Teachers Create a Professional Learning Community to be a Place of their Own

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Abstract

In Spring, 2012, seven New Jersey middle school mathematics teachers volunteered to lead an afterschool Professional Learning Community. The teachers set the meeting format, selected topics, and rotated facilitation of six 90-minute sessions. A university researcher, working within a National Science Foundation-sponsored Mathematics/Science Partnership, designed the project to investigate how, if at all, these activities would enhance teachers’ leadership. The researcher videotaped the teachers’ meetings, elicited written reflections, conducted interviews, and analyzed these data. Emergent themes included cohesiveness, commitment, focus on practice, respectful participation in controversies, changes in confidence and leadership. All seven teachers planned to continue meeting during the 2012-2013 school year.

Keywords: teacher leadership, professional learning communities, practitioner inquiry, teacher change, teacher empowerment

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Introduction:

Confounding Definitions of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

The designation, “Professional Learning Community,” has become an educational “buzzword” defined by an overlapping spectrum of meanings. Similar words describe the characteristics of teachers’ professional learning groups: peer collaboration; shared values and vision; collective responsibility; accountability, and data examination for practice improvement and students’ gains (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Little, 2002; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Whitford & Wood, 2010). Despite similar descriptions, teachers’ learning communities’ purposes and implementations are often strikingly different (Feger & Arruda, 2008; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

Lieberman and Miller (2008) define a teacher learning community in general terms as an “ongoing group of teachers who meet regularly for the purpose of increasing their own learning and that of their students” (p. 2). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) contrast today’s PLCs with communities they define within the Practitioner Inquiry “movement.” These researchers sift through similarities and differences, depicting a Venn-diagram of shared and distinct features of practitioner inquiry groups and professional learning communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 53). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) distinguish between practitioner inquiry groups with participants as the focus and Professional Learning Communities formed by top-down directives. They describe the former groups as “often ‘pushing back’ against constraining policies and mandated practices and opening up spaces for practitioners to articulate and enact deep beliefs about education” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 6). The latter groups’ activities focus on data examination with emphasis on stated goals to raise students’ test scores.

Several teachers who participated in this study described the activities of their schools’ PLCs to be correctly described by the latter category. Perhaps this informs why their interest was piqued by the opportunity to form an autonomous group. One teacher described required school PLCs to be places where teachers are “filling out meaningless paperwork, watching a clock to gain the correct amount of professional development hours, and discussing topics that were irrelevant to [our] classrooms” (Male Teacher #1, written communication to author, January, 2013).

Professional Learning Communities are now mandated throughout many districts and states, including New Jersey, where this study took place. New Jersey’s mandated PLCs vary greatly within and across its 590 districts. Each individual school is responsible for implementing its own plan with specific goals to improve students’ skills (DeBellis, 2011). To that end, the New Jersey Department of Education has made available on its website a collection of materials to support PLCs. These include videos, webinars, and a resource tool kit.

Feger and Arruda’s (2008) review of the literature on PLCs addresses tensions between mandatory and voluntary participatory groups and group effectiveness.
教師創建專業學習社區以成為他們自己的地方


目的: 教師領導發展在教師領導的設定


研究問題的調查為:

1) 教師在被提供機會領導和負責自主專業學習社區的活動時，他們如何表現？
2) 教師對他們自願社會的影響有何反思，以及他們認為對未來方向有何影響？
3) 教師是否參與自願社區對領導發展有何影響？

方法

方法為這個自然主義案例研究的基礎是一個教師領袖的，課外專業組，建立一種矛盾的自然主義研究，這種研究方法要求確定其設計不能事先預期（Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 221）。我想象這個自然主義研究設計會重疊教師領袖的組活動，並嘗試使用一個扎根理論的方法（Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999）找出問題的重點。

我的活動包括：1) 獲得兩個目的選取的地區的志願教員參與；2) 領導集體討論；3) 反映教師參與的動機；4) 組織教師自願專業學習的空間；5) 收集和分析從視頻和音頻記錄的數據。
of meetings, focus groups, and interviews; and 6) collecting and analyzing teachers’ written reflections. This article builds on preliminary findings that were shared in a poster session at a professional conference (Leavitt & Babst, 2012). The following sections further describe the participants, data sources, and analysis methods.

Participants

I selected a purposeful sample from two geographically adjacent and demographically similar districts among the initial seven districts participating in the Mathematics/Science Partnership (MSP). The students’ demographics from one of the districts are displayed in Table 1 (below). Teachers report that students from the second district are demographically similar, but with higher family SES. Percentages from the second district were not available to the authors.

Table 1. Students’ Demographics from One District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>American Indian / Alaskan Native</th>
<th>Hawaiian Native / Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Multiracial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Percentage:</td>
<td>46.33</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>15.01</td>
<td>15.36</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count:</td>
<td>2775</td>
<td>1154</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 5990</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Percentage:</td>
<td>49.70</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>16.39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count:</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 1318</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An invitation to participate was offered to all 14 mid-career middle grades mathematics teachers in the first two MSP cohorts from these two districts. These teachers had completed or would soon complete a 19-month, series of seven graduate-level mathematics education courses aimed to increase teachers’ mathematics content knowledge for teaching—this MSP’s primary focus. Seven of the 14 eligible 6th, 7th, and 8th grade teachers (50%) from these two districts’ three middle schools formally consented to participate in the study. They agreed to meet after school between March and June, 2012, in addition to their ongoing attendance in their schools’ mandatory PLCs. Teachers met six times and several participated in three focus groups held before the 2nd, 4th, and 5th sessions. The sixth session was a reflection session that I facilitated. Teachers did not meet in the weeks immediately preceding and during the state’s standardized testing in April.

Most, but not all, of the teachers knew each other prior to participation, if only superficially, either through shared coursework within the MSP or from teaching in the same school. Their teaching experience ranged from five to over 20 years. There were three females and four males, one African American and six White teachers. Five taught
at the single middle school in one district and one at each of two middle schools in the second district. One of the schools was designated to be “on probation.”

**Data Sources and Analysis**

I videotaped each of the six 90-120 minute after-school sessions including the three focus groups. I conducted formal and informal interviews, collected teachers’ written reflections, and wrote fieldnotes. During the design and data collection phases, I was immersed in the data. I attended and coordinated the scheduling of each topic session, conducted focus groups and formal interviews, held informal conversations, wrote fieldnotes, and solicited written reflections. I reviewed my notes and watched the videotaped sessions several times. Given the volume of data, I developed a casebook of significant selections with an eye to recurring themes. I analyzed selections with *dedoose*, a qualitative software analysis program. I began with a simple a priori coding scheme: “Reasons for Joining Group”, “Topic Sessions” (e.g., *Establishing ground rules, Assessment, Common Core implementation, Rubrics*), and “Benefits from Participation” (e.g., *Changes in leadership, Increased confidence among peers*). Several subcategories emerged including *Cohesiveness, Focus on Practice, Examples of Leadership, and Respectful Participation in Controversies*. In the following sections, results are presented by reporting on the teachers’ actions in the group’s formation, emergent themes, and the researcher’s description and interpretations of the first and last topic sessions where controversies arose.

**Organizational Outcomes: Creating a Collective Space**

**Establishing Trust and Focus**

At the first meeting in March, 2012, each teacher stated her/his reasons for joining the group and visions for what the group could become. Male teacher #1 began: “In establishing ground rules, I don’t want anyone to be judged, whether it is a teacher [or] a student. [Our group] should just be focused on the work itself and our practices.” He went on, “we will have to get comfortable with each other, have a level of trust…that we are all in this together…to better our students and our teaching practices.” Female Teacher #3 offered her idea that the group could be a place to “share ideas from our classrooms [about] what really worked.” Female Teacher #2 imagined the group could become a place where she could bring examples of “a really cool lesson.” Male Teacher #1 wanted to delve into “as much detail as we can about…students’ understanding”, and Male Teacher #4 echoed: “the deeper we go, the better this could be.” Female teacher #1 added: “I am also thinking about vertical integration, since we are from the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades.”

Teachers quickly and unanimously agreed upon a “No venting!” policy, and set a 90-minute meeting format designed to minimize digressions (See Table 2). I interpreted these actions to be early indications of teachers’ *cohesiveness* of purpose with explicit ground rules for free expression of opinions. I admire how they immediately took up control of the group and set a *professional, respectful culture*. These would be recurring
themes.

### Table 2. Meeting Format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Allotted Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recap ideas from previous meeting(s)</td>
<td>10 - 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing recent “Cool Stuff” or dilemmas</td>
<td>15 - 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session topic discussion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary – Planning next meeting</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the first meeting, teachers also determined five topics for future sessions and volunteered as teacher/facilitators. They selected the order of the topic sessions: 1) Equitable grading and assessment, 2) Implementation of Common Core Standards, 3) Vertical integration of mathematics content, 4) Teaching graphing with technology, and 5) How rubrics reveal variations in students’ mathematics understanding. Again, I noted three themes of cohesiveness of purpose, commitment to participate in a professional style for the study duration from March to June, 2012, on topics that focused on practice. The meetings took place after school at two of the three middle schools, within teachers’ classrooms or the schools’ libraries.

**Results**

**Group Formation, Evolution and Maturation**

Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) identify four stages of teachers’ professional communities’ formation:

1) Formation of group identity and norms of interaction
2) Navigating fault lines
3) Negotiating essential tensions, and
4) Developing communal responsibility for individual growth.

Lieberman and Miller (2008) augment these four stages with a model that describes the Beginning, Evolution, and Maturity of a Teacher Professional Community (p.14). Teachers’ previous familiarity with each other from participation in the intensive university Mathematics/Science Partnership may explain their commonality of purpose and rapid selection of session format and topics at the initial meeting. This interpretation offers reasons why the group did not exhibit characteristics of Beginning stages of community formation, such as, “undercurrents of incivility”, “denial of difference”, and “belief that students’ intellectual growth is an individual responsibility” (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 14).
Analysis: Thematic Outcomes

Several themes emerged; these are summarized in Table 3 (below) along with selected quotes from various data sources. Themes include: Cohesiveness, Commitment, Focus on Practice, Respectful Participation in Controversies, and Teachers’ Changes in Confidence and Leadership Development. Following this summary are descriptions of spirited controversies that took place on the topics of Assessment and Rubrics at the first and final topic sessions. Each session is significant in different ways.

At each topic session, the teacher/facilitator prepared materials independently and led the discussion. Teachers began with a cohesive purpose, sharing reasons to join the group and demonstrating their commitment to participate in all of the planned Spring 2012 sessions. Teachers’ discussions often focused on practice strategies. I noticed changes among several group members who began to speak out more and take stronger stands during respectful practice-oriented controversies stating clear definitions of their positions. These new stances are described in the Assessment and Rubrics sections later in this paper. Several teachers also became increasingly confident as leaders within these sessions and reported on their group’s activities at one school’s year-end mathematics department meeting on May 22, 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Evidence and Teachers’ Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohesiveness</td>
<td>• Initial Common Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reasons to join group:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o “To start taking on...a leadership role in my district [for] professional development” (Female teacher #3, March 15, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o To develop confidence to express positions in department meetings with combative colleagues (Female teacher #1, March 26, 2012; July, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Rapid agreement on meeting structure, selection of topics, facilitator volunteers (March 15, 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>• Near full attendance at all sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Agreement: “No venting!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unanimous intent among seven participants to continue to meet during 2012-2013 school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Practice</td>
<td>• Selection of practice-oriented topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teaching strategies for students’ learning gains</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Respectful Participation in Controversies

- “With our group we can look at much more big picture ideas...we can also spend time just debating...different ideas or theories” (Male Teacher #4, July, 2012)
- “I liked provocative ideas and theories, and I liked it even more when people disagreed or even challenged some of those ideas. This lets me hear different arguments and opinions and see how I might even come up with my own ideas from what I have heard and talked about.” (Male Teacher #2, June, 2012)

## Teachers’ Changes Leadership Confidence

- “The group has helped me to feel more confident. It gives me a chance to have a more in-depth discussion where I can better formulate my views before I talk to my peers.” (Female Teacher #1, July, 2012).
- Four group members report to peers and supervisor at May 22, 2012 mathematics department meeting

## Significant Topics Assessment Rubrics

- “The topic of assessment was the most beneficial to me, not because I got lots of answers about how I should assess students, but because it made me ask myself more questions about how I want to assess students.” (Male Teacher #4, June, 2012)

### Topic Sessions: Assessment and Rubrics

Equitable assessment was the first topic the group considered, and participants were divided on the non-traditional grading policies described in the materials selected by Male Teacher #3, the topic session leader (Wormeli, 2006). Several teachers referred back to this topic in later sessions, some noting how they were reconsidering their stance on policies designed not to overly penalize students with a failing exam or assignment score. I interpreted these shifts as indications of how teachers were changed by their participation in the group as they considered new practices not previously part of their repertoire. Additionally, taking a stance and arguing opposite positions among “friends” prepared teachers to assume leadership roles within their departments with oppositional colleagues.

The second section describes the last topic session (June 7, 2012) where a controversy arose regarding the evaluation of students’ mathematical understanding and “acceptable” solution methods. In this session, Female Teacher #1’s stance revealed how
she had changed during the three months. Her stated goal for joining the group was to
assert herself confidently after she had been shaken by an unpleasant encounter at a
department meeting near the beginning of the school year. In early sessions of the group,
this woman was often relatively quiet. She spoke out more during the last two sessions
and the final reflection session, and first assumed a noticeable leadership role among her
peers during the Rubrics topic session. She argued her perspective clearly and firmly that
students should select their own mathematical method to lead to a problem’s solution and
not be limited to a teacher-specified approach.

Equity in Assessment

The first example of a spirited controversy took place in the first topic session
about *Equitable Grading and Assessment* (March 26, 2012). The facilitator, Male
Teacher #3, introduced an article that suggested teachers raise failing test scores to 60%
to minimize the negative impact on a student’s grade point average and improve chances
for successful course completion (Wormeli, 2006). Several participants voiced sharp
differences of opinion about the fairness of this policy for those students who had initially
earned a good score. Teachers referred back to this discussion several times during later
sessions, pondering shifts in their own positions and considering implications for failing
students. Female Teacher #1, who had initially spoken out against boosting students’
failing scores, announced that she had reconsidered her stance (May 23, 2012). The
assessment session became a bellwether to notice teachers’ changing flexibility to
consider new teaching models.

Rubrics that Demonstrate Students’ Strengths

At the last topic session (June 7, 2012), another spirited controversy took place.
The teachers examined different rubrics selected by the facilitator, Male Teacher #1, to
explore variations in students’ understanding of mathematics. Several participants
sharply disagreed about the value of the mathematical approach of one specific sample of
a student’s work. The teacher/facilitator introduced a student’s hand-drawn solution to the
problem, “How many chickens and how many pigs if the animals have 23 total heads and
76 total feet?” This problem could be solved with linear equations; however, the
drawing below showed one student’s pictorial solution (See Figure 1):
The approach brought out a respectful debate where teachers shared strong opinions about this student’s understanding of mathematics compared to formal algebraic strategies. Interestingly, the debate lined up along gender lines. Three male teachers did not find value in a “Guess and Check” strategy and three female teachers voiced varying levels of support for this student’s approach. The facilitator, Male Teacher #1, did not explicitly state his position.

Female Teacher #1 stated that she formally teaches her 6th grade students a systematic “guess and check” strategy. She went on to explain how in her previous experience as an engineer, she used professional judgment to choose among problem-solving approaches. I interpret this controversy as an example of participants’ increased confidence to speak out in this debate.

Discussion

At the end of the 2011-2012 school year, teachers reflected upon what they found to be most valuable among their group experiences. They stated: 1) collaborative
communications, 2) increased confidence to lead peers in discussions about content and teaching strategies, 3) new considerations of unconventional, equitable approaches to grading, and 4) new willingness to challenge oppositional colleagues.

Male Teacher #2 summarized in a written reflection how the group’s work could lead to improvements in his teaching:

I enjoyed the spirited discussions about assessments and rubrics. Whether teachers recognize it or not, we are a team…The goal is simple: Get students to learn math and problem solving skills. Everyone has ideas how to get there the most effective way… sharing those ideas will only produce better teachers.

(June, 2012)

The clarity of these reflections illuminates these mathematics teachers’ appreciation of collegial discussions of meaningful topics. Male Teacher #2 added: “I feel that our group has merely scratched the surface of these topics. I don’t feel we’ve exhausted any topic; I’d love to [add] new ideas for next year’s sessions” (June, 2012). Battey and Franke’s (2008) conceptualization of the renegotiation of a mathematics teacher’s identity characterizes many changes described by participating teachers. Male Teacher #3 connected the group’s focus on practice to his increased confidence for teaching effectiveness amidst the demanding educational policy climate:

The pressure for higher student achievement impacts math teachers greatly and often leaves us with feelings of insecurity and incompetence. [This was a] space for math educators to come together and problem-solve ways to be most effective.

(July, 2012)

Unanticipated Changes in the 2012-2013 School Year

In conclusion, analysis of the data collected in this exploratory study reveals teachers’ willingness and enthusiasm to seriously create a Professional Learning Community of their own. In this setting, teachers felt empowered to argue and advance their positions on meaningful topics they selected in order to improve their mathematics teaching practice. Teachers confidently began to widen these discussions to other colleagues with reports of the group’s activities at the year-end mathematics department meeting.

These are examples of several worthwhile accomplishments of the group, despite its relatively short span of implementation. Significantly, in September, 2012, all seven teachers wanted to continue their participation during the new school year. I recruited 12 additional teachers from the same two cohorts after the Mathematics/Science Partnership widened the offering. I organized 18 of the 40 eligible teachers into three regional groups representing six New Jersey districts. However, after a confluence of factors, five teachers from one school in the initial group chose not to continue. At this time, only one
of the three groups continues to meet. The ongoing group is composed of two teachers from the first year and three teachers from another partner district.

What happened? There was a two-week hiatus in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy in October 2012, and one of the new regional groups spanned an area devastated by the storm. Graduate school coursework and family needs also took precedence for several teachers. However, the storm did not carry the only winds that knocked out the group’s momentum. I accepted another research position and moved out-of-state. One of the female teachers wrote to me a few months later: “Our PLC did not run this year. I think it was, in large part, because you weren’t here to coordinate it.” Long-noted in practitioner inquiry settings are the difficulties in maintaining continuity when a university partner simultaneously guides and releases control in teacher-led settings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Yet the accomplishments from the group described in this study remain a tribute to the seven teachers whose investment in time and conscientious efforts made this group a space of their own.

**Implications: Future Directions**

This research can lead toward innovative and further research in teachers’ professional learning activities that include: 1) individual case studies of teacher’s changes, 2) teachers’ collaboration for design and delivery of Professional Development activities, 3) development of shared assessment rubrics, 4) discussion of published and/or peers’ video cases to investigate effective teaching practices, 5) collaboration for teacher-designed classroom observation protocols, and 6) building trust leading to meaningful participation in peer evaluation teams.

**Acknowledgements**

I am privileged to have been an insider/outsider for the group of teachers in the context of this afterschool group. We live in an era that burdens teachers with increased standardized testing, unclear retention criteria, and public rankings of teachers’ performance based on students’ test scores. I am grateful to have contributed to finding a space for dedicated teachers to explore topics they selected within a professional group of their own design. The seven women and men are simultaneously extraordinary and representative of many teachers throughout our nation who remain committed to teach our children day-in and day-out. Thank you.

Thank you to Rutgers University professor, Dr. Dan Battey, for his inspiring Professional Development course where several teachers who participated in this group learned what is possible to accomplish within a meaningful Professional Learning Community. The researcher is also grateful to Dan for his support throughout the design and analysis of this project.
Teachers Create a Professional Learning Community to be a Place of their Own

Notes

The numerical designations for the four male and three female teachers throughout the text represent an effort to keep teachers’ voices distinct and their identities confidential.

1 Also see http://www.state.nj.us/education/profdev/pd/teacher/common.pdf

2 See http://www.nj.gov/education/profdev/pd/teacher/plc.shtml

References


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