational studies over the past decades (Kapustka & Damore, n.d.). It is well known that to successfully implement new curricula, teachers need professional learning opportunities and ongoing support to make the needed changes to their pedagogical practices (Francis-Poscente & Jacobsen 2013). As a result, ongoing research conducted in many countries has shown that professional development activities within and beyond the school day, positively affect teachers and their students (Bayer, 2014). By making professional development available for our teachers, we are giving them the tools to expand their teaching methods and the education to provide a more suitable and effective learning environment for our students. Professional development has expanded its offerings over the past decade to give educators the chance to become more specific with being able to have their professional development focused within their learning areas of education. To be able to accommodate each staff member's different needs, Professional Learning Communities were developed (Bayer, 2014). Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) are able to give all staff members the opportunity to better themselves in their specific instructional areas, and work together to better students academic needs.

PLC's have grown to become a significant professional development activity in education for student success (Smith, 2012). Professional learning communities have evolved as a method for the professional development of teachers specifically, so educators could have the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community, with

the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning (Bolam, n.d.). As a result, professional learning communities (PLC's) have been able to transform districts, as indicated by students' higher test scores (Siguroadottier, 2010), and close the achievement gap for ethnically diverse students (Williams, 2013). Lastly, PLC's have grown to be seen as an effective method of education for all students (Sink, 2008), and are able to give their educators a chance to collaborate with one another to find interventions geared towards student success

This paper will be covering past practices in professional development as well as adult learning theory and how it relates to current trends in professional development, specifically the development of PLC's. In addition school districts that have recently implemented PLC programming will be discussed. Therefore, it is the intention of this author to analyze the current practices in developing professional learning communities and its impact on staff development and student achievement, which may be helpful in paving the way for success in our education system.

Review of Literature

As previously stated, professional development has always been a crucial part of education. So much so that the National Education Association believes that professional development should be a requirement for educational professionals over their career (2014). Thus, as an educator one must commit one's career to constantly improving methods of instruction for self-improvement and student achievement. Professional development has been proven to be an effective way of reaching out to teachers to share the most current practices for instruction so that instructional practices continue to improve (Barlow, Frick, Barker, & Phelps, 2014). According to Shaha and Ellsworth (n.d.), studies have shown that professional development can lead to improved student performance. Therefore, when teachers and

administration stay up-to-date on the most current practices in education, one's standard teaching method can be constantly enhanced. Similarly, by educating teachers to promote positive changes in beliefs and self-efficacy through professional development, one's methods of improvement can lead to positive benefits for student achievement throughout the course of their career.

Professional Development in the Past

According to DuFour (2014), the traditional approach to professional development was episodic; it was often a series of disconnected, fragmented events. The goal was to entertain, and the only question asked to evaluate that training was, "Did you like it?" He writes that, professional development typically occurred outside school. Educators could enroll in almost any workshop, course, or random graduate program, and they were often financially rewarded just for accruing semester hours, regardless of whether the subject matter was connected to their current assignment or to the goals of their school. Therefore, the majority of the professional development that educators used to take part in was ineffective and many were only taking part because they were contracted to do so (Bayer, 2014). With that being said, one can see how ineffective this type of professional development would be. There was no connection between what was being presented and how educators could enhance students learning. It was merely a practice of showing up because one was required to.

This type of professional development is commonly referred to as "traditional development" (Bayer, 2014). In many places traditional development seems to be a practice of the past. Researchers have criticized traditional professional development activities, because, while shorter in the time commitment they require of participants, they tend to be less effective in reaching their desired goal (Francis-Poscente & Jacobsen, 2013). Therefore, the activities of

traditional development fail to demonstrate an observable effect on education. One can see that traditional professional development does not transform teaching. With this type of traditional development, teachers often have little or no choice in the type and timing of their professional development. Most professional development is pre-determined, “sit and listen, maybe try it on Monday” with a one size fits all approach (Francis-Poscente & Jacobsen, 2013). Therefore, without any sense of personal benefit for educators many of them find this traditional type of professional development to be insignificant. With the ineffective process, traditional professional development programs lack efficiency regarding specific teaching and learning issues in education (Bayer 2014). Consequently, one can see why there was a need for a change to this required practice.

With reevaluating past practices of professional development, one can see the ways that they were ineffective and unproductive. According to Bayer (2014), many resources have been wasted because very few took time to understand what techniques help adults acquire the knowledge and skills that help students achieve. If one understands the way of the adult learner, one can reform the way of professional development, and evolve it into a meaningful practice to help educators succeed with their students. Thus, professional development is colossally and constantly evolving into a meaningful practice for educators. According to Stewart (2014), teacher learning has gone through a “reform” movement over the past decade as prevailing beliefs that link high-quality professional development to higher-quality teaching, and high-quality teaching to student achievement.

Adult Learning Theory

Malcolm Knowles' theory of adult learning (andragogy) is best known in the world of adult education as a conceptualization of how and why adults learn (Harper & Ross, 2011). Knowles assumptions about adult learners are based on their foci of self-directed learning and life experiences that serve as a source of information. Also, adult's focus is on problem-centered learning, and an internal motivation to learn (Linder, Post & Calabrese, 2012). By having that self-directed and internal motivation, adult learners are truly able to engage in and understand what it is that they are learning and how they are affected by it. According to McGrath (2009), if adults are aware why they are learning new skills, there will be a 'readiness' to learn and they will be more willing to participate in discussions in the classroom or learning context. Therefore, to keep adults engaged in what is being presented to them, one must be clear and open with their teaching intentions, and create a learning environment where the adult learner understands the importance of the lesson in means to their benefit.

In Knowles' theory, there are five areas in which the adult learning theory is based upon:

1) adults need to know the reason why they are learning certain material, 2) the learner must have concept of him/herself, 3) adult learning is based on the experience of the learner and the role it plays in the classroom, 4) motivation, and 5) for the adult learning theory to work effectively in the classroom, the lecturer must promote a climate which provides a safe environment for the student (McGrath, 2009, p. 103-104).

Therefore, when operating under these five areas of Knowles' theory, one should be able to make a meaningful and educational impact. By following these five areas of Knowles' theory one could take the process of adult learning to a new level. Whether it be presenting to adults at a workshop, or teaching a college course, by following these five aspects there could be

abundant success in connecting with adult audience.

Additionally, when working with adult learner, one of the key aspects is to create goals in which they can see themselves achieving. According to Harper and Ross (2011), adult learners do better when they are actively engaged in their own learning and understand the end to which their learning is leading. Therefore, by implementing these types of traits with adult learners, there could be high engagement and satisfaction since they understand the basis of what they are learning, and what they have to do to achieve success in the end.

Knowles' adult learning theory seems to be aligned with the concept of PLC's (Linder, Post & Calabrese, 2012), as both recognizes the need for professionals to self identify the areas for which they need professional development to improve student outcomes. Furthermore, when implementing this theory within the study of PLC's and their level of effectiveness, one can take into consideration the positive outcomes these groups may achieve due to the fact that members of the PLC can relate to one another in an educational way, and that problem-centered learning is a key part in PLC success.

Lastly, the adult learner tends to be more motivated to learning that helps them solve problems in their lives (McGrath, 2014). With that being said, PLC's are very solution-focused groups, and by taking the focus of the group and aligning it with the adult learning theory, the different opportunities for groups to thrive could be endless. By implementing these key elements within a PLC, there could be more engagement from participants since they understand the basis of this professional development, and what their desired outcome may be. By integrating the assumptions and suggestions from the adult learning theory into the present structure of PLC's, one can lead the group towards a more advantageous, diverse and educational experience.

Current Trends in Professional Development

Professional development has become a crucial part to the education system. It provides support for our educators, and helps provides achievement for our students. A teacher continuing their professional development has become one of the most common considerations in educational studies in the past decades.

As a result, ongoing research conducted in many countries (Bayer, 2014), has shown that professional development activities within and beyond the school day positively affect teachers and their students (Bayer, 2014). By having professional development available for our teachers, we are giving them the tools to expand their teaching methods, and the education to provide a more suitable and effective learning environment for our students. Professional development has expanded its offerings over the past decade to give educators the chance to focus their learning on the content within their respective curricular areas of education.

With the importance of professional development and its strive to be effective, one may ask what does the program need to include to produce the results that educators want to see. According to Barlow, Frick, Barker and Phelps (2014), there are five key components of professional development that can positively impact teacher beliefs and practices leading to improvements in student achievement: 1) content focus, 2) active learning, 3) collective participation 4) duration and 5) coherence. By staying true to these five practices in professional development, one can find an overall basis of a positive professional development experience. Even with a good experience though, one does not always receive the individualized support one may need for true professional development. Therefore, to be more effective, professional development needs to be embedded in the classroom, responsive to the teachers' needs and have the experience tailored, and personalized (Francis-Poscente & Jacobsen 2013).

Considering the new trend toward professional learning communities, one may wonder from where the need for a change to traditional professional development has stemmed. With PLC's, no longer are staff members being forced to take part in professional development that does not apply to them. They are now getting the opportunity to make their professional development more specific towards their instructional needs.

In contrast to the previous type of traditional development that was covered, the current style is now commonly known as “nontraditional development” (Bayer, 2014). The nontraditional environment is becoming a current trend in education. Nontraditional professional development activities include tasks such as mentoring, peer observation and group work. These activities tend to utilize greater time on task; and as a result, are more effective than their traditional professional development counterpart (Bayer, 2014). Therefore, more districts are turning to this trend of nontraditional development, and making their professional development become more interactive and effective. Shah and Ellsworth (n.d.) have also shown that the more actively educators participate in professional development beyond the traditional passive learning such as, sitting in a workshop or passively watching a video alone, the greater effect the information has on the participants. Thus, by making this change to nontraditional development, educators are able to become more involved in the development of their instructional practices.

The nontraditional professional development trend is something that may see consistent growth in the future. Through nontraditional development, educators can expand teaching techniques and ideas by becoming more engaged in student achievement. According to Stewart (2014), appropriate conditions and characteristics of professional development augment the potential for depth of understanding that leads to change in teaching practice. This is a shift from passive and intermittent professional development to that which is active, consistent, based in the

teaching environment, and supported by peers in a professional learning community. Thus, professional development is evolving into a trend that is more active and supportive as is the case in professional learning communities.

Professional Learning Communities

Within the past decade, professional development has become more specific for each educational professional. It has evolved into something not only teachers can benefit from, but also school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other educational professionals. For all of these educational professionals, PLC's have pervaded school districts in the United States, and the use of them for professional development has been on the rise throughout the United States. Since PLC's are on the rise within so many districts in the United States, it is important to question their effectiveness, and the overall outcomes of implementing this type of professional development.

According to Hoaglund, Birkenfeld and Box (2005), PLC's are defined as a group of educators who are committed to working collaboratively in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for education. Therefore, it is very similar to standard professional development, and falls under the same guidelines, but PLC's are much more than that. The PLC structure suits the collaborative nature of action research and provides a common ground for collaborative research efforts between educators (Hughes-Hassell, Brasfield & Dupree 2012). Therefore, PLC's are an ongoing research process for educators searching for ways to improve themselves and their students.

Using research, there are many tasks PLC's can concentrate on. According to Stewart

(2014), activities that are recommended for professional learning groups include examining data on student progress, analyzing student work, determining effective strategies to facilitate learning, designing and critiquing powerful lessons, and developing classroom-based common assessments to measure progress. Therefore, by incorporating all of these types of activities, PLC's have been able to transform districts to achieve higher test scores, and overall teacher satisfaction (Dufour, 2014). Within incorporating the correct structure of PLC's, school leaders are able to give staff members the opportunity to collaborate in all of these activities. By having these characteristics in PLC's, it gives educators a chance to work as a group within their department: thereby ensuring continuous development throughout the school year. Also, they are able to learn as they engage in their daily work, and have the groups consist of results-oriented activities that can be directly linked to higher levels of student learning

Once a PLC is formed and their goals have been established, the group must then collaborate and decide with which of these previously listed activities they want to begin. The collaboration should happen cyclically as teachers work together to identify needs for improvement and act upon those needs. The PLC groups must commit to working together over the course of a semester or longer with the goal of professional improvement. The length of time is important, but more important is the process. In this process, professional learning communities are more focused upon what kind of data the group can gather and what they can do with acquired data to support their students and close achievement gaps.

By keeping the groups consistent and following the expectations that are bestowed upon them, the PLC can sincerely make a difference within a district. PLC groups will become an effective source of professional development by abiding by the following outline: That is, PLC's must be ongoing, collective, job-embedded and results oriented (DuFour, 2014). Thus PLC's

prove to be a more sustainable and hands-on experience for educators as opposed to the standard professional development methods that were utilized in the past.

With the start of PLC's, staff members begin their year by choosing certain goals they want to achieve for themselves and their students. By using the goals that they have established, educators can meet regularly to improve their lessons and assess their progress using another important source: formative assessment data (Stewart, 2014). As stated previously, data can be seen as a crucial part in the PLC process, and is a central focus of the group. One of the systems of measurement in PLC's is that teachers should look critically at student work and data to identify specific gaps in student learning (Stewart, 2014). Therefore, the data can be gathered every few weeks or at each grading period. Formative data enables the team to gauge levels of success and to adjust their instructional efforts accordingly. By reviewing the data they have collected teams have the opportunity to capture and celebrate short-term results, which are essential to success in any group (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld & Box, 2005). Thus, by reviewing data and keeping track of their formative assessment throughout the year in their PLC's, it give educators a chance to really see their data laid out for them on timelines so they can identify what does not work for their students. Professional learning communities provide opportunities for reflection and problem solving that allow teachers to construct knowledge based on what they know about students learning and evidence of their progress (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014). Therefore, by having this type of data to use as a resource, educators can focus more on how to achieve student's progress by evaluating different areas.

Lastly, by incorporating PLCs into ones professional development repertoire, educators are getting the opportunity to learn and work alongside their colleagues to form the best education environment they can for their students (Hoaglund, Birkenfeld & Box, 2005).

Furthermore educators are able to collaborate numerous teaching techniques and interventions. The ideas of relations and professional collaboration in the workplace have burgeoned into the development of PLCs in school districts as an alternative to the basic staff development approach (Williams, 2013). Therefore, educators who utilize PLC's as more of a more hands on and interactive approach between colleagues, will witness a copious amount of success for themselves and their students.

The School Counselor's Role

With all of the data and research regarding the use of PLC's and educators, one may wonder where the role of the school counselor fits in with the growth of professional development and the implementation of PLC's. According the American School Counseling Association, the role of the professional school counselor is to address all students' academic, career and personal/social development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school-counseling program that promotes and enhances student success (2014). Therefore, one can see how implementing this type of role into standard teacher based professional development would be difficult and ineffective for the counselor. Previous traditional professional development activities were often directed at teachers and administrators, and school counselors were rarely the primary audience (Howell et al., 2007). With that being said, much of the professional development that was provided to school counselors was taught by those out of their subject area and included little to no relevance of their profession. This type of traditional development was not giving counselors the opportunities to grow within their field, or to collaborate with one another to find a ways to enhance student achievement. There was a need for a change with traditional professional development, and the role of the school counselor needed to be recognized and valued in this process.

Research has recognized school counselors' need for professional development to renew or attain skills needed to serve student populations with severe emotional difficulties (Sears, 1993). Also, Sears noted increasing levels of emotional and personal problems in student populations, which places a greater demand on counselors to be skilled in the most current preventive techniques and remedial services for students with such issues and few external support systems (1993). Therefore, one can see the need for counselors to constantly be improving their skills because the amount of different services a counselor provides for students is immeasurable. From helping students emotionally to academically, it is clear to see the different needs a counselor would have when it came to their professional development practices.

With having such a difference in educational needs between educators and counselors, one can see how the implementation of PLC's have been able to change the way professional development occurs among school counselors. By giving counselors the opportunity to work together and to collaborate in their PLC's, counselors are given the opportunity to focus in on their own goals and create results-driven assessments to understand the needs of their students. According to Sink (2008), the school counselor's PLC's plan must in some measure be results-driven; ensuring that all students' needs are met and all community perspectives are acknowledged. Therefore by incorporating a type of needs assessment of their students, or possibly even measuring their graduation rate, counselors are able to achieve results for student success with the incorporation of PLC's. In conclusion, school counselors are in a strong position to assess their school-based services with the use of PLC's (Sink, 2008). By offering data to support the use of PLC's to promote educational success, the role of the professional counselor can change the way of student achievement both in and outside of the classroom.

Success Story

With all of the information regarding the implementation of PLC's, it is important to determine whether or not the PLC's as a method for professional development can be seen as successful. In an journal article *Harnessing the Powers of PLCs* written by Richard Dufour (2014), he highlights two major high schools in the United States that have been implementing PLC's for the past decade, and shares information regarding their students and educator success. One of the high schools that Dufour highlights is Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. This high school has taken PLC's and utilized them in the areas of increasing their students ACT scores, and the amount of students who take and pass their AP exams. Stevenson High school focuses on the goals of reducing the failure rate, increasing the percentage of students experiencing success in the most rigorous course offerings, and improves student achievement on the ACT exam. With the implementation of PLC's in this education environment, the school has been able to achieve these academic goals and have even been able to collaborate together throughout their PLC's to form cooperative education measures to improve their students learning. Their current PLC strands include developing and using common formative assessments, standards-based grading, instructional technology, and social and emotional learning (Dufour, 2014). Therefore, without the implementation of PLC's at Stevenson, many of these strands of leverage for student achievement may not have been brought forward or overlooked.

With this success story one can see how much of a positive effect PLC's can have on a school district. Stevenson High is just one school out of many in the United States who are swiftly moving forward with their educational practices because of the productivity that is generated from PLC's. One can see that by the dedication and implementation of this new

practice, they have truly thrived with their student's achievement and are changing the way of education.

Conclusion

Professional development is something that will most certainly always be a part of education. It is the educators' job to constantly be improving their teaching techniques and practices. Even though the standards and practices of professional development may change over the course of time, its importance and overall meaning to student growth and development will not. Professional development has grown over the course of time as once being something standard and traditional, to now being an extended and hands on approach. These changes in professional development will continue to benefit our educators and students. When opportunities such as collaboration and evaluation in professional development are opened up, educators will be able to create a strong foundation of student achievement.

By having professional development available for our teachers, we are giving them the tools to expand their teaching methods and the education to provide a more suitable and effective learning environment for our students. Therefore, professional development has been able to give educators the chance to become more specific with being able to have their professional development focused within their learning areas of education. With these expansions, professional development has grown to be able to accommodate to each staff members different needs with the creation of PLC's. All staff members have the opportunity to better themselves in their specific instructional areas, and work together to better students' academic needs using the Professional Learning Community model.

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